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Assessing the Mass Media's
Handling of
Religious and Moral Issues

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Introduction

America's mass media have recently been the targets of a good deal of criticism from the political right and the religious right. These criticisms deal with subjects ranging from the content of the news itself to the personal beliefs and values of media members. The religious right in particular has attacked the media for being "biased" against people with moral and religious world views. The group claims that the media consistently mishandle stories dealing with religious or moral issues.

At issue is the tremendous power of the media. In his article, "The High Cost of Free Speech," Richard McKenzie discussed this perceived power: "Both the political left and political right denigrate (the press) for its failure to report the 'truth.' Its freedom to print what it considers news is interpreted by others...as the power to influence public events and, thereby, as the power to coerce."¹

If the media are indeed able to influence public events, then a great responsibility exists: to report on all things fairly and accurately. Criticisms of the media in this area should not be disregarded, but should be examined.

This report will examine criticisms of the media from the political right and the religious right, to determine first whether the criticisms are valid, and if they are, to suggest methods of improvement in covering religious and moral issues. The assessment, of course, will be subjective, and the report may raise more questions than it answers. But the conclusions

drawn could be a starting point for further study of perceived media bias.

1. The Basis for the Criticism

A 1980 Gallup poll indicated that 38 percent of the total United States population claimed to be born-again Christians--emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation. Nineteen percent of the total population were classified by pollster George Gallup as Evangelicals. Gallup defined that term as those who have had a "born-again" experience, those who have encouraged someone else to believe in Christ and those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible as the inspired word of God.¹

Gallup also reported that 23 percent of the total adult population could be considered part of the Christian political right, in which he included the "moderately right" as well as the "far right."²

While even Evangelicals themselves might consider Gallup's figures too high, the group has certainly become a political force to be reckoned with in the 1980s. Based on a variety of religious and moral issues, along with traditional conservative politics, the Christian right has reflected somewhat of a change in attitude for many people. Burton Yale Pines, commenting on the Gallup poll, said that "...In many respects, the Christian right's agenda and the fulminations of the preachers mirror a

broad disquiet, even anger, that has spread across the United States."³

A good portion of that anger has been directed at America's mass media, which some charge with being far from representative of the general public. The media, especially the "prestige media," are often accused of holding predominately liberal, anti-moral and anti-Christian values. And because of their power and influence, their views are said to "choke out" all other political and religious viewpoints. Writing in Commentary magazine, Joseph Kraft remarked, "The pluralistic model of an unbiased system depends upon the persons in the news media being broadly representative. The theory was that every view would find some expression, some sympathetic presentation across the broad spectrum of bias making up the media diet. We have seen, however, that increasingly the media are staffed by an unrepresentative group..."⁴

Results of a study by sociologists S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman suggest that Kraft's assertion was correct. In 1979 and 1980, the two conducted 240 hour-long interviews with journalists and broadcasters at "the most influential media outlets," including the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Time, U.S. News and World Report, and the news departments at CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS. Employees at all levels, from reporters to top executives, were interviewed. Seventy-six percent of those contacted by Lichter

and Rothman completed the interviews--a response "high enough to insure that our findings provide insight into the composition and perspective of this new elite."⁵

Results of the study found, much to the dismay of the Christian right, a distinctly secular outlook among those surveyed. Exactly half said they had no religious affiliation, while 86 percent said they seldom or never attended worship services of any kind. Fourteen percent said they were Jewish, with 23 percent having been raised in Jewish households (about 2.5 percent of the total U.S. population is Jewish). Another 20 percent identified themselves as Protestant, compared to 67 percent of the population, and 16 percent was Catholic, as opposed to 22 percent of the population.⁶

The huge gap in the percentage of Protestants would account for some of the enmity between the Christian right, most of whom are Protestant, and the "media elite." The two groups are also at odds over social issues, the study revealed. "...Members of the media emerge as strong supporters of sexual freedom or permissiveness, and as natural opponents of groups like the (Christian-oriented) Moral Majority..." Lichter and Rothman wrote.⁷

For instance, 90 percent of the media members surveyed agreed that a woman has the right to have an abortion. Seventy-six percent disagreed that homosexuality is morally wrong, 85 percent disagreed that homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in public schools, and 54 percent disagreed that adultery

is morally wrong.⁸

In overall political outlook, those surveyed were found to be overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic compared to the rest of the public. Fifty-four percent placed themselves to the left of political center, and only 19 percent placed themselves to the right.⁹ Predictably, the study was also used by business people as a basis for accusing the media of holding an anti-business bias. While the study did not suggest this, such magazines as Business Horizons did: "The indirect evidence strongly suggests a link between ideology and news content: the more liberal the journalist, the more likely he is to believe that present news coverage is not critical enough of business."¹⁰

