

Could Christine O'Donnell Really Win?



Familiar Fairytales

September 16, 2010

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All, I've got a new "Think Again:" The World as It "Ought to Be," which is [here](#).

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Perhaps, however, this is a good week to go back and take a look at some of Marty Peretz's greatest hits [here](#).

Also, next week I'm doing a panel, which Katrina is moderating, called "Which Way for the Working Class? Elections 2010 and Beyond"

When:
Friday, September 24, 2010
3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Where:
The Great Hall at Cooper Union
51 Astor Place
New York, NY 10003

Moderated by Katrina vanden Heuvel, Editor & Publisher, *The Nation*

Confirmed panelists:

Eric Alterman, Journalist and Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress
Bob Herbert, the *New York Times*
Richard Trumka, President, AFL-CIO
Karen Nussbaum, Executive Director, Working America

[This](#) just in. "A curious phenomenon has emerged at the intersection of fashion, sports and crime: dozens of men and women who have robbed, beaten, stabbed and shot at their fellow New Yorkers have done so while wearing Yankees caps or clothing."

Alter-reviews:

"The 4 Complete Ed Sullivan Shows Starring the Beatles." Really what is there to say? Well, how about the fact that it retails for only \$14.99?

Night one is February 9, 1964 and they do stuff like "I wanna hold your hand," they come back and a week later on February 16.

Then they come back a year and half later on September 12 1965 with "Ticket to Ride", "I Feel Fine", "Yesterday" and "Help!" and then again one more time. They're practically a different band by this time, and one can't really say enough about how wonderful they were, but hey, the whole shows are great and so, too, are the commercials. The audio mix is not bad, too.

On an unrelated, though still DVDesque topic, have I mentioned that there are now three new Leonard Cohen-related dvds out? Well, you can trust me, there are. They are:

- a) *Lonesome Heroes*. This [one](#) is one of those symposiums of expert opinion, if you like that sort of thing.
- b) *Bird on a Wire*. This one is a record of a 1972 European tour that began in Dublin and ended in Jerusalem when he was a moody poet/philosopher/talk singer/sex symbol and superstar abroad, but not so well known here. It's actually pretty honest and interesting and definitely worth renting if you don't want to own it. Read all about it [here](#).
- c) "Songs from the Road" is the new cd/dvd from the amazing world tour the old man did that ended up here at Madison Square Garden. (I saw the show at the Beacon—which was one of the greatest nights of my life, and Radio City, which was merely wonderful.) This is the same tour as the "Live in London" double cd and dvd, but the band has been playing for a much longer time together and the tracks are culled from the alleged best performances. It's only 12 songs and it comes in all imaginable formats. I'm still looking forward to the Bluray because if anybody deserves a Bluray, it was Leonard Cohen on this tour. I haven't gone to the trouble of comparing the setlists with the London set, because, it strikes me as churlish to try and save small amounts of money on something so wonderful. You can read all about it [here](#).

Now here's Reed. He's quite good today and we're lucky to have him.



Re

Here We Go Again

It's like clockwork. Another election cycle, another [self-flagellating news article](#) uncovering the supposed scourge that is journalists' making campaign contributions. The blueprint for these "exposés" is by now well-established and, true to form, this latest version, from the Center for Responsive Politics, hews pretty closely to the [previous incarnation](#) from three years ago, right down to the detailed naming of names, confronting of some of the offenders, and trotting out of a journalism ethics expert to tell us why public political advocacy among members of the media is all so, so very bad. Sadly, this latest story also falls victim to the same mistakes as its predecessors, including the lack of numerical context, intellectual fealty to conventional wisdom, and one-dimensional analysis of what constitutes journalistic bias.

The last time this happened, I wished that someone smart would challenge all this pious, superficial posing and shlocky media self-analysis. When that didn't happen, I decided to take a [shot](#) at it [myself](#). The experience convinced me these boilerplate which-journalist-is-donating-to-which-party stories don't advance the conversation about the press's role in our society or illuminate new thinking about the media's responsibilities to the public. Instead, they just predictably churn out more grist for the mindless "media is liberally biased" [mill](#), while propping up an antiquated media ethical architecture and undermining the value of actual reportage.

In fact, my beef with this latest story, by Megan R. Wilson, begins before we even get to her byline. Here's the headline:

Journalists, Media Professionals Donating Frequently to Federal Political Candidates this Election Cycle

Wow, "frequent" donations by journalists sounds like it could be quite a scoop. What's more, the story's editor (and Center for Responsive Politics' communications director), Dave Levinthal, went further in a [radio interview](#) this week, saying "there are a *lot* of journalists who are donating to politicians." [italics mine] But, as we dig down into the data, these qualitative terms begin to appear increasingly suspect and unsubstantiated. Here's some not so qualitative numbers:

235: Total number of journalists or members of the media the CRP story found to have made donations in 2009–10, according to FEC records

73,600: Approximate number of working [print](#), [TV & radio](#), and [online](#) journalists in the United States, according to their respective trade associations, using latest 2009–10 data (figure does not include many more freelancers, book writers, bloggers, or non-profit organizations)

