**The Platformate Style of Reporting**

**Squelching of key facts to push an agenda now a part of journalism**

By [Jon Ham](http://www.carolinajournal.com/cjcolumnists/display_author.html?id=191)

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RALEIGH — In my first journalism course in 1971 we were given an example of what makes journalism superior to advertising. It involved a Shell Oil commercial that ran in the late-‘60s and early-’70s touting an additive called Platformate.

The commercial showed two cars on a straight desert road, one fueled with Shell gas containing the wonder additive Platformate and the other topped up with gas without Platformate. Not surprisingly, the car without the Shell gasoline sputtered to a stop in the hot sun while the Shell car kept going a considerable time longer.

The announcer told us that this was proof that Shell with Platformate was a superior auto fuel to gasoline without Platformate. All of this was perfectly true, in a sense that decades later would be called “parsed” and “Clintonian.” What the ad did not tell you was that *all* commercial gasolines contained Platformate, and without it your mileage will plummet.

The impression left with the consumer was clear: Use Shell with Platformate instead of those other brands without Platformate if you wanted good gas mileage. As my professor at the University of Georgia, Beverly Bethune, told us, this kind of subterfuge was what made journalism noble compared to the advertising game. Journalism, we were told, would never leave out meaningful context in an effort to mislead readers. It was concerned with truth, not case-making.

This was probably true 35 years ago. But even then something new called “advocacy journalism” was on the horizon. It was considered “alternative” and not quite responsible journalism back then. Unfortunately, it is today the norm among mainstream reporters. It borrows many techniques from advertising, among them the squelching of facts that don’t fit an agenda-driven template.

Just a few recent examples:

• The status of Valerie Plame at the time her name became public. There is a serious question whether Ms. Plame was an operative at all, much less a covert operative, when her name was first used in Robert Novak’s column. The mainstream media, however, have ignored this debate and consistently reported that she was unquestionably a covert operative at the time.

• Joseph Wilson’s original report after returning from Niger. Wilson, Valerie Plame’s husband, reported to the CIA when he returned from his mission to Niger that there was indeed evidence that Iraq had tried to obtain nuclear material from Africa. When he wrote his famous op-ed for *The New York Times*, however, he claimed the opposite. The mainstream media, of course, have virtually ignored his original report. *[Ed.: Correction made to this paragraph subsequent to posting.]*

• Jamie Gorelick’s role in erecting the so-called “wall” between domestic and foreign intelligence while she was deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration. Gorelick was also a member of the 9/11 Commission. However, even though the “wall” she helped erect was determined by the commission to be instrumental in the intelligence failures prior to the 9/11 attacks, stories by the mainstream media ignored her crucial role in the exact problem the commission was studying.

• The stem cell debate. There are several examples of Platformate reporting here. First, the notion that President Bush opposes all stem cell research — instead of just embryonic stem cell research — has been encouraged by shoddy reporting. Second, the fact that what is at stake is only *public funding* of embryonic stem cell research has also been obscured in the reporting of this issue. And third, the fact that Bush is the first president ever to have provided *any* federal funds for stem cell research goes unmentioned, or is buried, in most stories.

• The Kyoto Treaty. Almost never mentioned in any story about the wisdom of the Kyoto Protocols and the Bush’ “refusal” to join other nations in their ratification is that the U.S. Senate defeated it by a 95-0 vote, that a panel of economists recommended against ratification, and that President Clinton, while he was in office, made no serious effort to get it ratified.

• Global warming. The mainstream media ignore serious scientists who don’t subscribe to the “Chicken Little” hysteria surrounding this issue, reporting man-made global warming as an uncontested fact.

• Illegal immigration. The media consistently, in stories and headlines, use “immigration” as a synonym for “illegal immigration,” leading readers to believe that reformers are anti-immigration, racist xenophobes rather than people asking that the existing immigration laws be enforced.

These are just a few examples of cases in which the deletion of key facts and context changes how the average reader perceives important issues. There are many, many more. Like the ad that withheld a key fact to get people to buy a certain gasoline, these stories use the same tactic in an attempt to affect public opinion. Some people call that propaganda, not journalism.

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