

Media Revolt: A Manifesto
Friday, May 07, 2004
Introduction

Journalism is kind of like the weather. We all like to complain about it, but none of us ever do anything about it.

Oh, many of us point out the problems. Some of us are even very good at it. But at what point does our criticism finally coalesce into action?

As a longtime journalist and sometime editor, I love to read the [Daily Howler](#) almost daily. There really is no one on the Web as good at eviscerating bad reporting as Bob Somerby. His Webzine is a big regular stop in my daily rounds.

But lately, he's been even more on-point than usual, which is saying something. In [one of his recent pieces](#), Somerby pointed with a kind of savage finality to the bottom line of the media's flagrant frivolousness and demeaning of the national discourse: It puts us all at serious risk.

What does Dowd have on her mind today? George Bush can't answer questions about 9/11. And John Kerry doesn't make his own sandwiches!

Of course, inanity has been this corps' stock-in-trade over at least the last dozen years. When you read your paper each day, you read the work of a vacuous press which is happy to display its Millionaire Pundit Values --- a press corps addicted to trivia and inanity. While Osama plotted in the summer of 2001, they rubbed their thighs about Chandra Levy. Meanwhile, they've turned your elections into trivia festivals, built around earth tones, Love Story, dog pills, blow-jobs. Now we're handed our current fare. What is the headline on Dowd's piece? "Guns and Peanut Butter," it says.

Somerby displays an unusual amount of passion in this piece. In fact, it might even seem a little over the top, except for two things: 1) he's exactly right, and 2) what he's saying should indeed make us all very, very angry.

While they clowned about Gary Condit, Osama's men were tooling those planes. And now, as they clown about peanut butter, Osama's men are still at work. And what will happen to your country because Wilgoren and Dowd set the tone? Let us finally tell you your future: Osama's men will come with a bomb (see below), and they'll destroy an American city. American society will end on that day. And when it does, you can think of Wilgoren and Dowd --- and you can think of the "letters editor" who laughed in your face with that letter today. They've made a joke of your discourse for years --- while your enemies hunt for a bomb. There is little chance those enemies won't succeed, because screaming idiots --- screaming idiots --- have long been in charge of your discourse.

9/11 should have driven that home. In the wake of the disaster, the media --- newspapers, TV, radio, the Internet --- needed to do some serious soul searching about its own role in the disaster. And it should have begun reforming its practices, particularly in the way it covers both international news and domestic politics.

Nothing. Nada. Zippo.

No, we're still indulging our audiences with "reality programs" that are nothing if not exercises in surreality. There remain only a handful of mainstream media outlets performing serious journalism with any consistency, and none of them have sway with the Kewl Kids of the Beltway.

We still treat our national politics like a combination sporting event and gossipfest. We're still

demeaning the national discourse with a steady diet of propaganda/spin souffle served up on a platter of triviality, with a side of slander.

In the process, we keep the public (a large portion of it willingly) in the dark about the very real politics and policies that directly affect their security and well-being, both here and now and for the long haul.

How do we fight the war on terror? (Other than buying an SUV and being a good consumer and keeping your head down and voting Republican, that is.) Well, have you heard anything in the way of serious national dialogue about this point? I haven't, not to any great extent, and for a simple reason: The media have declined to facilitate that discussion.

They have instead defaulted to Position A: Whatever course of action George W. Bush takes is a *priori* good, and done for sound reasons. Neither, for that matter, is his competence ever seriously questioned.

The reality, as [I've been discussing](#), is that Bush's "war on terror" is an incomprehensible exercise in increasing the likelihood that high radicalized, highly motivated terrorists will again strike on American soil. A serious war on terror would begin from a recognition of the nature of the threat, with a considered response that's both flexible and comprehensive. Bush's Iraq war is none of these.

And the American public will never hear this from its mainstream media, especially not the dysfunctional, inbred family that is the Beltway press corps.

I mentioned [awhile back](#) that I went to hear Charles Pierce give the keynote address at this year's [National Writers Workshop](#) in Seattle (and, since I was one of the speakers, wound up having the pleasure of hanging out with Charles for much of the day).

