



Think Again: How to Manipulate Form and Content for Fun and Profit (and Conservative Ideology) or 'Enough about You'



SOURCE: AP/Mark Lennihan

A recent *Economist* article attacked this author's claim that right-wing billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch have collaborated with multinational corporations to shift the public debate in their direction.

By Eric Alterman | June 9, 2011

In a lengthy post entitled "[How Not to Raise the Discourse](#)," *The Economist's* "[Democracy in America](#)" blogger, "W.W.," argues that your author is a hypocrite and that this somehow reflects on the inability of liberal critics of the mainstream media to accept truths they prefer to ignore. The argument is based on the author's interpretation of an [essay](#) I recently published in *Academe*, which is published by the American Association of University Professors, in which I "bemoa[n] the mere truthiness of journalism and think-tankery" relative to academic research.

Mr. "W" does not take issue with my overall argument. It's "true, to a limited extent," he explains. The problem arises in my argument that:

...right-wing billionaires like Richard Mellon Scaife, Rupert Murdoch, the Coors brothers, and, more recently, the Koch brothers have joined together with multinational corporations to shift the center of political gravity in our debate rightward on matters of economic, military, and social policy. They have been able to succeed, in part, because most academics who retain a commitment to intellectual scrupulousness have lost the ability to speak beyond their narrow disciplines to the larger public.

According to Mr. "W," "Though it appears in a publication for academics, this is not a scholarly argument," as I do:

...not attempt to quantify in any systematic (or even unsystematic) way the combined effect of Scaife, Murdoch, Coors, and Koch money on public opinion. He attempts no fair accounting of the sources of left-wing money, and presents no evidence whatsoever for the implicit claim that right-wing money has had a greater effect on public opinion than left-wing money. Mr Alterman does not appear to rise even to the standards of ideological think-tankery. There are no footnotes to lend his argument

a patina of pseudo-scholarly authority. This is speculative ideological just-so-storytelling.

Here again we confront the problem of “truthiness.” The attacks on my article are not exactly false—at least not self-evidently so—but they are purposely misleading.

First, the author misunderstands the form of the subject of his attack—namely, the magazine article. Though *Academe* is intended for scholars, it is not a scholarly publication. It is a magazine and not the proper outlet for the kind of research described above.

Second, knowing that the article in question provided no opportunity to offer the kind of scholarly support for the arguments, were the author truly interested in whether I were interested in quantifying the effects of money on political discourse “in any systemic way,” he might taken the trouble to do some research into the fully footnoted scholarly work I’ve published on this and related questions before leveling his accusations.

He could have, for instance, found it rather easily with a [Google Book search](#) in *Sound & Fury* (HarperCollins, 1992,1993, Cornell University Press, 1998); *Who Speaks for America* (Cornell University Press, 1998); *What Liberal Media?*(Basic Books, 2003,4) *When Presidents Lie* (Viking, 2004, Penguin, 2005); to a (much) more limited extent *Why We’re Liberals* (Viking, 2008, Penguin 2009); and *Kabuki Democracy* (Nation Books, 2011).

Each of those books contains not only research on the questions addressed in my short article but also a discussion of the difficulty of assessing the value of such research in getting to the heart of the issue. Hence, they provide the foundational authority for the arguments I make.

So the author is only half right when he writes: “I don’t know [how to judge the effect of conservative investments in elite opinion formation] and neither does Mr Alterman. It’s the sort of thing you need actual evidence to speak intelligently about.” I have the evidence. He doesn’t. I’ve investigated the question over a period of two decades. He hasn’t. I make no claims that go beyond what I understand to be true. He can’t be bothered.

(To make an analogy regarding the ridiculousness of refusing to consider the form an argument takes, recall that in recent weeks, I mocked Slate editor Jacob Weisberg’s misplaced enthusiasm for Rep. Paul Ryan’s (R-WI) plan to destroy Medicare in order to further reduce taxes on the extremely wealthy on this [website](#). Weisberg’s defense came in the form of a tweet that read in its entirety: “Shorter Eric **Alterman**: blahblah evil Republicans phony liberals media media blah.” Were I to ignore the form, I could complain that Weisberg has no citations, no footnotes, no quotes, no defense at all of his misguided arguments. Just a not-so-clever wise-crack [that by the way, ignores the fact that this is what I get paid for]. On the other hand, I might note that it’s just a tweet, and while it’s significant that Weisberg felt he could only reply in a form that allows 149 characters, there’s not a heck of a lot of room for him for to do much more than snark in reply.)

Meanwhile, speaking “as a veteran of the (conservative) Cato Institute,” Mr. “W” writes:

I can tell you that the institute has had precious little success in ending the ‘war on drugs,’ preventing the erosion of civil liberties, keeping America out of land wars in Asia, or changing Social Security into a forced-savings programme, among many other things, despite the many tens of millions poured into these projects. I assume these failures are due, in no small part, to countervailing influences on public opinion, from both left and right. The way public opinion actually emerges from the complex clash of idea-peddling forces is a tricky business that deserves inquiry more serious and less partial than Mr Alterman is interested in.

This is so naïve as to be silly. Does the author really think that what he calls “countervailing influences on public opinion, from both left and right” are more important in preserving the war on drugs than the continued profits of the pharmaceutical industry and the politicians and would-be experts they fund? Does he think that the influence of the multi-billion-dollar military-industrial complex irrelevant in what Walter Lippmann called “the manufacture of consent” regarding land wars in Asia? Is the influence of the AARP irrelevant to how Congress behaves regarding Social Security (or AIPAC regarding Israel for that matter)?”

