

The Inside World of the Texas Press

By Sherry Sylvester

Editor's Note: This version of this article differs from the printed Veritas version only in that the endnotes are include here. They were not included in the print version due to space constraints.

In the state where most Texans live, there is general agreement that a low tax environment, conservative manners and non-intrusive government is a good match for the aspirations and values of the natives and the thousands of domestic and foreign immigrants who have flocked to the Lone Star State over the last few decades.

But the people who work and write at the state's metropolitan newspapers – the Dallas Morning News, the Houston Chronicle, the San Antonio Express-News, the Ft. Worth Star-Telegram and the Austin American-Statesman – live in another Texas.

In their world, Texas is a backward, dull-minded state where an uninformed and misguided electorate chooses leaders who stubbornly resist policies “everyone” knows to be progressive.

In this “alternative universe” where the Texas press dwells, Democrats always fight racism and poverty while Republicans are the tools of big business whose goal is to keep the little guy down.

News reports frequently portray conservatives as troglodytes bent on destroying public schools and forcing us all to become church ladies while liberals simply don't exist.

Unlike their conservative counterparts, liberals are rarely tagged in the media and liberal organizations are almost always referred to as “advocates” or “watchdogs.”¹

Reporting from a Texas they view in deep trouble, the state newspapers do not perceive themselves as biased. Instead, during the legislative session, they saw a state government fairing so badly under Republican control that they had no choice but to get involved.

The states largest newspapers stopped recording the first draft of history because they were in the middle of the fight.

The great debate of the first GOP-controlled legislature in 130 years went largely unreported.

For example, Republicans and Democrats came to Austin with different views over whether it is wiser to concentrate state program resources on the poorest Texans or expand the programs to a larger pool of people. That exchange was lost in the barrage of news reports charging that disaster would strike if state agencies were required to cut any part of their budgets.²

That budget debate distortion and several others that followed made it clear, long before the regular session ended, that Texas no longer has a paper of record. While there were many well-written news reports and reasoned editorials, there is no state publication that can be counted on to consistently provide a fair-minded and thoughtful account of the public policy process in Austin.

The Rise of Fox News

In the year and a half since Michael Quinn Sullivan last examined the Texas press on these pages, several changes have occurred.

New polls consistently show that only about a third of people think the news is accurate.³

The Jayson Blair scandal at the New York Times awakened the larger world of journalism to the fact that their credibility is extremely low⁴

and the persistent success of Fox News has also inserted questions of bias into the larger media conversation. The establishment and immediate interest in Texas Media Watch, which directly confronts the big Texas papers on a weekly basis, demonstrates that the search for fair and balanced reporting is also occurring closer to home.⁵

The Fall of the Texas Chili Parlor Culture

The death of longtime Dallas Morning News reporter Sam Attlesey was a poignant and symbolic end to an era that had already passed – the days when the Austin press corps was on the inside at the State House – or at least had pipelines to insiders.

Attlessey and many of his colleagues flourished in an environment where they got the inside scoop from behind the scenes at the State House from the lobbyists and staffers who hang out, drank beer and gossiped at the legendary Texas Chili Parlor and other downtown watering holes.

Those who dished out the scoop, mostly allies of the Democrats in power, knew to chat up reporters on a turf that is comfortable for them. That their political tastes were often similar undoubtedly helped this process.

But the new Republican leadership and their allies are not a Chili Parlor crowd. Their relationships with the press tend to be far more professional – even when they are cordial. They do not confide in reporters and believe they have good reason to be cautious.

Writing for Texas Media Watch earlier this year, Republican communications strategist Ray Sullivan said he sincerely believes the Texas media doesn't understand conservative thought or Republican philosophy.⁶

In reviewing the press coverage of the last legislative session at Texas Media Watch, we found extensive evidence of this lack of understanding among the state press corps and we believe it is one of the causes of biased and inaccurate reporting.

Without the Texas Chili Parlor culture, most Texas reporters were left with few genuine relationships with sources who view the world through a conservative lens. Consequently, they are vulnerable to stereotypes that characterize conservatives as stingy, racist, religious fanatics.

Stingy, Racist, Religious Fanatics

If the Texas press understands conservative approaches to social programs or government, it is not apparent in much of their coverage. The fiscal restraint reflected in many conservative budget proposals was most often portrayed in the Texas press as simply cold or stingy.⁷

Conservatives were also frequently victimized by stereotypes of racism. Earlier this year there were five news reports regarding House Speaker Tom Craddick's vote against making Martin Luther King's birthday a state holiday in 1991.

Nothing was written about the issues that were debated at the time – just a rehash of Craddick's vote and pro-forma accusations from Democrats.

