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OP-ED COLUMNIST

They Don't Report. You Don't Have to Decide.

By [FRANK RICH](#)

“DESPITE the major environmental disaster unfolding in the Gulf and the attempted terror attack on New York’s Times Square, President Obama spent his Saturday night laughing it up at the White House Correspondents Dinner,” [griped Sean Hannity of Fox News last week](#). His complaint is not inaccurate. But it’s hardly the whole story. Also laughing it up at that dinner were many of the country’s television news potentates, including some of Hannity’s own colleagues. And unlike the president, they were caught napping on a night that could have been 9/11 redux.

Here’s the time line from last Saturday. At 6:30 p.m. the abandoned Nissan Pathfinder [was found smoking in Times Square](#). Relevant public officials marooned at the correspondents dinner in Washington [quickly got word](#). Over the next hour and a half, several news organizations [spread it as well](#) while Times Square was evacuated. To clear the Broadway theater district at curtain time on Saturday night isn’t like emptying a high school; it’s a virtual military operation. By 8 p.m., the crossroads of the world looked like a ghost town, yet if you tuned in to a cable news network, it wasn’t news. No one seemed to know or to care. On MSNBC, which I was watching, it didn’t even merit a mention on a crawl.

MSNBC was instead busy covering the correspondents dinner itself, so we could feast on journalists schmoozing with mostly B-list show business folk — and sometimes C-list, as in Kim Kardashian. (Another NBC employee, Jay Leno, was [the evening’s mirthless comic headliner](#).) This annual Beltway fete, [once safely quarantined on C-Span](#), has now mutated into a poor man’s Golden Globes on all three cable news networks. On MSNBC, this meant red-carpet arrivals, in-depth historical analysis of past dinners, and morning-after post-mortems [by network news stars wearing sunglasses on camera](#) (just like Hollywood!).

One dinner attendee, Rachel Sklar, [would later write](#) on AOL News that, Michael Bloomberg aside, reports of the bomb “didn’t seem to interfere with anyone else’s evening.” That MSNBC couldn’t be bothered to interrupt its two-hour coverage of these festivities to report on the attempted bombing was particularly embarrassing, given that the network’s headquarters are just blocks from Times Square. If NBC journalists in the Washington Hilton ballroom were too busy gawking at Justin Bieber to pounce on the bulletins moving through the BlackBerry-and-Twittersphere, you’d think someone back in New York would.

Apparently little short of King Kong climbing up 30 Rock could have grabbed the network’s attention. When MSNBC did take a brief break from the dinner for news updates at 9:30, Times Square didn’t make the cut. Whether this was due to ignorance, ineptitude or an unwillingness to play party pooper is a distinction without a difference. Real-time coverage of Leno bombing (since when is that news?) mattered more than any actual bombs. Only as the dinner wound down, at 10:54, did MSNBC at last muster a “breaking news” bulletin about the Times Square story that had in fact been breaking for hours. Even then, we were told that NBC News couldn’t independently confirm the facts MSNBC was recycling from Reuters.

But the dinner coverage hadn’t been a total loss. The waxworks sprang to life for Obama’s 15-minute riff on the press. His words were sufficiently tart that they [attracted some of the same criticism from Beltway hands that Stephen Colbert aroused at the same dinner four years ago](#). For the president, it was the second time in a single day, following [a University of Michigan commencement address that morning](#), that he played media critic. In both halves of his double-

barreled attack Obama pretty much nailed this moment as far as much of America's news culture is concerned.

In his speech in Ann Arbor, he keyed off from a question written to him by a kindergarten student in Virginia: "Are people being nice?" As the president joked, "even a kindergartener" could be provoked to ask that question by the "24/7 echo chamber" of cable news, where talking heads make "their arguments as outrageous and as incendiary as possible." He called yet again for the restoration of "a basic level of civility in our public debate."

