

The *Statesman* Doesn't Matter

The Declining Influence of the Mainstream Media

by
Michael Quinn Sullivan

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Maybe it is the newspaperman in me, or perhaps it is that I've read the circulation numbers behind the mainstream media, but I am tired of conservatives running scared from the news media while ranting about "liberal bias."

Both fearfulness and grouching are the defensive tactics of people comfortably accustomed to "minority" status in the halls of political and cultural power. Worse, it is too often indicative of a deep-seated fear that our arguments and ideas cannot, or will not, carry the day. A mature political movement ready to take and exercise power in the service of ideological principles will get around, under, over, or straight through a hostile press in order to deliver its message to the public.

Our ideas are right; we have no reason to fear the big, bad press.

Those of us who lay claim to the principles of free markets and limited government, who are involved in the public debate, can effectively use the media to communicate our message by strategically engaging them – and, yes, even at times safely ignore them. Our message is too important, and too true, to be hampered by those who deliver it.

The Public Gets It

Over the past decade, outside media watchdog organizations such as the Media Research Center (of which I am a former employee) and Accuracy in Media have given the public in-depth analyses of what the media does and does not say, and the time they give to points of view. Further, a proliferation of insider books, such as "Biased" by former CBS reporter Bernard Goldberg, has exposed to the world the agenda of the mainstream press.

Indeed, there can be no debate: the mainstream media tends to be populated by political and cultural liberals. The American people know it.

But there is even worse news for the media, an industry that relies entirely on the trust and goodwill of its customers. One national poll found that almost 60 percent of the American people think news organizations "are often inac-

curate.”¹ Another poll found 89 percent of Americans believe that, to one degree or another, “members of the news media let their own political preferences influence the way they report the news.”²

Whether it is trust, accuracy or political bias, the voters and taxpayers generally know the score. John and Jane Public, our audience, take what is written and said by the mainstream press with a grain of salt.

Frightened Children

Yet all too often conservative politicians run like frightened children at the thought of a negative editorial or the possibility of an unbalanced news story.

When looking at the large Texas newspapers, one is hard-pressed to think of one that is consistently “conservative” on the opinion page. It is difficult to find those that are truly balanced, let alone friendly, in the news sections. The *Austin American-Statesman* is often so far to the left in editorials, and biased in coverage, that many casually refer to it as the *Unamerican-Socialist*.

When newspapers do take a “conservative” position – endorsing a right-of-center candidate, for example – they often do so in spite of philosophy. When endorsing a candidate they will often

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates, as cited by [Pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com). Most recent numbers: February 1999.

² Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates, as cited by [Pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com). Most recent numbers: October 2000.

cite an ability to “work” for the region, bring home special projects or other process-related considerations. Rarely, however, do they present ideology as an asset. How could they?

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Would one expect a free-marketer to endorse the ideology of a socialist?

While newspaper endorsements do have a value with some people, 76 percent of those surveyed

in a nationwide poll said their local newspaper’s endorsement of a presidential candidate wouldn’t make a difference in their voting.³ The numbers improve, from a newspaper’s perspective, as one slides down the ballot – but not a lot.

Liberal Axe Grinding

Okay, editorials are no big deal – they are clearly labeled as opinions. But, conservatives often say the real problem is with the “aggressively liberal” news reporters. Remember the opinion poll on accuracy and trust?

I’m often confronted by those who are worried about reporters grinding a liberal axe in their conservative back. Is their fear justified?

The honest answer must be: sometimes. In larger cities, one is far more likely to face news editors and reporters possessing sharpened ideological axes and the freedom and desire to hack away at conservatives.

For example, a political reporter in the Austin bureau of the *San Antonio Express-News* once worked in the office of Democratic politician John Sharp. That reporter is now covering the

³ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey conducted in January 2000, as found in their website: <http://www.people-press.org/>.