A later study, by Lichter, Rothman and Lichter's wife Linda, produced more discomfoting results for conservatives. The Columbia Journalism Review's "non-partisan" commentary on media coverage of political and social issues was interpreted to be decidedly liberal in outlook--despite the magazine's disclaimer that, "The Review does not and must not espouse directly or indirectly any cause except that of honest, fair, and enterprising journalism. If it ever appears to be 'left' or 'right' or committed to any 'ism,' it has gone out of bounds."¹¹

The researchers coded 1,895 stories that evaluated media coverage of society and politics. Of these, 79 percent "reflected a liberal perspective," as compared with 12 percent conservative and eight percent non-partisan perspectives.

"CJR seems unaware that the views and criticisms espoused in its pages are informed by any worldview at all," the researchers wrote. "Yet its articles rarely practice the norms of 'objective' or 'value-free' journalism that its editorials preach," they wrote. The article concluded with the warning, "If the nation's premier press critic lacks the capacity for self-criticism, the profession of journalism will suffer the consequence."¹²

Not only have the media's beliefs been subject to criticism, but so have their methods. Human Events, a conservative weekly newspaper, complained recently that the media do a poor job of choosing sources for stories involving controversial issues. For instance, it was reported at the 1984 Republican National Convention that many women there were anti-Reagan and might leave the party. "So (the reporter) found the usual hand-full of dissidents, and made it into a big story...He was wrong, and so were all those network correspondents who constantly run to the head of the National Organization for Women...or Gloria Steinem to get their 'gender gap' reading."¹³

The newspaper also accused the media of being unfair to the political right (although this is hardly surprising, considering the newspaper's point of view). Media criticism of an appeal by conservatives to Christian ministers to register people to vote was said to be inconsistent with their not being so critical of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's similar drive to register

black voters (who as a whole tend to be more liberal) in churches.

Former White House Press Secretary Hodding Carter attributed such "inconsistencies" to the press' narrow-mindedness. Carter wrote in a Newsweek guest editorial that the media receive all of their news from "designated messengers," including "in-house radicals." Because the media are still relatively unfamiliar with concepts such as religious revival, Carter said, the messages of those involved in such movements are either misunderstood or ignored. "Only recently has Jerry Falwell been portrayed as something more complex, and significant, than a redneck exploiter of redneck yahoos (this was 1981). The futile pretense of omniscience in the news magazines as they struggle to catch up with each great shift in public mood is the dead giveaway of their myopia before the fact," Carter wrote.¹⁴

Carter suggested that more reporters be assigned to non-traditional beats, including religious revival. "What those reporters find should be given adequate space and time, rather than be used as back-of-the-book wraparounds for the ads," he added.

Another person from the Carter administration, Jody Powell, pointed out the media's mishandling of Jimmy Carter's public profession of his Christian faith. "The American people, as a whole, are probably better equipped to understand that aspect of Jimmy Carter's life than are the people who are trying to explain it to them," Powell wrote. "...There have been stories

that have been superficial and slipshod and biased to the extreme, not necessarily against (Carter), but based on what I take to be a general distaste for religious faith."¹⁵

2. The Media's Handling of Religious and Moral Issues

If the Lichter-Rothman study is any indication, it would not be surprising to learn that, as many Christians claim, members of the media are biased against--or ignorant of--religion. A 1982 editorial in Religious Broadcasting magazine complained that the press gives coverage to such subjects as sewage technology or the sensory paths of lobsters, but rarely discusses religion seriously. The author of the editorial, Robert Niklaus, criticized the media for their non-coverage of events which, if they were anything but religious, would be considered newsworthy. For instance, Niklaus wrote, the press ignored the fact that 17,000 college students attended a missionary conference at Urbana, Ill., during their Christmas breaks. Had there been a similar gathering for any secular purpose, he maintained, the event would have received a good deal of coverage.¹

Wes Pippert, an Evangelical Christian who is a correspondent for United Press International, offered this criticism in the same editorial: "A large segment of good journalists simply turn off moral information. It's as if they were tone deaf in this area. They don't understand the Judeo-Christian ethic. Since they don't understand it, they find great difficulty

in reporting it accurately or interpreting it fairly. They lack a cultivated religious and moral sense."²

