

Hyping ‘Hate’

Understanding the Incestuous Relationship between the Mass Media and the SPLC

BY KEVIN LAMB

Most consumers of “managed news,”—pre-packaged articles and televised newscasts—remain largely unaware of the filtering process that occurs in the mass media. News accounts (published articles in daily newspapers, weekly news magazines, wire services, web-based postings, or televised broadcasts on CNN, MSNBC, FOX News, ABC, CBS, or NBC) do not simply fall out of the sky. Journalists and editors carefully craft each article, whether choosing the right words to more accurately convey the essence of a given story or selecting sources (authorities or experts) that fit the narrative thread of the article. Several factors, including the standard elements of who, what, when, where, and how, shape modern news accounts.

Conservatives routinely criticize journalists for liberal bias in their coverage of the “news,” but such critiques either overly simplify or frequently miss the underlying source of much of the media bias in news reports. Journalists in turn bristle at the notion that their work is biased. Nonetheless, the mass media serve as gatekeepers of information and are the sole arbiters of what constitutes “news”—establishing standards, deciding the proper tone, determining the right approach when shaping content.

One indicator of subjective bias seeping into news coverage is to consider individuals who are frequently cited by the Fourth Estate as “experts” or “authorities” on issues journalists consider important. To peel back the curtain and get a better view of this process, consider as a case study the close association between the SPLC and mass media.

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Villains and Heroes

In any given narrative, journalists favor the good-versus-evil angle and regularly draw attention to “good” and “bad” characters—villains and heroes that serve some useful purpose. The late Aaron Wildavsky (1930-1993), founding dean of the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley, identified a common attribute among the media elite. It explains the *type* of bias that categorizes some as villains and others as heroes:

I shall argue that the national media has a characteristic bias that could be called American egalitarianism. This bias is not recognized by those who hold it, partly because it seems natural to them (as our biases appear natural to us) and partly because it does not fit neatly into the liberal-conservative or Democratic-Republican dichotomies to which all of us are accustomed. The fact that members of the national media are criticized across the usual political spectrum solidifies their view that they are distributing their blows impartially. Because scholars have not tested for American egalitarianism, they do not find it. A well-known research phenomenon—you only find what you are looking for—may explain why some of us find biases while many studies deny it.¹

One landmark survey, *The IQ Controversy: The Media and Public Policy* by Mark Snyderman and Stanley Rothman, contrasted the positions of experts with beliefs of journalists on issues involving IQ testing.² Snyderman and Rothman tracked news accounts and examined thirteen aspects of IQ research and found that the nature of news coverage differed considerably from the views of experts in the field of psychological testing. They showed how this coverage of IQ testing reflected the biases and misconceptions of journalists rather than the truth about IQ studies. Snyderman and Rothman’s findings reinforce Wildavsky’s theory about the egalitar-

ian nature of media bias.

In conclusion, the authors note:

Our work demonstrates that, by any reasonable standard, media coverage of the IQ controversy has been inaccurate. Journalists have emphasized controversy; they have reported scientific discussions of technical issues erroneously and they have misreported the views of the relevant scientific community as to the interaction between genetic and environmental factors in explaining differences in IQ among individuals and between groups.³

The publication of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve*, in the fall of 1994, triggered a wave of negative publicity. The nature of this coverage underscores an egalitarian bias among journalists. News organizations struggled to report the book’s findings in fair and impartial coverage and in many instances mischaracterized the authors’ thesis or spread innuendo and rumor in order to undermine the book’s findings and authors’ credibility.

(A search of the Nexis database turns up 481 hits, articles that contain mention of Herrnstein, Murray, and *The Bell Curve* in either the headline or lead paragraph in the four years after the book’s publication, 1994-1998. The amount of coverage over an 845-page analysis of IQ research reveals the hostility that greeted the book in journalistic circles.⁴)

The same egalitarian bias is easily noticed in news accounts of cultural and ethnic issues relating to immigration, multiculturalism, national sovereignty, border security, domestic terrorism, and the politics of diversity. Journalists seek out authorities and experts that validate their own perspectives on these issues.