Lieutenant Governor race pitting his old boss against Republican Land Commissioner David Dewhurst. Could that be a conflict of interest, creating at least the appearance of impropriety? Possibly, but one never acknowledged by the paper in print.

In most cases, though, it is wrong to assume the axe-grinding is for political purposes.

More often than not, if a reporter has an axe to grind, it is for others in the industry. Look around Texas. Remember the *Dallas Times-Herald*? The *San Antonio Light*? The *Houston Post*? The list of deceased newspapers is long and distinguished. While many of the surviving papers have managed to expand their staff, the reality is that competition among reporters for jobs is fiercer than ever.

The most important question for us to ask is not if a reporter or editor is liberal, but if he is professional and competent.

Just because your neighbor is a card-carrying leftist doesn't mean you don't ask her to collect your paper, check the mail, feed the dog, and occasionally watch the kids. If you are a staunch conservative, it is likely that many of your friends and neighbors are more liberal than you, on at least some issue you hold dear. The girl working at the cleaners and the mechanic caring for your car may also be less conservative than you, but you trust them because they do a good job.

Reporters are no different. Trust and accuracy reign supreme.

The problem plaguing most reporters is not that they are "too liberal," but that they have been too narrowly educated. Like teachers with degrees in "education," reporters typically have

degrees in "journalism." There is nothing wrong with that.

Indeed, many J-Schools are arguably producing excellent process-oriented journalists who can conjugate verbs, write at the appropriate public comprehension level, and put together a really appealing page for publication. They understand the process, but they lack the experience or knowledge to frame the context.

When reporters enter the workforce and take on a beat, they need someone to help define the context of that beat. For far too long, it has been

people on the left who are willing to take the time to "educate" young reporters, providing that critical context. Conservatives have tended to ignore them.

Like all people, reporters must ask themselves who they trust.

Human nature inevitably causes one to trust those who have been helpful, and be suspicious of those who have not. Adding the activist nature of those often drawn to journalism, one has a recipe for problems.

Conservatives – acting in politics or policy – must recognize that to be successful in communicating to the public through the media, they must be willing to invest the time, effort and energy needed to provide context to the reporter.

Reporters do not win accolades (whether awards or advancement) for stories swiping at conservatives – those are a dime a dozen – but for work that is better written, more interesting and insightful than what their colleagues have produced. Reporters move up in their careers when they are first, accurate, and original, not because they are liberal activists.

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Fundamentally, a reporter earns accolades for producing copy that sells more newspapers (or increases viewers and listeners). The news business is just that: a business.

The Media Market

Rush Limbaugh is heard on almost 700 radio stations around the nation. Most of those stations' program directors are just as liberal as the rest of the media. So how does the generally conservative Limbaugh get airtime? Easy – people listen. Where people listen, advertisers spend money.

The challenge in the media market – just as in the free market as a whole – is in knowing how to make the pressures and trends work for you.

Why does sports coverage occupy more newspaper space than anything else?⁴ Are reporters all just dying to cover high school soccer? No. The fact is people want to read about sports coverage, especially young men with disposable income – an attractive demographic to advertisers. Better sports coverage sells more newspapers, attracting more advertisers. Therefore, since newspapers make their money from advertisers, and advertisers want eyeballs, sports gets the space.

Why do newspapers run obituaries? Why does Ann Landers and the horoscope continue to appear in almost every newspaper? Because people read them. Newspapers don't publish letters to the editor because they are required to do so by law, they run letters because people like to see them.

⁴ Impact Study, Readership Institute, Media Management Center, Northwestern University, as quoted by Presstime, March 2001, (<http://www.naa.org/>)

The newspaper editors and publishers – whether at large metropolitan dailies or small local weeklies – may well be socialists in their hearts, but they make business decisions in their capitalist self-interest. They are confronted daily with the realities of our free-market economy. They work in a manner appealing to the market, or they go out of business.

