JournoList Story Confirms Liberal Media Bias

A July 20 article posted on DailyCaller.com, a neoconservative political commentary website, has put a spotlight on one of the worst-kept secrets in mainstream journalism: liberal media bias.

The story, written by reporter Jonathan Strong, detailed how a group of liberal journalists, activists, and academics who made up an online discussion group called JournoList responded after presidential candidate Barack Obama was questioned during a televised debate concerning a video that showed his pastor and friend, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, making incendiary, racist, and anti-American remarks from his pulpit.

The liberal writers and eggheads were livid over how the moderators of the debate, ABC's Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos, cornered Obama and insisted that he explain why he had waited nearly a year after the damaging video had surfaced to condemn the African-American pastor's remarks. "Do you think Reverend Wright loves America as much as you do?" Stephanopoulos asked the future President.

Strong wrote that the tough questioning outraged the discussion group, prompting one of them, Richard Kim of *The Nation*, to call Stephanopoulos a "little rat snake" for not soft-peddling on an issue most Americans wanted to know more about.

"Others went further," reported Strong, showing how members of JournoList allegedly "took radical steps to protect their favored candidate." Continued Strong, "Employees of news organizations including *Time*, Politico, the *Huffington Post*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Guardian*, Salon, and the *New Republic* participated in outpourings of anger over how Obama had been treated in the media, and in some cases plotted to fix the damage."

Strong wrote that the initial discussion among the JournoList participants following the televised debate led to the crafting of an open letter "expressing disgust" at the supposedly poor treatment Obama received at the hands of Gibson and Stephanopoulos. The letter, which gained the attention of (among other newspapers) the *New York Times*, called the line of questioning Obama faced "a revolting descent into tabloid journalism and a gross disservice to Americans concerned about the great issues facing the nation and the world."

That might have been, more or less, the end of the story, but the Rev. Wright refused to go away and several days later the JournoList discussion veered back to how to defend Candidate Obama after Wright made several damaging media appearances, including one at the National Press Club.

As coverage of the Rev. Wright's intemperate rhetoric threatened to do serious damage to Obama's campaign, the JournoList discussion turned to what the participants might do to manipulate the story and deflect attention from their candidate. According to Strong, Chris Hayes of *The Nation* urged

participants in the discussion group to ignore Wright in their mainstream news reporting, arguing that the controversy, after all, had little to do with Wright, but "everything to do with the attempts of the right to maintain control of the country."

As the left-leaning JournoList members began letting their hair down, their discussion turned toward how they might manipulate the news-reporting environment in a way that would make it risky for anyone to cover Obama in anything but a favorable light.

Spencer Ackerman, a writer for the *Washington Independent*, weighed in: "What is necessary is to raise the cost on the right of going after the left. In other words, find a rightwinger's [sic] and smash it through a plate-glass window. Take a snapshot of the bleeding mess and send it out in a Christmas card to let the right know that it needs to live in a state of constant fear. Obviously I mean this rhetorically."

Ackerman then followed through with a suggestion that they might even resort to a smear tactic favored by "yellow journalists" for generations: false accusations against which the victim is largely powerless to defend himself. " Take one of them — Fred Barnes, Karl Rove, who cares — and call them racists," Ackerman advised. "Ask: why do they have such a deep-seated problem with a black politician who unites the country? What lurks behind those problems? This makes them sputter with rage, which in turn leads to overreaction and self-destruction."

When another JournoList participant, Kevin Drum of the *Washington Monthly*, offered that the tactics Ackerman was suggesting amounted to the type of "gutter brawl" the Obama campaign wanted to avoid, Ackerman retorted: "Kevin, I'm not saying OBAMA should do this. I'm saying WE should do this."

While the July 20 article on the DailyCaller prompted a non-stop flood of Twitter and blog fodder from across the political spectrum, it was neither the first nor the last story Strong would glean from the private comments of liberal reporters and reactors speaking against their own best interests on the JournoList discussion.

