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Reality and Spin in the Media

By [Joshua Holland](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [December 13, 2005](#).

In a wide-ranging interview, 'Wag the Dog' author Larry Beinhart describes how members of the news media censor stories -- even as they publish them.

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In a speech this fall, Al Gore spoke of the "strangeness" in our political discourse. He bemoaned the "new pattern of serial obsessions that periodically take over the airwaves for weeks at a time," and the lack of desire for accountability in American journalism. On top of all this, the idea that perception is far more important than reality has become the principle of our broadcast politics, debasing our political discourse to a game of controlling the spin.

Larry Beinhart has thought long and hard about the nature of message-based politics. Beinhart, author of the bestselling novel, "Wag the Dog," recently waded into the nonfiction world of 21st-century communications with his new book "[Fog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of Spin](#)."

AlterNet caught up with Beinhart outside of Woodstock, New York, in the cabin in the woods he shares with his wife and son.

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## What are "fog facts?"

Fog facts are things that have been published or are easily known but have disappeared in the fog. And there are lots of facts that should disappear in the fog; they're trivia, they're nonsense, and we don't need to know them. I'm talking about things that are important -- that once you bring them to the foreground it changes your picture of reality.

## How does a fact become a fog fact?

With certain exceptions, news is not automatically big news. The exceptions are dead popes, the World Series, tsunamis, volcanoes, wars the wars that involve us anyway -- but most news actually becomes news -- including wars -- because of press releases. The example I always use -- because we're in the small town of Woodstock -- is the little league schedule. If the little league schedule is going to be in the newspaper, it's only because the coach or the coach's wife sends it to the newspaper.

Most news originates as a press release or a press conference or an announcement. And if it's going to stay in the news, it has to get new press releases and new stories. Someone has to work at that, someone has to invest effort and time to make it a big story. And if nobody does that, it may not be a story at all, or it may be a one-time item. You know, page 12 of the *New York Times*, page 26.

And part of what happens is that people in the media -- especially print people -- think that if they're reported it they've done their job. Their job is not to determine what effect it has on the population, how well we absorb it, how excited we get about it -- that's not their job. Their job is to get the fact and put it in the paper. They're done. Then if the fact comes back again, as a new press release or a new twist, they go with it.

Two great examples are the Oil-For-Food money. Everybody in America knows that there's some kind of weird scandal about what the U.N. did with the Oil-For-Food money. They don't know exactly what it is but they know there's something scandalous, that Kofi Annan is a little dirty. Now, as far as anybody's been able to tell so far, the corruption and malfeasance involved several hundreds of thousands of dollars at most, excluding those moneys that Saddam Hussein was able to hold onto, which was generally approved by all parties or permitted by all parties. But however much the U.N. did wrong was fairly minor.

After the U.S. conquest of Iraq the Oil-For-Food money was transferred to a new entity, the CPA -- the Coalition Provisional Authority run by Paul Bremer. And about \$9 billion dollars of oil money went into the CPA, plus about \$10 billion dollars of other funds went into the CPA. And this money was essentially being held in trust for the Iraqi government. Now they ripped through about \$19 billion dollars of it -- it has essentially disappeared.

If I remember correctly out of 20 billion dollars there was about half a billion left. And it surfaced in only about three isolated stories. The reason for that is that there is no constituency that has influence

in the American media that gives a damn about Iraq's money. There's a very big constituency in the United States that hates the U.N.. And they hate the U.N. because the notion of any restraint on America's sovereign, unfettered authority is something that just disturbs them to no end. So they were eager to find things that would tarnish the U.N., so they worked that story very hard -- the right wing -- they pushed that story and we heard a lot about it.

So one stayed a fog fact and one's a well-known fact.

Another instance is when the media itself will decide that they want to create a fog-fact -- they don't want something known. The most notorious example of this was the recount that the media itself paid for after the Florida election in 2000. There was enough controversy about it that a consortium of the major players in the media business -- the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the Tribune Company -- which is the *Chicago Tribune* -- the *Los Angeles Times*, CNN, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *St. Petersburg Times* all got together and said we're going to recount these votes and we're going to find out who really won. And they went and they spent a million dollars on it. And who really won, presumably, was news.

