

**THE BLOG****Journalism's Slo-Mo Suicide**

By Marty Kaplan

12/13/2005 11:44 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Dan Froomkin's "White House Briefing" column, which appears on washingtonpost.com, is a sparkling daily anthology of the deceit, disingenuousness, evasiveness, hypocrisy and lack of accountability of the W administration. What Froomkin does is artfully compile links to journalists who cover our leaders for MSM outlets, and he glues them together with the kind of snark familiar to any watcher of "The Daily Show."

But now comes the new ombudsman of the Post's print edition, bemoaning how Froomkin's column poses a truth-in-labeling problem. Deborah Howell calls his column "highly opinionated and liberal." She says political reporters in the Post newsroom don't like it. "They're afraid that some readers think that Froomkin is a Post White House reporter." She quotes John Harris, national political editor at the print Post, who says, "The title invites confusion. It dilutes our only asset — our credibility." And she says that the Web site's executive editor, Jim Brady, "is considering changing the column title and supplementing it with a conservative blogger."

If the Post's ombudsman has swallowed the right-wing canard that telling the truth is "liberal," then journalism might as well check into the hospice. If Deborah Howell were right, then all the Republicans in Congress who pointed out Bill Clinton's disingenuousness, evasiveness and hypocrisy about fellatio were also liberals, as were the reporters and columnists who were no less inclined to cry deceit. We have reached the point where instead of assessing the objectivity and accuracy of statements in public discourse, we are told by journalistic traffic cops to treat them merely as theological observations that flow from one's political religion. It's a symptom of the same disease that already causes spineless editors to force apparently defenseless reporters to pair every truthful "he said" in an article with a bogus "she said" in service of some nihilistic postmodern notion of balance.

Froomkin put it this way in his response on the Post's blog: "My agenda, such as it is, is accountability and transparency. I believe that the president of the United States, no matter what his party, should be subject to the most intense journalistic scrutiny imaginable... This column's advocacy is in defense of the public's right to know what its leader is doing and why. To that end, it calls attention to times when reasonable, important questions are ducked; when disingenuous talking points are substituted for honest explanations; and when the president won't confront his critics — or their criticisms — head on. The journalists who cover Washington and the White House should be holding the president accountable. When they do, I bear witness to their work. And the answer is for more of them to do so — not for me to be dismissed as highly opinionated and liberal because I do."

Froomkin's boss's idea – add a conservative blogger to the mix – is the journalistic equivalent of tattooing “Just Shoot Me” on his forehead. The “intelligent design” guerrillas want to subvert the credibility of evolution by forcing science classes to “teach the controversy” – that is, to put science and theology on morally equivalent footing. Instead of inviting readers to take seriously the troubling information that Froomkin assembles from some of the nation's most highly-credentialed journalists, Brady wants to turn Froomkin's content into infotainment: Dancing Bear Left, to be enjoyed alongside some Dancing Bear Right. (Josh Marshall nominates Post columnist Jim Hoagland for the latter job.)

Harris says that people in the newsroom worry that readers might mistakenly think that Froomkin works for the newspaper, when actually his paycheck comes from Washington Post-Newsweek Interactive, which is also owned by the Washington Post Company.

It's possible that once upon a time, American newspaper readers really did understand that reporters are different from editorial writers, who are different from the paper's columnists, who are different from the syndicated columnists they run, who are different from the op-ed writers they carry.

If ever that were true, that day has passed. It's partly a function of a lack of readership understanding. But it's also a consequence of Fox News, The Washington Times, the Manchester Union-Leader* and other outlets whose cheering for their team has broken down the news/editorial wall. It's a consequence of journalism become a profit center in big media conglomerates, which means that decisions about what to cover and how to invest journalistic resources are driven by entertainment values, not by news values. It's a consequence of relentless pressure from conservatives, which has pulled what used to be the center way over to the right, and which has made editors and producers scared of their own shadow. It's a consequence of brazen government propaganda, from a Republican White House and a Republican Congress, which is so breathtaking in its Orwellian disinformation that none dare call it Stalinist, and which is so vindictive and pugnacious in its push-back that none dare call it McCarthyite (except, of course, as flattery).

And yes, it's also a consequence of the Web. But it's not because the Web is some bizarre parallel universe of disinformation and opinion-mongering. Sure, there's plenty of that. But just as the Web has made falsehood universally accessible, so it has also made the fruits of hard-nosed journalism universally available. In that marketplace, brand name means something, and I can see why the Post wants to protect theirs. But just as in the consumer marketplace, brand isn't everything. Quality, performance, reliability: these mean something, too. Like never before in history, people can now compare countless competing claims, innumerable different news accounts, a virtually infinite number of varying interpretations, for themselves. Sometimes, Post stories are brave: gold-standard journalism. Sometimes, they're craven stenography. It's kind of pathetic to blame the range that the Post brand already stands for on a blogger.

The truth is that Dan Froomkin is actually the best ombudsman the Washington Post and its readers could hope to have.

*UPDATE: Charles Perkins, the executive editor of the New Hampshire Union Leader, writes to point out that the latter is the accurate name of his paper; I stand corrected. He also says I'm unfair to the paper. When I used to read political clips from it fairly regularly, in the 1978-88 period, it was my impression that the extreme conservative views of the editorial page did indeed have an impact on the paper's news coverage. His email got me to do some Googling, and my impression now is that the news side of the paper is today squarely in the journalistic mainstream. So while I still think that the Washington Times and the Union Leader suffered from similar maladies at the start of the '80s, when the Times was founded, I'm happy to draw a distinction between them today.