

The Disinformation Society

George W. Bush's re-election has been explained as a red-state-versus-blue-state "values gap." But research shows a majority of Bush voters were misinformed about White House policies on the environment, Iraq, and terrorism. Instead of news, they got propaganda, disseminated by the right-wing machine, corporate broadcasters, and journalists who think balance is reporting one side. In a new epilogue to his recent book, *Crimes Against Nature*, ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR. shows how, almost two decades after Reagan's F.C.C. eliminated the Fairness Doctrine, the media have hidden the real gap—between America's values and those of its government

Many Democratic voters marveled at the election results. George W. Bush, they argued, has transformed a projected \$5.6 trillion, 10-year Bill Clinton surplus into a projected \$1.4 trillion deficit—a \$7 trillion shift in wealth from our national treasury into the pockets of the wealthiest Americans, particularly the president's corporate paymasters. Any discerning observer, they argued, must acknowledge that the White House has repeatedly lied to the American people about critical policy issues—Medicare, education, the environment, the budget implications of its tax breaks, and the war in Iraq—with catastrophic results.

President Bush has opened our national lands and sacred places to the lowest bidder and launched a jihad against the American

environment and public health to enrich his corporate sponsors. He has mired us in a costly, humiliating war that has killed more than 1,520 American soldiers and maimed 11,300. He has made America the target of Islamic hatred, caused thousands of new terrorists to be recruited to al-Qaeda, isolated us in the world, and drained our treasury of the funds necessary to rebuild Afghanistan and to finance our own vital homeland-security needs. He has shattered our traditional alliances and failed to protect vulnerable terrorist targets at home—chemical plants, nuclear facilities, air-cargo carriers, and ports. He has disgraced our nation and empowered tyrants with the unpunished excesses at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. These baffled Democrats were hard-pressed to believe that their fellow Americans would give a man like this a second term.

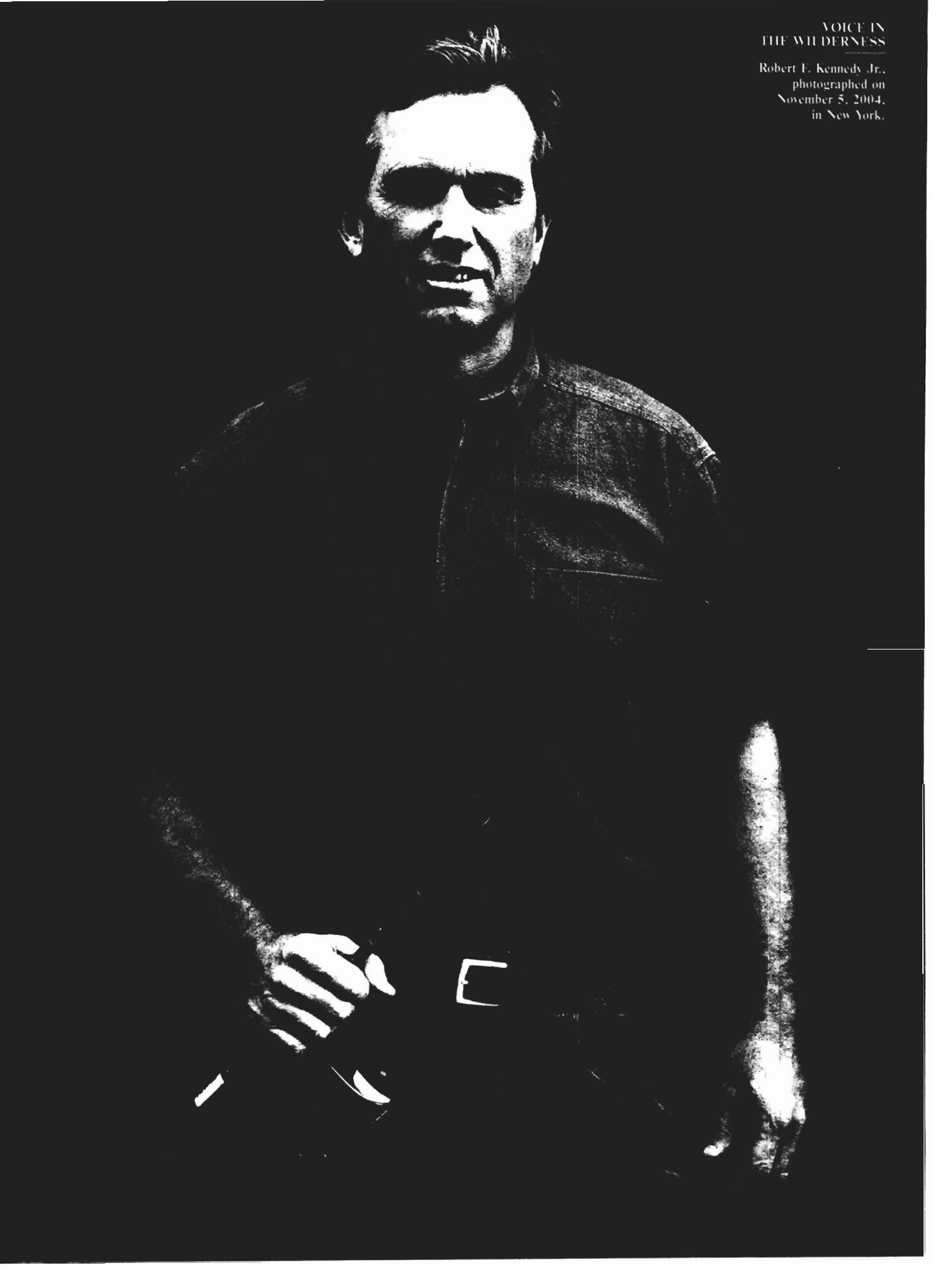
To explain the president's victory, political pundits posited a