Today, the news media needs you a lot more than you need them, though they won't admit it. Despite what reporters and editors might have you believe, they ultimately answer to the consumer.

If anyone knows capitalism and understands the opportunities of the marketplace, it's the conservative. The challenge in the media market – just as in the free market as a whole – is in knowing how to make the pressures and trends work for you.

Declining Influence

Not long ago I chatted with a politico who expressed concern about taking public stances that might be considered “too conservative.” After all, he reasoned, the *Austin American-Statesman* might attack him in a news story or write a negative editorial. His fear was that it could injure his re-election efforts – even if such positions were acceptable to his political base.

I asked how many of his voters actually read the *Statesman*. “Probably none,” was his reply. How many financial supporters believe what they read in there? Again, very few.

So why worry? The paper doesn't vote in your district, or hold magic sway over people a hundred miles away. For most people, the *Statesman* really doesn't matter.

It is true that many “important” people (like voters, elected officials, and policymakers) read the newspaper. But it is also true that those are the same people who say they do not have a great deal of trust in the accuracy of the media as their only source of making judgments about the world around them.

Like this legislator, too many conservatives have been intimidated by the old saying about arguing with those who purchase ink by the barrel.

The influence of big newspapers and the broadcast media is greatly exaggerated. They are increasingly paper tigers and hot air. A great many politicians have bought into the media-promoted idea that the mainstream press influences great numbers of people.

Now, do not confuse this point. They do influence people, and the media does play a key role in delivering information. But they are not as important as we fear, nor are they as ubiquitous as they would have the public believe.

Nationally, most people say they get their news from television (65 percent).⁵ Yet no one has a clear edge – news channels and local broadcasters are crowded in the spectrum, all competing for a viewer’s eyeballs.

The downside, of course, is that television is suitable for quick communiqués of easy-to-understand ideas, and tailor-made for he-said/she-said confrontation, but is simply not the place for in-depth analysis or complicated messages.

Of course, it appears the public doesn’t believe newspapers – which are the ideal medium for such coverage – are doing a very good job.

⁵ Media Studies Center survey, Jan. 11-18, 1998, as cited by Pollingreport.com.

Nationally, the average weekday readership of a daily newspaper in 1964 was 80.1 percent of the population.⁶ Today, daily newspaper readership sits at 54.3 percent in the top 50 markets.⁷

In 1990, daily newspapers nationwide had a circulation of 62.3 million during the week and on Sundays. By 2000, the daily newspaper circulation had dropped to 55.7 million during the week and 59.4 million on Sundays.⁸

The picture was worse in Texas’ four most influential media markets: Austin, Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio.

In 1990, the Sunday circulation of daily newspapers sat at 2.9 million, but by 2000 it had *dropped* 15 percent, to 2.46 million. Astonishingly, those same four regions experienced a 23.7 percent *increase* in population. (Fig. 1 & 2).

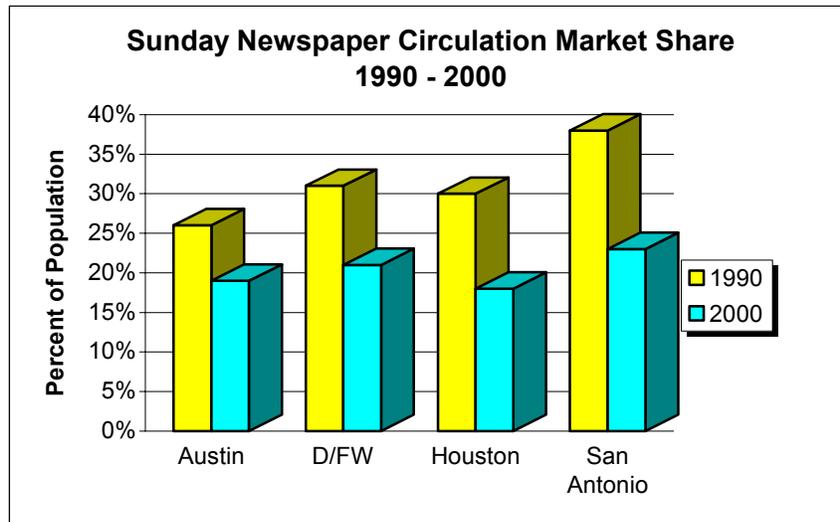
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⁶ Media Studies Center survey, Jan. 11-18, 1998, as cited by Pollingreport.com.

