Obamacare

The Good, the Bad & the Missing

John A. Lynch

What Obamacare Misses & Its Free-Market Opponents Would Make Even Worse

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Obamacare – The Good, the Bad & the Missing

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What Obamacare Misses &
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Media Wars –

Shaping Public Opinion

Unless you slept through the past several years, you’re no doubt aware of the media attention paid to health reform as it was deliberated, massaged, and ultimately enacted into law in 2010. If nothing else, this highly public debate drove home the central role now assumed by the media in shaping public policy in America.

The transformation of the media from reporting the news to creating the news has never been starker, and its implications for the future of health reform remain profound. Major media outlets have staked their ideological ground and are unlikely to change their ideological loyalties.

**This means that reform will be implemented under the same harsh light in which it was deliberated.** This assures a continuing and central role for the media in our healthcare future.

Unfortunately, this role to date has shed more heat than light on a complex subject that would benefit from solid and objective journalistic reporting and public education.

This is no longer a profitable role for American media, however. The money in media is made in entertainment with polarizing coverage of topical subjects that increase audience share and advertising revenues, not in the staid old world of news and journalistic integrity that exists now mostly in retrospect.

This chapter considers how this is likely to affect health reform’s implementation and what might be a more constructive role for the media to play in educating the public rather than inflaming its passions. It also suggests the public’s outrage might be better directed elsewhere if public service were the media’s true objective. Of course, it is not.

“I find television very educational. Every time someone switches it on, I go into another room and read a good book.”

Groucho Marx

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It’s been noted throughout these chapters that America’s need for fundamental health reform transcends political ideology because all Americans are being victimized by the medical status quo - whether they choose to recognize it or not.

Relying on doctors and hospitals to self-correct their abuses and negligence when we have plenty of evidence they are unable or unwilling to do so is simply turning a blind eye to the problem – a problem that injures and otherwise adversely affects patients of all political persuasions.

And the media do the public a disservice when they inflame the politics of health reform and exaggerate the purported benefits of medical advances without mentioning their risks. In fact, the media have become very much a part of the problem in our medical dysfunction.

And they promise to complicate the implementation of reform in a number of ways. This starts with the blatant use of falsified charges and misleading assertions that serve to confuse consumers and distract them from measures they might pursue that could actually improve their health and that of their families.

Item: *The New York Times* saw fit to report on 230 deaths from nutritional supplements from 1983 to 2004, or over a 20+ year period.¹ That’s about 11 deaths a year. The worst year was 2005, when a “record 27” such deaths were reported. Now 10-20 deaths a year from supplements is still serious, but compared to deaths from the prescribed use of prescription drugs – estimated at 106,000 deaths a year (see *Our Healthcare Sucks*) – it’s a drop in the bucket. Prescription drugs kill over 7,000 times as many Americans as supplements, yet you’d be hard-pressed to find media coverage of that fact.

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How is such distorted media coverage possible in a free and open media market such as ours? As always, when nothing else is obvious, follow the money.

Pharmaceutical companies spend billions every year on drug advertising at a time when newspaper, television, and radio outlets are all under intense financial pressure due to falling advertising revenues. Advertising revenues for newspapers - about 80% of their revenues - declined by about 30% from 2008 to 2009\(^2\) due to both the recession and increased competition from digital media, with newspapers shedding over 30,000 jobs since January of 2008.\(^3\)

This trend has gotten even worse since – with ad revenues now down to levels not seen since 1951\(^4\). And print ad revenues are declining at ten times the rate that digital ad revenues are increasing, so the conversion to digital formats is barely putting a dent in their declining ad revenues.

The following table from the Newspaper Association of America says it all in terms of how desperate America’s print media have become:

![Print Newspaper Advertising Revenue Adjusted for Inflation, 1950-2011](source)

Source: Newspaper Association of America

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\(^2\) MAGNA Media Advertising Forecast. MAGNA, 7/13/09.

\(^3\) Paper Cuts. [http://graphicdesignr.net/papercuts](http://graphicdesignr.net/papercuts).

\(^4\) US Newspaper Ad Revenues drop to 60Yrs Low. Viral Blog. 2/29/12.
This means media companies are highly sensitive to not alienating their advertisers with stories that are negative about their advertisers’ industries or products.