What Pierce had to say was important, especially for those of us in the journalism business. He extolled the virtues of what we do as writers -- but also applied a razor knife to the current milieu and exposed just where we are going wrong.

I kept some sketchy notes from the talk, but another blogger named [Bailey the Dog](#) took better notes than mine and reported back on the upshot of Pierce's talk:

Someone in the audience did ask what I thought was a pretty decent question of Pierce -- he wondered what four topics the media covers most ineffectively. (Why limit it to four, I wondered?) At any rate, Pierce responded that journalists summarily do the worst job with:

- 1.) The poor.
- 2.) Politics (in that we rarely know the real person campaigning, what they're saying to the public and how what they're saying effects us.)
- 3.) Real life (in terms of long form stories)
- 4.) International affairs. (I think this probably goes without saying, but as examples Pierce notes that events such as 9/11 and war in the Balkans routinely surprise the American public but if we were remotely clued into the world, they probably would not.)

Pierce emphasized the second point, especially noting that the press really fails to report on policy and its effect on people in their real lives. It makes campaigns into horse races and scarcely gives the public any sense of the policies that candidates represent and how they will work out in the real world.

It's not just the press: It's the entire political class that has fallen into this degraded form of

discourse, from pundits to pollsters to operatives to the politicians themselves. This was driven home to me by [a post from Rhetorica](#) that excerpted a [Frank Luntz discussion](#) on MSNBC (Chris Matthews' Hardball was the occasion) describing a recent encounter with a "focus group" of voters:

His opening question: "Regardless of who you're voting for, what characteristic do you want in a Democratic nominee?" After several people responded, Luntz said (with my clarifying remarks):

We'll [the press] talk about personalities for the Democrats and you [the panel] all keep bringing it back to policy. That's an interesting dynamic. Up until now, people [who?] were looking for, as you used, bold leadership, honesty, a vision for the future. [Luntz turns to the camera] And yet they're all talking policy. [To the panel] Is that where the Democratic nominee is going to go, rather than focusing on attributes, they're going to focus on policy?

Luntz continues to mention, with a sense of wonder, the panel's interest in policy. Matthews and his guests ignore it. Here is Luntz's concluding remark that Matthews cuts off to return to his guests:

I asked them to talk about candidates, talk about attributes and they kept coming back to issues. That says to me that there's no Democrat out there that's really captured the hearts and mind of the public as an alternative to George Bush. It is early, but there's no one out there that's got a clear...

In other words, the panel's interest in policy, the day-to-day stuff of governance that affects peoples' lives, is proof that no candidate has a convincing presidential image. And the logic in that would be what? I would say this is proof that, at the moment, no image created by the campaigns or the press has completely usurped their abilities to comprehend their own political interests.

The obvious aspect of this discussion is the way the entire framing of the debate — as a question of "character" as opposed to such boring details as policy — heavily favors the party that relies more on imagery and jingoism, wrapping itself in the flag and pounding its chest about moral superiority: in other words, conservatives.

But even beyond the bias is the way this framing really corrupts and trivializes the national debate, so that we find ourselves constantly arguing about the "morality" or "character" of politicians, an issue that is by nature a product of spin and propagandizing. This has never been more clear than in the current election, when the "character" of a pampered fraternity party boy who couldn't be bothered to serve out his term in the National Guard and who went on to fail miserably at every business venture he touched is successfully depicted as that of a sincere and patriotic regular guy, while that of a three-time Purple Heart winner who voluntarily left Yale to serve in Vietnam, and whose ensuing three decades of public service have been a model of principle and consistency, is somehow depicted as belonging to a spineless elitist.

If the press were properly reporting on this election, the public would have a clearer picture of how John Kerry's economic, environmental and education policies would affect their lives differently than those purveyed by the Bush administration. It would understand the significant differences in their approaches to national security, and it would be far clearer just who in fact has more serious and credible credentials when it comes to the "war on terror" and keeping the nation safe, particularly when it comes to matters of basic competence and knowledge. These are issues that affect us in concrete ways.

But the press doesn't deal with those issues. Instead, we get peanut butter.