James Hitchcock, in his book, What Is Secular Humanism?, wrote that many newspapers deal with religious issues by devoting the headlines and the opening paragraphs to "dissenters and secularizers," while allowing religious orthodoxy a "token voice" near the end. Hitchcock also wrote, "The mass media distort religion in a very fundamental way. Properly understood, religion is something which goes very deep into a person's being; it permeates all of existence. The media, however, tend to notice it only when it generates controversy...which is easily understood in secular terms...."³

Journalists are criticized for having little knowledge of the religious or moral subjects they cover. If they do believe strongly one way or another, chances are good that they have been educated mainly from one point of view. Therefore, they may be unwittingly biased in their reporting because of their ignorance to one entire side of an issue.

If the criticisms are correct, and many members of the media do not understand religion, then it is hardly surprising that they are criticized for the way they cover it. Russ Pulliam, formerly of the Associated Press and now with the Indianapolis News, wrote in Eternity magazine that, "Because the American news media have no solid, self-conscious set of values, they tend to reflect the cultural trends of the day, often failing

to raise penetrating questions that would come out of a well-developed world view."⁴ Thus, the problem, he said, is less one of malice than it is one of ignorance.

Pulliam also said the problem is most evident in stories where divine intervention in a problem is claimed. "For example, a Christian drug rehabilitation program, Teen Challenge, is seldom accurately described or even mentioned in stories on drug treatment, yet in some cities it is one of the most successful programs going. It would be hard to explain the success of Teen Challenge apart from the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. In the eyes of the world, the people who run the programs just don't qualify."⁵

Other Christians, including the Rev. Jerry Falwell, have made similar criticisms. Falwell, in his Fundamentalist Journal, asked why 50,000 people on a pro-life march through London went unnoticed by the media, even by the London Times, despite the belief that the demonstration was the largest in London's history.⁶ Similarly, Tim LaHaye, in his book, The Hidden Censors, complained that the media ignored a gathering of 300,000 Christians for prayer in Washington, D.C.--the second-largest crowd in the District of Columbia's history.⁷

Pulliam's observation about reporters failing to ask penetrating questions in religious or moral-story interviews surfaces again in a Christianity Today article. In discussing the "one-sidedness" by the press about abortion, Rodney Clapp

wrote, "...A reporter could query an officeholder or candidate, 'Is abortion morally wrong and are you opposed?' The politician could answer, 'I am personally opposed, but pro-choice when I legislate on the matter.' This standard answer, containing logical holes the size of the Grand Canyon, would cause reporters half as aggressive as Mike Wallace to salivate if given in another context. But given in answer to an inquiry about abortion, it was meekly accepted, reportorial notebooks slamming shut quicker than mousetraps."⁸

Some charge the media with presenting distorted images of well-known Christians, particularly those who have become active in politics. Those doing the complaining say that because people take uncompromising stands either for or against something, the media brand them as close-minded zealots. They are treated with ridiculing humor, or ignored. Falwell, for example, wrote LaHaye, has been portrayed as everything from a book-burning cult leader to a reincarnated Hitler. LaHaye maintained that Falwell is grossly misrepresented, his only crime being "...that he favors laws to protect the lives of unborn children; he wants children to be permitted to pray in school; he wants to keep drugs and pornography from polluting the minds of teenagers and adults."⁹

An interview with Falwell in National Review brought some media-fueled misconceptions to light. The media, Falwell said, have hung a "Fundamentalist" label on anyone connected

with the Moral Majority. Fundamentalists are Evangelicals who place increased emphasis on biblical literalism and on Christ being the only way to salvation. In fact, the Moral Majority is 30 percent Roman Catholic, 20 percent Evangelical-Fundamentalist, and the remainder a mixture of Mormons, Jews, other religions and some non-affiliated conservatives. Falwell also pointed out that the Moral Majority is political rather than religious in nature--another distinction the press may have failed to make at times.¹⁰

As extreme and deviant as the media may portray the Moral Majority's views, those views may be close to those of a majority of Americans, according to a 1981 article in Public Opinion magazine. With regard to issues such as abortion, homosexuality, school prayer, sex education, drugs, pornography and general societal morality, the article dismissed as hardly debatable "a contention that the Christian right merely represents a development on the fringe, a movement that somehow has rocketed to prominence and power by wrapping issues around the cross or by employing other means alien to the American political tradition. To the contrary, what gives the Moral Majority and other religious groups their clout, it seems, is that on many key issues the morality they proclaim is the morality of the majority."¹¹

