

How the Media's Real 'Bias' Works in McCain's Favor

By **Andrew Romano** | Monday, September 22, 2008 4:43 PM

Breaking news! The McCain campaign thinks the press is "a pro-Obama advocacy organization that every day attacks the McCain campaign, attacks Senator McCain, attacks Governor Palin, and excuses Senator Obama." Or at least that's what chief strategist Steve Schmidt told a bunch of reporters--I mean, "pro-Obama advocates"--on a conference call this morning.

I sympathize. I really do. In fact, I sympathize so much that when McCain's speechwriter, co-author and alter ego Mark Salter made a similar complaint last week--that the press was not applying "the same standard" of factchecking to Obama's latest ads and attacks as it was applying to McCain's--I sifted through the evidence and found that "the guy's got a point." You can read my analysis of Obama's misleading messaging [here](#).

But there are limits to my sympathy--and with this morning's rant, Schmidt may have crossed that line. Here's why. When people on either side of the political spectrum make these claims--whether they manage presidential campaigns or spend their precious time commenting on Stumper items--they're usually latching onto a single unfavorable story to make a sweeping generalization about the entire "media establishment."

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I don't fault individual readers for seizing on isolated reports as evidence of the MSM's overarching ideological bias. It happens to me all the time. One week I'll write an item critical of McCain and a commenter will call me a "degenerate marxist." The next week someone else will say I'm a "FOX News butt boy" for criticizing Obama. Neither reader has weighed both items in their analysis--let alone the 1,400 others I've posted since last September. That's more than understandable--and it's exactly what happens on a larger scale with the media as a whole. Still, it's worth noting that groups that keep track of this stuff for us have found that the claims of pro-Obama, anti-McCain bias are wildly exaggerated. In late July, for example, the **Center for Media and Public Affairs** found that on-air evaluations of Obama went from 62 percent positive during the primaries to 72 percent negative during the general election. Meanwhile, McCain's negatives fell and positives rose over the same period of time. Hardly evidence of a "pro-Obama advocacy organization."

The bottom line is that Schmidt has too much skin in this game to be credible source of media criticism. He wants to discredit any negative news about his candidate by discrediting the messenger--an easy task, given how much the masses seem to hate the MSM. He wants to shame reporters into writing critical stories about Obama to prove that they're fair and balanced. And he wants to distract the press from reporting on McCain's economic struggles by dangling a shiny object in front of their faces--in this case, a melodramatic attack on the media itself (incidentally, the media's favorite subject to cover).

More than anything else, that last goal--and Schmidt's success in achieving it, as evidenced by this very blog item as well as stories everywhere from the Politico to the Washington Post--is probably the strongest argument against his accusations of ideological bias. For the record, I think there's a lot of bias in the mainstream media. It's a huge problem, in fact. But the issue isn't ideology. No reporter I've ever met sits around scheming about how to get his or her favored candidate elected. Do they have private political beliefs? I'm sure. Do these preferences occasionally skew their work? No doubt. But as a rule, reporters spend too much time with politicians to feel anything but skepticism. The really damaging bias is narrative in nature--bias for tension, bias for conflict, bias for drama. Which is why when Schmidt and Co. release a misleading ad about Obama that's not actually airing on TV, the cable newsniks air it for them. Or why we jump to cover Schmidt's histrionic attack on the Times instead of focusing on McCain's economic speech in Scranton. Schmidt knows how the MSM works, and he's doing a brilliant job--far better than Team Obama--of capitalizing on its weaknesses. I'd tell him to stop whining if it weren't such an effective part of his strategy.

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