

What we didn't see. Why we didn't see it

By Danny Schechter

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As I was leaving the Democratic Convention at Boston's Fleet Center last night, Congress member Jesse Jackson Jr. was telling me how ecstatic he was about the inspiring keynote address of Barrack Obama, the young Kenyan-Kansan American who may be on his way to the US Senate From Illinois. If he wins, he will be the first black male Senator since Massachusetts Edwin Brooke, whose name graces a federal court house just up the street from where we were chatting.

Obama's inaugural oration was a stunning personal and political coming out party – my partner now thinks of him as a possible first black president as a result of his dynamic presentation. Jesse Jr. said he deliberately watched the speech of the night on TV set, not on the Convention floor, because he wanted to see how it was going over in America's living rooms. His take resonated with mine: a 'star was born.'

But – and this was the BIG BUT (or should it be BUTT?) – this event staged by for the media, presented at great expense to maximize production values and reach out to the nation at large, a made for TV spectacle designed to take advantage of the free airtime, was not on the networks that reach the largest audience. And Why?

Our biggest media outlets were in effect boycotting this big media event. What's the sound of one hand clapping, or a tree falling in an empty forest? That's what the Democratic Convention sounded like last night in most of America's living rooms.

This is not to say that the networks were not set up to cover it. Oh, no! They were all there, at great expense, loaded up with the latest gizmos, their gear overflowing into trailers. Their satellites were at the ready, engineers and reporters in position. There was a multi-camera feed they could just plug in to. But they turned that switch off and kept their big screen dark.

I hung out next to Ted Koppel and Sam Donaldson at the ABC News compound right outside the Fleet Center. I chatted with NBC's top producer, and even ran into CBS's Dan Rather. They were all on the scene, but to paraphrase a comment I heard earlier about

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Florida in 2000, "if I had one of those yellow ribbons, I would have draped the whole state with a sign saying "CRIME SCENE."

Boston was a media crime scene last night, and the network heavies knew it.

They had a good rationalization for their decision. Opening night had been a ratings disaster. Together the networks only recorded a 10 rating, which one ABC executive I spoke to spoke of as a clear "vindication" of our decision. It was a small audience in TV terms, but still many times bigger than any of the cable news outlets or C-SPAN. Nevertheless the nets argued that this was "the proof" they needed that the American people were not interested.

An ABC exec who spoke of "vindication" rationalized that those viewers who wanted to see the event had many choices including a new digital channel that ABC News cranked up for the event shown on the digital tier on Time Warner Cable, and available on the internet. Never mind that practically no one knows its there.

This is a heroin peddler's argument: "we just give the people what they want." Often, people are not interested because politics is not made interesting. The familiar templates of sound byte driven TV coverage and horse race polling turn the process into a sports event where whose winning is all that matters. The stories of the people who are debating and organizing and battling in the trenches has been pronounced not news worthy. If our major political events are not interesting, what is? Maybe another state funeral for a dead Republican? (Ronald Reagan's son spoke last night and his talk was not broadcast either!) Were we given a choice about watching that?

I spoke by phone with Max Robins of Broadcasting an Cable. The leading trade mag and he said he was going to editorially challenge the network arguments. And he is in an industry serving publication so you know there is plenty of debate on this one in the business.

NBC's top gun said his network was giving away their whole effort to MSNBC, one of America's least watched news networks and not only during the convention. (Internally, they call the channel "MS" as if they want to distance NBC from it.) CBS's Dan Rather told me outside his 6th floor anchor booth that he had done all the broadcasting he was gonna do – and this was before Teddy Kennedy gave a powerful speech denouncing the failures of the Bush Administration. Now, he told me, he was just going to watch "the windfest." My namesake Dan is the MAN for most colorful turn of phrase, his daily speciality of da house.

So there you have it with some regrets or not – no network coverage! My partner Rory think I am too sentimental for the bygone era of gave to gavel coverage because there are no surprises at this convention which is set up to "get the American people to know about John Kerry" – and support him, of course.

