

MAD ABOUT MAUREEN

A Content Analysis of Maureen Dowd's "Liberties" BY KEVIN KOSAR

Maureen Dowd was once a good reporter. She did her research and asked tough questions of people in power. Now she looks no farther than the headlines for her material. Her "Liberties" column once used the lens of pop culture to tell readers something about politics. Now it's just shtick.

Yet this spring she was awarded a Pulitzer for "commentary." The Pulitzer committee claimed she had earned it for her "fresh and insightful columns on the impact of President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky."

Oh? And what had readers gained from bits like this:

We have a President with a congenital need to get his hand caught in the cookie jar, so he can be rescued yet again by the brainy wife he has turned into Mommy Dearest. We have a "prosecutor" picking the wings off female bit players. We have a bunch of House conservatives who can't see their own hypocrisy. We have Senate bloviators engaged in an orgy of self-congratulation for their agreement to agree on very little. We have a Supreme Court Chief Justice who fails to appreciate the value of basic black.

How did the hardworking sorts in print journalism react to Dowd's prize? They praised her for her "keen perspective," calling her a "master writer" with an "acid-tongue" cranking out "first class political analysis." James J. Kilpatrick was particularly enthusiastic. "The award was richly deserved... [S]he wields her pen like a rapier, like a machete, like a cleaver. The lady is a writer." *Brill's Content* put her on the cover in June, called her "brilliant" and ran a fawning 12-page piece on her.

A few journalists have objected. "If she deserves a Pulitzer, we all do," muttered one DC reporter. At the *Boston Phoenix*, Dan Kennedy wrote that Dowd's victory "smacks of Pulitzer Lite."

Dowd's fans tend to dismiss that kind of talk as jealousy or hypocrisy. "[H]er enemies are heavy-breathing stalkers...if they claim their eyes don't ogle her column first, they're lying," Richard Turner wrote in *Newsweek*.

Dowd's uncanny popularity with her peers would be understandable if she challenged readers to think. But she doesn't. She "expresses the conventional wisdom of the moment," notes Jay Nordlinger of *National Review*. "Her style is daring. But it would be unthinkable for her to go beyond the bounds of establishment opinion. Unthinkable." The *Observer's* Joe Conason agrees: "She reflects the conventional, Georgetown, elite point of view."

Clinton fooled around with an intern? Clinton's an over-sexed pig. The NYPD guns down Amadou Diallo? Aggressive policing has gone too far. The shootings at Columbine? There are too many guns available. This wouldn't be fatal to her "commentary" if she backed the conventional wisdom with new information or policy analysis. She doesn't.

As our chart shows, instead of research her columns are loaded with lazy pop-culture references. Eight of the 21

columns that followed her Pulitzer award referred to movies, ranging from a column title like "Hoop Nightmares" to the full movie metaphor of her June 23 column "Bushfellas" (which oddly conflated *Goodfellas* and the *Godfather* films). One column mentioned tv, four made general references to Hollywood and there was a scattering of other pop-culture references like "Guns and Poses." Not a single column gave evidence that she keeps up with any serious political media—no reference to C-SPAN, no *Roll Call* or *National Journal*. She cited no policy expert, no academics.

Only three times did these 21 columns show any evidence of reportorial footwork. She visited a gun salesman in a department store; she was in New Hampshire for the Republican candidates' gathering; and she was at one of Hillary's campaign stops. But these forays out into the world served only as springboards for her launching into the journalistic equivalent of stand-up comedy routines.

Maybe that's her appeal: Maureen Dowd, the Seinfeld of newspaper columnists.

Just five of these 21 columns actually argued a point. Typically, the topic is something banal like May 23's spring is here but DC power couples like Bob and Liddy Dole are not getting along, or June 2's Tipper's calling Al Gore

sexy made me uncomfortable.

Sixteen columns focused on people, five on issues or events. Clearly she has a few favorite individuals—Hillary is a topic seven times, Gore five times, George W. three times. But rather than a studied assessment of these people, she makes wisecracks or rehashes widely broadcast information. There is no evidence that she sought interviews with them, ferreted out sources to comment on them, analyzed their achievements or skills.

In terms of what we might call the "seriousness" of her columns, at most three were sober. Seven were spoofs—what Rudy secretly thinks of Hillary, what NRA leadership is really saying in a letter it sent to members. As a result, the average

column scores a dismal 1.95 on our profundity scale of 1-5, where 1 means no information was conveyed, 5 means she actually broke a story. Not once did she score a 5, and eight of 21 columns scored a 1.

Apparently James Carville is right: Maureen Dowd is a "professional wiseass."

For this she gets a Pulitzer? Even considering how wired the award is for *New York Times* writers, how to explain this?

