

The Politics of Media Coverage

“Trumpled: The Roar of the Hairdo, the Smell of the Mob”

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As I sit down to write my position paper, I feel two strong but contrasting emotions: excitement and dread. That’s because I have to talk about the *politics of media coverage*. And to talk about that topic *now*—that is, August 2016—means to talk about... well, *him*.

I began thinking about *him* seriously when I attended the Rising Tide Summit in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on December 5th, 2015. Organized by FreedomWorks, a “grassroots service center to a community of over 6 million activists who believe in individual liberty and constitutionally-limited government,”¹ the Rising Tide Summit was a stump-speech fest for Republican candidates (Paul, Santorum, Carson, Fiorina, Cruz). The event was a live performance with a definitely breathing and apparently *voting* audience with strong opinions. This freedom-loving audience had a clear favorite that day: Ted Cruz. I knew this because I could *feel* the positive, emotional response to his well-rehearsed stage performance.

What’s perhaps more interesting is who *wasn’t* there that day. Can you guess?

That’s right: the Donald was not there that day.

But that’s not all. There were surprisingly few members of the media present that day. Those who were there seemed more distracted than at other campaign events I’ve attended this cycle. While I sat amused, horrified, frightened, and angry at different times during the program, the journalists who sat adjacent to me in the press section on the floor of the U.S. Cellular Center certainly did their jobs, but with what appeared to be a sort of detachment. For example, at one point a reporter came over to me and, with much reluctance, apologetically asked me if I was a “voter.” It sounded so strange when she said it—as if she were looking for a type of person *much* different than herself. As if she were entering a culture that intimidated her greatly. I said yes, and she smiled, with hope.

¹ See <http://www.freedomworks.org/about/about-freedomworks>.

I went on to say that I live in New Jersey and her excitement quickly turned to despair. As I watched her go to the next rows, I saw her struggle. The audience members didn't want to talk to her. She was the enemy. She wasn't alone—soon another journalist, this time a man, asked the same question—“are you a voter?”—again, as if this room full of political T-shirts, baseball hats, signs, flags, and coozies *was not* full of “voters.” Again I explained my New Jerseyness, and quickly, as if time was running out, he proceeded on past me, skipping the man in front of me who wore a particularly intimidating expression.

So: To what extent are the media responsible for the state of politics in the US today?

Well, “they” are completely responsible, but that responsibility can't possibly fall on the two journalists struggling through the U.S. Cellular Center floor. Placing the responsibility on “the media” similarly fails miserably to account for where blame should lie since “the media” disallows an individual or individuals to be named and blamed.

At the Rising Tide Summit, I thought about Trump because *he wasn't there*. I found that fascinating (and of course this was before he stood up the Fox News debate). His absence, read as independence, made me think about the model of the SuperPAC vs. the individual. The SuperPAC machine promises to wield enormous power to not only get candidates elected but also to *shape the popular imagination*. Such cultivation assumes the widest net of “the media” from nightly news, to 24-hour news-as-entertainment, to setting the agenda for reality TV.

And yet an individual—a brand—defied all predictions to “win” the Republican nomination.

And so: What influence do media corporations yield on politics and elections, and is this relationship a conflict of interest?

Total, and yes.

But I'm more interested in Trump's ability to *intimidate* the media. For example: in an August 10th interview with Democracy Now, David Cay Johnson, who recently published *The Making of Donald Trump*, claimed “I've been an investigative reporter for almost 50 years; I've never been lawyered like I was for” his May 2016 article on Trump in

Politico. “And it didn’t have anything that hadn’t been published before. [Trump] has intimidated the news organizations, and they’re not willing to talk about that.”²

Hmm. Makes sense, right? I mean, if the guy with a “Don’t Tread on Me” hat could intimidate a regional newspaper reporter... who’s to say the Donald, who many ridicule with equal parts laughter and fear, can’t have a go, as he has done, with the *New York Times*?

SO: The phrase “get money out of politics” is a common rallying cry in both political parties, but is there any merit to the notion of getting media corporations out of politics?
and

What would a reformed media system look like particularly for political coverage?

As Fox News pundits grit their teeth through painful Trump moments; as the RNC looks one more time at the rules; as the Koch Brothers scowl at Trump Tower from Park Avenue; as the Republican Party “implodes,” The Donald laughs all the way to the *bank*. The only way to unpack the problem with the media and politics is to think through three ideas: *money*, *power*, and *performance*. The media produces *performances* for profit. Politicians produce performances for *power*. Some performances are presented as “fiction”; others as “non-fiction.” The trouble begins when these two genres begin to blur—this is when *money* backs performances of *power*. The media enable such performances backed by dark money as in the *Citizens United* conundrum. But when someone like Donald Trump—with no superPAC, no establishment backing—arouses his audiences, there is no filter; *money performs*. The make-believe of fiction becomes, as performance theorist Richard Schechner argues, *make-belief*.³ To solve the problem, the media needs to take responsibility, but so do audiences, who need to finally look at the media critically, and parse fiction from non-fiction, make-believe from make-belief.

² See <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/donald-trump-2016-mob-organized-crime-213910> and http://www.democracynow.org/2016/8/10/donald_doesnt_know_anything_author_david.

³ See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013.