But that's what conventions are, aren't they? Advocacy events. Parties for the parties.

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What's so wrong with that? Isn't the idea to maximize political turnout, to encourage Americans to care and to vote in our democracy. Or am I being too idealistic again in these cynical times?

I asked as many big names as I could about this decision, and most were disgusted. Carol Mosely Braum, the ex-Senator turned ex-candidate shook her head. "The networks. The networks..."she muttered. "They are just corporations."Nuff said.

To my surprise, former Republican aide to Richard Nixon, John McLaughlin, the loud mouth TV host of his widely seen weekly program (The cumulative rating is an 8.5, he boasts) ran into us at a party afterwards thrown by GQ magazine which has an article in the current issue graced by a Halle Berry cover claiming that W was on a top-secret secret mission in Vietnam the year he was supposedly AWOL from that base in Alabama.

This packed party was thrown for Gavin Newsom, the marrying mayor of San Francisco, and attracted all the beautiful people. The pols were at the function at the junction for Obama or the Ziggy Marley song fest at the Aquarium.) As the rains began to fall, I was forced to consume the Conde Nast supplied wine and sushi.

Anyway, McLaughlin, who, believe it or not, once asked me to consider producing his TV show (as did John Kerry himself) denounced the network boycott. "This is the most important political election in recent history,"he said. "And it should be covered. Full stop. Period. And he's on the right and knows a thing or two about attracting people to watch political debates, however formularized!

The halls were alive last night with the sound of Michael Moore fans cheering for the capped one when he strolled into the building and was quickly surrounded by every camera crew in sight. He is now an A-list celebrity and rates more coverage than the people he covers. Politicians like Maxine Waters and John Lewis looked on in amazement as the baseball capped political party of one was making news, while they were not, at their own convention. How unconventional! I didn't get close enough to hear what he was saying.

Lest you think I was only media focused last night I did imbibe the political debate that spilled into the corridors. I liked Teddy Kennedy comparing George W to George the Third and quoting FDR's line that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. He added: "The only thing we have to fear is 4 more years of George Bush. That got a laugh line and a big cheer. So did Howard Dean's insistence the party must allow diverse views.

I watched Larry King hold forth on the floor with, among others David Gergan, a Republican who also served the Clinton white house and later said hello to me. I did meet a minister who has joined the DNC to run a new outreach campaign to people of faith including the Christian rightists whose passion for Bush almost equals their fidelity to their lord and savior. There were still rumors flying about Cheney stepping down and speculation

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that Bush will tap McCain or Condi Rice to outflank them liberals out to get him.

I did scan the press coverage. The prize for the biggest putdown went to the New York Post which carried a photo of him in a space outfit that in their worldview made him look like a sperm in a scene from the Woody Allen movie "Everything you were afraid to ask about sex but were afraid to ask" and compared him to Michael Dukakis in that tank photo. The Democrats responded by releasing a photo of President Bush picking his nose. (I finally saw Dukakis, now a non-person in party circles, giving interviews outside the Hall. His wife Kitty looked great as she watched his long awaited moment in the sun of media attention.)

On the way to the convention, I dropped in at the official protest zone which looked like a cage at Guantanamo Bay. Maybe this was there as the ultimate warning to dissenters. It was DISGUSTING, wrapped in concertina razor wire and festooned with signs denouncing it as an affront to freedom of the speech. Real protesters were boycotting the place. When I was there, a small group of ultra-right crazies were screaming at about ten onlookers in a scene that even Fellini could not have imagined. John Ashcroft's America was on display for all to see!

My film WMD was playing at Simmons College as part of the Boston political film festival and I dropped in at the screening. A conference on Vietnam was happening across the hall and the one vet I met in the hall kept mumbling "bull shit" after peeking his head into my screening but never really watching it. He was as arrogant as he was uninformed. Later after we traded barbs, he came back and watched some more, and the whispered to me "Oh this is about the media, not just the military." (Next screening: Thursday at 6 at the West End Library.)

Duh!

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