

The Lasting Consequences Of Rathergate

[Note: For a summary of Rathergate so far, see [here](#).]

What do CBS and suicide bombers have in common? They have each taken their chosen form of political intervention to its appalling and self-destructive logical conclusion, and have thereby, as **PowerLine** very perceptively points out, changed the world in somewhat analogous ways:

Before September 11, important aspects of our security arrangements were based on the assumption that people, even terrorists, want to live. For example, airlines followed the rule that if a passenger's bags were checked but the person failed to appear for the flight, his bags would be removed from the airplane. The idea was that a bomb could have been planted in the luggage. But as long as the passenger was on the airplane, it was assumed that his bags were safe, since no one -- it was thought -- would blow up an airplane with himself on it. After September 11, security arrangements were changed to take into account the new reality (or newly recognized reality) of the suicide bomber.

When he defended CBS's publication of forged documents, Dan Rather spoke of the "checks and balances" that ensure the reliability of news coming from CBS, as opposed to news and commentary from the blogosphere. What are those checks and balances? Ultimately, the main check on the danger that a powerful media giant like CBS might abuse its position of trust by deliberately propagating falsehoods is the assumption that the network values its reputation for accuracy and trustworthiness. In the past, most people have assumed that while broadcast networks, wire services like the Associated Press, and newspapers will occasionally make mistakes, and will certainly spin the news consistent with their political biases, concern for their reputation in the marketplace, and even more among their peers, would prevent them from spreading outright falsehoods.

In the wake of the CBS scandal, that assumption must

be reevaluated.

Yes. But also, given this and many other recent scandals with a similar aetiology, we have to doubt that newspapers and television networks ever deserved the trust that was placed in them. We may well be witnessing a significant moment in the history of news media: a radical restructuring of patterns of criticism and authentication into a decentralised and non-authoritarian form.

This is not (as some have said) the end of the traditional news media. Quite the contrary, for just as Karl Popper said that the point of politics is not 'who should rule' but how bad rulers and bad policies can be replaced, so the point of (news-oriented) blogs is not to replace news organisations: it is to cause bad stories and bad reporters to be replaced. Which is to the benefit of everyone, traditional news media included.

We expect that among these benefits will eventually be the destruction of the culture of manipulation and left-wing paternalism in the traditional media, which has done so much harm (as well as some occasional good, by the way) over so many decades. But we also hope that that will be only the beginning. Who knows what the first ever society with deservedly high-reputation news media will be like?

Mon, 09/13/2004 - 00:58 | [permlink](#)

Comparisons

This is a document typed on a IBM Selectric Composer:

The ability to justify copy easily and quickly is one of the distinct advantages of the new IBM "Selectric" Composer. By merely typing copy once, taking a reading from a scale on the Justification Tube, then setting the Justification Dial, copy is automatically aligned at the right margin as it is typed a second time. Color coding is used to designate pitch on the Type Element, Escapement Lever, and Justification Tube. The idea of color coding for simplicity is used again for taking a reading on the Justification Tube and making the appropriate adjustment on the Justification Dial.

Same document in Word:

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Instruction manual for the IBM Selectric Composer.

Comparison of enlargements of CBS "original" and Word document:

CBS DOCUMENT



to sugar coat it: Bush wa
c from 187th in Alabama.

MS WORD SAMPLE



sugar coat it. Bush was
rom 187th in Alabama.

by a reader on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 10:54 | [reply](#)

LOL: Comparisons

You can't have been following the debate very closely.

The differences you have found are due to you comparing a screen image with a printed image. Printing uses slightly different font settings. If, instead of looking at your Microsoft Word doc on screen and taking screen shots, you print it out and then scan it back in, you will see that the 'th' aligns precisely where it does in the CBS forgery. If you also photocopy it a few times, you will get random variations similar to the ones you are holding up as differences.

Try it. Then adjust your world view. Then report back.

by a reader on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 12:29 | [reply](#)

Re: Comparisons

This is a document typed in MS Word:

.

This is the same document written with a No 2 pencil on the back of an envelope:

.

See? They're identical.

by [Kevin](#) on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 16:18 | [reply](#)

partial touche

Let's grant that, if nothing else, the anti-forgery side can indeed point to an uneven baseline; this feature would not be produced by a computer nor (I think) would the errors induced by repeated xeroxing (which I presume would all be deformation + noise) would cause this effect. I have not seen this point rebutted (feel free to point me to such a rebuttal).