And while the impact of this “ad spend” on journalistic content hasn’t been extensively studied in mass media publications, a study of one year’s worth of advertising in eleven major medical journals found “Increased pharmaceutical advertising is associated with publishing fewer articles about dietary supplements and publishing more articles with conclusions that dietary supplements are unsafe.”

No one can prove “cause and effect”, of course, but it seems highly probable that the financial sponsors of these publications have at least an indirect impact in shaping - if not outright censoring - their “scientific” content.

Those studying the media have similar concerns about the corrosive effects of media dependency on advertising revenues to shape, distort, and even dictate news:

“Janine Jackson of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a news media watchdog group, told the American Free Press that 60% of journalists surveyed by FAIR admitted that advertisers ‘try to change their stories’…”

“There is an ‘overwhelming influence of…advertisers’ on broadcast and print news reporting…Local broadcasters are under pressure from big corporations to ‘entertain’ rather than inform…people are ‘more ignorant’ after viewing television news because of the misinformation they broadcast (emphasis added)”.

This report was in 2002, long before advertising revenues began their downward spiral. The pressures on these journalists must be even greater amid today’s financial pressures that threaten their very survival.

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5 Does pharmaceutical advertising affect journal publication about dietary supplements? BMC Complementary & Alternative Medicine 2008; 8:11.
6 Mainstream Journalism: Shredding the First Amendment, Online Journal, 11/7/02.
Advertising revenues can shape, distort, and even dictate the news

FAIR has an even more direct assessment on its website:

“Most of the income of for-profit media outlets comes not from their audiences, but from commercial advertisers who are interested in selling products to that audience…

“The fact is that the most important transaction in the media marketplace - the only transaction, in the case of broadcast television and radio - does not involve media companies selling content to audiences, but rather media companies selling audiences to sponsors…

“This gives corporate sponsors a disproportionate influence over what people get to see or read… Most obviously, they don’t want to support media that regularly criticizes their products or discusses corporate wrongdoing…

“More generally, they would rather support media that puts audiences in a passive, non-critical state of mind – making them easier to sell things to….it is becoming harder and harder to escape from the propagandistic effects of advertising…Even supposedly ‘noncommercial outlets like PBS and NPR run ads – euphemistically known as ‘underwriter announcements.’”

It should come as no surprise to hear the following:

“In the business press, the media are often referred to in …the way they present themselves in their candid moments: as a branch of the advertising industry (emphasis added).”

And the ties that bind go directly to the top. According to an analysis by FAIR, 6 of the 9 major media companies shared a board member with at least one pharmaceutical company, a practice called “interlocking directorates”. This practice extends to health insurance companies as well, where 5 of the 9 major media companies had interlocking directorates with health insurers.

This represents a kind of stealth infiltration at the highest corporate levels designed to assure that neither company sharing a director does things that adversely affect the other.

Of course, insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies don’t have a public obligation to report the truth like media companies do, so the damage occurs in effectively censoring the stories the affected media companies will cover. Those that reflect poorly on the pharmaceutical or insurance industries tend not to get published – or even written.

“\textit{It’s becoming harder and harder to escape from the propagandistic effects of advertising}. www.fair.org

Here are the overlapping directorates reported in the FAIR study of this subject:\textsuperscript{8}

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\begin{tabular}{ |c|c| }
\hline
\textbf{Major Media Companies With Interlocking Directorates} & \\
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\textbf{Media Company} & \textbf{Insurance \& Pharmaceutical Companies With Interlocking Directorates} \\
\hline
Disney/ABC & Proctor & Gamble \\
GE/NBC & Chubb, Novartis, Proctor & Gamble, Merck \\
Time Warner & AIG, Health Cap, Paratek Pharmaceuticals \\
Fox/News Corp & GlaxoSmithKline, Genentech, Hybritech \\
New York Times Co. & Eli Lilly, First Health Group \\
Tribune Co. & Abbott Labs, Middlebrook Pharmaceuticals \\
Gannett/USA Today & Chubb \\
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The financial pressures on traditional media show no signs of letting up and are likely to intensify, making it ever more difficult for these media outlets to regain whatever semblance of journalistic integrity they once had.

This assures continuing erosion in journalistic standards and integrity – an unsettling context for objective coverage of health reform as it unfolds through its contentious implementation phases and likely revisions over the next decade.

As traditional media increasingly become advertising extensions of their sponsors, news coverage will become more and more like entertainment programming where sponsors often dictate program content.