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VOICE IN
THE WILDERNESS

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.,
photographed on
November 5, 2004,
in New York.



vast “values gap” between red states and blue states. They attributed the president’s success in the polls, despite his tragic job failures, to the rise of religious fundamentalism. Heartland Americans, they suggested, are the soldiers in a new American Taliban, willing to vote against their own economic interests to promote “morality” issues that they see as the critical high ground in a life-or-death culture war.

I believe, however, that the Democrats lost the presidential contest not because of a philosophical chasm between red and blue states but due to an information deficit caused by a breakdown in our national media. Traditional broadcast networks have abandoned their former obligation to advance democracy and promote the public interest by informing the public about both sides of issues relevant to those goals. To attract viewers and advertising revenues, they entertain rather than inform. This threat to the flow of information, vital to democracy’s survival, has been compounded in recent years by the growing power of right-wing media that twist the news and deliberately deceive the public to advance their radical agenda.

According to an October 2004 survey by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes, in Washington, D.C., and the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland:

- Seventy-two percent of Bush supporters believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (or a major program for developing them), versus 26 percent of Kerry voters. A seven-month search by 1,500 investigators led by David Kay, working for the C.I.A., found no such weapons.
- Seventy-five percent of Bush supporters believed that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, a view held by 30 percent of Kerry supporters. *The 9/11 Commission Report* concluded that there was no terrorist alliance between Iraq and al-Qaeda.
- Eighty-two percent of Bush supporters erroneously believed either that the rest of the world felt better about the U.S. thanks to its invasion of Iraq or that views were evenly divided. Eighty-six percent of Kerry supporters accurately understood that a majority of the world felt worse about our country.
- Most Bush supporters believed the Iraq war had strong support in the Islamic world. Kerry’s supporters accurately estimated the low level of support in Islamic countries. Even Turkey, the most Westernized Islamic country, was 87 percent against the invasion.
- Most significant, the majority of Bush voters agreed with Kerry supporters that if Iraq did not have W.M.D. and was not providing assistance to al-Qaeda the U.S. should not have gone to war. Furthermore, most Bush supporters, according to PIPA, favored the Kyoto Protocol to fight global warming, the Mine Ban Treaty to ban land mines, and strong labor and environmental standards in trade agreements, and wrongly believed that their candidate favored these things. In other words, the values and principles were the same. Bush voters made their choice based on bad information.

It’s no mystery where the false beliefs are coming from. Both Bush and Kerry supporters overwhelmingly believe that the Bush administration at the time of the 2004 U.S. election was telling the American people that Iraq had W.M.D. and that Saddam Hussein had strong links to al-Qaeda. The White House’s false message was carried by right-wing media in bed with the administration. Prior to the election, Fox News reporters, for example,

regularly made unsubstantiated claims about Iraq’s W.M.D. Fox anchor Brit Hume, on his newscast in July 2004, announced that W.M.D. had actually been found. Sean Hannity repeatedly suggested without factual support that the phantom weapons had been moved to Syria and would soon be found. An October 2003 survey by PIPA showed that people who watch Fox News are disproportionately afflicted with the same misinformation evidenced by the 2004 PIPA report. The earlier study probed for the source of public misinformation about the Iraq war that might account for the common misperceptions that Saddam Hussein had been involved in the 9/11 attacks, that he supported al-Qaeda, that W.M.D. had been found, and that world opinion favored the U.S. invasion. The study discovered that “the extent of Americans’ misperceptions vary significantly depending on their source of news. Those who receive most of their news from Fox News are more likely than average to have misperceptions.”

