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March 27, 2011

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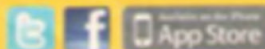
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AMONG THE GUERRILLA

What role do the mainstream media play in an environment beset by Assange and O'Keefe's?

By BILL KELLER

Has anyone actually seen James O'Keefe and Julian Assange together? Are we quite sure that the right-wing prankster who brought down the leadership of National Public Radio and the anarchic leaker aren't split personalities of the same guy—sent by fate to mess with the heads of mainstream journalists?

Sure, one shoots from the left, the other from the right. One deals in genuine (albeit purloined) secrets; the other in "Candid Camera" stunts, most recently posing as a potential donor and entrapping a foolish NPR executive into disclosing his scorn for Republicans and the Tea Party. Assange aims to enlist the media; O'Keefe aims to discredit us. But each, in his own guerrilla way, has sown his share of public doubt about whether the press can be trusted as an impartial bearer of news.

I don't intend this occasional essay to become the Editor's Pulpit, but right now—when we are buffeted between those on the right who think we are agents of liberalism and those on the left who think we should be, and when we are asking devoted readers to pay for us online—it seems like a good time to pause and review some first principles.

Back in 2004, Daniel Okrent, the first ombudsman at The Times, wrote a column under the headline, "Is The New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?" The sly first sentence of his essay was: "Of course it is." Nobody seems to remember what came after. Okrent went on to explain that The Times's outlook, steeped in the mores of a big, rambunctious city, tends to be culturally liberal: open-minded, skeptical of dogma, secular, cosmopolitan. We publish news of gay unions on the wedding pages. We have a science section that does not feel obliged to give

Bill Keller is the executive editor of The New York Times.



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