Whenever it fits the narrative, journalists interview or quote SPLC officials Mark Potok and Heidi Beirich as “experts” on “far right” extremists and “hate groups” as if Potok and Beirich were objective, credible observers without ideological bias. Potok makes regular appearances on Chris Matthews’ “Hardball,” Keith Olbermann’s “Countdown,” Anderson Cooper’s “AC360,” “the Rachel Maddow Show,” the “O’Reilly Factor,” and NPR programs.

The coverage of antigovernment sentiment at the grassroots level on the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing offers a case in point. In “Hate: Antigovernment Extremists Are on the Rise—and on the March,” *Newsweek* presented an unflattering portrait of “Oath Keepers” founder Stewart Rhodes.⁵ The second paragraph featured a quote from Potok as saying

Oath Keepers are “a particularly worrisome example of the ‘patriot’ revival.” In the course of 1,971 words, *Newsweek*’s Evan Thomas and Eve Conant mention the Conservative Political Action Conference, Timothy McVeigh, Rhodes, “lone wolves,” Waco, Texas, an anonymous “tea-party activist,” militia groups, “extremist outfits . . . preening and prancing about in Nazi garb or white robes,” the Second Amendment March on Washington, death threats to members of Congress, the Ku Klux Klan, Father Charles Coughlin, Huey Long, Hutaree militia members, Louis Farrakhan, Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Sarah Palin. And this supposedly passes for “unbiased” news! The commonality that unites these individuals, right out of central casting, is what *Newsweek* (and Potok) consider “a sign of disturbing times.” (The arrest of nine Hutaree militia members featured prominently in *Newsweek*’s article. Since then the case seems to be unraveling as a local judge has released some of the detained militia members to home detention awaiting trial.)

This type of reporting, known as “advocacy” journalism, spins the “news” to fit a pre-packaged narrative. Some news accounts thread a narrative around “experts” to give a feel of legitimacy.



Newsweek’s Jon Meacham and Jonathan Alter

Newsweek, a Washington Post Co. subsidiary (and my former employer for more than a decade), has gradually incorporated the “advocacy” style of journalism into its news coverage. It has become the magazine, indirectly so to speak, that Charlie Peters created. Peters, a fixture of the Washington, D.C. journalism scene and founder of *The Washington Monthly*, has cultivated a cadre of “left-of-center” journalists over the years, including: Taylor Branch, James Fallows, Michael Kinsley, Nicholas Lemann, Mickey Kaus, Gregg Easterbrook, Jonathan

Alter, Timothy Noah, Jason DeParle, Katherine Boo, and *Newsweek*'s editor Jon Meacham. Noah and Eastbrook are former *Newsweek* staffers; Alter is a senior editor and columnist; and Meacham, currently editor, served as managing editor. All are *Washington Monthly* alumni.

Hot Air Versus Fact

The role of editors and reporters in shaping the news has moved beyond the Sergeant Friday (just the facts) style to what William McGowan refers to as “coloring the news.”⁶ News accounts reflect the outlook of journalists, and this view of the world reflects a politically correct prism of egalitarian diversity. Beirich and Potok, as “experts” on “hate groups,” “white nationalists,” and assorted “far-right extremists,” provide journalists with ready-made commentary that bolsters their preconceived spin on pre-packaged news stories: anniversary events (Waco, Oklahoma City bombing, immigration restriction, “social justice” and “civil rights” issues, “far right” domestic terrorism, etc.).

The fact that so few journalists or news anchors critically question Potok or Beirich on the details of their “information” reveals an incestuous relationship between the SPLC and news media. It also shows the vulnerability of news organizations to diminished skepticism about individuals who are regularly cited as reputable authority figures. Consider the fact that Potok and Beirich continue to claim a rise in the number of “patriot” and militias groups. Beirich is quoted in *Time* (April 12, 2010) as saying, “The number of patriot and militia groups has increased 244 percent, to 512, in the past year, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights group.”⁷ In July 2009, Potok claimed that “we’ve seen a remarkable level of domestic terrorism ... almost all of it has been associated with the election of Barack Obama.”⁸ In February 2009, the SPLC claimed “hate groups” had risen 54 percent since 2000, and noted, “scores of racially-charged incidents—beatings, effigy burnings, racist graffiti, threats and intimidation—were reported across the country after the election.”⁹ However, in November 2009, the *Christian*

In His Own Words

Mark Potok on ‘Hate Groups’: Threat, Vanishing Threat, or Re-emerging Threat?