The opportunities are endless to subtly – even subliminally – influence news content with “product placements” and advertiser-produced video and “news copy” that TV reporters simply read to their audiences as if it were independently produced. Indeed, this practice is common today as newsrooms operate under deadline pressures with less staffing and more airtime to fill.

This pervasive commercialism is likely to drive consumers’ desire to consume medical care and stimulate demand that will further increase medical spending and treatment risks.

With the average American exposed to some 500-1,000 advertisements a day⁹ across all media formats - and with direct-to-consumer drug advertising expected to represent an increasing share of declining advertising revenues - the background noise against which health reform will be implemented will be very much one of promoting the benefits of medical consumption while downplaying its risks.

Those media mavens who remain opposed to health reform can be expected to continue to “cherry-pick” their data to support their ideological view that America has the “best healthcare system in the world”. And the evidence to the contrary will continue to be ignored or get short shrift because it’s too “nuanced” for the average viewer or listener – or because it doesn’t fit with the political ideology of the media outlet.

Translation: news reporting will be further “dumbed down” with catchy sound bites that “poll well” among target audiences.

Entertainment will continue to take priority over information because it creates a more receptive audience mindset into which to sell products. Depressing stories discourage buying, upbeat “gee-whiz” stories encourage it.

Such marketing psychology increasingly dictates our mass media coverage, while niche media markets are driven by shared views and interests – political ideology, in this case – that induce buying by appealing to and affirming audiences’ preconceived views. In fact, an entire media division has been spawned by this phenomenon...

Advocacy Media…Yakety Yak!

To discuss hurdles to implementation of reform without including advocacy media – largely talk radio, cable TV, and internet social media – would be to ignore the 800-pound gorilla in the over-heated room of public opinion.

These are difficult economic times and jobs and the economy rightly dominate public concerns. During such times, public opinion turns angry, and that anger is directed at whichever party is in power. This natural and predictable phenomenon weakens the incumbent government’s ability, in this case, to implement health reform.

Media’s role in shaping public opinion has grown dramatically with the advent of 24/7 cable TV and the internet. In order to find programming for the seemingly endless hours of broadcast time available, media have diversified beyond news reporting and broadcast journalism into diverse niches of “infotainment”. These include political coverage and commentary now dominating primetime on the major cable networks.

Politics has become sport for many aging Americans, complete with the competitive need to win at any cost. There are no referees or umpires, however, to enforce any rules or otherwise keep things civil. Demonizing those with opposing views is not only permitted, but encouraged - as it helps to drive ratings and ad revenues. We now have major cable TV networks that function, for all practical purposes, as propaganda arms of the major political parties.
Advocacy media blends fact with fiction to shape public opinion to fit their agenda

In order to attract a broader audience, media commentators take deliberately provocative positions on issues like health reform that resonate with a particular market segment – generally either conservative or liberal.

Since opposition to health reform comes from the conservative side, however, the rest of this discussion will address conservative commentary as it is more likely to affect implementation of health reform.

It starts by recognizing this is advocacy media, not journalism - as most such commentators will admit. It’s a form of infotainment that can prove dangerous - to the extent it relies on fiction and not fact - when it shapes public opinion and, thereby, public policy.

But it will remain very much a central part of our public discourse. This is particularly so on the political right, where much of the conservative political agenda is defined by conservative talk radio and cable TV commentators yielding far greater de facto political power than ever envisioned by the Founding Fathers they love to cite.

They know that psychology research and audience polling prove that perpetuating a state of fear - in this case, fear of “big government” - keeps their audiences dependent on them to assuage their fears or, more likely, to keep those fears front and center in their audiences’ consciousness so they “stay tuned”.

And although conservative views tend to dominate talk radio and yield the highest cable TV ratings and revenues, liberals have their own media outlets not above similar tried-and-true tactics to stir up their base.

The danger in this unprecedented phenomenon is the blending of fact with fiction to shape rather than inform public opinion. This often results in the creation of news - generally embellished to fit viewers’ and listeners’ preconceived biases as determined by audience polling - rather than the reporting of actual news events.
Stoking peoples’ fears and insecurities makes them less open to opposing views and more dependent on sources that reinforce their fears and insecurities.

Fear, in other words, keeps audiences bound to the broadcasts that stoke their fears in ways not unlike the dependency of addicts on their drug of choice. Fearful audiences need to tune in to their favorite spewers of fear and loathing as junkies need their daily fix.