⁷ NAA website, “MORE THAN HALF OF ADULTS READ A NEWSPAPER YESTERDAY,” October 2001.

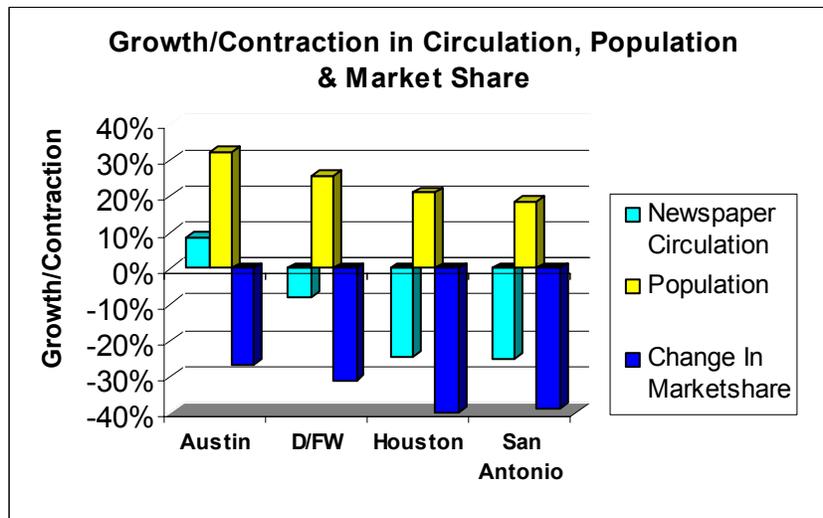
⁸ NAA website, “Facts About Newspapers 2001,” U.S. Daily Newspaper Circulation.

Figure 1



Sources: Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media, 123rd and 134th editions, and from the United States Census Bureau.

Figure 2



Sources: Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media, 123rd and 134th editions, and from the United States Census Bureau.

Put another way: 31 percent of Texans in Austin, San Antonio, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Houston read the daily newspaper on Sundays in the early 1990s; today, only around 20 percent read them.

Yet how can this be? The *Houston Chronicle*, *Dallas Morning News*, and *San Antonio Express-News* bucked the trend – they saw per-

centage increases of 19, 41, and 48 percent, respectively, in circulation from 1990 to 2000. They must be doing something right, right? A reasonable assumption, if you don't remember what happened in the first several years of the decade.

In 1990, all three cities had two daily newspapers – in Houston it was the *Chronicle* and the *Post*, San Antonio had the *Express-News* and

the *Light*, and Dallas the *Morning News* and *Times-Herald*.

The Houston papers had a combined Sunday circulation of 979,798, reaching 30 percent of the population in 1990. According to the most recent numbers, Houston's daily newspaper circulation is 740,134 on Sundays, accounting for 18 percent of the Houston population. Sunday newspaper circulation in Houston fell 24 percent at the same time population was increasing 21 percent. This represented a 40 percent decline in market share.

In San Antonio, there was a combined Sunday readership of almost a half-million people in 1990, falling almost 25 percent to 366,402 a decade later. At the same time, San Antonio's population rose 18 percent, from 1.3 to 1.6 million.

Dallas' combined Sunday circulation in 1990 was 882,257, and ten years later stood at 780,084, an 11 percent decline.

In the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, population rose nearly 26 percent, from 3.8 to 5.2 million people in the 1990s.