In contrast, many of those same people see journalists as being in opposition to those values, as the Lichter-Rothman

study hints. Former New York Times correspondent Bob Slosser, interviewed on the Christian television program, The 700 Club, defined religious faith as an "anchor," adding that too many journalists lose that anchor in the name of objectivity. "Our society has plucked the truth (he meant Christianity) out of consideration. We say we don't want to choose a side...But choosing God is not choosing a side," Slosser said.¹²

3. Is there a "liberal-humanist conspiracy?"

Christian author Franky Schaeffer, not one to mince words, wrote in A Time For Anger that the media "do not exist solely to perpetuate the free flow of information and the right of free speech. These multinational corporate news machines, along with their liberal establishment collaborators, exist to perpetuate themselves and their view of the world. Period."¹

That statement would be news to many members of the media who believe the media exist, first and foremost, to make money. Schaeffer later softened his position somewhat, but continued to use emotionally charged words to build his case: "With such widespread agreement (by media members) about basic issues, it hardly takes a conspiracy for the media machine to speak with one smothering voice...In effect, the media have become the enemy of religious principle and also, because of their vast unelected power, the rival of the constitutional process and of elected officials."² Schaeffer later adds that "The shared

humanistic consensus of all the major news organizations controls the 'free flow of ideas' in our press almost as surely as the Communist Party controls the Soviet press."³

Thus, in one fell swoop, Schaeffer, while dismissing the idea of a conspiracy, turns the media into public enemy number one. An even more emotional case was built by Beverly Hudson in a magazine published by evangelist Jimmy Swaggart: "What will happen to our nation if we allow the media to continue their blatant exploitation of the innocent, the uninformed, the vulnerable? Remember, empires greater than ours have perished!... Much of what the media pass on to the public is intellectual garbage to poison the minds of the masses. The filth, the perverse doctrines, the distortion of reality peddled by our 'elite media' destroy the values upon which this nation was built."⁴

These and similar arguments are so extreme that they are dismissed by many people as fanatic rantings and ravings. To an extent, they may be, but there also may be some truth sandwiched between the rockets' red glare. To be sure, many Christians do feel alienated from the mass media they depend upon for news--"strangers in their own land," as author Michael Novak termed them. "A culture has gone awry when the guardians of the media do not defend the moral resources of the nation's families, but treat them with indifference and contempt," Novak wrote.⁵

Apathy on the part of those same people who are now

complaining about the media may have, in part, been responsible for the situation in the first place. Hitchcock accuses Christians of patronizing the moral revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, offering little resistance to the imposition of values contrary to their own.⁶ Robert Burns, in U.S. Catholic magazine, said the American people are manipulated by the media, but "I do not suggest the existence of a conspiracy. Nothing of the sort. Far from being a condition forced on us by a band of willful reporters, it is rather the result of carelessness on the part of the media and apathy among the rest of us."⁷

This apathy has not allowed the media to dictate what most people think, but it has allowed the media to influence what people think about. Hitchcock wrote that the media's greatest power is the ability to "define reality." The media, he wrote, determine what ideas will be discussed in public. At the same time, "The media determine what ideas are to be considered respectable, rational and true. Those excluded from discussion, or treated only in a negative way, are conversely defined as disreputable, irrational and false."⁸

Hitchcock's last contention was supported by Pamela Shoemaker's research for Journalism Quarterly. Shoemaker examined criticisms that the media "vary their coverage of political groups according to how different the groups are from status quo..." Groups that are different from the media's perceived norm may be portrayed as ridiculous, non-legitimate and threatening. The media, then, become powerful molders of public opinion

about these groups. After all, Shoemaker wrote, "What most people know about the Ku Klux Klan, they have learned from the media, not from personal experience with the Klan."⁹

Shoemaker admitted that some of the groups she included in her study (including the KKK) are justifiably portrayed by the media. However, in other cases, she added, "Labelling theorists say that a group will be defined as deviant if someone labels it as deviant, not because of any inherent badness." Here lies a potential problem. If the media's ideas of "status quo" differ from those of the rest of the public (as the Lichter-Rothman study indicates), then the media may portray as deviant some groups which are perfectly normal and acceptable to a majority of the public.

