

Faking the alternative

THE 1989 Hollywood release, *When Harry Met Sally*, would never have been more than a blip on the cultural landscape apart from Meg Ryan's now famous scene where she audibly faked an orgasm in a crowded restaurant. It went down like this: Ryan tells her would-be Casanova, Billy Crystal, that women fake orgasm all the time. Crystal counters that no woman ever faked an orgasm with him – he'd have known. Ryan then, right there at their restaurant table, began to squeal in ecstasy, "Oh yes, yessss, yessssss." The rest is pop-culture history. Poor movie. Convincing faked orgasm. I'll get back to this in a moment.

Fast forward to 2006. A handful of politically entrenched corporations with neo-conservative connections control almost all the media Americans consume. The product is homogenized, available in 1,000 bland indistinguishable flavors. The pundits wear many suits but speak with one master's voice. The news anchors and print journalists perform for mirrors, fooling only themselves. They're the smiling cheerleaders that dutifully lead us off to illegal, immoral and insane wars. They're the face of the American mass media.

This media model worked well, dumbing down the American population for over a generation. But now we're facing ecological catastrophe, endless war, runaway global social inequality and an impending economic collapse. The voices that the media silenced have proven prescient.

FAKING THE ALTERNATIVE / 2

Code Yellow, get some duct tape, drive a Hummer, drink Coke, hate Venezuela, rah team, for the rest there's MasterCard, just ain't doing it for us anymore. The corporate media, crippled by their own arrogance and disrespect for their audience, has pushed it too far. We're on bullshit overload and the anesthesia is wearing off. Americans are clamoring for some alternative – some source of real critical information – something different.

Suddenly there's a huge market demand for alternative media. Alternative newsmagazines such as The Nation, Mother Jones, In These Times and The Progressive have all seen major spikes in readership. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the nation's leading media criticism organization, has seen an unprecedented growth in membership and readership for its monthly publication, Extra! Pacifica Radio's hard hitting flagship program, Democracy Now!, is now simulcast on television, airing on nearly 400 radio and TV stations in the United States. Almost every major city has at least one commercially viable alternative newspaper. Here in Buffalo, a group of media activists (including me) formed Niagara Independent Media and recently launched the nation's first commercial alternative news and information radio station – The Voice of Reason, AM 1270. Its instant popularity has put the national media on notice as community activists team up with investors in other cities, looking to launch their own progressive community-based radio stations.

Like deer frozen in the headlights of a speeding semi full of industrial waste, the corporate media has been blindsided by the alternative press movement. Only this time the headlights aren't illuminating a graceful fawn. Today's road kill looks more like Rush Limbaugh, trousers around his ankles, taking a dump on the U.S. Constitution.

But the corporate media is resourceful. And like any good madam, they'll have their stable turn whatever tricks the market demands. This is where we get back to Meg Ryan and her theatrically convincing squeals of ecstasy. Like Ryan faking an orgasm, the corporate media is now faking its own alternative – trying to both cash in on the new demand for alternative media, and to preempt real alternative media from forming. And sometimes, where there was alternative media, the corporate media has moved in with cash, buying and sanitizing its former competition.

The break no news formula

This ersatz "alternative media" is easy to identify. It's in-your-face alternative branding is constantly reminding you that this corporate mainstream media product is your real alternative to the corporate mainstream media. But if you look closely, the fake alternatives follow a Break No News (BNN) formula. Sure, like Meg Ryan, they're

Academy Award quality squealers. They croon an anti-Bush mantra. He's soooo bad. He stole the presidency. Impeach! Impeeeeeech! And they might even echo national opinion, opposing the Iraq war. But they absolutely will not break a news story or lead a movement for change. They will only take whatever anti-administration story that's already made its way from the real alternative media into the New York Times, The Washington Post or USA Today, and run with it ad nauseam. In the larger scheme of things, being anti-Bush does not necessarily make one progressive. Anti-fascism is a mainstream value, not a radical alternative.

That's the BNN formula. It's safe. It does no additional harm to the powers that be, and, where it's successful, it preempts real hard-hitting alternative media from forming. Ultimately, it's in the preemption of the real alternative, where the ersatz alternative is most valuable as part of an overall propaganda machine.

