

# From debates to disinformation

**HALLOWEEN** came and went early this year in the form of three presidential debates – with George W. Bush’s weird behavior proving more frightening than a cabinet of Freddy Krugers. For the first debate of the trilogy, Bush appeared confused, angry and unable to cogently respond to Kerry’s attacks, as if he just awoke from a coma and was unfamiliar with the Iraq war. At one point he admonished an invisible adversary for interrupting him, demanding that he or she “let me finish.” His light was green and no one was interrupting him, except maybe Karl Rove’s voice in his ear.

Bush raised the fright factor during the second debate. Still unable to respond to Kerry’s attacks, he kept leaping from his stool, flailing his arms about and once again shouting his talking points from the first debate, at one juncture refusing to obey the debate rules and talk in turn. Between episodes he sat in place rapidly blinking his eyes.

Bush should have been more comfortable at the third debate since the moderator, Bob Schieffer, is a close friend with whom the Commander-in-Chief frequently played golf and attended ball games. Schieffer’s brother was Bush’s business partner. This familiarity with the moderator, however, didn’t put the seemingly rabid Bush at ease or help him keep his Mr. Jekyll at bay.

## **Botox gone bad: that weird grin**

Instead, by the time the third debate rolled around, Bush had morphed into a dead ringer

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for Jack Nicholson's Joker character in the film, *Batman*. He was hyperactive, giggly and obviously wired – at times appearing like a crackhead puppeteer's marionette. His speech was as halting as ever, but faster. He blurted his lines in quick spurts, skidding to stops, then unexpectedly jackrabbiting forward again. And he seemed to be suffering from some sort of botox fuck-up on the starboard side of his face, with spittle accumulating at the south end of a permanently affixed crooked eat-shit smirk. With all those Swift Boat photos of a young John Kerry circulating about, today's John Kerry looks wrinkled and grey. I suspect Bush's handlers wanted to contrast this tired old Kerry with a young vibrant wrinkle-free George W. But maybe they got overzealous with the wrinkle-smoothing botox, which works by temporarily paralyzing facial muscles. Like a curse, Bush couldn't shake this weird smug grin no matter what topic he attempted to address. The visuals were made worse by his erratic behavior, such as when he responded to a question about healthcare by giggling.

Fox did all they could to help their man out, running the Yankees Red Sox game opposite the multi-network debate broadcast. Keeping people from watching debates and registering to vote gives the Bush team its best hope for victory. Still, 50 million people watched the debate. That's 50 million people who won't believe the media spin from papers such as *The Buffalo News*, which had to venture all the way to Rhode Island to find their idiot academic of the week to declare that "Bush won." For the corporate press, "objectivity" means finding an expert to declare Bush the winner, another to declare Kerry the winner, and one to chalk the debate up as a draw – reality be damned. This is akin to finding three pundits – one to declare the sky is up, one to declare that it's down, and one to find merit in both arguments.

### **Stolen Airtime: The "Disinfomercial"**

The GOP's hopes for victory lie in distracting attention away from a faltering incoherent Bush, and over to a supposedly treasonous John Kerry. To do this, however, the Republicans first have to construct the image of a treasonous Kerry. Hence, they've enlisted the help of their big guns at Sinclair Communications, the nation's largest TV chain with 62 stations reaching 24 percent of American households. Sinclair is a company with a long history of supporting neo-conservative Republicans. Their owners and executives regularly donate funds to Republican campaign coffers. In the run-up to the Iraq war, Sinclair required its stations to air canned editorial statements supporting the Bush agenda, including recorded diatribes from the company's vice president, Mark Hyman, a cold war relic who accuses Kerry of "a lifetime of supporting communist forces."

In the final weeks before the presidential election, Sinclair leaked plans to order all of

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its local stations to air a commercial-free, hour-long anti-Kerry disinformercial attacking the presidential candidate for his Vietnam-era anti-war stance. The initial plan, verified by local affiliates, was to air a GOP-linked ersatz documentary titled, "Stolen Honor: Wounds That Never Heal."

Sinclair's own Washington Bureau chief, Jon Lieberman, accused his bosses of "using the news to drive their own political agenda" and violating the public trust. Sinclair responded by immediately firing Lieberman and having security guards escort him out of the office. Sinclair announced later, on October 19, that this broadcast will now appear in the form of what they are calling a "special news event" titled "POW Story," based on "Stolen Honor." "Stolen Honor" is funded by the same Republican PAC that brought us the now discredited series of Swift Boat Veterans TV ads which attacked Kerry's Vietnam heroism and attacked him for testifying to Congress about atrocities committed by U.S. troops.

