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The White House Stages Its 'Daily Show'

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THE prayers of those hoping that real television news might take its cues from Jon Stewart were finally answered on Feb. 9, 2005. A real newsman borrowed a technique from fake news to deliver real news about fake news in prime time.

Let me explain.

On "Countdown," a nightly news hour on MSNBC, the anchor, Keith Olbermann, led off with a classic "Daily Show"-style bit: a rapid-fire montage of sharply edited video bites illustrating the apparent idiocy of those in Washington. In this case, the eight clips stretched over a year in the White House briefing room - from February 2004 to late last month - and all featured a reporter named "Jeff." In most of them, the White House press secretary, Scott McClellan, says "Go ahead, Jeff," and "Jeff" responds with a softball question intended not to elicit information but to boost President Bush and smear his political opponents. In the last clip, "Jeff" is quizzing the president himself, in his first post-inaugural press conference of Jan. 26. Referring to Harry Reid and Hillary Clinton, "Jeff" asks, "How are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality?"

If we did not live in a time when the news culture itself is divorced from reality, the story might end there: "Jeff," you'd assume, was a lapdog reporter from a legitimate, if right-wing, news organization like Fox, and you'd get some predictable yuks from watching a compressed video anthology of his kissing up to power. But as Mr. Olbermann explained, "Jeff Gannon," the star of the montage, was a newsman no more real than a "Senior White House Correspondent" like Stephen Colbert on "The Daily Show" and he worked for a news organization no more real than The Onion. Yet the video broadcast by Mr. Olbermann was not fake. "Jeff" was in the real White House, and he did have those exchanges with the real Mr. McClellan and the real Mr. Bush.

"Jeff Gannon's" real name is James D. Guckert. His employer was a Web site called Talon News, staffed mostly by volunteer Republican activists. Media Matters for America, the liberal press monitor that has done the most exhaustive research into the case, discovered that Talon's "news" often consists of recycled Republican National Committee and White House press releases, and its content frequently overlaps with another partisan site, GOPUSA, with which it shares its owner, a Texas delegate to the 2000 Republican convention. Nonetheless, for nearly two years

the White House press office had credentialed Mr. Guckert, even though, as Dana Milbank of The Washington Post explained on Mr. Olbermann's show, he "was representing a phony media company that doesn't really have any such thing as circulation or readership."

How this happened is a mystery that has yet to be solved. "Jeff" has now quit Talon News not because he and it have been exposed as fakes but because of other embarrassing blogosphere revelations linking him to sites like hotmilitarystud.com and to an apparently promising career as an X-rated \$200-per-hour "escort." If Mr. Guckert, the author of Talon News exclusives like "Kerry Could Become First Gay President," is yet another link in the boundless network of homophobic Republican closet cases, that's not without interest. But it shouldn't distract from the real question - that is, the real news - of how this fake newsman might be connected to a White House propaganda machine that grows curiously by the day. Though Mr. McClellan told Editor & Publisher magazine that he didn't know until recently that Mr. Guckert was using an alias, Bruce Bartlett, a White House veteran of the Reagan-Bush I era, wrote on the nonpartisan journalism Web site Romenesko, that "if Gannon was using an alias, the White House staff had to be involved in maintaining his cover." (Otherwise, it would be a rather amazing post-9/11 security breach.)

By my count, "Jeff Gannon" is now at least the sixth "journalist" (four of whom have been unmasked so far this year) to have been a propagandist on the payroll of either the Bush administration or a barely arms-length ally like Talon News while simultaneously appearing in print or broadcast forums that purport to be real news. Of these six, two have been syndicated newspaper columnists paid by the Department of Health and Human Services to promote the administration's "marriage" initiatives. The other four have played real newsmen on TV. Before Mr. Guckert and Armstrong Williams, the talking head paid \$240,000 by the Department of Education, there were Karen Ryan and Alberto Garcia. Let us not forget these pioneers - the Woodward and Bernstein of fake news. They starred in bogus reports ("In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting," went the script) pretending to "sort through the details" of the administration's Medicare prescription-drug plan in 2004. Such "reports," some of which found their way into news packages distributed to local stations by CNN, appeared in more than 50 news broadcasts around the country and have now been deemed illegal "covert propaganda" by the Government Accountability Office.