Unfortunately for John Kerry, many Americans now do get their information from Fox—according to Nielsen Media Research, in February, Fox was the cable news leader, with an average of 1.57 million prime-time viewers, nearly 2.5 times CNN’s average viewership in the same time slot—and from Fox’s similarly biased cable colleagues, CNBC and MSNBC. Millions more tune to the Sinclair Broadcast Group—one of the nation’s largest TV franchises. After 9/11, Sinclair forced its stations to broadcast spots pledging support for President Bush, and actively censored unfavorable coverage of the Iraq war—blacking out Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* when it ran the names of the U.S. war dead. It retreated from its pre-election proposal to strong-arm its 62 TV stations into pre-empting their prime-time programming to air an erroneous and blatantly biased documentary about John Kerry’s war record only when its stock dropped 17 percent due to Wall Street fears of sponsor boycotts and investor worries that Sinclair was putting its right-wing ideology ahead of shareholder profits.

Americans are also getting huge amounts of misinformation from talk radio, which is thoroughly dominated by the extreme right. A Gallup Poll conducted in December 2002 discovered that 22 percent of Americans receive their daily news from talk-radio programs. An estimated 15 million people listen to Rush Limbaugh alone, and on the top 45 AM radio stations in the country, listeners encounter 310 hours of conservative talk for every 5 hours of liberal talk. According to the nonprofit Democracy Radio, Inc., 90 percent of all political talk-radio programming is conservative, while only 10 percent is progressive. All the leading talk-show hosts are right-wing radicals—Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Oliver North, G. Gordon Liddy, Bill O’Reilly, and Michael Reagan—and the same applies to local talk radio.

Alas, while the right-wing media are deliberately misleading the American people, the traditional corporately owned media—CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN—are doing little to remedy those wrong impressions. They are, instead, focusing on expanding viewership by hawking irrelevant stories that appeal to our prurient interest in sex and celebrity gossip. None of the three major networks gave gavel-to-gavel coverage of the party conventions or more than an hour in prime time, opting instead to entertain the public with semi-pornographic reality shows. “We’re about to elect a president of the United States at a time when we have young people dying

in our name overseas, we just had a report from the 9/11 commission which says we are not safe as a nation, and one of these two groups of people is going to run our country,” commented PBS newsman Jim Lehrer, in disgust at the lack of convention coverage. CBS anchor Dan Rather said that “I argued the conventions were part of the dance of democracy. I found myself increasingly like the Mohicans, forced farther and farther back into the wilderness and eventually eliminated.”

The broadcast reporters participating in the presidential debates were apparently so uninterested in real issues that they neglected to ask the candidates a single question about the president’s environmental record. CBS anchor Bob Schieffer, who M.C.’d the final debate, asked no questions about the environment, focusing instead on abortion, gay marriage, and the personal faith of the can-

didates, an agenda that could have been dictated by Karl Rove.

Where is that dreaded but impossible-to-find “liberal bias” that supposedly infects the American press? The erroneous impression that the American media have a liberal bias is itself a mark of the triumph of the right-wing propaganda machine.

and to intimidate and discipline the mainstream press into being more accommodating to conservatism.

According to Brock, right-wing groups such as the Heritage Foundation and Scaife’s Landmark Legal Foundation helped persuade Ronald Reagan and his Federal Communications Commission, in 1987, to eliminate the Fairness Doctrine—the F.C.C.’s 1949 rule which dictated that broadcasters provide equal time to both sides of controversial public questions. It was a “godsend for conservatives,” according to religious-right pioneer and Moral Majority co-founder Richard Viguerie, opening up talk radio to one-sided, right-wing broadcasters. (Rush Limbaugh nationally launched his talk show the following year.) Radical ideologues, faced with Niagara-size flows of money from the Adolph Coors Foundation, the four sisters, and others, set up magazines and newspapers and

“We’re in a situation,” says David Brock, “where you have ‘red facts’ and ‘blue facts.’ And I think the conservatives intentionally have done that to try to confuse accurate information.”