It was only in Fort Worth and Austin that daily newspaper circulation increased. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* circulation on Sundays increased slightly more than 2 percent over the decade. In Austin, the *Statesman* circulation increased 8 percent. However, the city of Fort Worth's population grew by more than 16 percent, and Austin's 32 percent.⁹ In each case, significant market share was obviously lost.

⁹ Preceding information drawn from: Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media, 123rd and 133rd editions, and from the U. S. Census Bureau. For Austin, the Austin-San Marcos PMSA data was used; for Dallas/Fort Worth, the Dallas-Fort Worth CMSA data; for Fort Worth, the Fort Worth city data.

Go Local, Very Local

As noted above, the circulation of daily newspapers has dropped both in real numbers and as a percentage of population. But there is a growing segment of the newspaper industry – the oft-overlooked weekly.

In 1990, there were 55 million people nationwide reading weekly newspapers. By 2000, that number had risen to 70.9 million.¹⁰ Today there are half-again as many people subscribing to local weekly newspapers across the nation as to dailies. Yet spending time with weekly newspapers rarely ranks in importance for all but the most desperate of politicians and wannabe policy wonks.

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That's a travesty.

From Abernathy to Zapata, the state is covered by weekly or semi-weekly publications. According to the Texas Press Association, Texas has 534 paid-circulation newspapers, which includes 91 dailies, 63 semiweeklies and 379 weeklies.¹¹ In all, there are more than 700 news publications in Texas, including monthly magazines, weeklies, semiweeklies and dailies, with paid and unpaid circulations. Add the "special-interest" publications, and the number rises to 1,254.¹²

¹⁰ NAA website, "Facts About Newspapers 2001," Total U.S. Non-Daily Newspapers.

¹¹ Texas Press Association website, www.texaspress.com

¹² *The 2002 Texas Media Directory* (Broadcast Publicity Services, 2002), electronic version.

Look, for example, to San Antonio. According to the 2002 Texas Media Directory, the *Express-News* has a current circulation of 236,698. In San Antonio, there are also five weekly general interest newspapers: the *Herald*, the *North San Antonio Times*, the *Southside Reporter*, the *Northside Recorder* and the *San Antonio Current*. These publications have a combined circulation of 246,800 subscribers.¹³

Looking statewide, weekly newspapers and twice-weekly publications represent a golden opportunity for conservatives seeking to get their message in front of the public. Unlike the large dailies owned by corporate conglomerates, weeklies are often small businesses, where the owner is the publisher, ad salesman, and reporter. They are always hungry for news and looking to improve their standing.

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While people by and large don't place a lot of trust in the big, corporate machine running the daily newspapers, they do trust the mom-and-pop weeklies. The rationale is easy to guess: mom-and-pop live next door, the CEO of the conglomerate probably does not.

The real challenge in dealing with these papers is in finding the local hook to the story you are trying to tell. It might be as simple as converting your idea on tax cuts to practical numbers and showing the editor how much people in her circulation area will save if your program is adopted. It could be as complex as holding events featuring local personalities (and kids!) to tout your mission.

¹³ *The 2002 Texas Media Directory* (Broadcast Publicity Services, 2002), pp. 90-92.

The difference is that while a large newspaper *might* publish your story but bury it on page B4 with no photo, the local weekly will often set it on Page 1, above the fold.

News in the Air

Local television and radio stations can be a lot like prospecting for oil – it takes a lot of time, without success, but one hit can be a boon. There are 210 television stations and 58 news/talk radio stations around the state.¹⁴ They always would rather have a local news story than a canned national segment – it is better business. Like newspapers, television and radio live and die by advertising. But television, especially, is a fickle medium. It has to grab viewers with impressive video – it is very often more about showmanship than journalism. Television news is as much about getting ratings as the sitcoms and drama, often needing the same elements.

