

7-23-2010

Why Does Anyone Take Andrew Breitbart Seriously?

Peter Dreier

Occidental College, dreier@oxy.edu

Christopher R. Martin

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty

Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dreier, P. & Martin, C.R. (2010, July 23). Why Does Anyone Take Andrew Breitbart Seriously? Huffington Post. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/why-does-anyone-take-andr_b_657964.html

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Urban and Environmental Policy at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdla@oxy.edu.

HUFFPOST MEDIA

[Peter Dreier and Christopher R. Martin](#)

Posted: July 23, 2010 11:36 PM

[Why Does Anyone Take Andrew Breitbart Seriously?](#)

Andrew Breitbart has a job to do and he does it well. Breitbart's job is to lie and distort the truth in order to advance a right-wing agenda, embarrass liberals, and undermine the Obama administration.

Breitbart is not a journalist, researcher, or pundit. He is a propagandist. He operates several websites (BigGovernment, BigJournalism, and BigHollywood), where he and other right-wing bloggers spew their political pornography. The articles that appear on these websites are contemporary versions of what historian Richard Hofstadter called, in a famous 1964 [essay](#), the "paranoid style" of American politics practiced by extreme conservatives.

Breitbart is part of the "paranoid style" conservative echo chamber that includes Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Mark Levin, and thousands of lesser-known activists who use a combination of talk radio, Fox News, dozens of conservative publications, and the new media (emails, blogs, youtube, facebook) to mobilize support for their right-wing crusade. Breitbart was a featured speaker at the Tea Party conference in Nashville in February and is a frequent guest on Fox News and right-wing TV and radio talk shows. His websites are propaganda vehicles for building a political movement. Unlike Fox News, he doesn't even pretend to be "fair and balanced." What much of America learned this week is that Andrew Breitbart is unfair and unbalanced.

What's distressing is not that Breitbart does his job, but that the mainstream media and mainstream politicians, including the Obama Administration, take him seriously. The recent dust-up over the firing of federal Department of Agriculture employee Shirley Sherrod, fueled by a doctored video on Breitbart's website, is only the latest example of this.

Since he began his website operation, Breitbart has sought to inject himself and his blogger network into the political debate. Sometimes he succeeds in getting wider attention, outside the right-wing silo, for the manufactured scandals he tries to provoke.

Breitbart's public visibility has peaked twice, according to an analysis of stories on the Lexis/Nexis database.

His first brush with fame occurred in September 2009, after he sponsored two young right-wing video activists -- Hannah Giles and James O'Keefe -- who visited 10 ACORN offices with a hidden video camera, claiming they were a prostitute and her friend, and tried to entrap the group's staff into giving them advice about buying a home to use for their prostitution ring. They recorded their stunt and selectively edited the tapes for release, later splicing in video footage of O'Keefe dressed up in an outlandish pimp costume (hat, sunglasses, fur coat, and walking stick) with racist overtones.

In fact, O'Keefe actually wore a dress shirt and slacks and identified himself as a student or friend of the young woman who was trying to protect her. Although O'Keefe's costume change was exposed months ago, the image has been imprinted in the media's mind. On Thursday, for example, the Associated Press story about Breitbart referred to O'Keefe and Giles as "actors posing as a prostitute and her pimp."

Breitbart not only defended the duo's actions but said that O'Keefe "is already well on his way to being one of the great journalists" and that he deserved a Pulitzer Prize. Breitbart has refused to release the original, unedited videos to any of the organizations investigating the ACORN controversy.

By the second week of September 2009, the ACORN videos became a national story. The videos were posted on Breitbart's website, then quickly became the top story on the Glenn Beck Show, the rest of Fox News, conservative talk radio (including Rush Limbaugh and his local counterparts), and CNN's Lou Dobbs Show. The controversy proved irresistible for the mainstream news media, which reported the story and broadcast clips of the videos many times. These video attacks compounded ACORN's problems, having been the victim of another manufactured scandal before and during the 2008 presidential campaign, when Karl Rove, John McCain, Sarah Palin, and the Republican establishment falsely accused ACORN of "voter fraud."

The videos led many of ACORN's supporters to abandon the community organizing group. Soon after the video scandal surfaced in the mainstream media, the U.S. House of Representatives (including many Democrats who had worked with ACORN in the past) voted to de-fund the organization. In reality, less than 10 percent of ACORN's budget came from federal grants. But the symbolism of Congress' action was more important than the money itself. Congress' action provoked ACORN's cautious foundation funders to drop the group like a hot potato.

Within a few months, ACORN had been exonerated of wrongdoing by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, the Attorney General of California, and a federal judge, who ruled that the law barring the group's receipt of federal funds was unconstitutional. By then, however, it was too late. In April, ACORN laid off its entire staff and closed its offices in over 100 cities. (Meanwhile, last January O'Keefe was arrested for breaking into Sen. Mary Landrieu's New Orleans office in another "gotcha" attempt,; he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years of probation, a fine of \$1,500 and 100 hours of community service).

(Full disclosure: We were a target of Breitbart's smear tactics after we published a study last year revealing the distorted media coverage of the manufactured ACORN controversy. An updated and expanded version of that study will be published in a few weeks in the fall issue of *Perspectives on Politics*, a journal sponsored by the American Political Science Association).

Now Breitbart is back in the news as a result of another manufactured controversy, this one regarding Shirley Sherrod. He's gotten even more media attention for this episode than he did for his ACORN shenanigans. But the current firestorm has many of the same elements as the phony ACORN scandal that he cooked up last year.