After hearing Pierce, and especially after reading Somerby's recent outburst, it became clear that many of us have a firm grasp on the nature and dimensions of the problem. But very few of us do much of anything about it. And the truth is that this is not like the weather — the behavior of the media is something we actually can do something about.

But we have to get organized. And after years of wandering in the wilderness, I believe that 2004 is the year to make it happen — if for no other reason than that the stakes are so high.

The main reason, though, is that I think the tools for serious change are finally within our reach. And the chief tool is the Internet, the blogosphere in particular.

For too long, the public has been forced to rely on the mass media as the means for obtaining and disseminating information. This was not a serious problem for most of our history. Though the means for spreading information had to go through the traditional filter of the media gateways (particularly editors and reporters), the system in fact worked generally well, as long as a measure of independence was present within the press itself.

As the conglomeration and consolidation of the mass media has proceeded apace through the past two decades unchecked, that independence has largely vanished or become effectively strangled, and with it a responsible treatment of the public interest by the nation's press. The traditional media filters have instead become bottlenecks, preventing information that is in fact vital for the public well-being from ever reaching them — oftentimes for reasons that are trivial and puerile, not to mention geared toward the manipulation of the media in the service of corporate powers and their agenda.

The blogosphere is a direct result of those bottlenecks. Information is now flowing around them through the networks of dissemination that blogs have become.

Blogs represent, in fact, the real democratization of journalism, which traditionally has always been about the work of keeping the public duly and properly informed. Stories and vital facts now no longer need go through the *New York Times* and NBC News in order to gain wide distribution. Blogs can effectively reach as many people as several large city dailies combined. And the network of their combined efforts represents a massive shift of data around the traditional media filters.

Blogs can also be terrific means for organizing, particularly for putting together a concerted response to political and media atrocities. One need only survey the ability of blogs to affect real-world politics — their role in bringing about the fall of Trent Lott was just a start — to understand that their power can readily extend to reshaping the media, since they represent in themselves a kind of citizens' solution to needed reforms in the media.

To bring that about, two things are needed: 1) A recognition that this power exists, and 2) Organizing in a thoughtful and effective fashion to wield it.

It seems to me that a manifesto — a definitive statement of revolt against the media status quo and an outline of the purposes and strategies of that revolt — is what's needed.

So I've written one. I wouldn't want to presume to speak on behalf of the entire blogosphere, nor for those who perceive the need for media reform and are working to enact it. But it's clear to me that we need a manifesto of some kind — which means we need a starting point. Here is mine.

I'm hoping the following Manifesto, if nothing else, gets the discussion going. I'm hoping to get plenty of feedback, both from other bloggers and readers. Consider it a kind of first draft. As the discussion comes in, I'll shore up its weaknesses, remove obvious flaws, add overlooked points

of significance. I see it as a semi-democratic project that draws input from all around -- though of course it will ultimately be filtered through my own sensibilities. Perhaps someone else will come up with an even more effective and concise manifesto. The idea here is simply to lay the groundwork. In the end, I hope to have a document that others will feel comfortable co-signing. I'll then collect the signatures and attach them to the bottom of the Manifesto.

Without further adieu, here's my stab at moving from simple critique of the media to the much harder work of actually doing something about it. Feel free to join in.

The Media Revolt Manifesto

1. The well-being of American democracy ultimately depends on a well-informed electorate. As such, the role of the media in keeping the public properly informed is not merely vital, it is sacred.

2. Over the past 20 years, American media have been in a state of serious decline insofar as it lives up to the responsibilities of this role:

-- Conglomeration and the increasing grip of monolithic corporatism has reduced the diversity of voices and viewpoints that are available to the public at all levels, from small local papers to major networks.

-- The rising dominance of television journalism has replaced serious journalism geared toward the public interest and policy with infotainment journalism that regards the value of stories almost solely for their ability to garner viewers through titillation, scandal-mongering and gore, while the perverse and demeaning cult of celebrity is elevated to the highest echelons.