The danger lies in the willingness of the fear-mongers to invent hypotheticals - fictions - to justify their fear-inducing rant of the day, building an entire broadcast around total fabrications as if they were fact.

It goes something like this: “I wouldn’t put it past X to do Y”. Whatever it is that the loathsome “X” might be imagined capable of doing then becomes the basis for soliciting audience feedback about the horrors of “X doing Y”.

The fact that “X” has only done “Y” in the fevered imagination of the commentator seeking to drive his or her ratings and ad revenues - and personal compensation - gets lost in translation.

Here’s the issue: these are clearly works of fiction, by definition. Were they books, they’d belong in the “Fiction” section of the bookstore.

Yet these fictions serve to rile the conservative base and influence public policy. For public policy to be so heavily influenced by fictions can’t be healthy for any society - no matter how sacred its right to a free press.

Listeners and viewers of these programs should have a corresponding right to the truth and programming based on fact, not fiction. But this type of inbred programming - uninformed and untempered by opposing views - dominates talk radio and cable TV ratings.
It’s a proven formula not likely to be abandoned out of any sense of duty or responsibility to the national interest – especially when there are no repercussions to be had.

And that is part of the problem: Advocacy media is free of responsibility for its actions and the incitement it produces. Unlike elected officials, talking heads never face voters at the polls and are never held accountable when their claims are proven baseless.

As a genre, its attack mentality, chronic need to demonize opponents, and bullying tactics cheapen public discourse and promote a “my way or the highway” mentality that makes political compromise impossible. It’s hard to meet the devil halfway.

Facts are secondary in political debate anyway. Studies show that the more strongly held one’s political beliefs – on either end of the political spectrum – the less likely we are to change our views when confronted with facts that contradict them.

In fact, these studies show that political partisans tend to get defensive when confronted with factual evidence that disproves their political beliefs.10

According to this report, confronting partisans with facts can backfire by causing them to retreat even more strongly into preconceived, if factually unfounded, beliefs:

“In a series of studies in 2005 and 2006, researchers at the University of Michigan found that when misinformed people, particularly political partisans, were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs…

“Facts, they found, were not curing misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts could actually make misinformation even stronger...Instead of changing their minds to reflect the correct information, they can entrench themselves even deeper (emphasis added)”.

This “don’t bother me with the facts” mindset - rooted in natural human defense mechanisms in response to the threat of admitting we’re wrong - allows partisans to ignore evidence such as that discussed in Chapter 4 showing that deregulation of healthcare has never succeeded in lowering medical costs despite economic theories suggesting it should.

Theories are theories and they don’t always pan out in practice, but that never stops partisans from clinging to their beliefs - facts be damned. Free-market theory, for example, has yet to be proven in any market economy on earth, yet its proponents espouse it with the certainty of centuries of tried-and-true favorable experience.

The ready availability of misinformation on partisan media outlets compounds this phenomenon by making misinformation ubiquitous and reinforcing in those who believe it the sense that they’re right in believing it.

This leads us to this point in time where the most misinformed actually have the strongest held political beliefs, which amplifies their impact on public policy because of our shortage of “profiles in courage” to stand up to bullying tactics of the misinformed.

Those who study these things have long worried about “information overload’ with our media-dependent lifestyles, especially with the fragmentation of information with “narrow-casting” cable TV, talk radio, and the internet.

The greater concern with the arrival and success of advocacy media is misinformation overload in which audiences tune out that which doesn’t reinforce their preconceived beliefs, setting up a series of partisan silos that make political compromise and accommodation increasingly unlikely.

It’s hard to imagine where all this divisiveness will lead us, but it’s unlikely to be the “more perfect Union” the Founding Fathers foresaw in the Preamble to our Constitution.
As for health reform, all of this means that implementing health reform is in for protracted unpleasantries that may or may not rise again to the level of 2009’s “Town Hall Meetings”. At a minimum, however, it will assure a constant level of dissonant background noise that will keep reform from gaining the level of public support it found in Massachusetts with its prototype version of health reform that enjoys over 60% public support.

By contrast, months after passage of national health reform, public support hovered in the low 40th percentile range, while public disapproval rates were in the high 40th percentile range. By mid-2010, however, this began to reverse as public promotion of the early benefits of reform began to resonate with the public.