The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy, by David Brock—the president and C.E.O. of Media Matters for America, a watchdog group that documents misinformation in the right-wing media—traces the history of the “liberal bias” notion back to the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign, in 1964, in which aggrieved conservatives

railed against Walter Cronkite and the “Eastern Liberal Press” at the Republican National Convention. In response to Spiro Agnew’s 1969 attack on the networks as insufficiently supportive of Nixon’s policies in Vietnam, conservatives formed an organization called Accuracy in Media, whose purpose was to discredit the media by tagging it as “liberal,” and to market that idea with clever catchphrases. Polluter-funded foundations, including the Adolph Coors Foundation and the so-called four sisters—the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, Richard Mellon Scaife’s foundations, and the Smith Richardson Foundation—all of which funded the anti-environmental movement, spent hundreds of millions of dollars to perpetuate the big lie of liberal bias, to convince the conservative base that it should not believe the mainstream, to create a market for right-wing media,

cultivated a generation of young pundits, writers, and propagandists, giving them lucrative sinecures inside right-wing think tanks, now numbering more than 500, from which they bombard the media with carefully honed messages justifying corporate profit taking.

Brock himself was one of the young stars recruited to this movement, working in turn for the Heritage Foundation, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s *Washington Times*, and Scaife’s *American Spectator*. “If you look at this history,” Brock told me recently, “you will find that the conservative movement has in many ways purchased the debate. You have conservative media outlets day after day that are intentionally misinforming the public.” Brock, who admits to participating in the deliberate deception while he was a so-called journalist on the right-wing payroll, worries that the right-wing media are systematically feeding the public “false and wrong information. It’s a really significant problem for democracy.

“We’re in a situation,” continues Brock, “where you have ‘red facts’ and ‘blue facts.’ And I think the conservatives intentionally have done that to try to confuse and neutralize accurate information that may not serve the conservative agenda.”

The consolidation of media ownership and its conservative drift are growing ever more severe. Following the election, Clear Channel, the biggest owner of radio stations in the country, announced that Fox News will now supply its news feed to many of the company’s 1,240 stations, further amplifying the distorted drumbeat of right-wing propaganda that most Americans now take for news.

Sadly enough, right-wing radio and cable are increasingly driving the discussion in mainstream broadcasting as well. At a Harvard University symposium the day

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 215 before the Democratic convention, three network anchors and a CNN anchor straightforwardly discussed the effects that right-wing broadcasters, conservative money, and organized pressure have on the networks. And in February 2005, Pat Mitchell announced her resignation as president of PBS, hounded from office by right-wing critics who felt her conciliatory efforts to conservatize the network—canceling a cartoon episode with a lesbian couple and adding talk shows by such right-wingers as Tucker Carlson and Paul Gigot—did not go far enough fast enough.

Furthermore, Fox's rating success has exerted irresistible gravities that have pulled its competitors' programming to starboard. In the days leading up to the Iraq war, MSNBC fired one of television's last liberal voices, Phil Donahue, who hosted its highest-rated show; an internal memo revealed that Donahue presented "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war." CBS's post-election decision to retire Dan Rather, a lightning rod for right-wing wrath, coincided with Tom Brokaw's retirement from NBC. He was replaced by Brian Williams, who has said, "I think Rush [Limbaugh] has actually yet to get the credit he is due." According to NBC president Jeff Zucker, "No one understands this NASCAR nation more than Brian."

Conservative noise on cable and talk radio also has an echo effect on the rest of the me-

dia. One of the conservative talking points in the last election was that terrorists supported the candidacy of John Kerry. According to Media Matters, this pearl originated on Limbaugh's radio show in March 2004 and repeatedly surfaced in mainstream news. In May, CNN's Kelli Arena reported "speculation that al-Qaeda believes it has a better chance of winning in Iraq if John Kerry is in the White House"; in June it migrated to Dick Morris's *New York Post* column. Chris Matthews mentioned it in a July edition of *Hardball*. In September, Bill Schneider, CNN's senior political analyst, declared that al-Qaeda "would very much like to defeat President Bush," signaling that Limbaugh's contrivance was now embedded firmly in the national consciousness.