Nearly a month earlier Strong had posted a story detailing how reporter David Weigel, whom the *Washington Post* had recently hired to write about conservatives in the news, had used the JournoList platform to berate the very movement he was supposed to cover. For example, when neo-conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh was rushed to the hospital in late December 2009 after suffering chest pains, Weigel commented on the listserv that he hoped Limbaugh would "fail" — an allusion to Limbaugh's comment nearly a year earlier that he hoped Obama would "fail" as President. Weigel defended his JournoList comments, which often amounted to little more than profanity-laced diatribes against those he considered the collective voice of conservatism, by saying he had always been "of the belief that you could have opinions and could report anyway…. people aren't usually asked to stand or fall on everything they've said in private." The management of the *Washington Post*, however, thought differently, and Weigel "resigned" from his position with the paper shortly after the DailyCaller article surfaced.

While Weigel paid a somewhat stiffer price than most for airing his feelings in a discussion room that he thought was private, the treasure-trove of material Strong mined from the JournoList discussions caused no small embarrassment to other participants. For example, in a July 21 DailyCaller posting, Strong recalled how Sarah Spitz, a publicist for National Public Radio affiliate KCRW in Santa Monica, California, commented that if Rush Limbaugh were having a heart attack in her presence, her response would be to "laugh loudly like a maniac and watch his eyes bug out" while Limbaugh suffered. Added Spitz, "I never knew I had this much hate in me. But he deserves it."

Shortly after her comments were made public by Strong, Spitz issued a public statement conceding that her remarks had been "poorly considered" and apologizing "to anyone I may have offended" — though that apology appeared to fall just short of directly addressing the object of her private hatred.

For his part, Limbaugh used the publicity generated by Strong's story for the type of self-promotion that has become his most recognizable trait. Asked by Byron York of the *Washington Examiner* about Spitz's comments, Limbaugh declared that "they" hate him "because I am the most prominent, effective and unrelenting voice of conservatism and they have not been able to stop me."

Many of the attacks coming from the JournoList participants did little more than reflect an immaturity that has become a defining virtue of an American liberal culture steeped in self-absorption and an entitlement mentality. But at least one of the discussion threads, from March 2010, veered into the tactical realm as participants discussed what might be done to eliminate media voices overtly critical of the Obama administration.

Fox Network, with its stable of neo-conservative celebrities, was often a favorite target of the liberal discussion group, which prompted UCLA law professor Jonathan Zasloff to suggest that the Obama administration should renew its "anti-Fox position" in time for the 2012 Democratic convention, and "simply refuse to give Fox News a skybox, like the rest of the networks." The liberal law professor, who charged that Fox is "not a news organization," but rather "a wing of the Republican Party and the Conservative Movement," went as far as to ask if there were any reason the Obama administration couldn't arrange for the FCC to "simply pull [Fox's] broadcasting permit once it expires?"

While Strong's series of articles (with more published since) did little more than confirm what has been well-known for years — that much of the political reporting and commentary in the major media is produced and massaged by a left-leaning (and sometimes mean-spirited) cabal of writers, editors, producers, and fellow-travelers — they did offer those who had been targeted by the leftists with an opportunity to sound off and posture their conservative credentials.

For example, Fred Barnes, editor of the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard* (but who worked closely with JournoList types when he was a senior editor with the *New Republic*), told Chris Moody of the DailyCaller that he wondered why those participating in the discussion did not "quit the thing when smearing other journalists to help Barack Obama was advocated? Why didn't they denounce the idea in unison?"

In a subsequent *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Barnes expressed his surprise at the existence of an online discussion group such as JournoList, composed of hundreds of liberal journalists and fellow travelers who worked together "to promote liberalism and liberal politicians at the expense of traditional journalism." After all, he wrote, in all his years as a conservative writer, Barnes had never caught wind of a group of like-minded journalists who joined together to push a conservative agenda at the expense of their liberal colleagues.

