

**MAY 27**

# Major 'liberal' outlets clog media debate

**F**or many years, health-conscious Americans avidly consumed margarine as a wholesome substitute for artery-clogging butter. Only later did research shed light on grim effects of the partially hydrogenated oil in margarine, with results such as higher incidences of heart disease.

Putting our trust in bogus alternatives can be dangerous for our bodies. And for the body politic.

For many years, staples of the highbrow American media diet have included NPR News and the New York Times. Both outlets are copious and seem erudite, in contrast to abbreviated forms of news. And with conservative spin widespread in news media, NPR and the Times appeal to listeners and readers who prefer journalism without a rightward slant.

Recent developments, however, add weight to evidence that it would be unwise to have faith in news coverage from NPR or the New York Times.

The myth of "liberal" National Public Radio has suffered a big blow. Days ago, the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) released a detailed study of NPR indicating that the network's overall news coverage leans to the right. The documentation is extensive and devastating.

Consider a key aspect of the research:

\* "FAIR's study recorded every on-air source quoted in June 2003 on four National Public Radio news shows: 'All Things Considered,' 'Morning Edition,' 'Weekend Edition Saturday' and 'Weekend Edition Sunday.' ... Altogether, the study counted 2,334 quoted sources, featured in 804 stories."

\* The findings on news coverage debunk the persistent claims that NPR is a liberal network. "Despite the commonness of such claims, little evidence has ever been presented for a left bias at NPR, and FAIR's latest study gives it no support. Looking at partisan sources – including government officials, party officials, campaign workers and consultants – Republicans outnumbered Democrats by more than 3 to 2 (61 percent to 38 percent)."

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\* The new results are in line with a previous FAIR study, released in 1993. Back then, the Republican tilt in sourcing was also pronounced: "A majority of Republican sources when the GOP controls the White House and Congress may not be surprising, but Republicans held a similar though slightly smaller edge (57 percent to 42 percent) in 1993, when Clinton was president and Democrats controlled both houses of Congress."

Every day, millions of Americans listen to NPR News – and many presumably trust it as a balanced source of information and analysis. Likewise, millions of people are in the habit of relying on the New York Times each day, whether they're reading the newspaper itself or Times news service articles that appear in daily papers around the country.

On May 26 – a year and a half after publishing front-page articles that boosted the momentum toward an invasion of Iraq – the New York Times printed a 14-paragraph "From the Editors" note that finally acknowledged there was something wrong with the coverage. But the unusual new article, appearing under the headline "The Times and Iraq," indicated that top editors at the newspaper still refuse to face up to its pivotal role in moving the war agenda.

The Times semi-apology is more self-justifying than self-critical. Assessing a page-one December 2001 article that promulgated a bogus tale about biological, chemical and nuclear weapons facilities in Iraq, the editors' note says that "in this case it looks as if we, along with the administration, were taken in." The same tone echoes through an internal memo to the Times newsroom from the paper's executive editor, Bill Keller, on May 26: "The purpose of the [published] note is to acknowledge that we, like many of our competitors and many officials in Washington, were misled on a number of stories by Iraqi informants dealing in misinformation."

But in many respects the Times editors were no more "taken in" or "misled" than Bush administration officials were. They wanted to trumpet what they were told by certain dubious sources, and they proceeded accordingly. For the readers of the Times, that meant disinformation – on behalf of a war agenda – was served up on the front page, time after time, in the guise of journalism.

Keller's internal memo explains that the editors' public article "is not an attempt to find a scapegoat or to blame reporters for not knowing then what we know now." The phrasing was seriously evasive. A comment from FAIR, posted in the "Media Views" section of its website, pointed out: "If Keller thinks the problem with Judith Miller's reporting was her lack of clairvoyance rather than her failure to exercise basic journalistic skepticism, then it's clear that he didn't learn much from this fiasco. He describes the publication of the editor's note as 'a point of journalistic pride' – as if a

publication should be proud of acknowledging egregious errors that other people have been pointing out for more than a year.”

Unnamed in the Times editors’ note was Judith Miller, the reporter who wrote or co-wrote four of the six articles singled out as flawed. Miller often didn’t let her readers know that she was relying on the Pentagon’s pet Iraqi exile, Ahmad Chalabi.

Tardy by more than a year, the semi-mea-culpa article by the Times editors – while failing to provide any forthright explanation of Chalabi’s role as a chronic source for Miller’s prewar stories – appeared a week after the U.S. government turned definitively and publicly against its exile ally Chalabi. Only then were the top New York Times editors willing to turn definitively and publicly against key Times stories spun by the Chalabi-Miller duo.

More revealing than they evidently intended, the editors’ article repeatedly lumped together two institutions – the New York Times and the U.S. government – as though they were somehow in comparable situations during the lead-up to the war. The excuses for both were sounding remarkably similar. So, the Times editors insinuated that they, along with top officials in Washington, were victims rather than perpetrators:

“Administration officials now acknowledge that they sometimes fell for misinformation from these exile sources. So did many news organizations — in particular, this one.”

While the May 26 article “From the Editors” took a step toward setting the record straight, it did so while sidestepping responsibility. There’s some symbolism in the fact that – unlike the indefensible front-page Times stories it belatedly critiqued – the editors’ note appeared back on page A-10.

A terrible truth, still unacknowledged by the New York Times, is that the newspaper did not “fall for misinformation” as much as eagerly jump for it. And no amount of self-examination, genuine or otherwise, can possibly make up for the carnage in Iraq that the Times facilitated.

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