The money that paid for both the Ryan-Garcia news packages and the Armstrong Williams contract was siphoned through the same huge public relations firm, Ketchum Communications, which itself filtered the funds through subcontractors. A new report by Congressional Democrats finds that Ketchum has received \$97 million of the administration's total \$250 million P.R. kitty, of

which the Williams and Ryan-Garcia scams would account for only a fraction. We have yet to learn precisely where the rest of it ended up.

Even now, we know that the fake news generated by the six known shells is only a small piece of the administration's overall propaganda effort. President Bush wasn't entirely joking when he called the notoriously meek March 6, 2003, White House press conference on the eve of the Iraq invasion "scripted" while it was still going on. (And "Jeff Gannon" apparently wasn't even at that one). Everything is scripted.

The pre-fab "Ask President Bush" town hall-style meetings held during last year's campaign (typical question: "Mr. President, as a child, how can I help you get votes?") were carefully designed for television so that, as Kenneth R. Bazinet wrote last summer in New York's Daily News, "unsuspecting viewers" tuning in their local news might get the false impression they were "watching a completely open forum." A Pentagon Office of Strategic Influence, intended to provide propagandistic news items, some of them possibly false, to foreign news media was shut down in 2002 when it became an embarrassing political liability. But much more quietly, another Pentagon propaganda arm, the Pentagon Channel, has recently been added as a free channel for American viewers of the Dish Network. Can a Social Security Channel be far behind?

It is a brilliant strategy. When the Bush administration isn't using taxpayers' money to buy its own fake news, it does everything it can to shut out and pillory real reporters who might tell Americans what is happening in what is, at least in theory, their own government. Paul Farhi of The Washington Post discovered that even at an inaugural ball he was assigned "minders" - attractive women who wouldn't give him their full names - to let the revelers know that Big Brother was watching should they be tempted to say anything remotely off message.

The inability of real journalists to penetrate this White House is not all the White House's fault. The errors of real news organizations have played perfectly into the administration's insidious efforts to blur the boundaries between the fake and the real and thereby demolish the whole notion that there could possibly be an objective and accurate free press. Conservatives, who supposedly deplore post-modernism, are now welcoming in a brave new world in which it's a given that there can be no empirical reality in news, only the reality you want to hear (or they want you to hear). The frequent fecklessness of the Beltway gang does little to penetrate this Washington smokescreen. For a case in point, you needed only switch to CNN on the day after Mr. Olbermann did his fake-news-style story on the fake reporter in the White House press corps.

"Jeff Gannon" had decided to give an exclusive TV interview to a sober practitioner of by-the-book real news, Wolf Blitzer. Given this journalistic opportunity, the anchor asked questions

almost as soft as those "Jeff" himself had asked in the White House. Mr. Blitzer didn't question Mr. Guckert's outrageous assertion that he adopted a fake name because "Jeff Gannon is easier to pronounce and easier to remember." (Is "Jeff" easier to pronounce than his real first name, Jim?). Mr. Blitzer never questioned Gannon/Guckert's assertion that Talon News "is a separate, independent news division" of GOPUSA. Only in a brief follow-up interview a day later did he ask Gannon/Guckert to explain why he was questioned by the F.B.I. in the case that may send legitimate reporters to jail: Mr. Guckert has at times implied that he either saw or possessed a classified memo identifying Valerie Plame as a C.I.A. operative. Might that memo have come from the same officials who looked after "Jeff Gannon's" press credentials? Did Mr. Guckert have any connection with CNN's own Robert Novak, whose publication of Ms. Plame's name started this investigation in the first place? The anchor didn't go there.

The "real" news from CNN was no news at all, but it's not as if any of its competitors did much better. The "Jeff Gannon" story got less attention than another media frenzy - that set off by the veteran news executive Eason Jordan, who resigned from CNN after speaking recklessly at a panel discussion at Davos, where he apparently implied, at least in passing, that American troops deliberately targeted reporters. Is the banishment of a real newsman for behaving foolishly at a bloviation conference in Switzerland a more pressing story than that of a fake newsman gaining years of access to the White House (and network TV cameras) under mysterious circumstances? With real news this timid, the appointment of Jon Stewart to take over Dan Rather's chair at CBS News could be just the jolt television journalism needs. As Mr. Olbermann demonstrated when he borrowed a sharp "Daily Show" tool to puncture the "Jeff Gannon" case, the only road back to reality may be to fight fake with fake.