-- The demise of the Fairness Doctrine has ensured that the public airwaves, controlled by a handful of conservatives given free rein to institute a hierarchy or self-interested propaganda, are now entirely the domain of right-wing ideologues who view defamation as entertainment and factuality and fairness as ratings death.

-- As a result of all these changes, reportage that remained vital to the public interest even though it may not have garnered strong bottom-line results -- especially investigative journalism, policy analysis, and international news -- became relegated to afterthought status.

3. The nature of these declines produced a string of travesties in the past decade and more:

-- The first major terrorist attack on American soil -- the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 169 people -- was treated as the idiosyncratic act of a small handful of mentally unstable actors, rather than as the arrival of the most serious threat to confront America since World War II: asymmetrical terrorist attacks that cannot be linked to foreign states and which cannot be dealt with through military action.

-- The continuing appearance of similar attempts to perpetrate equally horrific domestic terrorist attacks, mostly by right-wing extremists, in the five years ensuing Oklahoma City was utterly ignored by media outlets, largely because of the success of law enforcement in stopping such attacks in their tracks through an effective combination of law enforcement and intelligence.

-- The grotesque pursuit of pseudo-scandals regarding President Clinton's private life -- from Whitewater to "Travelgate" to Monica Lewinsky -- became the centerpiece of

national coverage of his presidency, eclipsing any rational discussion of his administration's policy initiatives as well as those of the post-1994 Republican Congress. This pursuit finally culminated in charade of Clinton's impeachment for allegedly perjuring himself in testimony over a civil suit that should never have been allowed in the first place, while in the meantime the clearly Machiavellian and unethical behavior of his pursuers went almost utterly unreported.

-- The media fetish for Clinton's private life buried the seriousness of the growing asymmetrical terrorist threat, embodied in the treatment of Clinton's attacks on Al Qaeda terrorist camps in 1998 as mere "wagging the dog" attempts to divert public attention from the Lewinsky scandal. At a time when Clinton was attempting to raise public awareness of the terrorist threat -- both domestically and abroad -- his pleas fell on the media's deaf ears because they had "other priorities."

-- The 2000 presidential campaign between Al Gore and George W. Bush became focused on trivial personality traits -- particularly Gore's supposed "embellishments" (such as the false "invented the Internet" meme) and Bush's supposed "straight shooter" qualities -- all of which were pure concoctions of partisan spin that favored the corporatist agenda of media ownership. The resulting extraordinary bias culminated in the Florida vote debacle in which Republicans were allowed to present pure falsehoods (such as the notion that machine counts were "more accurate" than hand counts) as fact, while Gore's legitimate efforts to challenge the counts under the established framework were depicted as illegitimate; and in the end, an extraordinarily corrupt and partisan Supreme Court ruling that overwhelmed Gore's popular-vote victory and placed Bush in the White House was treated as simply politics as usual, instead of the gross breach of democratic values that it was. It also placed in the White House a man manifestly incapable of comprehending the nature and gravity of the looming terrorist threat.

4. This degradation of the media, and its concomitant failure to keep Americans adequately informed, culminated in the attacks on American soil by Al Qaeda terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, in which more than 3,000 people were killed in New York City and Washington, D.C. The media, to no one's great surprise, have never even begun to confront their own culpability in this disaster; and similarly they have failed to point out the fairly obvious culpability of the asleep-at-the-wheel president on whose watch it occurred. (Meanwhile, of course, Bill Clinton's role in the attacks has been aired *ad nauseam*.)

5. When George W. Bush sidetracked the resulting "war on terror" into an invasion of Iraq -- a nation that had nothing to do with the Sept. 11 attacks -- by waving evidence of weapons of mass destruction in the public's face and suggesting that any dissent was akin to treason, the media utterly failed in its responsibility to examine the claims seriously and to treat them skeptically. Instead, it became a virtual propaganda arm for the White House, and savagely turned on any person (see, e.g., Scott Ritter, who was smeared as a pedophile) who dared play the role of skeptic. Protesters were summarily dismissed as loony "Bush haters."