In a related topic, Hitchcock said another method the media have for either legitimizing or non-legitimizing a group or a person is frequency of mention--a factor he said the media use consciously. "In a mass society, to be ignored is the worst possible fate," he wrote. "To be noticed is tantamount to being deemed worthy. To be noticed by a mass audience is almost a kind of canonization. No matter how seemingly 'neutral' the treatment, when certain ideas are given time and space in the media they acquire a respectability that increases with frequency...There is deep hypocrisy in the media's pious claims that they merely reflect reality and do not shape it. In fact the power of celebrity is used deliberately and selectively in order

to affect changes in values."¹⁰

Thus, if a conspiracy or something similar exists, it is with the "gatekeeper" function of the media. Information reaches them, and they have several options: shutting out the information altogether, passing it on either in part or in whole, or interjecting their own thoughts. Pulliam wrote in Eternity magazine that this last option probably is not an intentional occurrence. "There may not be a sinister plot to slant the news in an ideological direction, but every reporter brings some set of values and assumptions to bear on a story," Pulliam wrote.¹¹

4. Are Journalism and Religion Naturally At Odds?

Hitchcock maintained that the media, by nature, are incapable of discussing delicate issues of any kind. He said the media deal with religious questions "briefly, simplistically, and in a style which borders on the sensational. (The media's) aim is not primarily to explore problems responsibly but to attract the largest possible audience."¹

By that statement the public is also indicted. If discussion of deep, religious questions would sell papers, the press would surely, according to Hitchcock's reasoning, devote more effort to such discussion. But the majority of people who read newspapers probably pay more attention to "lighter" stories--ones that give them a chuckle or that give them something to talk about when they get to work--than they pay to the infrequent

attempts to discuss deeper, more meaningful topics.

Pulliam said many journalists strive for value-free journalism in the name of objectivity, but in doing so become more biased. "News judgment that has no philosophical basis in absolutes or ethics will tend to affirm the new over the old," Pulliam wrote.² This could, in part, explain the overwhelming preference for liberalism found in the media by Lichter and Rothman.

Some issues cannot be effectively dealt with without an underlying system of values, according to David Breese in Religious Broadcasting. "Few things are more pathetic than the attempt of the purely secular commentator, who believes in no doctrine of objective value, to declare why he believes abortion, euthanasia or school prayer are 'right' or 'wrong,'" Breese wrote.³

Breese, then, believes, as does Slosser who was quoted earlier, that "choosing God is not choosing a side." By excluding moral values from reporting, they said, many journalists miss a vital part of some issues, particularly those that are religious or moral in nature.

5. Do Personal Beliefs Enter News Stories?

In his book, Interpretative Reporting, Curtis MacDougall implied that absolute objectivity is impossible for anyone, including journalists. True, reporters can be impartial, but

they still must choose which facts to include in a story, in what order to place them and whom to use as sources in the first place.¹

A study by Journalism Quarterly revealed three variables by which reporters determine the roles of sources in their stories: prominence, dominance and within-story dominance. Prominence refers to a particular person's frequency of mention in all media. Dominance is a person's tendency to be quoted rather than simply reported upon or paraphrased--meaning he or she is viewed by the media as an important source or verifier of information. Within-story dominance is a person's tendency to be quoted more often than another within one story.²

Each of these factors depends on the subjective choices of writers and editors. Granted, these choices are often made fairly, with little cause for objection from either side of the story. But the factors become more vital--and reporters and editors become more vulnerable--in religious and moral-issue stories, because they may involve people's deepest convictions. These, of course, are the most difficult to detach oneself from, and thus, bias is more likely to be perceived.

Niklaus wrote in Religious Broadcasting that, "The media suffer from a flaw as basic as human nature: they too have their hang-ups. Complete impartiality is impossible. Even the best of editors and commentators operate within the universe of their own beliefs, values, experience and background. The information

they pass on bears their image."³

Pulliam's article supported this view. He too said that objectivity is impossible, because, "It ultimately rests on the false notion that one can operate free of values." He added that fairness, the alternative most journalists give for objectivity, is possible, but does not produce total neutrality.⁴

These arguments appear to be valid, but on the basis of the assumption that, like Evangelicals, everyone applies their deepest beliefs and convictions to their everyday lives. Pulliam wrote that one cannot operate free of values, but does that mean one cannot do anything, including write about a sensitive topic, without bringing his or her personal values into the story? Many journalists would argue that "value-free journalism" is not only possible, but that it is practiced effectively.

