

Strange bedfellows

By Rory O'Connor

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Like politics, media makes for strange bedfellows – but surely none stranger than Al Franken and White House communications director Dan Bartlett.

Administration officials like Bartlett share the left-wing's analysis that the most pervasive problem with American media today is its corporate bias, according to New Yorker staff writer Ken Auletta, whose "Annals of Communication" column appears regularly in that publication.

Auletta's recent article "Fortress Bush" delved deeply and expertly into the inner workings of the White House communications operation, and received ample attention in other media. (One of the surest ways to get the media to write about you is to write about them.). Perhaps it was because, as gossipmeister Lloyd Grove reported in the New York Daily News, Auletta got the president's closest adviser, Karl Rove, to say that the job of journalists is "not necessarily to report the news" but instead to "get a headline or get a story that will make people pay attention to their magazine, newspaper or television more."

Or maybe it was, as media maven Howard Kurtz reported in the Washington Post, that White House Chief of Staff Andrew Cord told Auletta, journalists "don't represent the people any more than other people do."

Auletta's column was even mentioned during the White House daily press briefing, when press secretary Scott McClellan was asked about New York Times reporter Elizabeth Bumiller's complaint that Bush officials "too often treat us with contempt." McClellan's response? "I don't think it's my position to be a media critic . . . I'll leave the media analysis to others."

Since it is my position to be a media critic, I'll take it from here if only to note that, in their mutual fascination, both the press secretary and the press missed the essence of Auletta's reporting: namely, his conclusion that the Bush press operation was embedded with liberal/left media critics and analysts.

"It's true, the White House critique is quite similar to that of people like Al Franken or The Nation's Eric Alterman," Auletta said.

"Although they would all be appalled at the comparison! Both sides essentially argue that there is a corporate bias pushing the media away from substance toward gossip and glitz and 'gotcha' journalism."

Strange embedfellows | 2

“Is the press elitist? Yes! Liberal? Largely!” says Auletta. “But the media’s real business is to be provocative, to get ratings and headlines.”

Surprisingly, White House communications director Dan Bartlett doesn’t shy away from the notion that the left may be right. “A corporate bias in the media? Maybe there is,” Bartlett told MediaChannel. “We call it something else – ‘the process’ – but it’s there, for sure.

“The process prevails,” Bartlett explained. “Who’s up? Who’s down? Where’s the controversy, the conflict? When you couple that emphasis with the fact that there’s now a 24-hour, highly competitive news cycle, the pressure is different and more intense. It’s a whole different ball game, and that puts pressure on us – but also on the journalists.”

I also asked Bartlett about David Gergen’s astonishing assertion to Auletta that, “Every White House – save one-- (Gerald Ford’s) has on occasion willfully misled or lied to the press.” (Gergen, who has worked for three Republican and one Democratic President, should know!)

“Where I would quarrel with Gergen is in his use of the word ‘willfully,’” said Bartlett. “Sure, for security reasons we sometimes have to be careful what we say. But ‘willful’ lying? No – although sometimes we do have to engage in a somewhat sophisticated tap-dance.”

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