

**THE BLOG**

What's Black and Blue and Read All Over?

By Marty Kaplan

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There's no MSM more MS than *The New York Times*. (If those acronyms confuse you, you're not spending nearly enough time online.) The *Times* isn't mass media, the way *People* or *Oprah* are; it requires its readers to be educated, high-volume consumers of news, and if that smacks of elitism, too bad. What makes the *Times* the Lord of MSM is its agenda-setting power. Editors at *People* and bookers for *Oprah* follow the *Times*'s lead, as do producers of network, cable, and local news, radio talkers, the wire services, newspapers across the nation and around the world, and even scribblers on the internets. Government officials, corporate executives, entertainment moguls and political operatives are notoriously obsessed by the *Times*. Its stories, reviews and columns may be disputed and denounced, but they're never ignored. In a media ecology where attention is oxygen, the power of the *Times* can mean life or death to information.

Ken Auletta's just-out *New Yorker* piece about Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., Judy Miller, and the rest of the gang at Times Square contains some juicy nuggets. Among them:

- When Sulzberger invited top management of Time, Inc. to pow-wow about the jeopardy that Judy Miller and *Time*'s Matt Cooper were in, Time, Inc. CEO Norm Pearlstine and *Time* editor-in-chief John Huey blew Sulzberger off and sent an associate general counsel and corporate flack to the meeting instead. At the meeting, Sulzberger "pulled from an envelope a bunch of small white buttons with writing in red, blue, and black – 'Free Judy. Free Matt. Free Speech' – and passed them around."
- After Keller and *Times* Washington editor Jill Abramson banned Miller from the WMD beat, Miller called Keller from the home of "one of the most famous products of Ahmad Chalabi's intelligence factory" to tell Keller, "I'm at Haideri's house. They're going to deport him. I'm the only one who can report this story." Keller told her to leave the house.
- Miller's criminal defense lawyer, Robert Bennett, "was astonished that Keller and Sulzberger had not inspected Miller's notebook" before embarking on their Free Judy campaign.
- Miller, in jail, "was upset that the paper had not run more stories about her imprisonment, although it did publish fourteen editorials championing her cause."
- While Miller was still in jail, Sulzberger and Keller had already decided that "her career at the *Times* was over." The night she got out of jail, at a Ritz-Carlton Georgetown steak dinner attended by Sulzberger and Keller, Sulzberger presented Miller with a *Times* medallion. "It was very special," Miller told Auletta, "eyes tearing as she recounted the

moment. 'Very few of them were given.' Sulzberger now describes the medal as 'a trinket,' one that his father sometimes gave to retiring *Times* employees."

- Sulzberger didn't know of Maureen Dowd's "Woman of Mass Destruction" column about Miller before it ran. *Times* gossip is delicious, but is it really anything more than highbrow Brad and Jen fluff? Yup, it is. For more than a decade, the right-wing echo chamber has been trying to destroy the MSM by describing it as "the liberal media." The right's goal is, ironically, the triumph of relativism. More French than the French, more decadent than Derrida, anti-homo but pro-pomo, the right would be delighted if the *Times* had no more claim to journalistic values like truth, accuracy, fairness and objectivity than the *National Enquirer*. It's all unreliable, the right wants us to say, all spin. (Except, of course, for Rupert Murdoch's "Fair and Balanced" psy-ops, or Rush Limbaugh's Excellence in Broadcasting [sic] Network.)

The right's principal strategy to accomplish this is, as Eric Alterman calls it, "working the ref." For years, conservatives and neocons have been trying so hard to mau-mau and demonize the *Times* that, as Auletta says, it's entirely conceivable that Keller's predecessor, Howell Raines, gave Judy Miller's WMD's stories the front-page play and alarmist headlines that they got in order to shield Raines and the *Times* from the charge that they were too liberal.

No wonder Rove and Cheney fed Chalabi's toxins, and the rest of the fumes from the Iraq disinformation factory, to Judy Miller. That stuff wouldn't have had nearly the impact it did if it had appeared in the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's *Washington Times*, or on Fox News, or Drudge. However much the right wants to delegitimize the *Times*, they still covet its mainstream credibility.

At a breakfast with Auletta, Miller accepted no blame for the WMD stories. "I was wrong because my sources were wrong," she told him. Adds Auletta, "She did not admit the possibility that her sources, among them Ahmad Chalabi, might have been not only wrong but also skilled at manipulating her." Auletta doesn't add this, but I will: not only Chalabi, but Scooter Libby, and every other sophisticated Administration spinner who filled her reporter's notebook with the kind of self-serving fabrications that have landed us deep in national tragedy.

Among the bloggerati these days, the *Times* is a kind of pet dinosaur. It's Exhibit A of old media, of the aging establishment, and the declining influence of print. Where news needs to be nimble, the *Times* is ossified; where journalism needs to be unafraid, the *Times* is in bed with its sources; when news needs to be interactive, and to benefit from the distributed intelligence of its readership, the *Times* is the gold-standard of gatekeeperism.

But I suspect that the economic marketplace is plenty capable of keeping the *Times* on its competitive toes, and the net's abundance of contrary views is a powerful goad, forcing the *Times* to keep re-earning its journalistic reputation. Whatever its faults, the *Times* is still the best newspaper in the world. And as long as BushCo regards it as the media enemy most worth manipulating, I'd call it a national treasure.

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