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Welcome, Willkommen, Bienvenue, Bienvenidos, Benvenuto. Welcome to our September edition which will be dedicated to a critical issue in our modern society: the lack of transparency, free press and media accountability.

THE DEGENERATION OF THE MEDIA: SENSATIONALISM, CONTROVERSY AND PROFIT

The old saying that money corrupts as a truism could never be as applicable, as we watch how legislators are bought out by campaign contributions and the media becomes a pawn for its corporate owners and ideology. The methods of the latter have degenerated to a spectacle, simplification and exaggeration as competition demands controversy and viewership. A free press is supposed to defend against gross errors of fact and understanding. But it has become clear that it does not. In *The Assault of Reason*, Al Gore underscores this assertion and further concludes that the mass media is one of the most important obstacles to social and economic progress in the 21st century. Let us look at some of facts regarding media criticism or lack thereof.

Media criticism is in an undeveloped state, today, largely because the mainstream media allows virtually no open discussion of the subject, most of which is corrupted by the same forces that have turned the rest of the media into a source of manipulation. Following are some of the characteristics of contemporary culture and society and its relationship to the media:

- All centers of power today rely on media and that all use sensory manipulations and simulations, along with story lines, rhetoric, and performances to sell audiences products, candidates and ideas.
- Most media, today, from news to advertising, rely on spectacle, simplification and exaggeration to grab and hold audiences.
- The news media has become a part of the power and economic system that it is supposed to report on. Instead of standing at a distance from events and trying to provide an accurate account, all too often it is just another inside player manipulating information for its own ends. This not only means that media companies have a conflict of interest but also that journalists who would prefer to be honest end up subordinating themselves to those in power in their own organizations and shaping their coverage accordingly. It also means that media criticism that isn't afraid to report on what is taking place is now essential to the maintenance of democracy.

- Much of media is beset by idealization and demonization in which media manipulators depict themselves and their allies as heroes and saints, and their opponents or targets as villains, fools and disturbed characters, both to create exciting stories and win battles.
- The media today is pervaded by missing information. What is missing is precisely the information above, which would discredit the system and result in reforms that would lock out many of those who now work the system for their own benefit.
- All media today is a form of action. Stories, rhetoric, sensory images and manipulated impressions are all efforts to influence people's perceptions and action, evoke fears and desires, and play to values. The omission of information from the media is a form of action, as well.
- Finally, the media today is also full of efforts to get at the truth, which are often disguised or limited in various ways. Many of these efforts to tell the public the truth can be found in the fictions of movies and television which openly depict the con artist culture we now live in and the corruption of the media.

Today, journalists are not only reluctant to explain what they know and how they know it, their news organizations are also often loathe to admit mistakes, and loathe to publicly state their policies regarding their internal journalistic and ethical guidelines. Pulitzer Prize recipient Sydney Schanberg concludes: "The press calls for transparency by government, corporations, and everyone else. But here the reporters reject transparency for themselves, and yet they say they are practicing good journalism. The public needs a fuller explanation, and that can only come from the reporters themselves." Recently, The *International Center for Media and the Public Agenda* did a study on media openness and accountability. The study used five categories to evaluate the news outlets: Openness to Corrections, Ownership, Staff Policies, Reporting Policies and Interactivity. Scoring from worst to best of the 25 media outlets, *Fox News* and *CNN* scored 20th and 21st respectively. *Newsweek*, *USA Today* and *ABC* scored 15th, 16th and 17th respectively. *Washington Post*, *MSNBC* and the *Wall Street Journal* scored 10th, 12th, and 13th. The clear winners were the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *BBC*, *CBS* and the *Christian Science Monitor* ranging from 1st to 5th. Some of the conclusions were: most sites grudgingly give information about their corporate owners or parent corporations, most sites have bought into the concept of engaging their visitors but found that they are more geared to generate sticklines than allow newsrooms to hear and respond to readers' complaints, most news outlets do not publicly acknowledge their mistakes, most news sites did poorly on posting their guidelines for writing and editing stories and on transparency Schanberg notes, "Journalism's most serious failure, probably, is its reluctance to explain how reporters go about putting together a news story...this lack of openness about our tradecraft—this non-transparency—is really the mother of most of the press's troubles."

HATE AS A COMMODITY

In our Western tradition, there is inherent in its history the belief that there are certain groups of people who do not share the same moral status as everyone else, when it concerns the kind of treatment they receive. These individuals are society's scapegoats as they have been subjected symbolic violence depicted in degrading words and images notwithstanding, physical violence. The list is long: Jews, blacks, Indians, Mexicans, Christians, pagans, saints, etc. While this endless historical game is old, we now have Act II in our contemporary society as the political system and media gain much of the profit and power by turning public figures into scapegoats, arousing emotions of anger, ridicule and disdain in audiences and voters. Republicans do it to Democrats; Democrats do it to Republicans, Independents do it to both; the TV news media to anyone they can find to stir up controversy and viewership. The business of inventing scapegoats, invading privacy, creating slander and libel is all part of the media circus culture which is now a global phenomenon. Fox's executive vice president of programming Bill

