Is the media the message? (An editorial)

Marshall McLuhan wrote an influential piece called “The Medium is the Message.” It dealt with the advent of electronic media and how that had subverted ideas, etc. And he didn’t even mean the Internet… Anyway. Here we are in the middle of a hotly contested presidential race where each side is upping the stakes. And what is the media doing? It is trying to even the playing field. Yes, that is right. The media is so busy being “fair” that it is not being informative.

Everyone reported that Sarah Palin’s speech was “dazzling.” Huh? Perhaps because there were zero expectations for her performance… In any case, no one in the mass media has had the nerve to be really critical of her. It is now considered sexist to talk about her ability to be a leader or to question her choices in regards to her family. Newspapers are talking about the mommy wars…again. And the blogs are responding. Sure women can balance a lot. And I agree that men should participate in childrearing and houshold chores, but I don’t believe women should have children simply to hand them over to a nanny as they pursue their careers. But the media won’t actually get into a fair discussion of this…they will all use soundbites (something to do with lipstick comes to mind).

Today, Yahoo News reports that the race between Obama and McCain is giving McCain a slight edge. Why are these numbers being reported? Who does that help? Are they trying to dissuade Obama supporters? LIft McCain supporters? During the campaign season, we are innundated with polls that are simply designed to incite. They are not useful. Many people are undecided, or more importantly, NOT POLLED.

Of course the media loves conflict and triumph. So they are showing Palin being greeted by mobs of women shouting out her

name. What they don’t tell you is that these women are Republicans, rounded up by Republican volunteers at a Republican rally. Have they gone out and talked to “average” Americans? Palin is also being featured on the covers of various pop magazines. Sure she is more photogenic than Biden, but is it over the top to feature her as a cover girl?

Bottom line is that media compete for ratings. And they think that people want to hear more and see more of Sarah Palin. So they create a virtual maelstorm of publicity that helps create the impression that she has more support than she has. This is where the media have become the message. They craft a story, based on their take on what is happening, and they pursue it. Soon, we all buy in to this story. In many senses, this is marketing 101. Follow the AIDA principal (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). BUT, politics is not simply about marketing. There are ideas at stake that WILL influence the course of the country in the years to come. Issues and thoughts don’t lend themselves to the soundbite world so well which is why if I ask you what each of the candidates think you can probably only quote a soundbite on different issues.

I am not sure how to fix this, but I do know that it is broken. For years to come we will wonder if sexism brought Hillary Clinton down or propped Sarah Palin up. And we will never know just how much those pesky polls influence the elections.

UPDATE: Frank Rich of the NY Times wrote an opinion piece about “truthiness” or lack thereof, in the news media. The media is supposed to shine light not act as a filter.