

Fighting Back: Responses to the Mainstream Media

June 15, 2006

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[This is part 7 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#), [part five](#), and [part six](#).]

Unlike the conservative media, it does not appear the national media is intentionally partisan. But it exists in a very specific structural context. A recent study found that two-thirds of journalists thought bottom-line pressure was “seriously hurting the quality of news coverage” while around half reported their newsrooms had been cut. 75% of print and 85% of broadcast journalists agreed that “too little attention is paid to complex issues.”[†] When you’re short on staff and stories are shallow, reporters become even more dependent on outside sources — and the right-wing think tanks are more than willing to help out, while further pulling coverage to the right.

But one obvious solution — creating a matching set of left-wing think tanks — while perhaps helpful in balancing the debate, will not solve the problem. Media norms of balance mean that even qualified experts will always be presented as “just one side of the story,” balanced directly against inaccurate conservatives — recall how the handful of corporate-funded global warming deniers are still balanced against the overwhelming scientific consensus.

Ideally, viewers would be able to hear both perspectives and decide which they thought was accurate. But since, as the journalists conceded, so little time is spent explaining complex issues, in practice very little information is presented that can help the viewer decide who’s correct. So they’re left to decide based on their existing ideological preferences, further splitting the country into two alternate realities.

Figuring out what is true — especially when it’s so obvious, as in the examples above — is precisely what the mainstream media should be doing. Partisan pundits would be replaced with thoughtful scholars. Non-peer-reviewed books would be ignored, not endlessly promoted. Scientific facts would be given precedence over political arguments. Political commentary would be replaced by factual education.

Don’t hold your breath. Six major companies own nearly 90% of all media outlets.[‡] And they — and their advertisers — don’t mind how things are going. Sumner Redstone, CEO of Viacom (Paramount, CBS, Blockbuster, MTV, Comedy Central, etc.), told a group of CEOs that “I look at the election from what’s good for Viacom. I vote for what’s good for Viacom.” And, “from a Viacom standpoint, the election of a Republican administration is a better

deal. Because the Republican administration has stood for many things we believe in, deregulation and so on.”† Better news reporting wouldn’t just be more expensive, it would threaten these business interests.

To get the straight story, it’s necessary to turn to independent and community sources which don’t have such conflicts of interest. One possibility is the daily news show *Democracy Now!*, hosted by Amy Goodman, which is funded only by viewers and foundations. Broadcast on 150 radio stations, 150 television stations, and the Internet, the show presents stories from activists, journalists, authors, and public interest organizations from around the world.

When outlets from ABC to the *New York Times* began claiming Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, *Democracy Now!* was one of the few sources to take a contrary view. It presented the testimony of Iraq’s top weapons official, who defected to the US and explained that all the weapons had been destroyed. (Other stations, ironically, parroted the Bush administration in promoting the information he presented about the weapons Iraq *had*, without mentioning they had been destroyed.)†

And when US soldiers kidnapped Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the democratically-elected president of Haiti, and flew him to the Central African Republic where they locked him in a hotel room, he managed to quietly phone out while armed guards stood outside his door. *Democracy Now!* was alone in airing his incredible story. When Aristide was finally freed, he insisted on returning to his country and again Amy Goodman was the only US television journalist who dared to accompany him back.†

Still, *Democracy Now!*’s audience is rather small compared to that of the mainstream media. But stories from overseas hint at what could happen if enough people begun paying attention to such sources. In South Korea, the country with the highest rate of broadband adoption, politics has been turned upside down by OhmyNews, a five-year-old website. Founded by Oh Yeon Ho, OhmyNews has a feature unlike any other paper: more than 85% of its stories are contributed by readers.†

Almost anyone can write for OhmyNews: the site posts 70% of all stories that are submitted, over 15,000 citizen-reporters have published stories. OhmyNews copyedits their work but tries to leave their differing styles intact. The citizen-reporters write about things they know about and that interest them, together they end up covering most of the traditional spectrum. Yet their new voices end up providing coverage on things which typically get ignored by the mainstream media.†

This is most evident in their political coverage. Before OhmyNews, conservatives controlled 80% of Korea’s newspaper circulation. Then OhmyNews gave a voice to progressives, inspiring massive nationwide protests against the government. The protests, in turn, led to the election of reformist Roh Moo Hyun, now known as “the first Internet president.”† The furious conservative National Assembly responded by voting to impeach Roh on technical grounds. OhmyNews

readers again organized and overthrew the Assembly in the next election, reinstating Roh. There's no reason why what happened in South Korea can't happen here. Overcoming the tide of misinformation is hard work, but working together committed citizens can make amazing progress, even when up against the most powerful interests. Our society has an extraordinary level of freedom and openness. Whether we use that freedom to seek out the truth or remain content with conventional platitudes is up to us.

Note to readers: Citations have been added to the previous articles in the series.