"As a conservative," admitted Barnes, "I normally write more favorably about Republicans than Democrats and I routinely treat conservative ideas as superior to liberal ones. But I've never been part of a discussion with conservative writers about how we could most help the Republican or the conservative team."

Perhaps someone should point out to Barnes that that is a fundamental difference between the collectivist mentality, which liberals embrace, and an individualist spirit, which has traditionally inspired those identifying themselves as conservative.

However, perhaps the greatest value the DailyCaller articles offered was identified by Ezra Klein, a writer for the *Washington Post* and the creator of JournoList. In a July 22 posting to the *Washington Post's* online edition, Klein charged the DailyCaller's founder and editor, Tucker Carlson, with dishonesty in how the JournoList stories were reported, claiming that quotes from the JournoList discussion threads were pulled out of context, and that Strong's stories "misstated fact, misled readers, and omitted evidence that would contradict his thesis."

Klein recounted how in May Carlson had e-mailed him with a request: "I keep hearing about how smart the policy conversations on JournoList are, and am starting to feel like I'm missing out by not reading them. Could I join?" Carlson assured Klein that while the two were on opposite ends of the political spectrum, "I can promise you I have no interest in flaming anyone or even debating (I get enough of that). I'm just interested in knowing what smart progressives are saying. It strikes me that's the one thing I'm missing in my daily reading."

Klein wrote that even though adding someone to the list meant that person would have access to the group's extensive archive, because the JournoList wasn't hiding any deep conspiracy or other secret, he personally had no problem with the idea — even though Carlson didn't share the political ideology of the majority.

After all, reasoned Klein, a person might "comb through tens of thousands of e-mails and pull intemperate moments and inartful wording out of context to embarrass people, but so long as you weren't there with an eye towards malice, you'd recognize it for what it was: A wonkish, fun, political yelling match."

But when Klein vetted the idea with other members of the discussion group, they voted it down. Unlike the trusting Klein, other JournoList members were concerned about "opening the archives to individuals who could help their careers by ripping e-mails out of context, misrepresenting the nature of the ongoing conversation," and fabricating a liberal media conspiracy out of a simple, no-holds-barred discussion group.

As it turns out, their worry was well founded, as Carlson was apparently already working on a JournoList story and simply found access to the archives through a back door (probably a DailyCaller reporter whom Klein allowed to remain a JournoList participant).

The members who chose to spurn Carlson were also prescient in their concern that he might use their archived e-mails to help his career — or in this case his heretofore only moderately trafficked website. Pilfering and piecing together carefully selected e-mails sent by liberal journalists in unguarded moments allowed Carlson and his DailyCaller crew to turn evidence confirming media bias into a sensationalized story supposedly demonstrating collusion to marginalize, denigrate, and damage certain neo-conservative celebrities.

While the DailyCaller stories on JournoList revealed little about the mindset and tactics of liberal journalists that was not already common knowledge, they turned out to be of great value to Carlson himself, as Klein points out: "Journolist has taken the Daily Caller from about 50,000 hits a day to more than 200,000."

Photo of Tucker Carlson: AP Images

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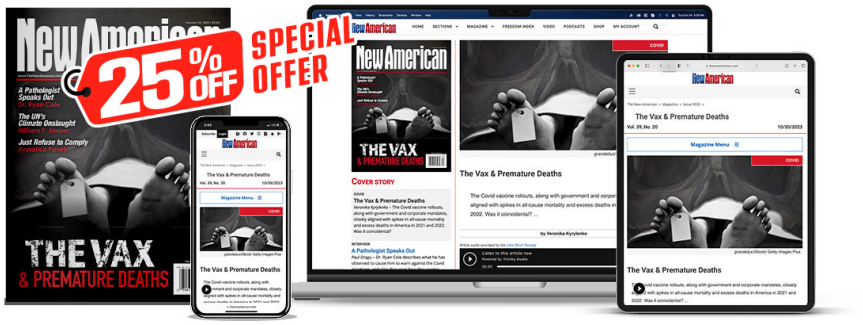

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