That "echo effect" is not random. Brock shows in his book how the cues by which mainstream news directors decide what is important to cover are no longer being suggested by *The New York Times* and other responsible media outlets, but rather by the "shadowy" participants of a Washington, D.C., meeting convened by Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, an anti-government organization that seeks to prevent federal regulation of business.

Every Wednesday morning the leaders of 80 conservative organizations meet in Washington in Norquist's boardroom. This radical cabal formulates policy with the Republican National Committee and the White House, developing talking points that go out to the conservative media via a sophisticated fax tree. Soon, millions of Americans are hear-

ing the same message from cable news commentators and thousands of talk jocks across America. Their precisely crafted message and language then percolate through the mainstream media to form the underlying assumptions of our national debate.

This meeting has now grown to include more than 120 participants, including industry lobbyists and representatives of conservative media outlets such as *The Washington Times* and the *National Review*. According to Brock, columnist Bob Novak sends a researcher. *The Wall Street Journal's* Peggy Noonan may attend in person. The lockstep coordination among right-wing political operatives and the press is new in American politics.

A typical meeting might focus on a new tax proposal released by President Bush. Following conference calls throughout the week, the decision will be made to call the plan "bold." Over the next 10 days, radio and cable will reiterate that it's "bold, bold, bold." The result, according to Brock, is that "people come to think that there must be something 'bold' about this plan."

This highly integrated network has given the right frightening power to disseminate its propaganda and has dramatically changed the way Americans get their information and formulate policy. In *The Republican Noise Machine*, Brock alleges routine fraud and systematically dishonest practices by his former employer the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's *Washington Times*, which is the primary propaganda organ for Moon's agenda to establish

America as a Fascist theocracy. The paper doesn't reach more than a hundred thousand subscribers, but its articles are read on the air by Rush Limbaugh, reaching 15 million people, and are posted on Matt Drudge's Web site, to reach another 7 million people, and its writers regularly appear on *The O'Reilly Factor*, before another 2 million. Network TV talk-show producers and bookers use those appearances as a tip sheet for picking the subject matter and guests for their own shows. And so the capacity of the conservative movement to disseminate propaganda has increased exponentially.

This right-wing propaganda machine can quickly and indelibly brand Democratic candidates unfavorably—John Kerry as a flip-flopper, Al Gore as a liar. The machine is so powerful that it was able to orchestrate Clinton's impeachment despite the private and trivial nature of his "crime"—a lie about an extramarital tryst—when compared with President Bush's calamitous lies about Iraq, the budget, Medicare, education, and the environment. During the 2000 campaign, Al Gore was smeared as a liar—a charge that was completely false—by right-wing pundits such as gambling addict Bill Bennett and prescription-painkiller abuser Rush Limbaugh, both of whom the right wing has sold as moral paradigms. Meanwhile, George Bush's chronic problems with the truth during the three presidential debates that year were barely mentioned in the media, as Brock has noted. Americans accepted this negative characterization of Gore, and when they emerged from the voting booths in 2000, they told pollsters that Bush won their vote on "trust."

In the 2004 campaign, the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth launched dishonest attacks which, amplified and repeated by the right-wing media, helped torpedo John Kerry's presidential ambitions. No matter who the Democratic nominee was, this machinery had the capacity to discredit and destroy him.

Meanwhile, there is a palpable absence of strong progressive voices on TV, unless one counts HBO's Bill Maher and Comedy Central's Jon Stewart—both comedians—or Fox's meek foil, Alan Colmes, who plays the ever-

losing Washington Generals to Sean Hannity's Harlem Globetrotters. There are no liberal equivalents to counterbalance Joe Scarborough, John Stossel, Bill O'Reilly, and Lawrence Kudlow. Brock points to the systematic structural imbalance in the panels that are featured across all of cable and on the networks' Sunday shows. Programs like *Meet the Press* and Chris Matthews's *Hardball* invariably pit conservative ideologues such as William Safire, Robert Novak, and Pat Buchanan against neutral, nonaligned reporters such as Andrea Mitchell, the diplo-

Furthermore, America's newspapers, like most other media outlets, are owned predominantly by Republican conservatives. Newspapers endorsed Bush by two to one in the 2000 election. According to a recent survey, the op-ed columnists who appear in the most newspapers are conservatives Cal Thomas and George Will. Republican-owned newspapers often reprint misinformation from the right. And red-state journalists, whatever their personal political sympathies, are unlikely to offend their editors by spending inordinate energy exposing right-wing lies.

