



Think Again: Mainstream Media Is Missing the Point

By Eric Alterman | February 21, 2013

According to a much-discussed recent report in Politico, members of the press are frustrated by their lack of face time with President Barack Obama. Their anger apparently boiled over when they found themselves excluded from the president's golf outing with Tiger Woods over Presidents Day weekend.

Still, it would be hard to find an administration that did not inspire unhappiness among those who have the misfortune of drawing the assignment of covering it for their media outlet. What a remarkably ahistorical bunch these reporters are—and they're apparently dealing with a collective case of short-term memory loss, too. "He gives interviews not for our benefit, but to achieve his objective," complained Mark Knoller, a veteran CBS News reporter—as if this were not true of every single politician who has ever given a press interview anywhere, anytime.

It may or may not be true that President Obama is less available to the press corps than previous presidents—though in many respects, that means he is probably telling fewer lies to the media and the people than his predecessors did. But it has always puzzled me why so many members of the press think it important to merely regurgitate a play-by-play of the president's day—to follow him around in a pack and report slight variations on exactly the same story, which happens to almost always be the one the White House wants covered that day.

Wouldn't it be a better use of resources to leave that sort of rote reporting to the wire services—or perhaps an intern, or even a stenographer or two—and let the reporters loose to actually find stuff out? Among the many problems with today's mainstream media reporting is the incessant focus on surface matters, when what really matters is almost always what happens beneath the surface—where money changes hands and deals are made. Press releases and photo ops are designed more to conceal and confuse than to enlighten and uncover.

Consider, for instance, how many think-tank studies are released on any given topic and how frequently these reports are covered by journalists who are either incapable or uninterested in delving into the topic themselves to determine the quality of the research. Of course many think tanks are filled with first-rate scholars, former government officials, policy researchers, and the like, whose work is uncorrupted by the sources of their funding or the political interests of their top officers. I have worked for six such research organizations over the past 30 years—including this one—and I have almost never encountered such a problem. This is less true on the conservative side, however, because the right wing's war on knowledge has forced it to create an infrastructure of organizations that support conservatives' phony claims lest the real data undermine its ignorant—or perhaps deliberately dishonest—arguments.

According to a new report by the Center for Public Integrity, our elected representatives working on behalf of those who fund their campaigns have gamed the tax code. Wealthy donors are allowed to fund

think tanks and organizations that fill our political discourse with false information in order to improve the donors' own profits and protect their own wealth. According to the report, this is happening both at the local and the federal level, and it all goes down in secret.

At the state level, the report notes, beginning in 2009, "A network of online media outlets began popping up in state capitals across the nation, each covering the news from a clearly conservative point of view." As for where the resources for these websites came from—particularly at a moment when most news organizations were going through an agonizing series of budget cuts—that was never clear. But thanks, belatedly, to IRS records, we now know that right-wing conservative foundations and individuals created an organization called "Donors Trust" as a pass-through to fund these online outlets without leaving any individual fingerprints. It gave away \$86 million in 2011 alone—and all of it was "dedicated to the ideals of limited government, personal responsibility, and free enterprise," according to the group's website.

Since its founding in 1999, the Center for Public Integrity calculates that Donors Trust and its affiliated organization, Donors Capital Fund, have contributed nearly \$400 million to a variety of allegedly independent—but actually conservative—groups, while simultaneously protecting them from being associated with the likes of such givers as the billionaire right-wing ideologue Charles Koch and his brother David. Other such Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund sponsors include Amway co-founder Richard DeVos, hedge-fund billionaire Paul Singer, and owner of the Examiner newspapers and The Weekly Standard magazine Philip Anschutz, along with right-wing foundations such as the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Coors family's Castle Rock Foundation, according to IRS records.

The money from these and other donors goes not only to small state-oriented think tanks but also to major Washington players, including the Cato Institute, which was funded by the Koch brothers' funds, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Hudson Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Reason Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, the Mont Pelerin Society, the Discovery Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute. American Enterprise Institute's president, Arthur C. Brooks, is on the board of Donors Trust. As conservative commentator and former American Enterprise Institute fellow David Frum observes, these groups "increasingly function as public relations agencies" rather than genuine policy research organizations.

Of particular interest to right-wing funders—particularly energy-based billionaires such as the Koch brothers and their associated foundation—is the concerted effort by conservative think tanks to undermine the global scientific consensus that man-made global warming exists. These organizations have worked tirelessly to prevent governments, particularly our own, from addressing climate change because their major donors don't want the oil and gas industry to go anywhere, lose any money, or forgo any of its various fiscal advantages and tax breaks that have come from it being a special interest over the years. Overall, Donors Trust and the Donors Capital Fund have financed 102 organizations, which, in the words of The Guardian's George Minibot:

... Either dismiss climate science or downplay the need to take action. ... These groups, working through the media, mobilising gullible voters and lobbying politicians, helped to derail Obama's cap and trade bill and the climate talks at Copenhagen. Now they're seeking to prevent the US president from trying again.

And yet these smaller organizations and think tanks are doing so not only with oftentimes tax-deductible funds but also due to the funders' anonymity—virtually without any connection to the people and corporations paying to undermine our climate security—meaning they're not being held accountable for their manipulation of the news. As Kert Davies, research director of Greenpeace, explained to The Guardian's Suzanne Goldenberg:

The funding of the denial machine is becoming increasingly invisible to public scrutiny. It's also growing. Budgets for all these different groups are growing. ... There is no transparency, no accountability for the money. There is no way to tell who is funding them.

Recall the fact that not a single question about global warming came up during all four presidential and vice presidential debates in 2012. Much of the public remains deeply confused about the nature and significance of climate change, particularly as it relates to natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy—to say nothing of the likely rise in the earth's temperature in the future. Meanwhile, members of the mainstream are in an uproar about just what President Obama and Tiger talked about on the ninth green.

What is wrong with this picture?

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