

Olberman & The Importance of Distinctions

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 8, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

Keith Olberman, one of the most popular cable television hosts on left-leaning MSNBC, may have done nothing more than what the owner of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch did. Both men donated cash to candidates despite being a member of the press.

Indeed, in terms of monetary influence, Murdoch did a whole lot more. It can be argued that Murdoch is a businessman, not a reporter, and so his donations did not violate any journalistic ethics. It can also be argued that Olberman is an advocate, not a journalist, and should be allowed to donate to whomever he wishes.

Of course, Olberman did violate company policy, which is why he was suspended.

Where to draw the lines? Is there a difference between being an advocate and a member of the press corps? What about people like me who traffic in news and opinion equally? After all, opinion writing must be based on some factual appraisals, not just on whim. Op-ed writers can't just make stuff up any more than reporters can, unless they work at the Catholic, ehem, News Agency. Maureen Dowd is not a reporter after all. And, is there no danger that reporters can deceive themselves into thinking that they are free from bias, when all of us bring our prejudices to bear on what we see, what we choose to look at, and how we frame issues?

In short, there is no easy way to draw the lines.

But, it seems to me that if press organizations are going to allow reporters or columnists to make political donations, they need to disclose that fact to their viewers, not just to the Federal Election Commission. Transparency allows viewers to assess how much a person's advocacy may color their reporting.

I have wrestled with this myself. Four years ago, I raised some money for Martin O'Malley, but this year when he called to see if I could do so again, I said that I intended to write about the race, or might write about the race, and so I thought it was inappropriate to be a contributor.

On the other hand, my neighbor was running for local office and is helping our neighborhood get re-districted into a better school. I had no intention of ever writing about the local issues with which my neighbor would be involved, and he was unopposed, so I wrote him a small check. My sister ran for office in Connecticut and while she did not need any donations, I could never have written about that race. All reporters get to vote for whomever they want.

I can't stand Olberman. He is the left's equivalent of Sean Hannity and both men produce shows that I find painful to watch. I wish MSNBC would have gotten rid of him because he is a blowhard just as I thought NPR should have ditched Juan Williams and CNN should have ditched Rick Sanchez not because of a few controversial remarks but because neither was very good at their jobs.

I suppose in the Olberman case, the punishment fit the crime. He was suspended for a week without pay. But, companies like Fox and MSNBC that exist to blur the line between news and advocacy must at least be

forthright about the political involvement of their hosts and reporters.

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