6. The Media's Response

Interestingly enough, Public Opinion magazine--the same one that published the Lichter-Rothman study--more recently published an article refuting the idea that the media are dominated by liberals. Author Edwin Diamond pointed out that the two most widely published syndicated columnists, James J. Kilpatrick and George Will, are conservatives. The two biggest selling magazines, Readers' Digest and TV Guide, are also conservative in political outlook, as are the editorial pages of the two largest-circulation daily newspapers in the U.S., the

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Wall Street Journal and the New York Daily News. Diamond added that several studies of network newscasts also found little trace of bias.¹

For example, a 1984 study by TV Guide (co-authored by Diamond) of perceived bias in network news found less-than-incriminating evidence. Based on conclusions drawn from a study of 10 consecutive nightly newscasts by ABC, NBC and CBS, the researchers found that, "The hard news is served straight, though usually with a twist of skepticism, on all three networks."²

Diamond suggested that the criticism may arise when the eastern establishment media are viewed as being more powerful than they actually are.

Alexander Haig recently wrote, "It is easy enough to remember, when one is greeting the voters in Indiana, that most Americans do not read the New York Times or the Washington Post, or watch the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC--or, for that matter, believe everything they read in newspapers and magazines or watch on television or hear on the radio." Haig said that once a candidate gets to Washington, D.C., the capital becomes the universe to them. The person thinks, "If I am so famous that the Washington Post is writing about me, then of course, the whole world is reading it."³

Many non-eastern journalists would also argue that the "media elite" described by Lichter and Rothman does not in any way represent the media as a whole. Vastly different results might be found if the researchers asked the same questions to

the rest of America's media members.

If political endorsements by newspapers are any indication, newspapers are far more conservative, at least at the top, than critics would like to believe. An Editor & Publisher poll just before the 1984 presidential election showed that 57.7 of the newspapers that responded endorsed President Reagan, while only 9.4 percent endorsed Walter Mondale (32.7 percent did not endorse a candidate). The 660 respondents to the poll accounted for 38.8 percent of all daily newspapers, the magazine reported.⁴ But those figures may be deceiving, since the Reagan endorsements represented only 22.4 percent of all dailies and 29.3 percent of all circulation.⁵ And they could mean even less in regard to the Lichter-Rothman study, because newspaper executives are known for being more conservative than reporters and, to some extent, editors.

Kraft, in Commentary magazine, wrote that the media are also viewed as being more influential than they really are. The media may shape the loosely-held views people hold on distant, unfamiliar events, he wrote, "But when it comes to what counts, to events that require paying or bleeding, people form views out of their own experience. These views tend to be deeply held. They are virtually immune to press and television."⁶

Thus, the accusations that the media are "perverting" society are weakened. Deeply held views are not likely to be changed by newspapers, magazines or television. Often the reverse is true. Those views are reinforced, because the recipients

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of the media messages are forced to think about why they believe what they do, and why they are in opposition to what they are reading or watching.

Furthermore, Evangelicals should not be surprised at the way they are covered (or ignored) by the media. Even if the Gallup poll was correct, Evangelicals represent a minority in America. They should not, then, be surprised to be treated as "deviants" by the media. In fact, such treatment may be beneficial to them if it causes more people to be sympathetic to their causes. Religious groups may be too thin-skinned when it comes to receiving criticism. After all, no one forced people like Jerry Falwell to become public figures. They did so by their own choosing, and therefore subjected themselves to criticism from the media, as do all public figures.

Some members of the media would claim that both the far right and the far left created the concept of a prejudiced press for their own benefit, to gain sympathy. If the press publishes information about something with which these groups do not agree, then attacking the messenger becomes the easy way out.

Finally, those Christians who criticize the media for what they perceive to be a leftist, anti-God bias are not being stopped from changing the situation. There is no unwritten rule that says more Christians and conservatives cannot obtain journalism degrees and enter the secular media. But many Christian journalists end up doing public relations work for churches or

working in the Christian media, and therefore have little room to complain about the media they have left behind.

Pulliam addressed this shortage of Christians in the secular media: "If (reporters) were true believers in their cause, they probably would prefer a more activist role than that of a reporter to advance their commitments." When Christians avoid secular journalism for that reason, then it is no wonder they feel the press is biased against religion. The situation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because none of the "religious" people are there to form the other side.

While Christian media are expanding, and in some cases rivalling their secular counterparts, they still do not enjoy the wide, convenient audience of the major, secular media. Even if they did, that would not mean the secular media was not responsible to cover religion news accurately.

