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Announcing the P.U.-litzer Prizes for 2002

For more than a decade now, the P.U.-litzer Prizes have gone to some of America's stinkiest media performances each year. The competition was fierce as ever in 2002. Many journalistic pieces of work deserved recognition. Only a few could be chosen. While making the selections, I have relied heavily on research by the staff of the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate). However, the responsibility for bestowing the latest P.U.-litzers is entirely mine.

Here are the eleventh annual P.U.-litzer Prizes, for the foulest media achievements of 2002:

KICKING OUT HISTORY AWARD – Multiple winners

Dozens of esteemed journalists and major media outlets qualified for this prize by reporting that the Iraqi government had ejected U.N. weapons inspectors four years ago. Actually, the inspectors left Iraq in December 1998 under orders from UNSCOM head Richard Butler just before the blitz of U.S. bombing dubbed "Operation Desert Fox."

With notable disregard for historical facts, many reporters at leading news organizations flatly asserted that Saddam Hussein had "expelled" or "kicked out" the U.N. inspectors. Among the purveyors of that misinformation were Daniel Schorr, National Public Radio (Aug. 3); John Diamond, USA Today (Aug. 8); John McWethy, ABC World News Tonight (Aug. 12); John King of CNN (Aug. 18), John L. Lumpkin of the Associated Press (Sept. 7), Randall Pinkston, CBS Evening News (Nov. 9); Betsy Pisik, the Washington Times (Nov. 14); and Bob Woodward, the Washington Post (Nov. 17).

Some outlets were repeat winners, as when USA Today claimed in a Sept. 4 editorial that "Saddam expelled U.N. weapons inspectors in 1998." Other prominent newspapers also made the false information a centerpiece of the positions that they espoused. The New York Times declared in an Aug. 3 editorial: "America's goal should be to ensure that Iraq is disarmed of all unconventional weapons ... To thwart this goal, Baghdad expelled United Nations arms inspectors four years ago." On the very next day, the Washington Post editorialized: "Since 1998, when U.N. inspectors were expelled, Iraq has almost certainly been working to build more chemical and biological weapons."

GOLD STANDARD PRIZE – NBC News

Too savvy to go along with the theory that TV news producers are professionals who should edit stories without fear or favor, the decision-makers at NBC Nightly News devoted 69 minutes of coverage to the Winter Olympics, which aired in early 2002 on NBC. It just so happened that competing news shows on other networks saw much less news value in the games – ABC World News Tonight gave them 30 minutes, and the total on CBS Evening News amounted to 10 minutes.

MEDIA DARWINISM PRIZE – Barry Diller

As a longtime media tycoon now at the top of the Vivendi Universal conglomerate, Barry Diller isn't shy about depicting his success as part of an upward evolutionary spiral. "Media is going to continue its trend of consolidation, which mirrors the ongoing globalization," Diller told the Los Angeles Times in March. "This is a natural law. It is inevitable."

FABRICATION-OF-EXONERATION AWARD – Cokie Roberts

Commenting on George W. Bush's dubious role as a member of the board at Harken Energy, reporter-turned-pundit Cokie Roberts dismissed the idea that Bush might have been involved in corporate malfeasance during his corporate endeavors. "The president was exonerated by the Securities and Exchange Commission, saying he didn't do anything illegal or improper on insider trading charges," she said on July 8. "But the Democrats won't let it go." Roberts did not mention that Bush's lawyers asked the Securities and Exchange Commission for a statement that he had been cleared -- and the SEC responded that its initial letter "must in no way be construed as indicating that [Bush] has been exonerated or that no action may ultimately result from the staff's investigation."

SELF-SLANDER PRIZE – Ann Coulter

Coulter is a best-selling author who likes to attack the news media for supposed left-wing bias and irresponsibility. During an August interview with the New York Observer, she said: "My only regret with Timothy McVeigh is he did not go to the New York Times Building."

SELF-SATISFACTION PRIZE – CNN anchor Jack Cafferty

On CNN's "American Morning" program Aug. 5, Cafferty mixed candor with exemplary media arrogance: "This is a commercial enterprise. This is not PBS. We're not here as a public service. We're here to make money. We sell advertising, and we do it on the premise that people are going to watch. If you don't cover the miners because you want to do a story about a debt crisis in Brazil at the time everybody else is covering the miners, then Citibank calls up and says, 'You know what? We're not renewing the commercial contract.' I mean it's a business." ■