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Artificial Dissemination

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Review of *The Kingmakers: How the Media Threatens Our Security and Our Democracy*. By Mike Gravel and David Eisenbach. Phoenix Books. 204 pp. \$25.95

Like anchorman Howard Beale in the 1976 film *Network*, Mike Gravel, the former U.S. Senator from Alaska and Democratic presidential candidate, is "mad as hell" and is "not gonna take this anymore!" Since he can't yell from the news desk, he has decided to yell at it.

In *The Kingmakers*, Gravel and David Eisenbach, an instructor at Columbia University and communications director for Gravel's 2008 campaign, try to elbow their way to the front of a long line of media-bashers. They argue that "a systematic flaw" compromises the work of all major news organizations in the United States. Instead of investigating, vetting, and presenting the news, television networks and newspapers adopt a "storyline" and then ram it through an "echo chamber," which repeats "the same inaccurate and dangerous claims over and over." With the power to control the flow of information, the lemmings in the news rooms have become "kingmakers," taking the country into ill-advised wars and anointing presidents. "The greatest threat to our democracy," Gravel and Eisenbach declare, "is not money: it's the media."

To clinch their case for mass manipulation, the authors take us through an aftermath (to 9/11), a run-up (to the war in Iraq), and a prelude (to an attack on Iran). After terrorists took the Twin Towers down, the press made George Bush a hero, even though he "wasn't up to the role." Editors and publishers refused, until it was too late, to challenge the original storyline that no one could have prevented the hijackers from boarding the planes. The media then "not only allowed" the Bush Administration to sell an attack on Iraq to the American people, it "promoted the war by echoing the sales pitch." Tim Russert, they insist, was "more lap dog than bulldog. No member of the media bears greater responsibility for helping sell the Saddam/Al Qaeda connection..." And by allowing the Bushies to demonize President Ahmadinejad, even though "the threat he might pose is limited," the mass media helped blow "a great opportunity to work with the Iranians to destroy our common enemy: Al Qaeda."

Reading *The Kingmakers* evokes feelings not dissimilar to the experience of watching Mike Gravel during the Democratic Party debates: you sort of sympathize with him, but can't help concluding that he's a few bricks short of a load. News organizations do, indeed, have a lot to answer for. We share the authors' indignation at Big Media's power to manage and manipulate the flow of information. But the book makes grand accusations which it never substantiates. Gravel and Eisenbach don't investigate where the "storylines" come from, why they are selected, how they come to be adopted, or the context in which they're tabled or terminated. They present no evidence -- not even circumstantial evidence -- about news organizations' motivations or editorial practices.

Their own narrative, moreover, seems to demonstrate that the mass media aren't kingmakers. Throughout the summer and fall of 2007, they acknowledge, the echo chamber called Hillary Clinton "inevitable." After Iowa caucused, "everyone in the echo chamber fell in love with Mike Huckabee." And the media maintained that John McCain, who had run out of money, was about to drop out of the race. Did NBC's decision to exclude Gravel, the tell-it-like-it-is "Man from Alaska", from the October 30 debate in Philadelphia "ultimately kill his campaign"? Well, probably not. In fact, since Gravel emerges as the hero of his own book, you just might conclude that *The Kingmakers* was made to fit a storyline.

Gravel and Eisenbach, touch on, but do not adequately examine, important structural changes accompanying the evolution from "Old Media" to "New Media." The mass media has always depended on the Administration to supply the vast majority of stories and story lines about politics and public affairs. Political operatives (in government and in campaigns) have become masters of managed news. Their press releases give new meaning to the phrase "artificial dissemination." They generate "leaks" to scooter their interests. They control image - producing what historian Daniel Boorstin called "pseudo events", activities like Ronald Reagan's commemoration of the D-Day invasion with a "photo op" at Pointe de Hoc. And they control reality -- restricting the movements of reporters by "embedding" them in military units.

Equally important, ever since Spiro Agnew attacked the press as "an effete corps of impudent snobs," the mass media has pulled its punches. As competition for ratings has intensified amidst draconian reductions in the budgets of news divisions in newspapers and TV network news organizations, the tendency to go soft has accelerated. Network news anchors open and close broadcasts with celebrities, salmonella, sharks, and shoulder replacements. They rarely give investigative reporters free rein or adequate resources. And they stop the presses whenever the Administration claims that "national security" might be compromised.

In the Age of Infotainment, the public gets stories about personalities and horse races. They get opinions masquerading as information. They get it on network and on cable. From Woodward and Bernstein, who are shells of their former selves. And from "The Best Political Team on Television," whose spinmeisters smash softballs served up CNN's sheep in wolf's clothing. The packaging is more important than the content. The reporters become the story - and the stars.

Kevin Morris and Glenn Altschuler: Artificial Dissemination

Gravel and Eisenbach believe that the blogosphere is America's last best hope for exposing "the discrepancies between news coverage and reality." They may have a point. Bloggers did expose Trent Lott's homage to Strom Thurmond and the good ole' days of segregation. They did rather better than Rather in investigating George W. Bush's record as an airman in the Alabama National Guard. And now a blogger has revealed that Justice Anthony Kennedy did not do his homework in the Supreme Court's recent child rape death penalty case. Thus, there is some hope that out of the creative destruction of this era, new open-source journalism will provide the hard hitting and honest reporting we need.

Unfortunately, the net is not yet a bastion of participatory democracy or an authoritative agent of investigative journalism. Occasionally, as Gravel and Eisenbach suggest, it is an open window through which truth is spoken to power. Just as often, it must be said, it's a gravel pit, filled with sludge and Drudge. And most of the time, alas, it's a bigger, more fractionalized echo chamber, where like-minded meet like-minded, each one of them spitting saliva and shouting "I'm as mad as Hell, and I'm not gonna take this anymore."

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I like this.

I think the internet has not quite reached it's full potential, but there is an organizational process going on within the fractionalized echo chambers. This

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