0.3%: Resulting *high-end* estimate of working American journalists who have also made political donations during the current election cycle

0: Number of times the CRP story puts this 235 figure in context

0.4%: Percentage of donating journalists from the CRP story whose name is Meenakshi Ahamed (1 out of 235, chosen because it's the first name listed)

Resulting absurd headline I could write by applying the same numerical logic used to promote the CRP story:

Journalists Donating to Federal Political Candidates this Election Cycle Frequently Named Meenakshi Ahamed

Sure, it's silly analogy, but it illustrates a common trap reporters often fall prey to—drawing far too broad of a conclusion from a few anecdotes or a tiny subset of data. So-called "trend" stories can appear tantalizingly [revealing](#) (especially, occasionally, for a Red Sox fan like me), but are almost always statistically flawed and have now become so commonplace that Slate's Jack Shafer keeps a [running tally](#) of them.

In a phone interview yesterday, Levinthal defended his "a lot of journalist" characterization because "hundreds of journalists were doing it and not five or ten." But I then asked him if he or Wilson ever thought to put that number in a larger context or if it would still pass the smell test to make the same "frequent" and "a lot" claims if the 0.3% figure were also presented to readers. He responded by saying: "We have no idea how many people would self-identify as journalists on a FEC donation form, so it didn't make sense to try and figure that [total number] out. I don't know what you're getting at here."

OK, so I think the decision not to explain the numbers in relative terms of overall participation rate is an mistake and he doesn't. Getting hung up on semantics about what does or doesn't constitute "frequently" or "a lot" is bound to end in splitting hairs anyway and as far as journalistic sins go, hyping this story's findings to generate buzz is but a venial transgression. The story's faults run deeper than simple innumeracy, however.

The public's [lack of confidence](#) in the media is an important issue, one that is tied to views of the press as biased and disconnected from society. But this story exhibits a striking lack of curiosity when it comes to digging into the reasons behind this. For example, when I asked Levinthal just how many of the journalists listed actually ran afoul of their news organization's ethics standards, he couldn't give me a number. To be fair, a handful of them, like the editorial employees from ABC News, pretty obviously did, but other notable examples involving the Washington Post, New York Times, and Reuters either didn't apply because the employees worked on the business side or weren't clear violations because the organization makes case-by-case exceptions for non-political reporters. And beyond those few

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examples, the reader is left to guess. Levinthal says "it would have been a Herculean task to ferret out all the different ethics policies involved," which strikes me as a pretty big cop out in terms of journalistic due diligence. In fact, this acknowledgement prompts yet another alternative headline for the story, one that, rather than being ridiculous, is instead ridiculously banal:

Hundreds of Journalists May Have Followed Company Ethics Policies While Legally Participating in Democracy

Of course, whether these donations did or did not violate a company ethics policy is beside the point, one could argue, it's the larger question of whether or not the press should be allowed to engage in any kind of public political advocacy that is worth exploring. Here, the CRP story—as the MSNBC.com story did before it—offers up the Society for Professional Journalists Code of Ethics and a journalism professor whose expertise is media ethics to argue that these public donations constitute a perception of bias that is tantamount to actual bias, and therefore wrong.

By contrast, the opposing viewpoint, though eloquently argued by *Falls Church News-Press* editor-in-chief Nicholas Benton, doesn't get the same serious consideration. Wilson should be commended for giving ample time to the counter argument, but it's noteworthy that the only authoritative "expert" sources she includes in the piece say political donations of any kind are a mistake, whereas the only figures in the story espousing a more open, transparent approach are members of the media who have a clear vested interest in justifying their own actions. There's been no discernible effort to include a media critic or academic who actually disagrees with the former and sides with the latter, so the reader is left with the distinct impression that Benton and other like-minded journalists are simply trying to cover their ass.

In fact, this omission somewhat ironically injects a confirmation bias into a story that is ostensibly about bias. By simply following the standard rubric—search the FEC records, quantify the results in terms of partisan giving, get some responses from those involved, and then roll in the big media ethic guns to counter their viewpoint—the story becomes little more than a paean to conventional wisdom. It rehashes for the reader the same old notion that, as the MSNBC.com story put it: "[journalists] have opinions, like anyone else, but they are expected to keep those opinions out of their work." But as I noted in my Nieman Reports [essay](#):

Finding clear evidence of this last point would have been the equivalent of an ethical smoking gun, proof positive that newsrooms are justified in clamping down on the mere appearance of political bias, lest actual bias run amok within their news coverage.

That's why it's frustrating that these types of stories invariably, and the CRP article is no exception, make no effort to find a link between a journalist's personal political leanings and any actual bias in their reporting. Again, from the Nieman essay:

Even when it is in the best interests of a story or a news organization to examine both, there still exists a powerful tendency to let appearing to be fair become the de facto lone standard. This has perhaps never been truer than now, when withering newsroom budgets and unprecedented staff cutbacks have left few mastheads with barely enough time to get a newspaper out the door or a broadcast on the air, let alone to consistently parse their news coverage for creeping bias.