POTOK: “In the last six to seven months, we’ve seen a remarkable level of domestic terrorism in this country.... Almost all of it has been associated with the election of Barack Obama.”

—*Herald-Times* (Bloomington, IN), July 3, 2009

POTOK: “[E]very year the FBI reports hate crimes, hate crime numbers and their reports generally account for about 6,000 to 10,000 hate crimes a year but the reality as shown in the recent, very carefully done Justice Department study is that the real level of hate crime in America is something like 200,000 incidents a year—in other words 20 to 30 times higher than the FBI has been reporting.”

—“The World Today,” ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corp.), June 16, 2009

POTOK: “There has been a significant and steady growth in hate groups in America in the last six years. *These groups are really quite tiny, and the total number of people involved in them is very small.*” [emphasis added]

—Voices on Antisemitism, Podcast series, June 21, 2007

POTOK: “Well, by our count there are now about 926 hate groups operating out there. We’ve created this map to give people an idea where they are. Really, if you look at the map carefully, you see it pretty much tracks population.

It’s false, for instance, to assume that they’re mostly located in the Deep South. They’re spread across the Midwest, up and down both coasts; they’re very heavy both in Florida and California.

As to the number of people really in these groups, it’s a very hard thing to really estimate well, but *I think somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 people in one way or another are involved with these groups is probably pretty close to the truth.*” [emphasis added]

—Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees, CNN, June 10, 2009

Science Monitor reported a 2 percent decrease in hate crimes since 2007. According to the *Monitor*,

“People are unhappy; it’s the downfall of civilization. I get it,” says Valerie Jenness, a criminologist at the University of California at Irvine and author of *Hate Crimes: New Social Movements and the Politics of Violence*. “But I don’t think there’s a lot of empirical evidence that we have a massive insurgency [of violence] going on. The level of discourse, after all, is different than the level of mobilizing and actual behavior.”¹⁰

Journalists accept at face value Potok and Beirich’s off-the-cuff commentary as if these statements were empirically unquestionable. Few if any journalists or news anchors point out the inconsistencies in their assessments of “hate group” activism or have questioned their assessments of the so-called groups SPLC identifies as increasing versus actual membership figures of such groups.

Unasked Questions

No one seems to ask: How do you arrive at your information? What sources are used to determine the rise in “hate groups?” What standards are used to identify “hate groups?” Out of a nation of 300 million people, what is the percentage of far-right fringe group membership compared to the nation’s population base? What is the basis of the claim that there is “growing evidence that racial extremists” are infiltrating the ranks of the U.S. military? Just how many veterans are considered to be potential “domestic terrorists?” What standards are used to classify an individual as a “white nationalist” and what distinguishes a “white nationalist” from a “white supremacist” or “white separatist?” When



Heidi Beirich, during a panel discussion on “Mainstreaming Extremism” sponsored by Media Matters, accused Pat Buchanan and other conservatives of fomenting a “toxic environment” and launching “basically a decades’ long jihad by certain conservative commentators against immigrants in this country, people

like Lou Dobbs and Pat Buchanan and that anti-immigrant fervor has translated itself into a huge growth in the number of hate groups in the United States.”

Potok claims that in the months following the election of Barack Obama as president, how many incidents constitute “a remarkable level of domestic terrorism...almost all of it associated with the election of Barack Obama?” Is the “Tea Party” movement a “hate group?”