6. Coverage of the 2004 election has already begun to resemble the travesty of 2000, focusing on trivial (and mostly concocted) personality traits: Howard Dean is grotesquely portrayed as a maniacal and out-of-control Howard Bealesque loose cannon; John Edwards as a callow pretty boy; Wesley Clark as an egotistical martinet; and Dennis Kucinich as a whiny, limp-wristed socialist. Once he became the de facto nominee, the "French-like" John Kerry was given both barrels of this treatment, as his status as a war hero came under fire without any grounds whatsoever, while other reports focused on his being served peanut-butter sandwiches by a personal assistant. Meanwhile, patrician fraternity brother George W. Bush is depicted as a man of the people, clearing brush on his Texas ranch. Matters of substantive policy that actually affect voters' lives -- the administration's floundering in Iraq; an economic policy that deprived over 2

million Americans of employment and destroyed the nation's job-creation capacity; an environmental policy that ensured more polluted air and water and diminished wildlife, as well as the more rapid approach of global warming; an energy policy that ensured \$2-a-gallon-and-worse gasoline and increasing dependence on oil; an agricultural policy that dooms forever the small family farm -- have not even crossed the media's radar.

7. Americans have had enough. Like Howard Beale, they're mad as hell and not gonna take it anymore. Unlike Beale, however, their revolt against the media Powers That Be will be neither manic nor futile. It will be organized, rational, factually sound, unintimidated and, in the end, constructive rather than destructive. It will be founded on certain basic principles:

-- The bastardization of modern mass media into a propaganda outlet for narrow conservative corporate interests, in violation of its historic (and constitutional) role as guardian of the public weal, will be opposed at every turn. The driving forces behind this corruption are the conglomeration and deregulation of the media, and the concomitant suppression of dissenting voices; the vanity and naked self-interest of the press corps, embodied in their open embrace of spin as fact; the willingness of the public to embrace "lowest common denominator" reporting that, instead of making them informed participants in democracy, treats them to the illusion of news as entertainment.

-- Its chief bylaw will be an insistence on traditional journalistic values: factual correctness, fairness and balance, a healthy skepticism of the reigning "official story," conventional wisdom, and the claims of critics and defenders alike. It will seek a return to the nation's newsrooms of the kind of investigative and consumer-oriented journalism that has been the first victim of the bottom-line orientation of corporate media ownership, as well as the kind of newsroom oversight in the form of truly independent ombudsmen that once ensured that someone was watching the watchdogs on behalf of the public.

-- It will embrace the principles of American democracy, particularly openness of debate and the open dissemination of information. It will never embrace or even suggest the suppression of conservative views; instead, it will be predicated on confronting bad speech with more speech. All we will demand is the equal consideration and dissemination of other viewpoints as well.

-- The degradation of the national discourse into trivialities and prurient speculation will be the focus of the revolt. When reporters insist on covering politics as a horse race, replacing serious analysis of policy and its effects on the real life of citizens with gossip columns and talking points, and especially when they engage in fraudulent journalism that twists and conceals the truth, they will be exposed for the untrustworthy miscreants they are. When corporate owners adopt de facto policies -- from gutting serious journalism in newsrooms, to a bias in hiring and promotion, to the outright suppression of dissent -- which slant the reporting that fills our newspaper columns and the public airwaves, they will be brought to bay by public pressure to respect the public's right to (and need for) informative, factual and balanced journalism. When the public is carelessly and selfishly gulled by entertainment propaganda posing as journalism, we will combat their languor by working hard to disseminate facts and logic through the many means now available to us in the computer age.

8. This revolt will be organized strategically around two realities: 1) Previous tactics in the efforts to reform the nation's media have largely failed or faltered (see, e.g., the "[public journalism](#)" movement), though their occasional successes and certain principles are well worth noting and preserving. 2) Though this is a revolution against an evolved status quo, the spirit it represents beckons to a return to civic-minded journalism that enshrines the diversity of voices in American media; it is, in fact, more traditionalist in orientation than radical. What is radical -- and

unacceptable — is the current state of journalism as a wholly owned subsidiary and propaganda arm of narrow corporate interests.

