

The Real Legacy of the Plame Affair

By David Sirota
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In watching more of PBS Frontline's fantastic "News War" series - and specifically the section about the Valerie Plame affair - it struck me that the most troubling aspect of the entire case was the original decision by reporters to grant government sources anonymity. As I and everyone else learns in journalism school, anonymity is supposed to be granted not on the basis of partisanship, sensational potential or anything else - it is supposed to be granted on the basis of the power relationship in question, and specifically, to the non-powerful figure versus the powerful figure. The reason for this is because non-powerful figures (such as a corporate or government whistleblowers) needs the anonymity in order to protect themselves from very real retribution from the powerful figures while the powerful figures (such as corporate CEOs or government officials) desire anonymity only to protect themselves from public scrutiny or law enforcement. In the Plame affair, that basic paradigm was entirely reversed out of subservience to Establishment power.

Anonymity is not supposed to be granted lightly, for all the obvious reasons. There is supposed to be a very compelling reason for granting it. Obviously, a power figure's desire to protect himself from public scrutiny or law enforcement is not a very good reason for a reporter - a person who is supposed to be employed to provide public scrutiny - to grant anonymity. And it is certainly not as good a reason as the non-power figure's need for anonymity to protect his employment or even his life (As an aside, most local reporters respect this basic construct; having worked on a number of campaigns where the candidates are considered equal power players, reporters will usually refuse to grant anonymity to either side when charges or attacks are put forward - if you want to go after your opponent, you usually can't hide behind media-provided anonymity).

In the Plame affair, it was the government versus a non-government figure, with the government clearly in the power position. Yet, in this case, reporters granted anonymity to government sources against a non-government figure. Other than Bob Novak, the reporters who perpetrated this were probably not acting out of partisanship - they were probably overwhelmed by their desire to get on the front page, and tragically, they prioritized that self-serving desire over basic journalistic ethics about granting

anonymity. In the process, these reporters used their media platform and the protection of anonymity not to challenge or question power (which is their job, after all), but to make sure power - in this case government power - would be harder to challenge and question. Their preening outside Washington courthouses as "heroes" refusing to give up their sources was only the final insult - reporters prancing around in front of other reporters showing off their supposed "courage" to protect not whistleblowers, but top government officials already in power. History's great muckrakers are surely turning in their graves.

This original decision to grant anonymity to those in the power position will be the true legacy of the whole affair, way beyond the partisan wranglings and way beyond the tragic assault on two courageous individuals, Valerie Plame and Joe Wilson.

The moment "objective" reporters like Judith Miller and Matthew Cooper granted anonymity to the government sources attacking Valerie Plame, American journalism took the side of the powerful figures against non-powerful figures - and publicly exposed a horrifying transformation of the media. Between the Plame affair and the willingness of the media to transcribe Bush administration lies about Iraq WMD, we now know that in the dark, shadowy places where news is reported, many major reporters no longer see their job as questioning and challenging power - they see their job as aiding and abetting it against those who dare to ask questions.

Whistleblowers and truth-seekers of America beware: that old friend of yours known as the media has now been infiltrated by your worst enemy.