7. The Response of the Political Left

In contrast to the religious right's argument that they are often ignored by the media, others claim that the media pay so much attention to outspoken figures like Falwell that they actually give these groups the power they want. In "How the Media Made the Moral Majority," author Tina Rosenberg claimed that Falwell uses the media by feeding them quotes that make good headlines and 20-second news clips. Because the media paid so much attention to the Moral Majority, it gave the group much

of the power it claimed it claimed to have, Rosenberg wrote. Power, she added, is self-perpetuating; what is described as powerful may become powerful for that reason. Thus, "...what should have been portrayed as a relatively new social and political development of modest size and power was transformed into a nearly invincible juggernaut that seemed to be on the verge of overwhelming American life."¹

While the Moral Majority certainly is newsworthy, Rosenberg thinks it has been over-emphasized. The media have given Falwell the sounding board he needs, and what may be a far smaller number of people than the media claim have ended up with a disproportionate amount of coverage and influence, Rosenberg wrote.

She also pointed out that Falwell's flamboyant personality has become a stereotype for the entire Moral Majority, and possibly for Evangelicals in general. "There are members of the Moral Majority who aren't arrogant, smug and vindictive," she wrote. "We just haven't seen many of them. Perhaps it's because they're relatively undramatic and unquotable...."²

In his book, The Media Monopoly, Ben Bagdikian took the argument a step further, saying that some religious movements in the U.S. have been purely media creations. He said publishers William Randolph Hearst and Henry Luce, in the early 1950s, needed a strong anti-communist, anti-liberal voice to preach doctrines they approved of. "The voice was that of Billy Graham, an obscure evangelist holding poorly attended tent meet-

ings in Los Angeles until the intervention of Hearst and Luce... When the rich and powerful control overwhelming access to the public mind they can turn this impulse into a national movement," Bagdikian wrote.³

Bagdikian also charged, in contrast to the Lichter-Rothman study, that the media are dominated by conservatives. The chain-owned media are so intertwined with the other companies owned by the parent corporations that they act only in the best interests of those companies. This leads to a pro-business bias, he said.⁴ Bagdikian's criticism does not completely counter those of conservatives, though. His targets are, for the most part, media executives rather than all members of the media.

Some liberals also charge that the Christian right has received too much attention, while activities of other religious groups have gone unnoticed. Perhaps this is because the religious right has done most of the recent complaining, and journalism by its nature pays more attention to the complainers than to those they are complaining about. A study by Public Relations Review supported this idea: "When an organization the pressure group is attacking is fatalistic in its behavior, functioning with the media at the suppression level, it is easy for the pressure group to move into the news vacuum with its own information," according to the magazine.⁵

8. Does Coverage of Religion Need to Be Improved?

Coverage of religious and moral issues has been inconsistent. While some religious events are ignored or given back-page treatment, others are treated as national phenomena. For instance, David Sanford of Harper's magazine, in discussing the 1979 papal visit to the U.S., said the press "got swept up in an ecumenical wave and began to behave as if he were everybody's pope and this was one big, monolithic Catholic nation..."¹

On the other hand, Commonweal editor Peter Steinfels saw the media's treatment of the pope in a different light. "Perhaps the pope's visit will finally convince the media that religion is a serious reality...Polls show that 90 percent of Americans believe in God and pray often, but most of the serious observations about this country are made by the other 10 percent," Steinfels wrote.²

The Lichter-Rothman study, while useful, may have been blown out of proportion by Christians and conservatives. The study was far from being a comprehensive look at America's mass media. It was, rather, a study of what the researchers considered to be the "media elite." Those views held by the eastern establishment media have not been proved to be indicative of those held by the rest of America's media members.

Still, those media studied do reach a large proportion of Americans, and do play a role in deciding what the news agenda will be. More influential than the New York Times, though,

are the major news agencies--AP and UPI. Particularly in smaller newspapers, news agencies are the sole agenda-setters for all non-local news. Had the Lichter-Rothman study included AP and UPI, the results would have been more indicative of America's media as a whole.

The results of the study should not be discarded, nor should they be used as the sole basis for criticism of the media. They are, however, a starting point for further study. The Lichter-Rothman questions could be used in a more-comprehensive study of America's media. Along with the "media elite," major newspapers and magazines, as well as smaller newspapers and individual television stations should be studied. The results could show composite statistics, plus statistics on regional and circulation-size levels. Such a study would be costly and time-consuming, but would provide far-more accurate readings of media attitudes.

Even with limited research, though, a conflict is apparent between some media members and religion. Journalists, who pride themselves on being open-minded and fair, sometimes do not give religious news the same consideration they would give other news.

To many journalists, religion is somewhat of a novelty. They may know little about it, and have little first-hand experience with it. Editors would not send someone to cover another type of story if that person had no knowledge of the subject--and they should not do it here. The power of the printed word

is sometimes underestimated. While it may not directly cause opinion changes, it does control what people think about. Uninformed reporters may cause a distorted image of religion to be impressed upon the casual reader.