— It will generally eschew boycotts of the media themselves. Such an attempt is not only unlikely to have any discernible effect (media companies are notorious for targeting "key demographics" anyway), it's self-defeating, since it's impossible to be informed enough to act as a media watchdog without being a consumer of their goods as well.

— It will nonetheless apply pressure against media companies — economic pressure through boycotts, and rhetorical pressure through letter-writing and publicity campaigns — through two key venues: advertisers and the media conglomerates' non-media enterprises.

— The businesses whose advertising dollars underwrite so much of this misbehavior can be especially sensitive to having their names associated with volatile issues that inflame public anger. Even mass letter-writing campaigns to these companies can have the desired effect; and if necessary, an outright boycott may be wielded.

— Likewise, business boycotts of the larger media conglomerates under whose auspices the corruption of the press has occurred may be useful or even necessary, particularly if the misbehavior is egregious enough or actually occurs at the larger corporate level. Disney, for example, fully deserves a boycott for its outrageous corporate decision to prevent its Miramax subsidiary from distributing Roger Moore's anti-Bush film, *Fahrenheit 911*.

— These campaigns will be focused especially on two key problems: the decline of journalistic standards for both factual straightness and depth of coverage, and the perversion of the national debate by focusing on trivialities and "character" issues in the place of serious policy matters.

— The revolution also will demand certain legislative and structural changes that will break up the monoculturalization of the media and return it to its former diversity and openness. Foremost among these is **the reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine**. The demise (during the Reagan administration) of this regulatory protection against the partisan abuse of the public airwaves proved to be the cornerstone of the rise of the modern conservative domination of radio, particularly in the realm of the propagandist talk shows which too many Americans use as a substitute for serious information sources. The fears of the original critics of ending the doctrine — that station owners would see the change as carte blanche for handing over the airwaves to a monochromatic ideology (in this case, conservatism) that only recently has begun to show [cracks in the facade](#) — have manifested themselves all too clearly.

— Along the same lines, but even more importantly, is the need to return many of the rules limiting the breadth of media ownership that were eliminated during the "deregulation" of the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and whose few remnants now remain under attack by the Bush-appointed FCC chairman. The vertical and horizontal integration of the nation's mass media is having the same destructive effect as the similar integration of the nation's food industry, ranging all the way from small-town papers devoured and gutted by chains to cable-TV and network news becoming increasingly dominated by a travesty of the journalistic ethos twisted into a perverse culture of celebrity whose broad effect is to numb and paralyze the populace. Our means of informing the public have been winnowed down to a handful of large corporations who continue to demonstrate an utter disregard for anything beyond their own narrow interests. And those interests in recent years have come to clearly include keeping the public in relative ignorance by keeping them focused on trivialities and

phony non-issues.

-- In the long run, this will require structural changes -- both in FCC and other regulatory policy, as well as in the tax and investment infrastructures -- that both require and encourage the breakup of media conglomerates. At the same time, it will be important to encourage (also through tax and investment infrastructures, as well as various small-business initiatives) the revitalization of small local ownership of the nation's media, along with the diversification of national-media outlets, ranging from the creation of viable newswire services beyond the current Associated Press monopoly to the divestment of national news networks from their dominance of cable TV.

-- This must be a nonpartisan revolution, though of course the immediate beneficiaries will be progressives, liberals and centrists, since all have faced a relentless assault from the conservative movement over the past decade regarding their voice within the mainstream media. (The entire purpose of the "liberal media" myth was to cast any idea or policy that fell outside the conservative party line as the product of a corrupt "liberalism.") Nonetheless, there are also conservatives of good will who recognize that the current cabal controlling both the government and media represent nothing particularly to do with genuine conservative values and almost entirely to do with the Manichean acquisition and manipulation of power. All Americans of every political stripe stand to benefit from these reforms, especially since their abuse in this decade can become a two-edged sword in another generation. No one, liberal or conservative alike, benefits from a constricted media that is only good for transmitting propaganda and lacks the diversity that is essential to informing a democracy.

9. The Internet -- and in particular, blogs -- will be the cornerstone of the strategy this media revolution will follow, though of course all means are important participants. Indeed, the reforms are intended to reach every facet of American mass media: newspapers large and small, television, film, radio, books, and of course the Internet.