When it comes to delivering insightful, probing news, television and radio have a hard time competing with newspapers. As *Washington Post* reporters Leonard Downie, Jr., and Robert G. Kaiser note in their compelling new book “The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril,” the broadcast media is driven by what appears in print.

“The networks and local television stations have a few beat reporters, but most of their correspondents are generalists who report on events – things that happen, primarily things that can be photographed while happening,” they write. They go on to note that “a local station’s half-hour news program... devoted largely to weather and sports, also reports just a handful of stories. Even a lousy newspaper will have dozens

¹⁴ *The 2002 Texas Media Directory* (Broadcast Publicity Services, 2002), electronic version.

of stories every day; a good one will have scores.”¹⁵

Policy makes for difficult television.

Whether it is newspaper, television, or radio, the challenge is in getting noticed. If we are trying to reach the public through the press, we have to first get the attention of the reporters and editors.

While television producers might want to do in-depth stories about hot policy issues, the reality is that television is a medium driven by exciting visuals that grab the eye of the channel-surfer. Again quoting Downie and Kaiser, they discuss the role of local television coverage noting that “...government stories usually do not produce good visuals for television. Given a choice between a news story without video and vivid video that might not be particularly newsworthy, most producers put the video on the air.”¹⁶

The lesson is this: always try for television coverage, but don’t expect much – their needs are specific and demanding, and their ability to deliver is limited.

Stop the Press Release, Get Personal

Talk radio is a similarly powerful medium, allowing policy makers and advocates to speak directly to the listener. But even there, the topics generally have to be those which can be quickly summarized and squeezed between traffic reports, weather updates, and commercials. But

¹⁵ Leonard Downie, Jr., and Robert G. Kaiser, *The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril* (New York: Alfred A Knopp, 2002), p.65.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.163.

the opportunity to take a message to talk radio cannot be underestimated – talk radio, perhaps more than any medium, gets results in the grass-roots.

Whether it is newspaper, television, or radio, the challenge is in getting noticed. If we are trying to reach the public through the press, we have to first get the attention of the reporters and editors.

How?

Press releases are a dime a dozen. I hate putting them out, though I dutifully do so because it is expected. And politicians and supporters like them.

Why do I despise press releases? Because I used to be a reporter. I threw away far more press releases than I read.

Whether at a small weekly or a large daily, a television station, or radio newsroom, the media is constantly flooded with press releases, advisories, and reports. An editor may get as many as a couple hundred press releases and media advisories a day. A day! Now, why does your message not shine through in the newspaper? It often has less to do with bias than simple human nature.

When most people come home from vacation to a large stack of mail, they sort it into four piles: junk, bills, friends, and unknown. The junk is trashed without further thought. Bills go to the back. Unknown senders get tossed to the side. But mail from a friend gets opened first.

Reporters do the same thing. Press releases that are inaccurate, too long, or simply hard to decipher, are junk. If the reporter doesn’t know the sender, the release might get read someday. But if she knows you, the release is read immediately.

To effectively use the media as a way to communicate ideas and messages, they must know you. Not just your name, but you. And they will never know you if you don’t make the effort.

Worse, they will get to know the wretched version of you painted by your opponents.

Remember, there are several hundred people every day trying to get the attention of the reporter or editor at most daily newspapers. Even the guys running the tiniest of weeklies have so many demands on their time they are not likely

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to hunt you down to get to know the real you.

A friend of mine works for a Member of Congress in Washington, D.C. Once every six months, he goes to the district and spends an hour at every newspaper, television and radio station that covers his boss.

The result? The district media works well with their office. They aren't bosom buddies, or staunch supporters, but they

appreciate the time and effort, and reciprocate.

By the way, the office also ignores the Washington, D.C., press corps. Why? They know no one in their district pays attention to the Washington *Post* or other national coverage. More correctly, they know no one who matters to the congressman's re-election cares about the Washington *Post* or national coverage.