The Swift Boat ads, running in heavy TV rotation, allowed Republicans to divert attention away from Bush's AWOL National Guard year, ironically by putting Kerry on the defensive about his past as a decorated war hero. After two weeks of Swift Boat ads, the debate centered on whether or not Kerry deserved all of his medals, while ignoring the fact that he was in fact in Viet Nam, fighting, and according to witnesses, saving lives – all while his opponent was AWOL in Alabama.

"Stolen Honor" begins where the Swift Boat ads leave off, claiming that Kerry "Desecrated the [fine memory] of the Vietnam War" and that North Vietnamese jailers cited the texts of Kerry's testimony to congress while torturing American prisoners. According to the film, Kerry was somehow responsible for extending the length of the war by two years – though I distinctly recalled it was Richard Nixon who prolonged the war while Kerry called for its immediate end.

### **A Moonie mercenary**

"Stolen Honor" was made by Carlton Sherwood, a former Vietnam-era Marine Corps sniper who served with the "Magnificent Bastards" unit. He began his media career as an award winning journalist before falling from grace in 1986, taking a job at The Washington Times, which was created by Korean Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church to promote an ultra-conservative political agenda in the United States. Sherwood went on to film a puff biography glorifying the megalomaniacal Moon who fancied himself as the messiah. A friend and former aid to Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge, Sherwood is currently on leave from his position as Vice President of the "anti-terrorism security" firm, WVC3. In that capacity he visited Iraq last year as a private contractor (or

mercenary).

Having threatened to air what is essentially a very long political commercial, Sinclair would have been giving a multimillion dollar in-kind corporate contribution to the Bush campaign while making a mockery of the emasculated equal time provisions formerly enforced by the F.C.C. Sinclair's Mark Hyman countered this argument, proclaiming to CNN that the film is straight news, and bizarrely explaining "If you use this logic and reasoning [that this film is an in-kind contribution], that means every car bomb in Iraq would be an in-kind contribution to John Kerry." Wacky, eh? As of Tuesday, Sinclair is still insisting that reports of what their program will contain are misleading, and that "the exact format of this unscripted event has not been finalized," meaning that they might still yield to public pressure and drop "Stolen Honor" entirely.

### **Hijacking history**

According to Michael Copps, one of the F.C.C.'s four commissioners, Sinclair's broadcast constitutes "an abuse of the public trust." He told CNN that Sinclair's action "is proof positive of media consolidation run amok when one owner can use the public airwaves to blanket the country with its political ideology..."

The broadcast of "POW Story," "Stolen Honor," or whatever Sinclair finally titles their rant, promises to open up old wounds concerning Vietnam, and more importantly, is an unprecedented move by a powerful media family to insert what appears to be politically motivated and biased misinformation only two weeks before a presidential election.

According to Sinclair, only part of the program uses "Stolen Honor." In it, material from "Stolen Honor" attacks Kerry for his testimony about U.S. atrocities – yet our own government investigated these allegations and verified that Kerry's information was accurate. (Not to mention the hypocrisy of a Republican-leaning corporation bringing this up after Abu Ghraib.) Vietnam veterans, more than any other group, know this. They were there. And most of them don't want to suffer through another rehash of this painful era in American history – especially when it is being manipulated by a cadre of draft-dodging warmongers who supported sending them off to a war they themselves wouldn't fight in.

Today, as politicians send another generation off to another war that none of their own children are fighting in, the story of Vietnam is more pertinent than ever. Let's not let Sinclair and the Bush campaign hijack and revise our history. And let's not let them degrade our political discourse with litanies of lies and historical revisionism.

Regardless of how much of it makes it to national TV, "Stolen Honor's" ultimate legacy will be to stimulate a national conversation about corporate media consolidation and its threat to discourse in a democratic society. Sinclair is the bastard child of Reagan and

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Clinton-era rules deregulating the public airwaves. They have continued to thrive, gobbling building their empire under the watch of Michael Powell's F.C.C. Now that they're brazenly trying tip the presidential election, in essence rewarding the powers that have been so kind to them, it's time to rethink what we have done to our media landscape.