But even ignoring typographical issues - indeed, even if the memos were in fact typed - there are still tons of contextual reasons to believe the documents are forgeries (2 of them; keep in mind that it is only 2 out of CBS's 4 "memos" which are in dispute). Just from memory: reference to a retired person putting pressure, no motive for writing something essentially self-incriminating, the purported author didn't type and there's no secretary/typist initials so who the f*** typed it?, the family has no idea where this thing would have been kept or came from, use of military terminology that doesn't square (see Donald Sensing), an order given weeks before regulations would require it....

Meanwhile on the other side, baseline aside we do still have the striking coincidence that the text (horizontally) lines up perfectly, with perfect centered header and all the line-breaks in the right place (but no hyphens!), including the whole "kerning" thing -- with a casually-inputted Word document. We are also supposed to believe that this thing's author (who is the typist again?) found it SO important to have a raised "th" in a private, informal memo that he switched font balls to do it. (WTF?)

The weight of evidence just points to this thing being a fraud and I have actually seen no convincing reason at all not to think it a fraud, so I'm going with "fraud" until given a convincing reason otherwise.

Which points to a larger issue. Some (see for example Matthew Yglesias) seem to be speaking as if we are somehow required to grant CBS provisional truth on this matter unless/until proven definitively otherwise. Essentially CBS/Dan Rather gets the presumptive benefit of the doubt in all that they put forward. I don't agree with this methodology; I don't see where they have earned it. Am I the only one who finds it ironic that the supposedly "liberal" side is in effect arguing from Authority?

Finally CBS's defense has been so staggeringly weak that even this fact alone gives one pause. Key testimony on which their story was based came from someone who has now backed down and said he was tricked (the memo he vouched for was read to him *over the phone* - well, parts of it). (!) Even more damning, CBS's lone "expert" to "verify" the document is a *handwriting expert*. He "verified" the signature of a person ON A FRICKING PHOTOCOPY. In the real world which you and I inhabit, verification of a signature ON A PHOTOCOPY means precisely ZILCH. I don't know which world CBS inhabits.

This laughable, even absurd supporting evidence simply does not

point to CBS having the truth on their side. Explaining why, if the truth is on their side, their defense consists of pure BS which only an idiot would accept, and their behavior does not coincide more with what one would expect of people confident in the veracity of the memos, is quite difficult. There is an utter failure to resolve more than 1% of the issues and problems raised by the memos' doubters. (I mean yes: typewriters existed which could make a raised "th". Aside from that?)

As such, the most reasonable surmise is that the memos are frauds.

Again, the only reason on earth to think otherwise is if you side with the Yglesias epistemology which (to paraphrase) seems to simply assert that because CBS is a Big News Organization and all, you have to provisionally accept whatever they foist as Truth unless/until you can build a beyond-reasonable-doubt case against it. I think that's moronic but YMMV.

--Blixa

by a reader on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 18:07 | [reply](#)

arguments from authority

I don't think it's ironic that liberals do it. It was never a right-wing phenomenon. It is part of our culture. The left, for example, is more statist. *shrug*

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 20:48 | [reply](#)

well, semantics

But I find the left being more statist ironic too. ;-D To be clear: the irony I speak of is only w/r to the *actual* meaning of "liberal", not w/r to common U.S. usage (in which essentially, "liberal" = "(D) party fan"). You're right there's nothing ironic about it in the second sense.

by a reader on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 20:53 | [reply](#)

It is

A right wing IBM Selectric Conspiracy Theory. All the conspiracy theory cells are working overtime on this one. This post is being typed on an IBM Selectric and scanned. At least I suspect that it is.

by a reader on Tue, 09/14/2004 - 21:33 | [reply](#)

Who knows?

"Who knows what the first ever society with deservedly high-reputation news media will be like?"

One thing we can surmise about the first ever society is that it will

be made up of human beings who truly value Truth.

To say that more precisely, such a society will be made of up human beings who truly value the search for the processes of ascertaining Reality, which appear to hinge on a constant personal quest for falsifiability and encompass both unbiased seeking as well as reporting.

Truth is not what is required or purchased and therein is a problem. Truth is rather constrained by what we consciously seek to find and therefore requires a society of individuals with open minds.

by a reader on Thu, 09/16/2004 - 20:20 | [reply](#)