The Austin press corps is not much better. In fact, for most people, the Austin press corps should not be a consideration. Even with the large dailies, a reporter "back home" is more likely to be friendly, or at least fair. After all, his audience is the people he sees at the grocery store. The capitol press corps is often seemingly

isolated from the market pressures of their newspaper, radio or television station.

Engage Strategically

The reasonable question one is likely asking by this point is, "Okay, so when can I ignore them?" Whenever you want, of course.

But do so at your peril. While the influence of the media is lower than it has ever been, it is not non-existent. And we are foolish if we think the media is going away anytime soon. We must engage them, and engage them strategically.

Unfortunately, our side often makes the mistake of confusing emotional responses with strategic media planning. We must make decisions not on our bad experiences, but on the value to the cause. Conservatives too often ignore the press today because of bad coverage yesterday, and wonder tomorrow why the media hasn't called when "our" issue comes up.

The choice is not one of either ignoring the press or talking to them like a chatty grandmother on the airplane. It is a question of whether or not we are willing to strategically engage the public through a variety of communications efforts.

The media is a tool, like a telephone or computer. We don't talk to the media any more than we talk to our telephone or computer. (Okay, so I talk to my computer, but that's different...) We use the telephone to talk to someone else. When we chat with reporters, we do so because we want to talk to the people who read what he writes or broadcasts.

If we are serious about influencing the public debate, whether as policy advocates or political candidates, we must reach people where and when they are most likely to hear us. Two places to find a good number of them: in front of the television, and behind the newspaper. We must therefore be on the television and in the paper.

But the media is useful only as part of a comprehensive strategy to reach, inform, and influence people on our issues. A complete effort in the marketing of ideas must include websites, media events, private functions, public rallies, e-mail, faxes, and even the occasional piece of old-fashioned mail.

We are fools if we rely exclusively on the media to communicate our message and ideas. We are equally foolish when we completely ignore the media in those efforts.

It is safe to ignore the media only when it does not compromise our mission or endanger our goals. That is assuming, of course, we actually have a mission and know the goals we hope to achieve.

Advancing the Cause

We must never ask ourselves, “Is this liberal reporter also going to stab me in the back with a negative story?” Instead we must ask, “Will talking to this reporter compliment my strategy and advance my mission? Does anyone important to me or my effort need to see/hear/read whatever this reporter will produce?” An affirmative answer requires engagement.

The emotional sting of bad coverage (no matter how much, or how bad) in the past should not be allowed to stop us from aggressively engaging the media in the future. Likewise, yesterday’s media glory should not be cause for us to fear them today.

To run from the press because of past fears or perceived bias is to tell the world we do not have courage or strength in our convictions. If we want our ideas to be taken seriously in the culture, we must demonstrate our willingness to

put those beliefs through the fire of public scrutiny.

If we are communicating our ideas through numerous channels, we have nothing to fear by speaking to the press. In fact, we have a lot to gain with very little effort. When people are hearing from us through the mail, on television, over the radio, and in the newspaper, they are going to get the message we want them to hear, not the bias of a single reporter or editor. Media coverage can only amplify our message, not change it.

That the mainstream media has lost a great deal of its influence should not be an excuse for us to ignore them, but rather encouragement to engage them without fear. They need us, but we can very effectively benefit from them. The media matters as part of a comprehensive plan to communicate the important ideas we hold dear.

Like a teenager with his parents’ car keys, the media is in the driver’s seat only when we allow them to be. By thinking strategically, planning completely, and using the vast array of communications resources and outlets available to us, we can set the public debate.

To be successful we must know our message, be forthright in our presentation, and let the conviction of our ideas emanate from the core of our being. We should welcome tough questions and publicly fight challenges to our ideas. We are, after all, right.

The *Morning News* is important, if we want someone who reads it to be exposed to our message. The *Chronicle* is critical, but only when we are committed to communicating our message. And actually the *Statesman* does matter, but only when advancing our cause.

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