

The Tea Party, Born of a Media Moment, Revealed the Limitations and Lies of the Media

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“Must see video!” read the subject line of an email from a friend. I was sitting in my home office in Nevada County, California and was feeling a little depressed about our nation. It was 2009. Just a few months prior, President George Bush had said, “I’ve abandoned free-market principles to save the free market system.” Was this the end of American free markets and exceptionalism? Then, when Barack Obama was elected, the government became even more bloated and corrupt. The President gave seven hundred million dollars to the Troubled Asset Relief Program. He gave billions to bail out the banks, to take over the world’s biggest insurance company, to buy out Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, then to buy out Chrysler and General Motors, then hundreds of more banks. Was this even America anymore?

I clicked on the video and saw CNBC’s Rick Santelli, standing on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The anchors back in New York asked Santelli a few innocent questions, not realizing his response would change the course of this nation.

“The government is promoting bad behavior! I’ll tell you what. I have an idea.... We’re thinking of having a Chicago tea party in July,” he said. The guys on the floor of the stock exchange piped up with cheers and encouragement. “All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m gonna start organizing! I’ll tell you what, if you read our founding fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves!”

The 5-minute video caught the attention of conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who broadcast it to his 10 million listeners. “This is the pulse of the revolution, starting today! When the pulse of the revolution starts, it just takes an action like this to inspire confidence in others who want to show up!”

Instead of waiting until July, thirty-five people took his idea and ran with it, organizing “tea party protests” on February 27th, 2009. My wife and I held one of them, in Sacramento, California. Over thirty thousand people showed up in cities across America, and the Tea Party was born.

Though I wasn’t an activist, I ultimately helped found the largest tea party group in America, “Tea Party Patriots.” In many ways, the Tea Party was truly a modern political movement (born of a media moment) and a historical one (reminiscent of our Founders’ fighting spirit). Once I stumbled into political activism, I was shocked at how the media reported on our very peaceful movement.

Though Tea Party members were generally patriotic, law-abiding folk, the media portrayed us as racist and violent. To this day, I’ve never heard of one actual instance of Tea Party-caused violence anywhere in the nation, but the media incessantly reinforced the false narrative... even to the point of reporting on fake signs held by liberals. (Here’s a dead giveaway: “Poor people

suck” is not an authentic talking point amongst the frequently blue-collar Tea Party members.) We were regularly referred to as Nazis, which—as a Jew—I found to be particularly ironic. Being constantly maligned and called a racist was frustrating then. But with the hindsight of several years’ perspective, it’s downright infuriating.

When Republican President Donald Trump emerged on the political scene eight years later, the media doubled down on accusing conservatives of racist violence. But when a Bernie Sanders supporter tried to kill as many Republicans as possible at the Congressional baseball game, the press could barely bring themselves to mention the shooter’s political persuasion. As a person who saw the Tea Party maligned and mistreated, I will never trust the media again. Ever. My decision has been reinforced every day since Trump was elected.

For example, I was thrilled when President Trump, in his first ever presser, refused to call on CNN’s Jim Acosta. "Your organization is terrible. Don't be rude," he said. "No, I'm not going to give you a question. You are fake news." CNN and others have been proving him right for a long time before that moment, and ever since. The media has been pearl clutching ever since. Though I’ll never trust the media again, there are three concrete ways they could try to win back at least a little respect.

First, they should start reporting down the middle. In 1990, the *Washington City Paper* discovered the only registered Republican among their 49 top editors, reporters and columnists was a sports writer who later said his GOP affiliation was a “mistake.” Though that’s a pretty narrow sampling, the trend continues across the board. [Studies demonstrate](#)¹ what [economists Tim Groseclose and Jeff Milyo wrote](#):² “An almost overwhelming fraction of journalists are liberal.” To earn back our trust, journalists need to remove their own perspective and return to neutral reporting. Advocates and opinion writers can spill gallons of digital ink on their pet causes, but journalists should simply report the facts.

Second, they should stop the hysterical attacking, demonizing and dehumanizing of conservatives. Bad, outrageous, offensive people exist on the fringes of both political parties. Adults know this. But the media has categorized all conservatives as racists, bigots, homophobes, Islamophobes and xenophobes for so long, that we became “mediaphobes.” After reporters called Mitt Romney a sexist for ineloquently describing how he hired female board members (hence, the unfortunate “binders full of women” phrase), we just didn’t give a damn how they described Donald Trump just four years later. Surprise! Their long term, and biased hyperbole had caused them to lose all credibility. (And, boy, were they surprised.)

Lastly, they should source their stories and refuse to publish until absolutely certain. After Trump was elected, the mainstream media produced all kinds of dramatic stories about such topics as the new President compulsively watching the news in his bathrobe, about staffers trying to make policy based on Trump’s tweets, and so forth. Chris Cillizza said these anonymous sources made Trump look like a “clueless child.” But these stories turned out to be so misleading that the gullible reporters who pass on false information were the ones left looking

¹ Stephen J. Dubner, “How Biased Is Your Media?” Freakonomics Radio Podcast, February 16, 2012.

<http://freakonomics.com/podcast/how-biased-is-your-media/>

² Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, “A Measure of Media Bias,” *Q J Econ* 2005; 120 (4): 1191-1237.

<https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/120/4/1191/1926642/A-Measure-of-Media-Bias>

clueless. These anonymously sourced stories have helped to erode belief in the credibility of the press. The rush for the scoop is destroying media credibility, because of the multiplicative effect of what passes as journalism these days. Reporters write stories based on someone else's bad reporting, which are tweeted to millions within mere minutes. These anonymous sources are making Americans not only skeptical of the media, but angry at its bias. Not only are we not tuning in to hear what the media and their secret friends have to say anymore, we actively root for their demise.

I'm okay with the media trying desperately to re-win our trust. *The New York Times*, after they really missed the mark in November, said they'd try to do better. "Did Donald Trump's sheer unconventionality lead us and other news outlets to underestimate his support among American voters? ... As we reflect on the momentous result, and the months of reporting and polling that preceded it, we aim to rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission of Times journalism." Believe it or not, this letter was even edited after the fact and became a Twitter argument between the Gray Lady and the President about whether this constituted an apology. Yes, *really*.

Enough with the drama. Most Americans just want the facts and will believe the media is fair and honest when they *become* fair and honest. In the meantime, it's up to citizens to be well-informed, logical thinkers and to reject the biased and misleading stories flowing from newsrooms every day. We have to find and support trustworthy journalists who put aside their own politics and report truth. In short, we have to be better consumers of news.

As someone who distrusts the corrupt federal bureaucracy, it's a shame that the so-called 4th estate is now as dirty and inept as the politicians. Thankfully, I believe in Americans' ability to see through the lies, even if I don't have faith that America's newsrooms will stop delivering them to us under click-bait headlines. Come to think of it, that's a lesson the Tea Party taught me, to believe in the power of hard-working, patriotic Americans.

Thankfully, no amount of deceptive reporting can change that.