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The politics of media filtration

Now, after all the national media have done for George W. Bush, the guy's complaining. "There's a sense that people in America aren't getting the truth," he says.

What an ingrate!

"I'm mindful of the filter through which some news travels," the president grouched recently, "and sometimes you have to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people."

Some con artists are never satisfied.

The big media's filtration process has worked to Bush's great advantage. During the 2000 campaign, his dismal record as governor — complete with a truly awful environmental scorecard and a heinously cavalier approach to executions in Texas — got woefully insufficient media attention. During his first months as president, with many Americans doubting the legitimacy of his electoral victory and sensing that he had risen way above his level of competence, the overall media coverage of the new chief executive was deferential.

In mid-September 2001, with Bush suddenly ascending to the media stratosphere, Karl Rove and other political strategists in the White House began their relentless exploitation of Sept. 11.

But they couldn't have pulled it off without the avid participation of mass media. Numerous mainstream news outlets swiftly hailed George W. Bush as FDR incarnate. They marveled at his consummate ability to use TelePrompTers and talk seriously in front of cameras. Exceeding low and narrow expectations, his stock spiked upward in the political marketplace.

From war on Iraq to abrogation of key civil liberties to further skewing of the federal tax structure in favor of the wealthy, everything on the Bush team's wish list has been shamelessly pitched as part of the "war on terrorism."

But even cowboys get the blues, especially when their imperial zeal turns out to be imprudent. Despite the world's most powerful military under their command, the

global reach of the current empire-builders in Washington is exceeding its grasp. They're now facing some very tough quandaries.

With the U.S. economy still slumping and the occupation of Iraq still in what Daddy Bush might call "deep doo-doo," we can expect the political exploitation of 9/11 to intensify between now and November 2004. Get ready for an election year full of efforts to wring every drop of media juice out of what happened on Sept. 11.

In the new edition of her book "W: Revenge of the Bush Dynasty," journalist Elizabeth Mitchell notes that "the Republican National Convention will take place in New York City on the latest date in the party's 148-year history to inch it near to the anniversary of Sept. 11." Only a few days will separate the GOP convention in Manhattan and the 9/11 commemorations.

The steady decline of Bush's approval ratings nationwide in recent months has surely accentuated the Rove administration's view of the 9/11 card as its ace in the hole.

In the real world, his complaints notwithstanding, President Bush can "speak directly to the people" like no one else. The extent of his unfiltered media access — including live coverage of rhetorical speeches and smarmy photo-ops — is enormous. What's more, every day, media outlets are choking with Bush appointees, Republican leaders in Congress, supportive pundits and corporate-backed think tankers who tirelessly tout the president and his policies.

And we ain't seen nothing yet. Much of Bush's anticipated \$200 million campaign war chest next year will be devoted to purchasing entirely "unfiltered" access to the public in the form of commercials lauding the man's supposed greatness.

Bush does have one thing right: By and large, the news media are functioning as a filtration system in this country. Of course, he wants it to filter out a lot more of the news and views he doesn't like. But Bush would be truly shocked if the nation's mass media acted less like a filtration system and more like a means for widespread democratic communication.

In the United States and around the world, impoverished people who suffer because of the administration's policies are among the real victims of media filtration. But evidently their complaints aren't newsworthy. ■

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