A few journalists speculate that her sex appeal and persistent refusal to be interviewed made her "alluring." But I think it's deeper than that: Maureen Dowd's lite banter, her high irony and low content, appeal to the deep cynicism many journalists feel for politics. Dowd treats politics as fodder for cheap comedy. You get the impression she believes that everyone involved is a liar, a sanctimonious ass or a rabid partisan, so she has ceased to follow it closely. Other journalists love her for that.

Jason Zengerle at *The New Republic* is typical. "If you judge her column on its own terms—i.e., not whether it unearths some new information or whether it makes a cogent policy proposal but whether it entertains—I'd say it succeeds most of the time," he tells me. "Her bon mots are better than anybody else's, and her cynicism is expressed through some very nice writing."

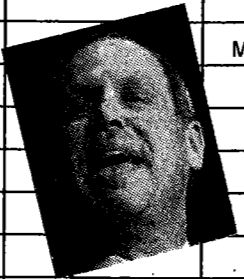
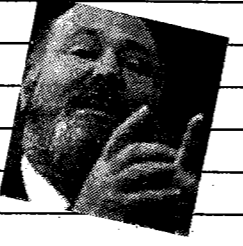
Newsweek's Turner relates, "It's a cliché that no one is as cynical as journalists... It's an old story—you start a young idealist, you get disappointed, your job's not much fun anymore... So what becomes fun is cynically trashing everyone. Do you look to Dowd's column because you think she's going to say something that will save the world? No, of course not... [J]ournalists love reading her because she writes about the stuff they talk about in the newsroom—and things you wouldn't see in the rest of the newspaper."

"I know I wasn't upset when she won the Pulitzer," Zengerle says. "Maybe that just goes to confirm my cynicism."

Another journalist who asked to remain anonymous confides, "She doesn't follow the issues and she doesn't have opinions on the issues. But what can I say—I read her anyway."

No doubt a lot of politicians would be delighted if more journalists followed her lead.



Date	Title	Movie Reference?	Mention of TV Show or Stars?	Mention of Hollywood?	Need to Leave Office/ Make Phone Calls?	Profoundity Scale	Column Summary
4/14/99	Contempt, She Says				no	2	Clinton nailed by Judge Wright; please end the Lewinsky saga.
4/18/99	Cold, Cold Hearth				no	3	Hillary's coming book on entertaining is a ploy to garner votes.
4/21/99	Hoop Nightmares	Hoop Dreams		Michael Eisner, DreamWorks	no	1	Dowd imagines how Al Gore fumes over Bill Bradley.
4/25/99	Hunker in the Bunker			Oliver Stone	no	2	Spoofs letter by NRA head, Charlton Heston.
4/28/99	In the DC Matrix	The Matrix			no	3	Al Gore blasts amoral movies but takes Hollywood money.
5/2/99	Dissolves on Contact				yes	4	Campaigning is making Hillary look disingenuous.
5/5/99	Sugar Rips NRA				yes	2	Liz Dole in face of NRA and New Hampshire calls for gun control.
5/9/99	Guns and Poses			Rob Reiner, others	yes	2	Clinton should buck Hollywood and also ban handguns.
5/12/99	The Coldest Cut				no	4	Jesse's return of U.S. soldiers creates problem for Gore.
5/16/99	Bill Says Chill				no	2	Clinton tells Al to have fun and in so doing embarasses him.
5/19/99	Leech Women in Love!	The Leech Woman			no	2	Lewinsky and Joyce Maynard have acted like teen girls spurned.
5/23/99	Bile in Bloom				no	1	DC power couples (e.g., Bill & Hillary, Bob & Liddy) not getting along.
5/26/99	Siamese Senators				no	1	Spoof: Lists what Giuliani and Hillary think of each other.
5/30/99	Here at the Ardsthorpe				no	1	Spoof of letter by manager of Ardsthorpe Hotel to Hillary.
6/2/99	Tipper's Tiger				no	1	Tipper's calling Al Gore "sexy" made Dowd uncomfortable.
6/6/99	Rudy in Reverse				no	1	Spoofs Rudy's tactics for dealing with Hillary.
6/9/99	Puppy Love Politics	Animal House	Dawson's Creek	Rosie O'Donnell	no	2	GOP has a crush on George W. Bush.
6/13/99	Lighten Up, Baby!	Austin Powers			no	1	Assorted ramblings on coming Starr report on Hillary.
6/16/99	Freudian Face-Off	The Wizard of Oz			no	2	Neither George W. nor Al is an engaging speaker.
6/20/99	The God Squad	The Mod Squad			no	3	Putting Ten Commandments in schools not adequate to stop shootings.
6/23/99	Bushfellas	The Godfather films			no	1	Spoof: Is George W. Bush like Sonny Corleone? Maybe, maybe not.
	TOTAL	8 of 21	1 of 21	4 of 21	3 of 21	41	
						Average: 1.95	