

Book Review

The Republican Noise Machine

David Brock

2004, Crown Publishers, 383 pages

David Brock continues his exposé of the right wing publishing and broadcasting empire in this, his second book on the topic. In his first, *Blinded by the Right*, he told his own story about being duped by the right wing into believing that shoddy research and personal vendettas could pass as serious journalism. In this second volume, he traces the history of our news and information industry in print and broadcast journalism, and shows how these powerful influences have been hijacked for dishonorable purposes, threatening our very democracy.

Mr. Brock's history of journalism is, itself, a worthy read. He explains how we came to see journalism, for a time, as an honorable and trustworthy profession. During the progressive era of the 1920's and 30's, as newspaper chains gathered broad subscriberships, they strove to represent several points of view with accurate and meaningful news coverage. With the advent of television news, and its responsibility to the public in exchange for the use of the public's airwaves, standards of objective professional journalism became well established.

According to David Brock, we have arrived at today's sorry state of affairs, in which publications and broadcasters produce content with obvious partisan slant, not because of popular demand or natural drift. We are here because the wealthy right wing interests have stayed up nights thinking of ever more devious ways of getting us here.

Brock starts his history as Republicans found themselves harried by advocates of consumer protections, environmental safeguards, civil rights, and the feminist movement. As they tried to pursue business as usual, Republicans found that objective, accurate, and meaningful news coverage got in their way. With the intention of rolling back economic and social gains achieved since the New Deal, business interests decided that the way to overcome the detrimental influence of the truth was to 1) undermine faith in professional journalism, and 2) dilute meaningful news with guerilla tactics.

David Brock spends one full, must-read chapter addressing what he calls "The Big Lie," the myth that journalists are liberal and exert a liberal bias in their reporting. This myth, believed and repeated by many modern progressives today, was deliberately fabricated by an organization called Accuracy in Media, backed by Richard Scaife, the Coors Foundation, and Mobil Oil, that complained that major publications expressing concerns about the war in Viet Nam were pro-communist, that news anchors were "comsymps," and that Walter Cronkite was a Soviet agent.

AIM's William Simon wrote a book frankly revealing his vendetta against independent journalists, in which he said: "Business money must flow away from the media which serve as megaphones for anti-capitalist opinion and to media which are professionally capable of a fair and accurate treatment of pro-capitalist ideas, values, and arguments. The judgment of this fairness is to be made by businessmen alone - it is their money that they are investing."

The myth of a left-leaning press was promoted with sloppy research reported in an article called "The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers," published by the American Enterprise Institute. That research looked at the self-reported voting patterns of journalists working at top newspapers and television networks, and compared them, not to the average American citizen, but to the top executives at six Fortune 500 companies. They found that the voting patterns of

these journalists were, on the whole, more left, or perhaps one could say, less to the right, than corporate executives. That report served as the pseudo-scientific proof that journalists are more liberal than... than what exactly? The implication was that they are more liberal than America. More liberal than common sense would desire. More liberal than is responsible. But in fact, they are just more liberal than Fortune 500 executives. Furthermore, when economic questions were asked, journalists tended to express more conservative views, and their liberal leaning was mostly reflected in questions regarding whether the government should regulate people's sex lives. In fact, the authors of the study actually concluded that news reporting was *not* liberally biased, but when the study was reviewed by Republican and conservative columnists, the myth was born that the profession of journalism was not professional or objective at all, but was sinisterly biased in favor of nuclear safety and against price gouging by the oil industry.

Americans who did not read the actual report were duped into believing that professional journalists, trained at responsible schools of journalism and edited by scrupulous experienced, seasoned, professional, editors were simply pulling a fast one on the American public.

Other more objective studies have repeatedly shown that newspapers and television news programs, all owned by Republican conservatives, publish and broadcast narrower ranges of views tilting predictably to the right. The press coverage of the 2000 election campaign has been shown to have favored George Bush two to one.

In addition to denigrating the professionalism of journalists, the moneyed right set out to simply buy their way into news coverage, by setting up a network of think tanks, research institutes, publishing houses, and broadcast networks that would be devoted to promoting right wing ideology. These lavishly subsidized enterprises could persist as money losers for years, even as their abundance

suggested that the American public chose these products over liberal publications and programs, supposedly proving that the American public was massively more right-leaning than previously supposed.

The right wing accomplished this sleight of hand in many ways. For example, books written by right wing authors that did not sell well were bought up by wealthy conservatives and distributed for free or at low prices or were sent out to members of right wing clubs as "gifts" or bonuses. These massive buy-ups often landed these poor quality books on the best seller lists right along with higher quality books being legitimately purchased by more discriminating readers. All the while these same right wingers trumpeted that the free market place of ideas was proving the popularity of Republican ideas.

For all progressives who have wondered, sick at heart, at what has happened to the American voting citizen, the American reader, the American consumer of news and information that has led us to the twenty years of Republican right wing politics of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush, this book by David Brock is a welcome answer. It is not the American public. It is a "vast right wing conspiracy" indeed that has created layers upon layers of myths. Myths about liberal news bias. Myths about the popularity of Republican ideas. Myths based on junk science and junk economics and junk journalism.

David Brock, ever the stickler for facts, has produced an exhaustive examination of the Republican Noise Machine, replete with documentation, citations, references, and quotations. His journalistic virtues, aimed at compensating for his earlier transgressions, may be a literary shortcoming, because his writing sometimes becomes a list of disembodied facts, names, and numbers. It is often left to the reader to fully appreciate the dramatic narrative that lies beneath.

But conspiracy theorists will be disappointed. The evidence Brock lays out for the plot by the right wing to achieve hegemony over our news and information

industry is no secret. The evidence is published and broadcast daily. They actually *want* us to read and hear this stuff.