As president, Obama is a seriously flawed messenger for this sermon. First, as he conceded in the same speech, fisticuffs (not always verbal) have been a staple of American politics since the birth of the Republic. Second, anything he has to say about shouting pundits will be regarded as special pleading from a Democratic president who is the target of nightly shoutfests on Fox News, a frequent subject of public White House complaints. Third, his administration is notorious for its fierce message management, [restrictive press access and undisguised hostility to nettlesome journalists](#) of all media and stripes.

Nor can Obama's repeated paeans to civility move the needle much. Try as he does to set a civil example — as have most recent American presidents and vice presidents of both parties with the conspicuous exception of Dick Cheney — no political figure can ever be a credible leader of a civility crusade. An American politician preaching restraint in partisan battle inevitably comes off like a liquor distiller lending its imprimatur to a public-service campaign against drunken driving.

But Obama's more valuable point was yet to come, when he reminded his audience of Senator Pat Moynihan's undying maxim that everybody is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts. Obama urged Glenn Beck and Huffington Post fans alike to be up on "the major issues of the day." If all sides of the nation's debates don't know the facts, the president argued, then "democracy breaks down," extreme voices rise to the top, and "powerful interests and their lobbyists are most able to buy access and influence." He might have added that when facts cease to matter, politicians become more convinced than ever that they can get away with almost any tall tale — whether it's Hillary Clinton's [campaign anecdote](#) of ducking sniper fire in Bosnia or John McCain's preposterous [recent claim](#) that he never saw himself as a "maverick."

The president repackaged his same point as a gag in one of his funnier passages at the correspondents dinner. The butt was not the more polemical cable networks, Fox or MSNBC, but CNN. The fact-free example of cable "news" that he cited was utterly nonpolitical: an excerpt from that network's discussion of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in which a laughing anchor expressed shock that such an eruption could have happened in Iceland, which is "too cold to have a volcano." Letting the video speak for itself, Obama deadpanned, "I guess that's why they're the most trusted name in news." Those of us watching at home were treated to a shot of Larry King, who wasn't laughing.

CNN actually is regarded as the most trustworthy news source in America, [according to a "60 Minutes"/Vanity Fair poll released last week](#). But no good deed goes unpunished. CNN's stars, including King, [have lost almost half their viewers](#) between the first quarter of 2009 and this year, and the network now generally comes in third among the cable news networks in prime-time ratings. As Obama's example illustrated, "most trustworthy" is a relative term that is gradually losing its meaning as well as its commercial value.

At Fox, which was a close runner-up to CNN in that poll, public policy issues have long been routinely distorted to suit its political interests — as typified by its promotion of the "death panel" canards during the health care debate. But now that network is even politicizing the facts of nonpartisan existential threats to the country. After the oil spill, both [Michael Brown](#), the "Brownie" of Katrina fame, and another Bush White House acolyte, the former press secretary [Dana Perino](#), turned up [to offer variations on Rush Limbaugh's theory](#) that the BP oil rig may have been deliberately sabotaged to bolster liberal arguments against offshore drilling.

What would most drive Moynihan around the bend is another Fox innovation used by Hannity last week in connection with the foiled New York attack. For a "text voting" segment, he invited the audience to vote "if you think the Times

Square bombing suspect acted alone” or with the Taliban or with Al Qaeda. The winner, he announced at the program’s end, was Al Qaeda. So what if the correct answer is the Pakistani Taliban? Fox viewers are officially entitled to decide their own facts. You’d think that if America is at war with terrorists, it might be helpful if we knew precisely which terrorists we are at war with. We’re still paying for having conflated Iraq with Al Qaeda after 9/11.

Then again, as egregious as Fox’s factual liberties may be, it’s often a pick-your-poison situation: on Saturday night [CNN](#) [was as slow as MSNBC](#) to jump from the revelers in Washington to the emergency in New York. The choice between news with distorted “facts,” Fox style, and the news-free “news” that can subsume its rivals is a lose-lose proposition, especially for a country at war. As we venerate the heroic street vendors who gave America its reality check last weekend, we should remember that they were the first to report what was happening in Times Square and that those covering and attending the White House Correspondents Dinner were the last.

The public editor will return next week.

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