First, Breitbart posted a highly doctored video on his website that was intended to put its target (both African Americans -- hardly a coincidence) in the worst possible light. Then the right-wing echo chamber -- including Fox News and the conservative blogosphere -- picked up Breitbart's ball and ran with it. Next, the mainstream media -- the daily newspapers and the TV networks -- took the false accusations at face value and repeated them without bothering to verify and fact-check, acting more like stenographers than reporters. Finally, liberal groups like the NAACP and liberal politicians (in this case, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and the White House), wary of any controversy, jumped the gun and distanced themselves from the target of Breitbart's attacks -- by firing Sherrod before she even had an opportunity to explain or they bothered to investigate the accusations.

Unlike the manufactured ACORN controversy, Breitbart's deception in the Sherrod "scandal" was uncovered quickly. A few media outlets, including CNN, dug a bit deeper, interviewed Sherrod, talked to the white farmers that Sherrod helped, reviewed the entire videotape of her speech to the NAACP in Georgia, and disclosed what should have been apparent from the beginning -- that what Sherrod actually said had no relationship to what Breitbart claimed she said. This led the White House, Vilsack, the NAACP and others to offer apologies and led Vilsack to offer Sherrod another job with the Department of Agriculture.

There are thousands of right-wing websites and bloggers, but so far Breitbart is the most successful, having mastered -- indeed, having helped create -- the new rules of political combat made possible by the internet and cable TV.

Breitbart has not only drawn attention to his manufactured scandals but also to himself. [*Time*](#) magazine, the [*New Yorker*](#), [*Wired*](#), [*Slate*](#), and other publications have published profiles of Breitbart. These profiles could hardly be called fawning or even admiring. He comes across as an obnoxious, self-centered bully. But the profiles are nevertheless respectful, in the sense that they recognize his entrepreneurial skill and his take-no-prisoners attitude.

Both the right-wing echo chamber and the mainstream media don't quite know how to categorize Breitbart and what he does. The *Philadelphia Daily News* called him a "rising conservative media figure." The *Washington Post* called him a "conservative activist" and

an "internet entrepreneur." NPR described him as a "conservative online news entrepreneur." The *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* called him a "blogger," while *Newsday* and the *New Republic* called him a "conservative blogger." The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* called him an "online muckraker and journalist." Sean Hannity, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and ABC's "Good Morning America" labeled him a "publisher."

Regardless of what he's called, the Sherrod story is a good example of Breitbart's skill at what academics call "agenda-setting" and "framing". A week ago, hardly anyone had ever heard of Shirley Sherrod. Now, she's practically a household name. And many people who might not recognize her name at least know something of the story. In the past few days, almost every major news outlet has published or broadcast something about this story. That's the art of agenda-setting.

Americans not only know who Sherrod is, they already have an opinion about her, because they've been told that she's a black federal employee who used her position to discriminate against whites. That's the art of framing. Within a matter of hours, that frame burned through the media like prairie fire.

This process is easily verified by an examination of Lexis-Nexis. Among daily newspapers, the conservative *Washington Times* has been the most likely to report Breitbart's propaganda over the past few years, followed by the *Wall Street Journal*. Among magazines, the conservative *National Review*, followed by the right-wing *American Spectator*, have given Breitbart a megaphone. Among TV networks, Fox News has been Breitbart's best customer, followed by CNN.

Only after his smears are reported in the right-wing echo chamber do the mainstream media outlets pick it up, where it reaches a much wider audience. The mainstream media are mesmerized by the Tea Party and controversies that it and its political allies have stoked. In bending over backwards to cover the right wing -- and [downplay comparable activities](#) by liberal and progressive activists -- the reporters and editors have lost sight of the journalists' responsibilities not only to fact-check and verify, but also to provide context.

By now it is clear what Breitbart is selling. But the real question is why the mainstream media and Democratic politicians bought it. Breitbart is a con artist, but con artists succeed if consumers don't know they are being conned -- or don't care.

Given Breitbart's track record, why does anyone -- reporters and editors, foundations, advocacy groups, and elected officials -- take him seriously? Or why not at least treat him like an arm of the Tea Party, as a political activist, and a propagandist, not as a source of credible information?

Of course, Breitbart has offered no apology and is still trying to defend and justify his actions. Perhaps this most recent brouhaha will destroy Breitbart's credibility with the mainstream media and even with his right-wing colleagues at Fox News and elsewhere,

who were embarrassed by the Sherrod mishap.

But it isn't only the mainstream media that needs to do some soul-searching. It is also the Obama Administration and, more broadly, liberal Democrats and liberal advocacy groups and foundations, who were too quick to distance themselves from ACORN and now Sherrod.

Clearly the Obama administration over-reacted, fearful, as a high-level official put it, of having the Sherrod story show up on Glenn Beck's Fox News show. Why they are so intimidated by Beck and his ilk is a mystery. Their followers, and those who identify with the Tea Party, represent no more than 15 percent of all voters. Moreover, very few of Beck's (or Limbaugh's) devotees would even consider voting for a Democrat. After all, they think Obama is a Marxist, a Muslim, and a foreigner. This is not a constituency that Obama and the Democrats are going to win over by appearing to be bipartisan or middle-of-the-road.

And if Obama and his inner circle are worried that Breitbart's and Beck's poison will spread from their base among right-wing zealots and start influencing "independent" and "swing" voters -- and thus help sway close elections toward Republican candidates -- then the best way to prevent that from happening is to fight back, and challenge their lies and distortions, not run away and hide, or capitulate, as they did by firing Van Jones, abandoning ACORN, and firing Shirley Sherrod.

Breitbart's credibility may or may not survive the Sherrod controversy. But what's important is whether responsible journalists -- as well as the Obama administration, the Democrats, and liberals and progressives -- learn some lessons from this episode.

Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College. Christopher Martin teaches communications at the University of Northern Iowa.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/why-does-anyone-take-andr_b_657964.html?view=print