The BNN brand left, tack right formula is typified by the Entercom media conglomerate's Buffalo Based WWKB radio. Dubbed by Entercom as "Buffalo's Left Channel," this BNN outlet is the sister-station of Entercom's hard right neo-con talk station, WBEN, home to Rush Limbaugh and a slew of less talented but more reactionary Rush wannabes. Entercom launched The Left Channel in February (2006) three days after The Buffalo News broke the story that The Voice of Reason, AM 1270, would be debuting in another week. Without warning, Entercom fired the entire on-air staff of their 50,000 watt oldies station, including one jock, Danny Neaverth, who has been on the Buffalo airwaves since 1957, and flipped it to a canned "left" BNN format.

The "Left Channel's" lineup is dominated by Jones Radio personality, Stephanie Miller. Miller, the daughter of a former Republican congressional representative, is an unapologetic shill for the Democratic Party, whose on-air act includes coverage of hard-hitting topics such as her pole dancing past and what lingerie she's wearing. Politically, her anti-Bush rhetoric is peppered with regular doses of Islamophobia and nativist racism – all delivered in girly-girl squeaky voice. She probably can hold the world record for the number of weeks she covered the Dubai Ports deal, but the number of stories she has broken still sits at a big fat zero. The Left Channel also runs Jones' Ed Shultz Show, featuring the former Republican turned Midwest populist who covers hard-hitting issues like his golf stroke, while, like Miller, managing to break no new news.

A Fox News lady from Pasadena

For local Buffalo content, the Left Channel contracted out to a Pasadena, California - based Fox News pundit (who also regularly appears on The O'Reilly Factor), Boston-native Leslie Marshall, who worked a one-year stint in Buffalo radio in 1991. Marshall, who does

her daily program from California via long-distance telephone lines, regularly pushes such "leftist" causes as Steve Forbes' flat tax and the death penalty, while calling for a boycott of France, the censure of Russ Feingold and for silencing Jay Bennis, the Colorado Geography teacher who spoke out against the Iraq War. To maintain the brand, however, Marshall, who also regularly appears on MSNBC and CNN, keeps reminding people that she's a "liberal," and that George W. Bush is a bad president.

To the trained ear, the Left Channel's line-up is clearly not an alternative by any means. And in Buffalo, where AM 1270 airs hard-hitting Pacifica Radio programming, and where publications ranging from ArtVoice (for whom I write) and Outcome to The Beast provide a slew of different alternatives, a media-savvy audience can see through the Left shtick – and the formula seems to be floundering when confronted by real alternatives.

When compared to Entercom's radical-right WBEN, however, a politically illiterate media consumer with no alternative touchstone would mistake it for a real alternative. And this is where the true propaganda power of fake alternative media lies. The ersatz alternatives serve to define and limit the scope of debate, crafting an alternative viewpoint that tacitly supports the corporate status quo. And like Ryan's fake orgasm, it could be convincing, at least for people who have never experienced the real thing.

The BNN formula for corporate-owned fake alternative media isn't limited to the world of radio. Around the country, newspaper conglomerates are launching fake alternative weeklies to counter, or more accurately, complement, their right-wing daily papers. They're also breaking into new markets, hoping to cash in on the new demand for alternative media.

In Buffalo, this came in the form of the now defunct, Current, owned by the same Alabama-based media corporation that controls The Niagara Gazette and The Tonawanda News. When The Current failed, critics questioned the viability of the alternative press. The Current didn't fail, however, because it was an alternative. It failed because it wasn't an alternative, hence it was just more nothing – nothing without a niche.

On an even more insidious level, we have media conglomerates going beyond starting up ersatz alternatives, and actually buying and emasculating existing legitimate alternative newspapers. In this "if you can't beat 'em, buy 'em" environment, it seems most everyone has their price. The most recent alternative weekly to fall is New York City's Village Voice. Since new Phoenix-based owners, The New Times Corporation, took control, The Voice lost many of its best writers. But this certainly doesn't forbear the death of alternative media in New York. To the contrary. The potential demise of The Voice as an alternative will just serve to strengthen the real alternatives in New York, such as the spunky Independent, published by New York's collectively run Independent

Media Center.

Truth whores

Yes, we're going to soon find ourselves awash in fake alternative news. The real story, however, is that alternative media has come of age in the free market. People are fed up with media crack and they're demanding something that is real, healthy and hard hitting. There's now a market niche for this alternative and ultimately that's why the corporate media wants in – because they are whores who first and foremost are in business to make money, even if it means having to let a little truth slip into their pages and on to their airwaves. Ultimately, what their pitiful stabs at ersatz alternative media serve to do is confirm the market viability of alternative media. There's momentum here. The truth is in demand. Hell, it's a commodity. Yesssssss!

Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism at Buffalo State College and Vice President of Niagara Independent Media (AM 1270).