Print journalism is a victim of the same consolidation by a few large, profit-driven corporations that has affected the broadcasters. Today, a shrinking pool of owners—guided by big business rather than journalistic values—forces news executives to cut costs and seek the largest audience. The consolidation has led to demands on news organizations to return profits at rates never before expected of them. Last summer, just a few months after winning five Pulitzer Prizes, the *Los Angeles Times* was asked by its parent company to drop 60 newsroom positions.

The pressure for bottom-line news leaves little incentive for investment in investigative reporting. Cost-cutting has liquidated news staffs, leaving reporters little time to research stories. According to an Ohio University study, the number of investigative reporters was cut almost in half between 1980 and 1995.

During the debate over the Radio Act of 1927, an early forerunner of the Fairness Doctrine, Texas congressman Luther Johnson warned Americans against the corporate and ideological consolidation of the national press that has now come to pass. "American thought and American politics will be largely at the mercy of those who operate these stations," he said. "For publicity is the most powerful weapon that can be wielded in a republic . . . and when a single selfish group is permitted to either tacitly or otherwise acquire ownership and dominate these broadcasting stations throughout the country, then woe be to those who dare to differ with them. It will be impossible to compete with them in reaching the ears of the American people."

The news isn't entirely bleak. Progressive



THUNDER ON THE RIGHT

- (1) Sean Hannity. (2) Rush Limbaugh.
 (3) Tucker Carlson. (4) Matt Drudge.
 (5) G. Gordon Liddy. (6) Peggy Noonan.
 (7) Brian Williams. (8) Bill O'Reilly.
 (9) Lawrence Kudlow. (10) Dick Morris.
 (11) John Stossel. (12) William Bennett.
 (13) Oliver North. (14) Michael Savage.
 (15) Michael Reagan. (16) Joe Scarborough.

matic correspondent for NBC News, or *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ronald Brownstein in a rigged fight that leaves an empty chair for a strong progressive point of view.

There is still relevant information in the print media. But even that has been shamefully twisted by the pressures of the right. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, which jumped on Scaife's bandwagon to lead the mainstream press in the Clinton-impeachment frenzy, have been forced to issue *mea culpas* for failing to ask the tough questions during the run-up to Bush's Iraq war.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

voices are prevalent on the Internet, which is disproportionately utilized by the younger age groups that will exercise increasing influence in public affairs each year. The success of Air America Radio, the progressive network whose best-known host is Al Franken, offers great cause for optimism. Despite a shoestring budget and financial chaos at its inception, Air America has grown in one year to include 50 stations, from which it is accessible to half the American people. Most encouraging, a recent study shows that Air America personalities as a group rank second in popularity to Rush Limbaugh. Last fall in San Diego, a traditional Republican bastion, Air America was reported to be the No. 1 radio station among listeners 18 to 49 years old. But progressive activists need also to find a voice on television, and there the outlook is dark.

If there is a market for progressive voices,

as the Air America experience suggests, why don't the big corporate owners leap in? A top industry executive recently told me that he was dead certain that there would be a large audience for a progressive TV news network to counterbalance the right-wing cable shows. "But," he said, "the corporate owners will never touch it. Multi-nationals, like Viacom, Disney, and General Electric, that rely on government business, contracts, and goodwill are not going to risk offending the Republicans who now control every branch of government."

This executive had recently spoken to Viacom chairman Sumner Redstone (a lifelong Democrat) about the corporation's open support of the Bush administration. "I said, 'Sumner, what about our children and what about our country?' He replied, 'Viacom is my life. I've got to do what's best for the company. I need to buy more stations, and the Republicans are going to let me do it. It's in the company's interest to support Republicans.'"

When veteran television journalist and for-

mer CBS news analyst Bill Moyers resigned as host of PBS's *Now* in December, he observed, "I think my peers in commercial television are talented and devoted journalists, but they've chosen to work in a corporate mainstream that trims their talent to fit the corporate nature of American life. And you do not get rewarded for telling the hard truths about America in a profit-seeking environment." Moyers called the decline in American journalism "the biggest story of our time." He added, "We have an ideological press that's interested in the election of Republicans, and a mainstream press that's interested in the bottom line. Therefore, we don't have a vigilant, independent press whose interest is the American people."

Moyers has elsewhere commented that "the quality of journalism and the quality of democracy are inextricably joined." By diminishing the capacity for voters to make rational choices, the breakdown of the American press is threatening not just our environment but our democracy. □