With all our new media, citizen grandstanding now competes with political grandstanding

And by the time of the Supreme Court’s finding that health reform is constitutional, public support for it was roughly equal to those who still opposed it. But it’s never enjoyed the broad public support its prototype has in Massachusetts – a state that’s considerably more liberal than the country as a whole.

This lack of broad public support is likely to continue, stoked by advocacy media that will continue to demonize each of the 60 reform implementation milestones as “creeping socialism” despite the fact that reform essentially mirrors Republican proposals of the 1990s.

Which begs the question: Were the Republicans who advanced similar reforms in the 1990s – many still in office – closet socialists? Or have we moved so far to the right that what was only recently a conservative healthcare agenda now considered socialism? Or is it all just contrived showmanship to gain political advantage, as most Americans recognize it to be?

We used to be a nation with enough sense to dismiss political grandstanding for what it is.

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Now a significant number of Americans tune into it because they get to do the grandstanding. “Citizen journalists”, YouTube wannabes, Tweeters, call-in and texting audience respondents all have opportunity for their “15 minutes of fame” as never before. If nothing else, this age of digital media and user-generated content has democratized political grandstanding and made acceptable what was once despicable - another “tipping point” we’d be better off without.

Is it actually possible, after all, that there is nothing in health reform – mostly measures Republicans themselves have previously advanced – that cannot be endorsed by those same Republicans today? Is there nothing an opposition administration can do that deserves bipartisan support in the interest of putting “country first”?

Or are conservatives now so “at war” with Democrats that there’s nothing – not one thing – meriting compromise? By this logic of extreme partisanship, there’s no national good worth compromising with “the enemy”. Under these new rules of engagement, what was once considered the “art of compromise” is now “collaborating with the enemy”.

Gone are the days of bipartisan compromise to serve some greater national purpose. It’s now all about power – pure, raw power; nothing more and nothing less. This all-or-nothing mindset is inconsistent with mainstream American sensibilities that favor political compromise and bipartisanship.

It may serve to rally the base of political extremists, but it’s unlikely to prove acceptable to moderates who manage to consider their politics without raising their blood pressure. This majority of Americans is likely to question why those seeking their votes can’t find one thing nice to say about their opponents. What are the odds, after all, that any one person or party can be completely wrong 100% of the time?

It doesn’t take long for those who aren’t obsessed with politics to realize that those who espouse this angry rhetoric may not have reality as their constant companion. But this is the political climate – scorched earth, search-and-destroy, attack “journalism” – in which health reform will be implemented.
Extremists and other “true believers” never prevail in the long haul because most people are not extremists. They’re called “extremists” because they don’t represent mainstream thinking, not because they do.

But they can certainly make things difficult for those trying to advance a complex agenda like health reform.

For those interested in more on the role of advocacy media in the form of cable TV, the following YouTube video of MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow’s interview with Jon Stewart about his views, including the distinction between “partisan” and “ideological” TV, is surprisingly thoughtful and thought-provoking. It’s worth 10-minutes of your time to possibly cause you to rethink this subject of such great importance to our futures - and not just our healthcare futures.

**Scorched earth, search-and-destroy, attack “journalism” is the context in which health reform will be implemented**
Like What You’ve Seen?

If you’d like to learn more about healthcare reform and the threats our fragmented, fraudulent, and dangerous medical system will continue to pose no matter our political future, read the rest of the book. Take a look at the Table of Contents to see how much more there is to learn.

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: More Than Politics At Stake</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I: Obamacare vs. Its Free-Market Alternative</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Half-Truths &amp; Half-Measures</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Cost Conundrum</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Why Obamacare Will Fall Short</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Free-Market Deregulation Will Add Fuel to the Fire</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Problem With Medicare Isn't Medicare</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table: Obamacare vs. Free-Market Alternative</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II: Implementing Obamacare</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Transitions Are Messy</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Healthcare Delivery: Follow The Money</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Media Wars: Shaping Public Opinion</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Grading Health Reform</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part III: What Would REAL Healthcare Reform Look Like?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Step 1 - Reengineering Our Public Infrastructure</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Step 2 - Rationalizing Private Hospitals</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Step 3 - Rationalizing Private Doctors &amp; Drugs</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13: Conclusion: Smarter Medical Consumerism</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Contact Information for Elected Officials</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About The Author</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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