

Opinion: Media needs to storm the places pols tell the truth

By Peter Beinart, Newsweek

Of the many things that the now-legendary Mitt Romney Boca Raton video has revealed, perhaps the most important is this: the real presidential campaign is the one the public doesn't see. Sure, Romney and President Obama fly around the country giving speeches and doing media interviews.

And sure, they occasionally use those speeches or interviews to unveil some policy nugget that helps Americans understand what they might do in office. But for the most part, their public performances are just that: performances. They speak in calculated, glittering generalities. The throngs who crowd into their rallies never get the chance to probe deeper, and when interviewers do, the candidates artfully deflect their toughest questions, knowing full well that any interviewer who inquires too relentlessly is unlikely to get many future interviews.

The more honest discussions take place behind closed doors, in the innumerable private fundraisers that Romney and Obama do with their big givers. Honesty, in fact, is part of what those donors are paying for. No one shells out \$50,000 to listen to the same platitudes that Joe and Mary Six-Pack hear at a 5,000-person rally in Akron, Ohio. In the "skybox" society (in Michael Sandel's parlance) in which we live, the super-rich don't simply stand in different lines at the airport; they experience a different presidential campaign.

It's not that the remarks candidates offer to donors bear no resemblance to their publicly stated views. They just express those views in a franker, less scripted, less sanitized way.

Publicly Romney derides big government. Privately he told Florida donors this spring that he might slash the Department of Education and eliminate Housing and Urban Development—specifics he had not shared with ordinary Americans. Publicly Romney accuses Obama of wanting to make Americans dependent on government. Privately he tells donors that half the country is composed of whiners who want to be dependent on government. Publicly Romney praises Israel and criticizes the Palestinians. Privately he says he opposes his own party platform's stated commitment to a Palestinian state.

Similarly, Barack Obama publicly talks about the economic frustrations of working-class Americans. But in the heat of the 2008 campaign, then-candidate Obama was caught by a Huffington Post "citizen journalist" telling a group of San Francisco donors that small-town Pennsylvanians "get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them." In private, in other words, Romney and Obama offer a version of what they say in public, just minus the dishonest, poll-tested fluff.

Currently the candidates' staffs sharply restrict the media's access to events with big donors. The Romney campaign does not allow press into fundraisers held in private homes. Obama bars journalists from the question-and-answer sessions that usually follow his remarks to donors. And the press plays along. That needs to change. What *Mother Jones*, Jimmy Carter's grandson, and his anonymous videotaping source have shown is that a creative, audacious press corps could do far more to inform the mass of Americans about the things big donors hear behind closed doors. Journalists could seek out donors, waiters, or anyone else with access to those closed-to-the-press events and either interview them about what they heard or, better yet, ask them to tape it.

Media organizations could tell the campaigns that if they don't allow reporters to cover the freewheeling candidate Q&A sessions that take place behind closed doors at night, those

reporters won't cover the rote stump speeches the candidates give in the afternoon.

In short, the press should do everything it possibly can, within the bounds of law and ethics, to foil the campaigns' efforts to speak one way to the 1 percent – and another way to everyone else.

Thanks to the Supreme Court, the government is less able to regulate, or even track, the way money enters political campaigns. But the media can still influence what that money buys. By exposing the private conversations between donors and aspiring presidents, the media cannot only fulfill its duty to help average Americans make an informed choice. It can also undermine the very rationale for super-rich donors to give in the first place.

After all, if everyone in the country is going to learn what candidates say at fundraisers, funders will have less incentive to shell out \$50,000 to attend. And then, perhaps, people like Romney and Obama will spend less time speaking honestly about the American people and more time speaking honestly to them.