

FROOMKIN AND ROSEN ON ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

Personal Democracy Forum ended up being perfectly timed to get the newly de-WaPoed Dan Froomkin together with Jay Rosen to talk about accountability journalism. And since we've been harping this story, I thought I'd do a real liveblog. With David Corn in the room and Froomkin around, it feels like old times!!

Jay: Why we're here, then some questions for 25 minutes. Froomkin was WH Watch for WP.com. Circumstances of departure subject of controversy in blogosphere and newsosphere. The Old Guard won at the WaPo. The print guys. The people from the WaPo newspaper, Political reporters on national staff. When Dan came on WaPo.com, run by Brady. Post lived by divided sovereignty. People worked for website, people worked for newspaper. In my view, served Post well, bc Brady didn't need permission to put comments on stories, put feature on post on who was blogging story. Now, different era.

Jay: Why no longer under contract.

Froomkin: Some of you represent some of the people who responded with outpouring at my departure. Jay mostly right. Specifics are least interesting part of the story. What is interesting is it has elements of morality play. They told me not working any more. Traffic down. Down compared to what? During last year or two, column most popular feature on website. It was down from that, but still pretty good. Switch from column format to blog format, readers were furious. Bush Obama, different presence, different themes. Some disagreements about format and content. Not exciting with possible exception of pressure to stop doing media criticism. I've always felt media criticism integral part of what I was doing. For me to not talk about coverage of White House. Money issue.

As a contractor I was a particularly easy line item to scratch out.

Dan: None would have happened or mattered if WaPo thought it had value. What explains delta between readers who thought it was valuable and WaPo who thought it didn't. I was contractor. Little contact with Post institutionally. When Debbie H0well thing happened, I only found out an hour and half before deadline. Tensions Jay and I have been writing about.

Jay: Last column, wrote, when I look back, I think of the lies. But lies not a theme of coverage of Bush years. Hard to get reporters in WH press corps to talk about lies. Why so hard to register lies?

Dan: [nods to Corn's Lies of George Bush] TradMed so averse to that word. Can't call someone a liar unless you know intention to deceive. Unless you have proof, editors will take it out. My wife, federal prosecutor, laughs that our standard of proof was a confession. So obvious that no one can argue with is not the standard of evidence in newsroom. Saw this firsthand and the Deborah Howell incident. Fervor in newsroom to not take sides, to not appear to have taken sides. Triangulation. Take a position in the middle. IRE Convention. Reminds me a lot of people care about accountability. Choice for keynote: Downie and Woodward. [someone laughs] Downie not that weird, Post has done some extraordinary investigative journalist. Len chief priest of impartial center. That's the Holy Grail.

Jay: Overwhelming agenda to stay in middle, why is that? Blogosphere says: cocktail weenies and access.

Dan: Any beat reporter has to do source maintenance. Access journalism. Journalists see themselves as part of establishment. Want to preserve that. [smoking jackets] Lots don't do those things. Pincus says it's a myth to say you'll be cut off. [Audience member interrupts to ask] What's the point of having access who

lie to you. I wasn't interested in access. A lot of people smarter better journalists than I, why didn't they call it. In the Bush years, terrible tradeoff. We should have rules that if a source goes on background and lies, you burn them.

Jay: Innocence agenda in the press, you have to advertise that you're not on one side or another.

Dan: Why?

Jay: Demand for objectivity. In press coverage of Froomkin kiss-off, City said, turns on everything but ideology. Ombud said not about ideology. I say firing was political act that could not take place until conditions were such that it could be claimed that it was not ideological. What is the actual ideology of the Washington press corps.

Dan: I don't know. Sociology of press corps. I was part of filthy hippy blogger world according to them. I don't think I told him, I don't think ideology had a role. I don't think Krauthammer had me fired. Hard to look at in vacuum of what has happened on ed board. What a lot of people were saying, NeoCon turn of ed board. I had anti-NeoCon position.

Jay: Two more questions. Is it possible to reinvent WH press corps? Or junk it?

Dan: Took part in documentary by IFC. They came down, goal of hatchet job of WH press corps, grew to like them. Said, They're trying their best. Made out of terrific people. They work hard, under hard conditions. You don't have to junk the system. Free the people from strictures. Corn telling the story of covering RNC in 2004, in same bar with a lot of Post reporters and editors. He said he overheard them talking about what a bunch of crap speech was, not credible. So David went to bed, curious to see how much appeared in paper. None of it appeared in paper. They weren't entirely wrong when they said I wasn't qualified to write about WH. They know a lot. Corporate structure ruin beat reporters. What you're seeing is incredible

growth of people who speak passionately.
Newsrooms could do better than anybody.

Jay: Safety first terrible principle for journalism. Especially in era of escalating danger in govt. Nick Denton, founder of Gawker, makes this very point, he noticed as a journalist, far more compelling when you talk them then when you read them the next day. THomas Boswell, covered baseball, because he didn't have to hold back.

Dan: Fox more authentic. They don't hold back.

Jay: Transparency, more information coming from parts of the govt. Assessment of transparency? What's it gonna take for professional journalism to convert transparency to accountability.

Dan: Parts spectacular. Absolute floored by amount of info that will be out there. Dazzled. Beth Novack doing astonishing work with open govt. Baking it into system, if the next guy doesn't feel this way, tough. On the other hand, the closer you get to the oval, national security issues. Obama's participation in coverup of Bush years. Surprisingly poor. Just on transparency w/in WH, not at all what we expected, at least not yet. Robert Gibbs doesn't really explain what's happening to Press corps, reminiscent of what we saw in Bush years. How many WH allowed to speak to press on the record. Press hasn't been hounding them on this. There needs to be downside to secrecy. Press hasn't made them suffer.