But no Texas paper reported that three African-American Republicans were elected to statewide office for the first time in Texas history.

Weeks after the election, an editorial in the Austin American-Statesman noted the fact, but said that the controversial remarks of U.S. Sen. Trent Lott "whited out" the victory for the GOP.⁸

Reporters also seem to spend an inordinate amount of time looking for religious fanaticism in GOP leaders.

On June 6, San Antonio Express-News writer Bridget Gutierrez described Gov. Rick Perry as "a religious man who favors school choice."⁹ Similarly, Clay Robison, writing on May 30, described Texas GOP State Party Chair Susan Weddington as a "Christian activist."¹⁰

Syndicated Texas columnist Molly Ivins compared the entire Texas Republican Party to the followers of David Koresh.¹¹

However, state reporters routinely ignore the religious affiliations of Democrats and their allies. A Texas Media Watch search yielded no instance of a Democrat being identified as a Christian, an atheist, a Jew or a Muslim in relation to a public policy position.

Agenda Setting Effect

When Michael Sullivan examined the Texas press in 2002, he asserted that conservatives have little to fear from the political and cultural liberals at the state's big papers because the public is well aware of their bias.

That observation is still accurate, but during the recent legislative session discerning Texans learned what scientists mean when they use the term "agenda setting effect."¹²

Most readers use a healthy amount of skepticism when they approach stories in their daily paper, but newspapers still have the ability – by the stories they chose to write and the stories they ignore – to determine public priorities.

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This “agenda setting effect” explains why the Children’s Health Insurance Program debate focused on whether to expand or limit coverage to certain income groups.

Stories on how the program has been mismanaged or other insurance coverage options were not written.

By February of this year, Texas Media Watch had already counted over a hundred Texas news reports on the dire consequences of almost any cut to state agencies. No paper explored the findings of several state audits that reported cost overruns in the transportation and mismanagement at human services. Even reports of fraud did not result in a press investigation.

Conservative arguments insisting that state government spending had increased 125 percent over the past 15 years were ignored by Texas newspapers even when news reports of bloated state budgets surfaced in national newspapers like USA Today.¹³

In most news reports on the state budget, Texas newspaper readers were not provided even basic information about the percentage of state agency budgets that were proposed for cut, the cost of delivering the service or the salaries of the state workers involved.

Meanwhile, redistricting -- an issue that almost no regular person cares about -- was made to seem vitally important by the number of news stories that appeared in the Texas press.

During a six week period, Texas Media Watch counted almost 300 state news reports on the Oklahoma flight of the Texas lawmakers and the investigations that followed.

Texas newspapers had a big stake in the redistricting fight. All of the large metropolitan newspapers took strong stands against the GOP initiative and repeatedly editorialized against it.¹⁴

They milked stories of possible Republican misconduct in chasing the Democrats long after it was clear that no laws had been broken and no resources has been illegally deployed.¹⁵

Biting Commentary – But No Biting Back

Columnists provide a face for big newspapers and most often are the people who generate public debate because their conversational tone can put them in more direct contact with readers.

Unfortunately, the large metropolitan papers in Texas currently have no columnists on staff who are conservative thinkers or have a sympathetic understanding of conservative views.

The big Texas newspapers’ high profile columnists are avowed liberals or at least left of center. They were almost unanimous in their opposition to redistricting and state budget cuts.¹⁶

The incisive and biting commentary that comes from these liberal voices has no conservative counterpoint. There’s no biting back.

Conservative views are provided on Texas editorial pages by nationally syndicated columnists, guest editorials and non-staff contributors including William Murchison at the Dallas Morning News and Jonathan Gurwitz at the San Antonio Express-News. Editorial page editors appear to pay attention to balance in selecting pieces, but they have not yet recruited conservative staff columnists who have the same stature as their own writers.

Beyond Corrections: The Capitol of the Red States

At Texas Media Watch we have learned that the state’s newspapers don’t often take kindly to criticism. When confronted with charges of bias, they hide behind their corrections policies and fall back on the old bromide that if both sides are mad about a news story, they are obviously doing their job.

Still, there is little doubt that the barrage of questions surrounding media bias – coupled with the declining readership of almost every Texas paper – is affecting their approach to the news. The San Antonio Express-News published a detailed editorial page survey in July asking readers if they believe their reporting is biased. This was a broad contrast to the Houston Chronicle who published a lengthy editorial manifesto in February proclaiming that they are not biased.¹⁷

Fortunately more sincere models for combating bias are beginning to emerge in other states. Los Angeles Times editor John Carroll issued a memo to his staff in May regarding the bias he discovered in a story his paper published on the new Texas abortion information law.