The idea that these policies are determined by something called “public opinion” is intellectually indefensible once one delves into the forensic determinants of the shape of public discourse—like, for instance, the billions committed by Koch, Scaife, Coors, and the various conservative foundations that have been investing in these positions for almost half a century now.

“W” then switches courses to demonstrate my alleged hypocrisy by noting that while [writing in *The Nation*](#) I begin a recent column this way:

One aspect of American politics that receives insufficient attention is that a significant percentage of self-identified Republicans—around half—are complete idiots. And the candidates who wish to be elected by them must pander to them, either by being idiots themselves—see ‘Bachmann, Michele’—or pretending to be. Nobody in the MSM is empowered to say this aloud. Indeed, the very act of pointing it out brands one a ‘liberal elitist’ who is biased against proud, patriotic conservatives.

He goes on to mock this statement as if the column’s introductory paragraph were its entire contents. (In this respect he mirrors, almost perfectly, Noam Chomsky’s dishonest attempt to portray me as “joyous” over the killing of Osama bin Laden and a lover of the death penalty, discussed [here](#).)

Had he bothered to go on reading for, say, an entire additional sentence, he would have found that I supported my argument with statistical evidence. A quarter of Republicans questioned profess to believe that ACORN is definitely planning to steal the 2012 election while another 32 percent think it might be. These numbers are admittedly lower than the 52 percent who, in 2009, went on record accusing ACORN of having stolen the election for Obama. But this should strike a person with normal mental faculties as a mite surprising given that the organization no longer exists.

Similarly, a recent poll of Republicans found that 48 percent of those questioned believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States. Again, this is almost double the 28 percent who believed it in February, but it is still rather low given that Hawaii released the president’s long-form birth certificate to satisfy exactly this group of noisy idiots.

More evidence can also be found in the support one finds among this same cohort for say, Bachmann, Palin, and Gingrich despite their frequent nonsensical, ignorant, and demonstrably false statements—particularly those regarding the kind of American history that they should have learned in seventh grade.

Once again, some of these statements are referenced in the same column whose content “W” ignores. For instance, I cited Newt’s nutty contention that President Obama’s political views can be understood “only if you understand Kenyan, anti-colonial behavior,” together with his insistence that the Obama administration leads a “secular-socialist machine” that represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

Those are, I submit, the statements of an idiot, or at least someone pretending to be an idiot. In any case, pretending that they are not even there and therefore that yours truly is merely engaging in name-calling toward people whose views I do not happen to share is ipso facto dishonest—whether for reasons of ideology or mere laziness I cannot say.

Finally, we are instructed by “W” to “forget all that” (and I can’t say I blame him) as he adds “I take the thrust of Mr Alterman’s argument to be this: the MSM is biased against the left and not to be trusted. So then who is to be trusted? Eric Alterman, I guess.”

OK, I teach journalism, and one thing I hope my students take away from my classes is the ability to identify weasel words like “I take the thrust of X’s argument to be...” Those words are a license to say anything one wants without even a single microbe of evidence. You can try it yourselves: “Forget all that. I take the thrust of W’s argument to be ‘Let’s kill all the Jews.’”

This is hardly, if I may borrow a phrase, “the sort of thing [that] improves the American public’s relationship to truth.”

Finally, yes, it’s true I [wrote](#) an extremely critical column in these pages about *The Economist* earlier this year, and no, I don’t think this column is payback. But it does prove my point about the ease with which journalists (and some think-tank partisans) can mess with the truth.

In that column, I called *The Economist* “undoubtedly the smartest weekly newsmagazine in the English language.” But even in the best journalistic outlets, we see the easy manipulation of facts, quotes taken out of context, and a lack of necessary (intellectual) legwork that academic standards of proof are designed to prevent.

Thanks, “W.W.,” for inadvertently proving my point.

While we’re on the topic of me, please indulge my desire to let readers of this column know that I was presented with the 2011 Mirror Award, sponsored by Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Journalism, for “Best Commentary, Digital Media.”

At the ceremony at the Plaza Hotel in New York on Tuesday, I expressed my gratitude to CAP and to my editors here for their help and support, and caused a minor ruckus by asking my fellow media writers to stop pretending that Fox News is actually a news operation. I

felt this was relevant because it was the topic of one of the columns that was being honored. You can read about it [here](#).

Thanks again, everybody.

Eric Alterman is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress and a Distinguished Professor of English at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. He is also a columnist for The Nation, The Forward, and The Daily Beast. His newest book is [Kabuki Democracy: The System vs. Barack Obama](#).

To speak with our experts on this topic, please contact:

Print: Megan Smith (health care, education, economic policy)
202.741.6346 or msmith@americanprogress.org

Print: Christina DiPasquale (foreign policy and security, energy)
202.481.8181 or cdipasquale@americanprogress.org

Print: Raúl Arce-Contreras (ethnic media, immigration)
202.478.5318 or rarcecontreras@americanprogress.org

Radio: Anne Shoup
202.481.7146 or ashoup@americanprogress.org

TV: Andrea Purse
202.741.6250 or apurse@americanprogress.org