

Journalists, Left Out of The Debate

Few Americans Seem to Hear Health Care Facts

By Howard Kurtz
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For once, mainstream journalists did not retreat to the studied neutrality of quoting dueling antagonists.

They tried to perform last rites on the ludicrous claim about President Obama's death panels, telling Sarah Palin, in effect, you've got to quit making things up.

But it didn't matter. The story refused to die.

The crackling, often angry debate over health-care reform has severely tested the media's ability to untangle a story of immense complexity. In many ways, news organizations have risen to the occasion; in others they have become agents of distortion. But even when they report the facts, they have had trouble influencing public opinion.

In the 10 days after Palin warned on Facebook of an America "in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's 'death panel,'" The Washington Post mentioned the phrase 18 times, the New York Times 16 times, and network and cable news at least 154 times (many daytime news shows are not transcribed).

While there is legitimate debate about the legislation's funding for voluntary end-of-life counseling sessions, the former Alaska governor's claim that government panels would make euthanasia decisions was clearly debunked. Yet an NBC poll last week found that 45 percent of those surveyed believe the measure would allow the government to make decisions about cutting off care to the elderly -- a figure that rose to 75 percent among Fox News viewers.

Less than seven hours after Palin posted her charge Aug. 7, MSNBC's Keith Olbermann called it an "absurd idea." That might have been dismissed as a liberal slam, but the next day, ABC's Bill Weir said on "Good Morning America": "There is nothing like that anywhere in the pending legislation."

On Aug. 9, Post reporter [Ceci Connolly](#) said flatly in an A-section story: "There are no such 'death panels' mentioned in any of the House bills." That same day, on NBC's "Meet the Press," conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks called Palin's assertion "crazy." CNN's Jessica Yellin said on "State of the Union," "That's not an accurate assessment of what this panel is." And on ABC's "This Week," George Stephanopoulos said: "Those phrases appear nowhere in the bill."

Still, some conservatives argued otherwise. On the Stephanopoulos roundtable, former House speaker Newt Gingrich said the legislation "has all sorts of panels. You're asking us to trust

turning power over to the government when there clearly are people in America who believe in establishing euthanasia, including selective standards."

And on Fox the next night, Bill O'Reilly played a clip of former Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean saying Palin "just made that up. . . . There's nothing like euthanasia in the bill." O'Reilly countered that as far as he could tell, "Sarah Palin never mentioned euthanasia. Dean made it up to demean Palin."

Ultimately, the media consensus was that Palin had attempted "to leap across a logical canyon," as the conservative bible National Review put it, adding that "we should be against hysteria." But the "death" debate was sucking up much of the political oxygen. President Obama kept denying that he was for "pulling the plug on Grandma." On Aug. 13, the Senate Finance Committee pulled the plug on the provision, with Republican Sen. Charles Grassley saying the idea could be -- yes -- "misinterpreted."

Perhaps journalists are no more trusted than politicians these days, or many folks never saw the knockdown stories. But this was a stunning illustration of the traditional media's impotence.

The eruption of anger at town-hall meetings on health care, while real and palpable, became an endless loop on television. The louder the voices, the fiercer the confrontation, the more it became video wallpaper, obscuring the substantive arguments in favor of what producers love most: conflict.

Never mind if some of the fury seemed unfocused or simply anti-Obama. Katy Abram was shown hundreds of times yelling at Democratic Sen. Arlen Specter: "I don't want this country turning into Russia. . . . What are you going to do to restore this country back to what our founders created according to the Constitution?" She later popped up on Sean Hannity's Fox show, saying: "I know that years down the road, I don't want my children coming to me and asking me, 'Mom, why didn't you do anything? Why do we have to wait in line for, I don't know, toilet paper or anything?' "

Twenty members of Congress might have held calm and collected town meetings on any given day, but only the one with raucous exchanges would make it on the air. "TV loves a ruckus," Obama complained more than once. In fact, after the president convened a low-key town hall in New Hampshire, press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters: "I think some of you were disappointed yesterday that the president didn't get yelled at." There was a grain of truth in that. As Fox broke away from the meeting, anchor Trace Gallagher said, "Any contentious questions, anybody yelling, we'll bring it to you."

If some Fox hosts seemed as sympathetic to the town-hall screamers as they were to last spring's tea-party protesters, MSNBC focused more on conservative efforts to organize the dissenters and whether they were half-crazed characters -- especially the few who rather chillingly stood outside Obama events with their guns.

Still, it was a stretch for White House officials, who have a huge megaphone, to blame media coverage for the sinking popularity of health reform. It was equally odd for Gibbs to tell

reporters that stories about Obama backing away from a government-run health plan were "entirely contrived by you guys" -- this after Gibbs and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius had said on Sunday morning shows that such a plan was not an essential part of Obama's proposal.

For all the sound and fury, news organizations have labored to explain the intricacies of the competing blueprints. "NBC Nightly News" ran a piece examining how Obama's public health-insurance option would work. ABC's "World News " did a fact check on the end-of-life provision in the bill. "CBS Evening News" highlighted problems with the current system by interviewing some of the 1,500 people waiting at a free makeshift clinic in Los Angeles. Time ran a cover story on health care, titled "Paging Dr. Obama." And major newspapers have been filled with articles examining the nitty-gritty details. Those who say the media haven't dug into the details aren't looking very hard.

But the healthy dose of coverage has largely failed to dispel many of the half-truths and exaggerations surrounding the debate. Even so, news organizations were slow to diagnose the depth of public unease about the unwieldy legislation. For the moment, the story, like the process itself, remains a muddle.

The Beck Boycott

The fallout continues over Glenn Beck assailing President Obama as a "racist" with a "deep-seated hatred" of white people. About 20 companies -- including Procter & Gamble, Geico and ConAgra -- have now pulled their ads from his Fox News show.

Beck's charge was so incendiary -- and bizarre, considering that Obama's mother was white -- that even some conservatives winced. But boycotts rarely succeed in forcing anyone off the air, and indeed, Fox hasn't forfeited a dime. A Fox spokeswoman pointed to the network's statement: "The advertisers referenced have all moved their spots from Beck to other day parts on the network, so there has been no revenue lost."

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