Jay: Bushies, went into their press relations with hypothesis that if they rolled press out of frame, there wouldn't be penalty. Wanted to test whether political penalty for dissing the press.

Dan: Obama dynamic, he's covered like a celebrity, press corps, the big guys, Brian Williams, want to watch him order a burger, they don't care if he doesn't tell them how he makes decisions about the bank bailout. Still no understanding of why it is that Obama trusts Larry Summers.

Q: Obsession about neutrality. How to reconcile that position with ed page getting righter and righter. Weren't you there to balance them?

Dan: Chinese wall between ed page and reporters. I got kicked off the news page, but not opinionated enough. People ask what page I'd be on, but there wouldn't be one.

Q: Couldn't trust web journalists because they'd be looking at traffic numbers. My jaw dropped that one reason fired. Are there other people dropping people on traffic numbers?

Dan: I cannot answer it. To be honest, I think that newspaper websites not sensitive enough to traffic, realizing what people are reading. Not reacting reflexively. Considering that it's a reflection of what we're interested in. Could put up naughty pictures on the webspost. Didn't want to promote it on home page, already getting traffic. HuffPo and Drudge, how you respond to what readers interested in (not perfect example).

Q: Attempt to cover up Bush's interrogation tactics. But photos, would put American photos in danger. NYT decision not to report on journalist not to report on Rhode taken hostage.

Dan: I'm an absolutist. Never appropriate to not release info bc of information. You're on a slippery slope to not telling people about blowing up house with 60 women and children in Afghanistan, especially about things that are embarrassing. Obama once said not keep secrets that are embarrassing, but he's got an asterisk, "unless they're really really embarrassing." Photos would have shown result that abuse was systemic. Not a national interest in knowing about Rhode.

Q: Torture issues. To what extent fearful of Cheney's gaming this?

Dan: An element? They're going to overcompensate so they can't be accused of being slack. Whole Obama has turned out to be corrective to Bush years. All these issues unresolved or made worse

by Bush, I don't understand why this part of it is somehow different.

Q: What lessons have you learned that you could follow if you could own your own newspaper.

Dan: Enormous value in beat reporters, even after X rounds of layoffs. You need to let journalists do their job. What editors can do—you don't want journalists, I never espoused partisan positions. Having them call truth as they see it. Tremendously qualified to do that.

Jay: Collaborating with networks of readers who also know lots of things?

Dan: Wave of future. A beat reporter can look on the center of community of people and that community creates news.

Jay: Every beat should be thousand people.

Q: You didn't fit into print paper. Will the beat reporters work out of their bedroom?

Dan: I was a lot more confident before my contract wasn't extended. Beat reporters in that role, and others from outside the traditional media.

Q: Perfect center. What will break them out of that?

Dan: I trace origin to newspaper monopolies. Over time they realize if they don't offend anyone, they can maximize their market. Info climate vastly different now. Not a competitive model. IF Stone, speak passionately to truth, create community around trusted voice. As to blogs, one would have hoped that, blogs playing important role in holding media accountable. Response has been hardening of center: "See I get criticized from both sides, I'm doing it right!"

Jay: They had the way to start getting out of it. They had Dan. They were starting to change their model. Started from coverage. An insitution changing.

Dan: Heartbreaking, people reading Post 20-30

years. Wanted more of what I was doing. I thought that was what Post should be doing.

Jay: Would have waited to see if hold Obama accountable.

Q: Involved in much smaller project with Plain Dealer. Four bloggers. Come and write and paid minimal amount of money. Two of four had made contributions could have been covering. Whole thing fell apart. Most people thought fear factor. What controlled atmosphere. What is the source of fear? It can't just be money or concept of journalism. What is driving these decision-makers to turn your work away or turn readers away?

Dan: If you have raised notion of impartial center, and that's how you define yourself, risk of losing who you are. Lost touch of value you do have.

Jay: Newsroom, about devoicing reporters. If you transform that where reporters have individual relationships with readers, managers have to give up ton of control.

Dan: And scary, bc what if someone walks away with brand?

Jay: Prof journalists get moral rightness by not being bloggers, by not being believer. Biggest term of contempt than "true believer."

Dan: Liberal is bad too.

Jay: So would be evangelical. Fear of giving up what you've known for so long.

Dan: Principles that journalists hold dear. Accountability, fair play. Nothing wrong with journalists holding those values on sleeve.

Q: Do you vote?

Jay: Downie famous for not voting.

Dan: Sense that if you have a belief then you can no longer be fair. Reporters have beliefs and values, key is to not let their values affect news gathering. Len's wanted people to

disenfranchise themselves.

Jay: Such a test to go into a voting booth and look at choices citizens have, he could compare his coverage to what he found in ballot box. Very convinced of that.

Q: Best thing to have a thousand people talking about it. What do you do in WH or smaller group where there's a smaller group, where there's a large group of people trying to manipulate media.

Jay: Has to be resisted.

Dan: Great place where trad journalists can fight back, can say, "we're being manipulated." Ask the White House, no followup. Greatest tragedy, sitdown with President, and rather than demanding an answer to first question, used it like press conference. There are ways we can demand accountability.

Q: Theme has come up is power of access. Citizen journalism, citizen doesn't have same access. What role will access continue to play?

Dan: With that power comes great responsibility. I'm still a big fan of people in trad media, most agree with everything I've been saying.

Jay: When we have citizen journalists digging through that data, questions are going to come up, journalists are empowered to ask those questions.