

# A RETURN TO ZAPRUDER IN THE LIVE-STREAM WORLD

Last fall, Jay Rosen wrote a post and I wrote a follow-up, both of which elicited much discussion. Jay quoted a member of the White House press corps explaining why the press corps continues to attend the White House press events even though they're staged spin, rather than news. Here's the exchange between Jay and the anonymous reporter.

Well, there are two phrases that I'd like to pass along to your readers. They mean more or less the same thing. "Body watch" means covering an event that will produce zero news on its own because you need to make sure the president doesn't collapse. The other is SSRO – "suddenly shots rang out" – which is basically equivalent, just a bit more dramatic.

[snip]

When I emailed this to my friend, he asked whether we were responsible for the president's safety, so I assume that others will have the same question. What we are responsible for is making sure that, if he collapses, or is shot at, we are in a position to get that information to our viewers/listeners/readers.

*From what I know, a correct and concise statement of what the body watch is.*

Think about how much JFK, RFK, MLK, Wallace, Squeaky, and Hinckley have shaped the logistical reality of White House coverage. The history of journalism is littered with stories of reporters who called it a day a bit too early, like the guy from the New York Times (if memory serves) who decided to

head back to NYC hours before Wallace was shot. [my emphasis]

Basically, the press corps continues to attend all of Bush's—or Presidential candidates'—events out of fear that something newsworthy might happen and they wouldn't be present.

When I read this account of how the reporters covering the Hillary campaign learned of her RFK assassination comment—not to mention the fact that John McCain had a squamous cell carcinoma removed in February, in the middle of a Presidential campaign, without anyone reporting it—it made me want to further challenge the notion that the press corps has to follow the President—and Presidential candidates around—to make sure they, and not some random citizen with a video camera—reports on serious things that happen to the President.

Here's how the NYT "covered" Hillary's RFK comment (h/t Scarecrow).

In the morning the campaign, with its traveling press corps of about two-dozen reporters, photographers and camera operators, flew from Washington to Sioux Falls, S.D., to campaign in advance of the June 3 primary.

Mrs. Clinton had three events. First was a meeting with the editorial board of the Sioux Falls Argus Leader, which was live-streaming the interview, something a few newspapers just started doing in this election cycle.

The press corps, meanwhile, was on a bus from the airport to Brandon, a few miles away, to set up for her second event at a supermarket. (The media are sometimes in a different place from the candidate, usually when the event is private or small.)

Her interview began while we were on the bus, but Internet access was so poor, we

could only pick up bits of her comments intermittently. We did hear her bat back reports that her campaign had made overtures to Senator Barack Obama's campaign about some kind of deal for her to exit the race.

At the supermarket, we were ensconced in a café off the deli counter, where many reporters were writing about her denying the overtures while also trying to follow the live stream. Here, too, Internet access was spotty and the stream came over in choppy bursts.

Mrs. Clinton arrived from the newspaper in the midst of this, and began addressing a couple of hundred people who were seated adjacent to us, in the fresh produce section. Then our cell phones and Blackberries went off.

On the other end were editors who had seen a Drudge Report link to a New York Post item online. The Post was not with the traveling press \_ and apparently had a decent Internet connection.

The initial N.Y. Post item read this way: "She is still in the presidential race, she said today, because historically, it makes no sense to quit, and added that, 'Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in June,' making an odd comparison between the dead candidate and Barack Obama."

So: the NY Post to Drudge to the editors to the reporters actually "traveling" with Hillary.

By way of comparison of how the blogosphere jumped on the story, here's a John Aravosis post that describes his efforts to confirm this story—and, as a loud Hillary opponent, frankly turn it into news.

UPDATE: I just called the newspaper's news room to inform them that they kind

of have a huge scoop here if they can confirm. Their response: You can watch the video yourself it's on our Web site. Uh, yeah, but is it true – did she say it? They don't know. Nice. The Argus Leader didn't sound very interested in finding out if they had a huge story on their hands, so who knows.

You can read the NY Post article and decide for yourself. I'm trying to listen to the interview now to find out what exactly she said and why.

The article just updated. Holy shit.

Hillary Clinton today brought up the assassination of Sen. Robert Kennedy while defending her decision to stay in the race against Barack Obama.

"My husband did not wrap up the nomination in 1992 until he won the California primary somewhere in the middle of June, right? We all remember Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in June in California. I don't understand it," she said, dismissing calls to drop out.

Clinton made her comments at a meeting with the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader's editorial board while campaigning in South Dakota, where she complained that, "People have been trying to push me out of this ever since Iowa."

Aravosis continued to update that post for two hours. One of the first recommended DKos diaries on the comment seems to rely on Aravosis and was posted sixteen minutes later. I don't know whether Aravosis found the Post story himself or via Drudge.

Whether or not it was Aravosis or Drudge who decided this comment had to be a story (nice company, Aravosis), it was, at last according to both Aravosis' account, some random guy reading the news who did so—he told them they might have a big scoop. And, ultimately, it was a newspaper reporter watching the live feed of an interview from someplace comfortable who first reported the comments—it was neither the press corp reporters who were traveling "with" Hillary nor editors of the Argus-Leader with whom Hillary was meeting.

Now I don't mean to suggest that a comment about an assassination is as important an event as actual physical events undergone by the President or candidate—though that's why I brought up the McCain carcinoma, which also went unnoted and, because of McCain's success at managing the release of his own medical records, underplayed when discovered. But it is an event that—for better or worse, and I've got mixed feelings about that—has been deemed a very important campaign event. (I actually trust Rachel Maddow's read on this the most—"this is a gaffe and a big mistake from a remarkably disciplined candidate"—since she has repeatedly defended Hillary against unfair attacks, but since she also has superb political judgment.)

There are some events that will be news independent of the editorial decisions surrounding them. But the coverage of the RFK comment affirms, I think, that news is rarely made in the presence of the press corps. It is "made" in the editorial decisions and by the blogger/Drudge publicity and the talking heads. That's in no way an entirely good thing. But it does mean that one's presence in the press corps largely means a reporter will only have privileged access to a media handler's spin on a particular event, and not necessarily a better vantage on the event itself.

Update: Athenae addresses related issues:

Which goes back to what we talk about here a lot, laziness and stupidity in

addition to bias, as a media problem. The utter arbitrariness, in that what one person says passes without comment other than on the back pages of the Beaver County Tidbit (much to the chagrin of the Tidbit) and what someone else says gets blown up into a 24-hour Pig Fuck of a "firestorm," which incidentally if I never hear that word again ... A bunch of things contribute to this: charged environment, relative stupidity of statement, availability of critics and ease of analysis with which to quickly put together a Sunday show, the latter being so much more crucial than people think. If you can't get anyone on the phone to say "that was outrageous!" you can't write a story about outrage.

I'm not defending her at all, at best it was a fucking dumbass thing to say and very uncool, at best. But the total lack of rules to this thing, the lack of dare I say it, standards to which journalists are always declaring they adhere, makes fighting back against it very difficult, and that's a lesson that all Democrats should have learned four years ago, hell, eight years ago. It's a lesson they're going to need to learn damn quick in the coming months.

Though I would add that—as I think I've shown here—the arbitrariness is by no means limited to the journalists. The blogosphere is at least as much at fault here.