

Networks sleep as Fleet Center burns

By Rory O'Connor

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Sometimes the mainstream media is so bad it's good, and once again that's been the case thus far here in Boston at the DNC.

Not good, of course, for the public they should be and often falsely claim to be serving, but certainly good for under-resourced sloggers and bloggers like yours truly, in that despite their massive technological and financial resource advantages, hundreds of employees, and "We Want to Own this Story" special convention sections, the mavens of the mainstream consistently miss the biggest and best stories staring all of us straight in the face.

Last night, while the networks slept, the cynics wept and the future revealed itself. The occasion was the extraordinary keynote speech by Barack Obama, a formerly obscure Illinois State Senator who is poised to become the only black member of the US Senate, and just the third since Reconstruction two turns of a century ago.

Obama, a self-described "skinny kid with a funny name," is the son of an African immigrant raised in a small village in Kenya, who grew up herding goats but got a scholarship "to study in a magical place, America." He is also the son of a white American woman from Kansas – but in a country that has elected only two black Senators in more than a hundred years, apparently even an ounce of African blood makes you completely and forever an "African-American." So be it. . .

In any event, the forty-two year old multi-culti pol with the Harvard Law degree and appealing, articulate manner would have stolen the show last night – had there been a show to steal. Instead, the networks took the night off, and judging from the morning coverage, so did the major newspapers, who trumpeted instead Ted Kennedy "leading the attack" (as the Boston Globe phrased it.)

The Globe and the Times, in particular, seemed to be drowning in minutia while "flooding the zone" with massive coverage of every possible party, personality, profile, sidebar, feature and folly. Meanwhile they missed the biggest story of the night: The First Black President.

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I came away convinced that twenty years from now – or less – we will all be watching clips of Obama’s keynote last night, as he accepts his party’s historic nomination.

And I’m not alone. Certainly the many hardened members of the media hunkered down in the press filing room watching agreed with me, unanimously, and that’s an unusually tough and unsentimental crowd to sway. Certainly my house-host this morning, who said she’s ready to drop everything and move to Illinois or D.C. or just about anywhere to work for Obama. And certainly Jesse Jackson Jr., whom one might expect to be competitive with Obama, but who gushed that “we always knew he was fantastic, but now all of America has seen what we’ve seen!”

Except all of America didn’t see it, because the networks took the night off.

Based on their Nielsen ratings the night before, it isn’t surprising, of course. When I ran into NBC News exec Bill Wheatley in early afternoon, he noted the precipitous decline in viewership over the years for political conventions, and reported that the “combined ratings of the three major networks on Monday night was only a 10.”

If you made a sitcom with numbers like that they would yank it with fifteen minutes to go and replace it with a rerun!

Meanwhile, ratings for cable channels and PBS, which are devoting substantial time to convention coverage, are showing large increases.

What’s it all about and who’s to blame, if anyone, for the disappearing act pulled by the networks? CBS anchor Dan Rather told the Times that “It’s basically an infomercial,” and blamed the “people who run the conventions” who “have squeezed out real news.” Rather admitted that “I understand it’s a public service,” but went on to add that “Most would need a speed-yawning course to get through it.” And he told me he was going to spend the “rest of the evening listening to the windfest.”

Les Crystal of the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, had a different take, however, saying “we feel very strongly we have a mission to show our viewers what’s happening at the convention.”

Why the difference? Private Media vs Public Media is at least one explanation. Rather understands it’s a public service – but despite using the public airwaves, feels no compulsion to serve the public.

But there are deeper underlying reasons that explain why the nets didn’t show Obama’s speech last night. They involve cold calculations and complicity by the organizers of the convention themselves.

The reality is that they had even less desire to showcase last night’s speakers than the networks, and in fact had carefully planned that far fewer viewer/voters would see Obama’s speech, as well as those of Howard Dean, Ted Kennedy and other Democrat stalwarts.

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As Adam Nagourney wrote in a fairly sharp analysis in the Times headlined ‘Shaping Convention for Its Separate Audiences’, “the fact that broadcast networks have cut their coverage to just three hours over four nights has provided Mr. Kerry with an opportunity to appeal to two diverse audiences with different interests, and Mr. Kerry has seized this moment aggressively.”

Translation: Kerry didn’t want you to see last night’s speeches, which featured some tough words, Bush-Bashing and, as Nagourney phrased it, “more than a few lines that Mr. Kerry might consider a tad over the top.” Instead, those speeches were meant only for the diehard Democrats, the delegates, “whom Mr. Kerry is not particularly eager to be identified with through Election Day.”

Too bad, because Obama laid it on the line with his lines – while still hewing closely to the Kerry line of unity. He spoke of “one people, all of us defending the United States of America,” and of how “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America. There’s the United States of America.”

Democratic Party Chairman Terry McAuliffe claims that “people watching the networks are getting the best of the best.” But Republican representatives like Christine Iverson had a different analysis, albeit one skewed for partisan advantage: “People who are watching the scrubbed version of the Democratic convention are missing what’s really going on here.”

Unfortunately for the public, Iverson’s version had a greater ring of truth. But as noted above, sometimes the mainstream media is so bad it’s good, at least for those of us adrift in the eddies of the Internet blogosphere. Because the story of the night was the ascension of Barack (which means ‘blessed’) Obama – and along with their audience, Big Media, working hand-in-hand with Big Politics, missed the story.

*O’Connor has launched his media blog “Media Is a Plural” at www.roryoconnor.org
<http://www.roryoconnor.org>*