That was the exciting thing. If they found out that it was Al Gore who won, then obviously on the face of it that's bigger news than George Bush won. That's old news. Who cares? And when they counted all the discernible votes -- according to the standard way you could tell what the voter intended, Al Gore won.

So, headlines should have been "Al Gore got more votes" or "Al Gore should have been president," or "Wrong man elected" or "Supreme Court stopped recount just in time to save Bush." Right? But those weren't the headlines. The headlines were "Bush won anyway," "Recount shows Bush won," "Recount shows Supreme Court stopping vote didn't matter."

And the *New York Times* was the worst offender. Unless you read the story with the care of an accountant, it was literally impossible to decipher that Al Gore got more votes. The truth is, I didn't figure it out. I read the story and I thought, "oh shit, that's a disappointment." Two years later I was reading a story by the other Gore -- Vidal -- and he mentioned it. And I went back and re-read the *Times* story. And I thought, "Oh my God. Al Gore got more votes than George Bush. It's astonishing."

And then I read all the others and I said, "This is one of the most amazing media events that I've ever seen." I want to find out how all seven of them all made the same decision to bury the story. Not to deny the story, but to bury the story so that they could in good conscience say "we reported the truth." And they did. And yet they all spun it so heavily that even dedicated lefties and the bloggers all missed it.

### **Is this a sinister plot, or is something else afoot?**

There are certain structural impediments to how the media functions. We have in the United States

what's known as objective journalism, which contrasted with the European model. In Europe, the newspapers -- and these traditions go back strictly to the newspaper days -- were all owned by political parties or affiliated with political parties. There was the Communist paper, there was the monarchist paper, there was the revisionist paper, and there was the Nazi paper, the Social Democrat, the Christian, whatever. So when you read the paper you knew there was a point of view and you expected it.

We took a different tradition, which was for a long time a very effective and honorable one. The journalist tries to actually be a non-judgmental gatherer of the facts. You lay them out there in as coherent an order as possible and then you make up your own mind. Sounds like a Fox News slogan. But there are certain weaknesses in the system. For anything controversial, it essentially depends on there being two separate but equal contestants. In political issues if there's a strong liberal and strong conservative view, you get them into the paper and you can sort it out.

But in certain situations like going to war, in which the administration could play the patriotism card, what happens is you have George Bush hollering for war. And George Bush got to say, "we're going to war because they have WMD and they're associated with Al Qaeda." Scott Ritter got up and said, "you know, I was a weapons inspector and I was there and we got rid of all the weapons. Let me tell you that if there's anything left -- and there might be something left -- but if there's anything left it probably doesn't work." O.K., they report it. And Bush shrugs and he goes and he says, "They have weapons of mass destruction -- with nukes."

And the press dutifully reports it because he's the president of the United States. So Scott Ritter goes and speaks the next time. But the press doesn't report it -- they *did* Scott Ritter already! Same with Hans Blix. For every three stories Hans Blix got Colin Powell got 10, Dick Cheney got 50, George Bush got 200, Condi Rice got another 150 and Rumsfeld got another 100. So in the aggregate number of stories, the number of times you heard that he had weapon of mass destruction compared to the number of times you heard he didn't means that the Scott Ritter story for most people disappeared into the fog. And the Hans Blix thing disappeared into the fog. Even now it's really hard to sort out the sequence of what I think are the really significant events that have happened.

**Every administration uses the media, every administration spins us. Clinton did it, FDR did it, you name it. They've all done it. Why is this administration different?**

It's a combination of things -- sort of a perfect storm. One is that -- this is difficult because it implies motive, and consciousness -- but these are guys who have an agenda that could not possibly be sold honestly. So, for them to even do it requires dishonesty. Clinton's dishonesty was largely in his personal life. And politically, he would attempt to do things and when he found out he couldn't do them he made adjustments and did something else. I don't know if that's lying or making adjustments, but this is something different.

These are people who very much want, for example, to take Social Security. To them this is just a

huge pile of money just sitting there. And they really wanted to take that money and put it -- and give it to businesses. They wanted to dump it into Wall Street. What a bonanza! And it makes them crazy that they can't. And if they know that about themselves, they could not run on that, and say "this is what we want to do," so they say "we want to save social security."