9. How Can the Coverage Be Improved?

LaHaye, in The Hidden Censors, suggested the need for media review boards at the local, state and national levels. These boards would not hand down binding decisions, but would serve as pressure groups, "using the power of public opinion to bring about changes in the media."¹ The idea is similar to that of the now-defunct National News Council. But instead of being staffed by media members themselves, as was the News Council, LaHaye advocated appointed boards, representing a cross section of the public. Those at the national level could be appointed by the president, he added. LaHaye dismissed the News Council's approach as being useless. "Asking the media to police themselves is about as practical as asking Jesse James to verify gold at Fort Knox," he wrote.²

Critics would argue that the idea of media review boards died with the News Council. But part of the reason for the News Council's death was non-support from the media. If independent boards were established, there would be a greater likelihood of success. Many journalists would accuse these boards of being "Big Brothers," but they should not object unless they have

something to hide.

Falwell advocates a more dramatic step on the part of Christians and conservatives. "The ultimate answer," he wrote, "is to buy television stations and newspapers, not with the purpose of 'do unto them what they've done to us,' but to establish true balance and pluralism."³

A similar approach comes from Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who, with a group called Fairness in Media, launched a campaign to try to buy enough stock to control CBS, "the most liberal, anti-Reagan network." The idea was treated by most media with novelty at first. A more recent attempt to control CBS by Atlanta entrepreneur Ted Turner was treated more seriously, but to date Turner has not gained control (Turner has also criticized CBS for being too liberal). Theoretically, the possibility remains an alternative for those who are critical of the current situation.

Perhaps a more basic solution--and one that many critics leave behind--would be for more Christians and conservatives to enter the secular media. If they, particularly Christians, are indeed underrepresented, it has often been by their own choice. As Pulliam noted earlier, Christians often enter the Christian media, where they can promote their cause more directly.

The natures of Christianity and journalism seem to conflict. Christianity's involves promoting the unchanging, unchanging Gospel of Christ. Any criticism of that objective or

its means of being carried out tends to be viewed as a threat. Journalism's nature, on the other hand, is more pragmatic. Its truths are not always viewed as being absolute, as are those of Christianity. This is a key difference, and the root of much of the conflict between Christianity and the media. While both are motivated by what they consider to be the truth, they may define that term differently. Truth for a secular journalist may change from day to day, while truth for a Christian is eternal, in his eyes.

But the worlds of the Christian and the non-religious journalist can coexist. If Christians are unhappy with the media, nothing is stopping them from entering those same media to create a balance between themselves and their secular counterparts. As of now, Christians have little room to complain when they consistently shy away from participation in the secular media.

If more Christians do become involved in the secular media, the responsibility for increased balance will shift to the established media executives and editors. With more "specialists" in religious and moral issues, the media would have the opportunity to present more-informed views. Granted, those views could also be biased in favor of Christianity. Christian writers are subject to the same potentials for bias as their secular counterparts--but from the opposite end of the spectrum. The key, though, is to have a broad range of personal beliefs among journalists--something that the media, or at least the "media

elite," lack today.

A network or newspaper takeover by the afore-mentioned conservative or Christian groups would likely result in a reversal of the currently perceived problem. Those media would then be dominated by a particular point of view, as is the current complaint. Liberals would then make the same criticisms that conservatives are now making, and journalism will have gained nothing.

Conclusions

A recent ABC-News Viewpoint program illustrated the real problem--one which can be recognized by people on all points of the political or religious spectrums. Instead of intelligently discussing the charges of a liberal bias in the media, the two sides, in the words of moderator Ted Koppell, "talked blithely past one another."¹ Both the media and their critics were so intent on making their points known that they failed to hear what the other side was saying. Whether there is a liberal, anti-religious bias or not, no progress will be made until both sides admit that they could be wrong. If and when that happens, the results of further studies of perceived media bias can be evaluated by both sides.

Any consequent measures taken by the media would have to be purely voluntary. Critics tend to forget that nothing in

the Constitution says the media must be neutral. As Edith Efron wrote in her book, The News Twisters, a free press means free to be biased, if that is the case.² Whether or not media are always fair and impartial is up to the consciences of individual journalists.

Notes

Introduction

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¹⁵Niklaus, Robert L., "The Gatekeeper is Flawed," Religious Broadcasting, Nov. 1982, p. 52.

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Conclusions

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