The fact that Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano had to apologize to veterans’ groups over a DHS report that warned of veterans returning from service abroad as potential, future domestic terrorists should raise serious questions from media organizations about the extent to which SPLC influenced the DHS report and the reliability of SPLC’s information.¹¹

News organizations accept at face value Potok or Beirich’s observations on whatever fits the prevailing narrative of a “news” cycle primarily because journalists share the same outlook and phobias of “disturbing trends” at the grassroots level of the political right. Consequently law-abiding citizens, including veterans, are being smeared with the broad brush of “extremism” for doing their civic duties as citizen activists—from the Tea Party movement to Second Amendment “Oath Keepers” to immigration reform—simply because it’s all the news that fits the incestuous narrative of the SPLC and mass media. ■

Endnotes

1. Aaron Wildavsky, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism*, Washington, D.C.: The American University Press, 1991: 116.
2. Mark Snyderman and Stanley Rothman, *The IQ Controversy: The Media and Public Policy*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988.
3. *Ibid.*: 255.
4. Nexis search conducted on May 23, 2010.
5. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/236202>
6. William McGowan, *Coloring the News: How Crusading for Diversity Has Corrupted American Journalism*, San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2001.
7. *Time*, April 12, 2010, p. 18.
8. Mike Leonard and Marcela Creps, “Hate on the rise: Experts say current economic, political climate spawning hate crimes,” *Herald-Times* (Bloomington, IN), July 3, 2009.
9. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/hate-group-numbers-up>
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'Kudos to the Southern Poverty Law Center'

Inseparable Bonds: The SPLC and the *New York Times*

Perhaps the most craven SPLC mouthpiece in the mainstream media is the self-proclaimed “Paper of Record,” the *New York Times*.

The *Times* regularly regurgitates reports and press releases from the SPLC without any independent checking of the group’s assertions or mentioning their agenda.

A July 6, 2007, piece, “Hate Groups Are Infiltrating the Military, Group Asserts,” begins by describing SPLC as a group that “tracks racist and right-wing militia groups,” and spends the rest of the article simply summarizing and quoting from the report without asking the military or anyone critical of the SPLC for comment.

A September 2, 2009, article, “Report Cites Culture of Ethnic Hatred in Suffolk County,” opens “An environment of racial intolerance and ethnic hatred, fostered by anti-immigrant groups and some public officials, has helped fuel dozens of attacks on Latinos in Suffolk County during the past decade, says a report issued Wednesday by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that tracks hate groups around the country.” It also described the SPLC as an organization that “came to prominence in the 1970s for anti-discrimination efforts and its legal battles against the Ku Klux Klan.”

The article devotes 24 sentences to quoting and summarizing the SPLC’s report and another five to supposed hate crimes that occurred after the report was printed. It only gave three sentences to describe or quote the Suffolk County officials’ responses.

If this was not enough, the *Times* reprinted the SPLC’s 28-page “Climate of Fear Report” by Heidi Beirich and Mark Potok in its entirety on their website.

Adam Cohen, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board, worked as a lawyer for the SPLC prior to joining the *Times*’ editorial board. Without the need to create the façade of objectivity, the editorial page does not conceal their love of the SPLC. They regularly publicize the work of the SPLC and even reprinted a SPLC chart showing the supposed epidemic of noose hanging “hate crimes”—some of which were proven to be hoaxes.

After making ad hominem attacks on immigration restrictionists Marcus Epstein alongside Pat Buchanan, Bay Buchanan, Jim Pinkerton, and Peter Brimelow (see “Immigration and the 2008 Republican Defeat: A post script,” in *The Social Contract*, Summer 2009, p. 120:

http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc_19_4/tsc_19_4_epstein_2.shtml) in their lead Sunday editorial on January 29, 2009, the *Times*’ editorial blog defended their decision in a February 2 editorial, “The Nativists are Restless, continued,” by simply linking to an SPLC blog post and thanking them for their “vigilance.”

Two days later they relied on the SPLC again to defend their attacks on immigration control advocates. In a blog entitled “The Nativist Lobby,” they linked to the SPLC’s report attacking John Tanton, Numbers USA, FAIR, and the Center for Immigration Studies, and concluded “Kudos to the S.P.L.C. for shining a light.” ■

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/07/washington/07recruit.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/03/nyregion/03suffolk.html>

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