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Every Country Gets the Media it Wants

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Hillary Clinton said the media pushed her out of the race. Barack Obama said the media is picking on his wife. John McCain said the media has treated him like yesterday's losing lottery ticket.

This may be as close as we get to fair and balanced reporting.

Still, it is causing great fulmination about the media stepping over some kind of historical line from reporting the news to making it -- or at least twisting it.

We can relax. That is not happening. There is no line.

There was no line when Thomas Payne got the colonists fired up for war with his Common Sense pamphlets. And there is no line today when the media focuses on Barack Obama's race; John McCain's age, Bill Clinton's petulance or any other the other topics that seems to have us hopping mad and casting blame.

Like it or not, it's just the media doing its job -- giving people what they want.

Before we reflexively lay at the feet of media responsibility for the polluting and perverting our electoral process, let's spend some quiet time on definition and context.

The question of definition is basic: what is the media?

There was a time when that answer was simple: three networks, a dozen or so national magazines and a collection of city newspapers and radio stations. They were the gatekeepers.

The gate keepers have gone the way of rotary phones. Power has moved from the center to the edge. Anyone with a laptop can enter -- and even influence -- the national discourse.

Taking on media today is like swatting a cloud.

Context raises a more complex question: what do we really want from media?

There is much that the media could have done better so far in this election, but in the context of an industry that makes money on aggregating eyeballs, I'm hard-pressed to come up with anything they did wrong.

Too much about race? Obama is the first African American to make the finals of the presidential race. So when his long-time preacher damns America to hell -- that sells.

Was there sexism in the coverage of Hillary Clinton? Some.

But her gender worked for her (tearing up to win New Hampshire) more often than it worked against her. Did the media pressure her to leave the race because she was a woman? Or did pressure come from the fact that she stayed on knowing she couldn't win, which raised a question about her motives, which ignited the speculation that media lives for.

Was it fair for the *New York Times* to run the Obama op-ed and send McCain's back for revisions? Or was it the simple fact that Obama's op-ed was good and McCain's wasn't -- as, if their speeches are any indication, was likely the case.

Is the media ("cable monsters" to McCain) giving Obama rock star coverage because it wants him in the White House? Or does a fresh faced, dark skinned, consummate political performer simply outdraw a respected septuagenarian who David Letterman said "looks like the kind of guy who brags that his new denture adhesive lets him eat corn on the cob."

It's a new world for media -- with a mob of unruly competitors jostling for share with organizations that still check their sources.

It's a new world of politics, energized by a candidate unlike any who came before him.

How can we blame "the media" for stepping out of bounds, when the lines have been washed away like sidewalk chalk in a rainstorm?

If leading this country to a more sophisticated level of political discourse was a viable business model, *Meet the Press* would be on in prime time, *Foreign Affairs* would sell more copies than *Cosmo* and Bill O'Reilly would be hosting a reality show.

But it's not a viable business model. And, as a country, we get what we pay for.