So whether they can convince themselves that's true, I can't answer. But it requires them to run, in essence, on something that's not true. Bushenomics is about the use of government for transferring money from regular people to rich people. That's what government is for in their minds. And all their economic decisions have done or attempted to do exactly that.

So these are people who have policies that aren't saleable so they have to lie to sell them. Public relations has reached a level of maturity -- over the last 20 years public relations has grown up immensely, especially in the corporate world. When some community group wants to force their local industry to take PCBs out of the river, the corporations will form a group called Citizens for Healthy Rivers.

And whatever statement they make, it'll read: "and the spokesperson for Citizens for Healthy Rivers says it's actually better for PCBs to be stuck at the bottom of the river than be churned up by dredging." So Citizens for Healthy Rivers is opposed to dredging gets repeated over and over again. They've learned to put fake labels on what they do -- they learned it in business. And we see this administration doing it very assiduously with their bills: Healthy Forest act, Clear Skies act -- with mercury! -- the methodologies for doing this have grown up.

**So it's a perfect storm. It's an administration that has an agenda that's not sale-able, we have a compliant media fixated on reporting "he said she said," we have all of these Astroturf citizens groups. Let me put to you the last question, which is 9/11, before and after. How did that create a proliferation of fog facts?**

Once we have 9/11 we have war hysteria. The war hysteria was worst among people in the media. People in the media were just scared shitless. Perhaps more so in New York than anywhere else. I think that's what made the *New York Times* go off the rails. And it caused the deification of George W. Bush. Rather than point out that on 9/11 he flew to Nebraska -- you know, he didn't go stand at the helm of the ship and steer us out of trouble, he got as far away as he could get -- they just sat there until he did the bullhorn act.

Then he was a hero -- thank God! And we all had to band together -- there was this tribal thing -- and we had to fight the outsiders and anyone who disagreed was a traitor. We had an administration that, after they got over being scared shitless themselves, pushed it for everything it was worth. They had had an agenda that they were waiting for an opportunity to achieve.

**Some argue that the new media -- we hear endlessly about the blogosphere and the relationship that's developing between the blogs and the traditional media -- are going to usher in a new era**

**of media transparency. Others argue that announcing the death of the mainstream media is premature. What's your view, are we headed to a time when a few major outlets can emphasize X while Y falls off the screen?**

I really don't know. I don't know. But what I think is that objective journalism as it stands now sucks. It's got a lot of problems. One is that the guys who make money from spinning it have figured out how to do it. And the media is essentially worthless if it's all spin and that's where a lot of the distrust of the media comes from.

There are two ways to change. We can fall into the European model where there's a left media and a right media. The other possibility is to redefine what objective media is. And this has been done in a small way in political campaigns. It's done with political advertising. They take a political advertisement and they take the responsibility of objectively, by their own standards -- not one from column A and one from column B -- looking at an ad and going through it line by line and saying how truthful it is. So that to me is a higher standard and a useful standard of objective journalism. These guys should go out and do the work that I'm paying them for.

And they're not doing the job that they want to do either. There are a lot of dissatisfied journalists out there going, "There's something wrong and we don't know how to fix it." Well there's the model to fix it.

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## **rinthy**

Posted by: rinthy on Dec 13, 2005 1:28 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

Granted that it's been a long time since I worked in a news room, it seems to me that the structure of main stream news departments ensures that the public will remain in the fog. The reason is simple enough, and it involves the chain of command. The reporter may know, understand, and have the skills to elucidate the complexities of a legitimate news story. If the medium in question is print, the reporter may pitch the story, even get so far as writing it, only to find that the editor...for any number of reasons... doesn't want it. It won't be published. If the medium is television, the reporter...in the same circumstances as above, and with the same skills...can't get a camera. Radio, no air time. Station managers are hired to maintain a certain status quo. Bleeding leads attract viewers and viewers attract advertisers and revenue. Complicated stories that don't build on popular 'knowledge' can't be told in a minute and a half, or read while perched over the can, and unless you read a wide variety of papers and blogs, you'll never ever know how narrow and ill informed you are. Let's hear it for the bloggers and the availability of international news. If you piece it all together you'll go beyond some editor's notion of what's 'fit to print' and you'll come a helluva lot closer to understanding your world. Rinthy

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