Shine described newly hired Sarah Palin as one of the most politically polarizing figures, noting that controversy drives viewership. He also stated he was not concerned about questions regarding Palin's attention to truth or accuracy. As can be seen, this type of information becomes a form of wealth, a commodity that can be exploited by the corporate entities. It is manipulative and pervasive but now with the sophistication of high tech tools of communications and image manipulation. This type of environment has created a modern sophisticated machinery of inculcation and brainwashing. People are misinformed daily as facts are spun and twisted to create a new slant. Historically, this was done quite well by the Inquisition as it created a 400 year body of false revisionism. Because of the media's irresponsibility, millions of people began to think erroneously that Barack Obama was a Muslim, 70% of Americans were convinced that Saddam Hussein was involved in the massacre of September 11, most Americans under 50 were made to believe they are never going to see their Social Security Benefits which is like saying there probably will not be an American government when they retire. Ironically, when one raises the issue of media responsibility in Washington, a common response from policy analysts, political operatives, and journalists is that the problem is with the American people, that they are just plain stupid. It has been noted that these professionals believe a number of falsehoods on important issues, many of which had their origin from the media itself. The solution is to have an independent truth finding network that cuts across lines of politics and self serving corporate entities so that the citizenry can be a well informed public capable of making intelligent choices in their daily existence.

TRUTH AND UNTRUTH: TOWARD A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF OBJECTIVITY

It has been said that in our post-industrial society, several philosophical ideas have emerged that are linked to the old concept of cause and effect, action and reaction, violence and revenge. One approach that is quite old has to do with the neutralizing of a negative with a positive; it is in the ancient eastern wisdom from Buddha to Jesus. It was put into practice by Gandhi as he created the ethic of nonviolence. He wanted all to recognize the common humanity we share with those that we consider our enemies. It was important to break the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and revenge, action and reaction. He was trying to get people to see the essential truth about the moral grounding of human identity, which has the power to free those who recognize it. Another idea has to do with illusions and perceptions. This also is a very ancient eastern concept, that humans can be tricked easily into illusions of the temporal world. In the modern world, Freud discovered anew that we are enslaved by illusion, of misperceptions of fears and desires from childhood to adulthood. We see enemies when they do not exist. Freud wanted us to break the cycle of conscious and unconscious deception and of symbolic, physical violence inflicted in each generation that resulted in the distortions of neurosis. It is truth that can liberate us from this cycle of untruth and violence. Another player and perhaps the most important is the system of profit leading to power which heretofore, has acted as the catalyst for the resulting exploitative effects. It is the unbridled and unregulated structure that invariably leads to abuse, excesses and brings out the worst of human characteristics. According to a Pulitzer Prize economist, it began to get out of hand in 1980 with Reaganomics in which Corporate America was given an unregulated structure and as its power base soon superseded other bases; the government and Congress soon lost whatever independence it had previously. Powerful money interests soon began to buy the last vestige for free expression—newspapers, T.V. networks, and radio. It was the subversion of democracy as the media engaged in symbolic violence against reputations; they manipulated information to achieve various ends; they made covert alliances and offered public forms of untruth that masqueraded truth. And now they even depict themselves as honest brokers that stand outside the system and expose its flaws to public scrutiny. Today, large scale decision making in America and other nations is to a considerable extent, under the control of an "oligarchy", made up of corporations, political groups, and the media. They all manipulate government to achieve their own ends and use television and other forms of mass media to shape public

opinion. Now television journalists manipulate information in ways designed to attract audiences, to push their own political agendas and to aggrandize themselves appearing as celebrities before the public. Instead of exposing the corruptions of the system, it is enmeshed in the system. Instead of revealing the reality of a society in which everything is a tool of marketing, and everything is for sale, T.V. news itself is for sale meeting the demands of marketing. Instead of revelation, we are exposed to simplified, exaggerated, hyped and staged television news. What is needed is a news media that is independent of the owner's political agendas or staged marketing ploys for viewership but one that is willing to step outside the system and tell the truth to a public that is in need of it. Telling the truth means that we have to admit the ugly with good, that democracy is only partial, that we have a kind of "oligarchy" in which governing classes compete and conflict, manipulate media to attain their goals. It is about money, power and control. Reform unfortunately, has been heretofore band-aid solutions. We need major change and it begins with eliminating conflicts of interests resulting from accepting money by powerful corporate entities in Congress. The internet may be where new movements will rise to expose and eliminate the culture of untruth.

MYTH VS. FACT: ANCIENT CULTURES

- **Myth**--*The Nazi holocaust was about the plan to exterminate only Jews.*

Fact---While Jews were the majority target group, other ethnic groups were singled out as unwanted by the Nazis. The other major group singled out was the Gypsies. In fact, there were 1.5 million gypsies that were killed by the Nazis.

- **Myth**---*Gypsies originated from the Slavic countries like Czechoslovakia.*

Fact---Actually their origin is from northern India. They made their way to Czechoslovakia by way of Asia Minor in the 11th century arriving in the 13th century. Distrust due to a different lifestyle and language contributed to their widespread persecution and homeless wandering. The stereotype of tramps and thieves unfit for work exacerbated the situation. Hanging, flogging and mutilation of Gypsies were commonplace. Their language is related to ancient Sanskrit and also to modern Hindustani.

- **Myth**---*Nazis made soap from the bodies of Jews.*

Fact---There is no evidence to support this idea. There is evidence that the Nazis would continuously remind Jews that they were going to make soap from them but this was a twisted and sadistic way to inflict mental torture on the Jews.

- **Myth**---*Hitler concealed his background because he was Jewish.*

Fact---Hitler's father was an illegitimate child; thus there were no records of his true line for Adolph Hitler. What is known is a true disposition in his family for mental illness. This perhaps, was his real secret.

HAPPY AND INSIGHTFUL READING,

Arnoldo Carlos Vento, Ph.D