Journalism won't reclaim its mantle of respectability by forces its practitioners to retrench further and further into shadows and by becoming less and less transparent. Indeed, by zealously guarding against any perception of bias, it's quite easy for news organizations to develop a blind spot regarding actual bias in their reporting. That's why, to me, this story was so disappointing. I'm all for more responsive politics, but propagating the idea that responsible members of the press should increasingly disconnect themselves from the people they are tasked to serve, instead, does just the opposite. A healthy, engaged press is critical for a healthy, engaged democracy. That's why I hope one day to see the last iteration of this type of story with a headline like this above it:

Hundreds of Journalists Make Political Donations, No Evidence of Bias Known to Exist in Their Reporting

And an easy fast to all my landmen (and women)

Now, here's the mail.

Greg Panfile Scarsdale, NY

Charles, since you asked, I will step up to the bar once again and hope we're done with this one. Someone might copy in Glenn Greenwald but I doubt it'll do any good. To wit, when it comes to all this stuff about secrecy and torture and whatnot: it is not that Obama wants any powers or is like Bush, at all. What it is, is that we know for a fact that the top people (Bush, Cheney, Yoo, etc.) thoroughly upholstered their dishonest derrieres with unassailable paperwork, and that the Yahoo faction will turn out in droves to defend them if prosecutions go forward on that level. It's unfortunately a non-starter. That leaves people down the food chain as the only ones vulnerable, and that's both a scandal in itself (hosing the little people while the bigfeet walk) and not going to do us any favors while we are mired in two wars, three if the neocons get their way. So the reason Obama is taking this line is easily explained in non-megalomaniac terms that don't require mind-reading or projection or anything else, and here I quote Scott Horton at [Harper's](#):

The dilemma faced by the Justice Department was rather that evidence presented in the suit would likely be used in the future (not in the United States, obviously) to prosecute those who participated in the extraordinary renditions process. Twenty-three U.S. agents have already been convicted for their role in a rendition in Milan. Prosecutors in Spain have issued arrest warrants for a further 13 U.S. agents involved in a botched rendition case that touched on Spanish soil. Prosecutors in Germany have opened a criminal investigation into the use of Ramstein AFB in connection with torture and illegal kidnappings. Prosecutors in Poland are pursuing a similar matter. And Prime Minister David Cameron was recently forced to brief President Obama on his decision to direct a formal inquiry which could lead to prosecutions tied directly to the subject matter of the Mohamed case. This is the remarkable background to the case decided by the Ninth Circuit, and remarkably not a single word about this appears anywhere in the opinion—or even in most of the press accounts about it.

Now we all know that the Bush cabal was a corrupt, perverse conspiracy to delude and defraud the public that took our economy and reputation down the tubes, and dumped far too much blood and treasure into, can you believe it, land wars in Asia. The problem is, we are never going to get those guys, legally or politically; and it is just plain wrong to nail the people far down the food chain, those who had families to feed and pensions to protect and whatnot, who were not prepared to resign when faced with legal orders (according to the attorneys general) during wartime.

Perhaps they should have, perhaps Charles would have, but they didn't. Obama has most likely made the determination that the best possible outcome is to stop it in the future, and let the past go by, given all the other crises we have to manage (oil running out, no job creation, two ongoing wars and that same cabal trying to start up a third).

He may be wrong on this, but there is no indication that he is doing it because he wants power, and there would be a lot of bad things to follow if prosecutions were to take place. Worst of all would be if the Yoo and other memos held up in court, so there were trials with no convictions, while we lost allied intelligence agency support, were laughed at by enemies who have no such qualms about rendition or anything else, and had to listened to I-told-ya-sos from Palin, two Cheneys, three or more Bushes, etc.

This whole thing stinks so bad and is so poisonous there is no good outcome from digging it up. None. It's about closure in the best possible way, not hunger for power. We have to put processes in place to prevent it happening again in the future, to be sure, and be vigilant about that. But we cannot afford what will happen if we prosecute our own people and open them and any foreigners who assisted them to exposure. It doesn't make sense. Sometimes you have to let people get away with stuff because the alternative is worse. This is one of those times.

Frank Lynch

[Really Not Worth Archiving](#)

Top of the morning to you, Eric.

The very real risk of reprisals from Koran burnings was brought home to me a couple days ago in the profile of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in this week's issue of The New Yorker. Subscribers can access [it](#).

The profile recounts KSM's college years in North Carolina, and the abuses which he and fellow Muslims received from other students. When KSM returned to the Middle East, his anti-American views were set in stone. Someone who knew him before he matriculated tried to persuade him that the students which KSM encountered were not representative of all Americans, that all Americans don't hate Muslims. KSM refused to be convinced, went silent, and said not to bring it up again, that his views were "strong."

Editor's Note: To contact Eric Alterman, use this [form](#).

September 16, 2010

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