

Fighting for the op-edsphere

NEW YORK, APRIL 8, 2005 – In the old days, the op-ed page of any newspaper was the place set aside for opinion, in part to preserve the myth that the rest of the paper was somehow objective and viewpoint-free.

Just as there was supposed to be a “wall” between the business and editorial functions in media organizations, the editorial pages were designed as the preserve of a “free” marketplace of ideas where pundits, commentators, columnists and advocates duked it out, debating the great issues of the day.

That has changed as the media system itself changes, with more media concentration and uniformity of approach influencing what we see and read. Just as the “news hole” in many newspapers shrinks, so does the space allocated for opinion. As a sometime contributor to the very diverse “Viewpoints” section of a Long Island-based daily, I have heard editors grumble about the cutbacks, which limit access by independents such as myself because of all the regulars they have to accommodate.

The prestigious NY Times op-ed page seems to be an exception, even though only 10 percent of Times readers actually read it – perhaps that is why they are launching a new section in the entertainment pages.

The experts chosen to contribute still tend to come from elite think tanks, universities and big publishers. Increasingly, PR firms, speechwriters and political consultants ghostwrite op-eds for big-name clients and then “place” them with the editors who they are always cultivating. The editors are invariably drawn to top pols and celebrity writers. Who really writes their words doesn’t seem to matter – and is rarely disclosed.

Others bypass the editors altogether and simply buy space on op-ed pages to showcase ads posing as editorials, further blurring the line between ideas and advertising. Exxon Mobil brags on its website: “ExxonMobil Op-Eds continue a tradition begun 30 years ago. Placed in The New York Times, The Washington Post and selected other periodicals, the Op-Eds present economic, political and social issues important to you and the company. It is our objective

to encourage thought and dialogue by informing the public about our industry, explaining our views on key issues of the day and presenting responsible policy proposals.”

Oil company critics often don’t have the budget to compete, although some radical causes and publications use this “op-ad” technique. In the past, TomPaine.com placed op-ads in The New York Times on a semi-regular basis.

An ideological litmus test seems to prevail as well. In the early days of the Iraq war, The Washington Post ran six pro-war columns for every one column dissenting. (On U.S. television it was worse, says former BBC Director Greg Dyke, with only six “experts” opposing the war out of the 800 interviewed in the period from the run-up to war through the Saddam statue being taken down.)

This is nothing new, contends scholar Noam Chomsky, whose books may be bestsellers, but who is rarely featured on leading op-ed pages because his stance is considered outside acceptable limits of debate.

In a recent interview on ZNET, he offered an example of the exclusion of other critics:

“To give one example, when Nicaragua was a big issue; the leading academic historian on Nicaragua, Thomas Walker, regularly (several times a year) wrote and sent op-eds to The New York Times ; not a single one was published. He just sent another one after this outrageous government-media propaganda ploy about how the elections in El Salvador were a model for Iraq...”

“They wouldn’t touch it. They have a party line. You’re not allowed to deviate from it. It’s not followed with 100 percent rigidity, of course, but it’s pretty substantial. And, yes, there is virtual terror at the idea that anyone might deviate.”

Today, almost every outpost of journalism contends with constant charges of bias. With the right bashing the so-called “liberal media” and the left denouncing a right-wing tilt in all mainstream outlets, the news world has become a battleground, with media analysts on all sides measuring fairness while critiquing a lack of balance through the partisan lenses of ideological agendas.

There are three times as many pundits as reporters on the air, with more communication students opting for the higher-paid provinces of public relations than the more insecure trenches of corporate journalism. With marketing and packaging driving media businesses, its no wonder that our

newspapers themselves are doing more selling than telling.

At the same time, the traditional op-ed ghettos populated by big-name journoes and syndicated wordsmiths are being challenged by the more free-wheeling and interactive “blogosphere” where millions of voices are blooming (way beyond Mao’s “thousand flowers”), often challenging what they call the MSM (Mainstream Media). New initiatives in citizen journalism are demonstrating that anyone with a computer, DV camera or cameraphone can now “be” the media.

This movement is beginning to call itself “personal democracy.” To see where it’s going, check out a new type of newspaper in South Carolina – Bluffton Today (<http://www.blufftontoday.com/>)

Just as more of us become media savvy, the media itself is changing in ways none of the critics anticipated. On the right and the left, in the corporate world and anti-corporate movements, we are struggling to keep up with the emerging technologies and possibilities.

It’s exciting – and maybe just a bit scary.

“News Dissector” Danny Schechter is the blogger-in-chief of Mediachannel.org. His new film WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception) challenges the media coverage of the war in Iraq. See www.wmdthefilm.com for more.)