Charging slanted language, unbalanced sources and “cheap shots” Carroll wrote that “we may happen to live in a political atmosphere that is suffused with liberal values (and is unreflective of the nation as a whole) but we are not going to push a liberal agenda on the news pages of the Times.”¹⁸

A similar memo went out from the Baltimore Sun in July prohibiting reporters from expressing their political views on any subject they cover.¹⁹

These are first steps to breaking down the denial of bias in the alternative universe of the press.

Another step is zero bias tolerance from newspaper readers. Publishers, editors and reporters must come to expect strong reactions from their communities when they slant news reports, overwrite headlines or fail to balance both sides of the story.

The Dallas Morning News aspires to be a national news paper. Readers should let the editors know that the paper will not succeed until they provide consistently unbiased news reports. Similarly, the Houston Chronicle would like to move up to the next tier, but to reach that goal, they will have to examine the individuals who cover public policy. They need some intellectual diversity on their news team.

At the Austin American Statesman, every editor and reporter should seriously reflect on why so few Texans take their paper seriously.

With George Bush in the White House, Texas has become the national cradle of Republican and conservative political thinking – the capitol of the red states.

And while we do not need a conservative press to support that ideology, the state does deserve newspapers that are fair-minded enough to effectively chronicle the dynamics of the debate and the times.

Sherry Sylvester is an award winning journalist who has been writing about politics, public policy and the media for over two decades. She stepped down as the Political Writer at the San Antonio Express-News in early 2003 to establish Texas Media Watch, a non-partisan project that monitors the Texas press. She is the project director.

Endnotes

¹ In 2002, the Austin based Center for Public Policy Priorities, a government program advocacy group, was identified as liberal twice in 177 news stories. The Texas Public Policy Foundation was identified as conservative 81 times in 129 news stories. Texas Citizens for a Sound Economy, a fiscal restraint advocacy group, was identified as conservative 33 times in 39 news stories. But Texans for Public Justice, a group that, among other things, led the charge against the federal confirmation of Texas Supreme Court Justice Priscilla Owen, was never identified as liberal although they were quoted in 349 news reports.

² In the first month of the legislative session, over a hundred stories were written on the consequences of budget cuts, but no stories were written examining the fiscal options facing lawmakers. See Texas Media Watch February 27, 2003 and April 25, 2003

³ A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll reported on May 28 that only 36 percent of the public believe the news they get from media sources is accurate. A June 19 Gallup Poll found that only 33 percent of the public has confidence in the press.

⁴ What seemed to shock the staffers most at the Times is that so few people bothered to call the paper and complain about Blair’s flamboyant inaccuracies. New York Times May 11, 2003

⁵ Visit Texas Media Watch.com on the web

⁶ Ray Sullivan, Texas Media Watch Crossfire, Feb 10, 2003

⁷ For one example, note this Houston Chronicle report from R.G Ratcliffe and Polly Ross Hughes on April 17 that “*Craddick and the GOP leadership have repeatedly fended off Democratic efforts to obtain more money for services for the poor and health care for children and teachers.*” But while Democrats were viewed as compassionate heroes, the motives of conservatives were questionable. On April 17, the Ft. Worth Star Telegram reported that the “sluggish economy gave Republican House leaders”...the cover they needed to insist that Texans should not be required to pay higher taxes...”

⁸ Texas Media Watch “Line Count” February 10, 2003 and “Lott’s Rebel Yell Spoils GOP Message, Austin American-Statesman, December 13, 2002.

⁹ San Antonio Express-News, June 6, 2003

¹⁰ Houston Chronicle, “Top Republican Wielded Criminal Words against Texas Dems, May 22, 2003

¹¹ Texas Media Watch, “Ivins compares Republicans to Branch Davidians”, July 9.

¹² For an overview of agenda setting theory, see the book review section of Public Opinion Quarterly, Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory, March 22, 1998.

¹³ USA Today, “Economy Not to Blame for States’ Budget Woes, June 22, 2003

¹⁴ Texas Media Watch, “Big Texas papers egged on Democratic walkout,” May 14, 2003

¹⁵ Several investigations determined that no Homeland Security resources were utilized in the search for the Texas Democrats, no Texas Dept. of Public Safety officials did anything illegal, no elected Texas official, including House Speaker Tom Craddick or U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, called any Homeland Security agency for help in finding the Democrats and the Federal Bureau of Investigation played no role in the search for the wandering Democrats.

¹⁶ Texas Media Watch, “Texas Columnist Watch,” May 19, 2003

¹⁷ Houston Chronicle, Blood, Sweat and Years, and others write on the balance and diversity of their editorial page, January 20, 2003

¹⁸ Carroll’s memo is posted at LA Observed.com

¹⁹ The Baltimore Sun memo is posted on Romenesko at Poytner.org