For that matter, blogs themselves are odd creatures in that, except for the handful who actually engage in original reporting themselves, they are almost entirely dependent on other media forms, particularly print and Internet journalism. But part of what makes them unique is that they synthesize and contain information from all these other sources.

Blogs are, above all, uniquely democratic in nature. Anyone can blog. Supposedly serious "name" journalists ultimately have no more real value in the blogosphere than pseudonymous gym teachers who reveal a knack for being in touch with the larger populace. The value of what you write about, and how well you do it, is all that finally counts.

Blogs are also uniquely self-correcting in a way that eludes most other media; if false information is disseminated, it doesn't take long before it's eviscerated by other bloggers. This function, indeed, forms the backbone of its larger role as a media watchdog; just as blogs will "out" bad blogging, they also have been shown to expose false reporting, as well as malicious behavior on the part of both politicians and the press that might otherwise be buried in the "mainstream."

Because the blogosphere is still more or less in its infancy, it remains somewhat indistinct in shape, though a larger architecture is already beginning to emerge. There are inherent flaws, not the least of which is that a consistent blogger ethos seems not to have emerged fully but has remained formative; at some point, a sense of journalistic ethics ought to take root in the name of establishing credibility.

Nonetheless, blogs can and should play the role of central clearing-house for information in the Media Revolt. As the general public realizes that blogs can provide them with vital information they're not getting anywhere else, the audience will build. This includes the whole gamut of

information: the factual news about the world, as well as reports on who's misbehaving or committing political atrocities or simply being incompetent; analysis of this information that would be suppressed in mainstream reports; information about planned actions to protest misbehavior; and action and funds needed to enact the needed legislative and structural reforms.

Blogs, in other words, can and should play the role abdicated by the mainstream media both in monitoring their own behavior and ethics, and in providing enough diversity that a wealth of viewpoints are given fair treatment, as in any healthy democratic society, and the public properly served.

Blogs will not and cannot do the job alone, of course. The whole purpose of the revolt is to foster an environment in which mainstream journalists, from the lowly ink-stained wretch to the well-coiffed network anchor, are both allowed and positively encouraged to provide truthful and meaningful journalism that provides vital information to the public and does it responsibly and thoroughly. So that will mean recognizing and positively celebrating when superior journalism does its job well; such reporters and truth-tellers should be lauded, promoted, and in the end well remunerated for their work. It will mean channeling the marketplace to reward organizations that do their job well, too.

Finally, the Media Revolt will tap the energy of the citizenry through traditional means as well: Letter-writing campaigns, voting with our pocketbooks, organizing politics and funds on the ground -- without which, in fact, anything that occurs on the Web may prove meaningless. The idea is to turn from simply critiquing the media to taking concrete action.

10. There should be no naivete about the nature of what we are up against. This is a revolt against a national discourse that has degraded into a puerile swamp of innuendo, smear, and dishonest reportage. Anyone participating must be prepared to have the worst of this kind of tactic used ruthlessly against them. And yet because of that, the revolt must at every turn repudiate such tactics and refuse ever to engage them: there must be no groundless insinuation or nakedly false "facts." When they natter about "character" or "likeability," we should talk plainly about policy and what happens in the real world. Smears (that is, fact-free attacks on a public figure's personal character) should not be answered with counter-smears. It's fair (if a concession to diversionary tactics) to fight back with facts, but never fair to resort to twisting or omitting: that's what they do. Cutting corners just to score political points is a Pyrrhic victory. If this is a revolt about integrity, then it will fail if it does not embody integrity itself.

Questions about our opponents' characters, of course, will remain an issue as long as they insist on framing the debate that way, and as long as they keep providing factual reasons to remain dubious. But defeating them should never be predicated on attacking their characters; it should be founded on their disastrous and incompetent stewardship of both the national media and the government itself.

Undertaking this task means hard work. But it has become clear to us as citizens, in an age when fear and terror rule our body politic, that what is at stake here is the soul of democracy itself. To save it, no labor should seem too great.