

BIAS IN THE NEWS

by Johan D Tangelder

When King William III died on March 8, 1702, the unofficial news didn't reach the North American continent until May 17. Official word, in the form of a copy of the *London Gazette*, did not arrive in Boston until May 28. When President John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, by one estimate, 68 per cent of the American population heard that shocking news within half an hour. How times have changed!

Whereas previous generations suffered from a constant dearth of news, we now possess the technological capability to collect news instantly from almost anywhere in the world. And we often complain that it is difficult to "keep up" with the torrent of news daily presented to us. We even speak of an "information overload".

The news we read or hear is more than reporting on facts, it is increasingly filled with reports on deliberations rather than decisions, on plans rather than actions, on predictions rather than votes, on potentiality rather than actuality. As we have breakfast, we are told what happened while we slept, given a short update at noon, and the latest news before we go to bed. We listen to the news, watch the news, conversations are dominated by the news, and our actions are stimulated by receipt of news. Thus, news has become a remarkable and powerful influence in shaping and defining modern society.

Someone wrote that, "the future of democracy rests on the quality of the political, economic, and social decisions that are made by the public and its leaders. Those decisions are based on citizens' attitudes shaped by what knowledge they get from the news media. News is thus a necessity in the advancement of civilization." But are we now so uniquely well informed in all aspects of our world? I doubt it. Our knowledge and impressions of the many places and people in the world come to us as second-hand-filtered information. Furthermore, this rapidly growing flood of information is being absorbed less and less. Indeed, it threatens to lead to disinformation and disorientation in the world. The paradoxical truth is that by human action our information saturated society has become increasingly less intelligible and transparent.

The rapid spread of news has greatly impacted journalism. It is now in trouble with its obsession with immediacy, with the pursuit of trivia, with entertainment and gossip. George Bernard Shaw's comment strikes a contemporary bell: "Newspapers are unable seemingly to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization."

News As Entertainment

After its shaky start in the early 1950s, television has become the runaway leader in media consumption. This potent device had a profound effect on journalism. On television the news business has become show business. Robert Fulford, the well-known Canadian essayist and editor, described the television news package as a "structured carefully crafted little drama, without unexplained facts or unanswered questions." Television's influence is most noticeable by the changes it has imposed on newspapers. It is nowhere more apparent than in the national daily *USA Today* – a colorful collection of

graphics and short, breezy stories. Television and *USA Today* simply supply vastly less information and in-depth reporting than can be provided in a typical daily newspaper.

But television has become not only a journalistic threat, but also an economic threat to newspapers. Around the world, newspaper circulation has been falling ever since television news moved into the driver's seat. In 1970 in the United States, 76 per cent of people under thirty-five regularly read newspapers. It's now around 20 per cent. Those in their twenties and younger largely don't read newspapers at all, according to the Newspaper Association of America. Since the TV's major function is to entertain, the edges between journalism and entertainment can be completely blurred. The influence of entertainment reduces news to a level where it is more a matter of form than of substance. Television news demands dramatic information clips in rapid-fire succession, a continuous flow of up-tempo excitement. It shuns abstract information apparently on grounds that if it can't be seen, touched or kicked, it probably isn't newsworthy. For example, a news broadcast may feature a mix of bantering sportscasters, weather reporters, overexposed celebrities, beatings, crashes, the latest on the war on terrorism, and sobbing victims of a crime or accident, who are invited to explain to a microphone how they feel to have lost all. Exciting news may be profitable, but it can have damaging consequences. When entertainment dominates the news, the public can become ignorant of or indifferent to serious issues. Knowlton Nash, a veteran journalist and a former anchor of "The National" on Canada's CBC, observed; "It's a dumbing down of the news that in turn lowers the quality of public knowledge and undermines the quality of decision making."

The Dismal and the Trivial

Through the news media we are shown a dismal and warped view of reality. With the descent into triviality, news stories are now shorter, less researched and prone to error and distortion due to their brevity. With the vast pool of resources available for news broadcasting, we are daily immersed in a selection of tragedies so unrelievedly black that the world itself, always grim when viewed through the news, may appear to be unrelievedly black.

A late-1997 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., showed that crime was the favorite topic for the main newscasts on the profit-driven NBC, CBS, and ABC. The same survey showed that there were more network newscast stories devoted to the sensational Simpson murder case than to the events in the Middle East.

In *Mosaic Madness* Reginald Bibby points out that the economic benefits of magnifying the sensational and the deviant have "created" a planet and a nation that, on paper, screen, and radio, are far more problem-plagued and violence-prone than the "real world." And Walter Cronkite, who became an American institution as the anchorman of *CBS Evening News* (1962-81), warns of the dangers of these developments. "It is not too far a stretch to say that the public dependence on television for the bulk of its news endangers our democratic system."

Bias in the News

Journalism profoundly influences society, either for good or ill. That's why in many parts of the world dictatorial governments employ blatant press control through censorship, threats, and punishments. In time of war even democratic governments use some form of press control for security reasons. For example, at one point during the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln moved to deny postal privileges to the leading pro-Southern newspaper in New York, the *Daily News*. No one is surprised by the obvious newspaper biases in dictatorships or in times of war. But it baffles me why so many people, including many journalists and others involved in the media, can go on making the remarkable and inaccurate assumption that news reporting is neutral and truly objective. When the American Society of Newspaper Editors drafted the "*Canons of Journalism*" in 1923, it included the pronouncement: "News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind."

But a journalist's function to purely and simply present the facts has proven to be an impossible ideal. The Jason Blair fiasco serves as a stark reminder that readers should not believe as "gospel truth" everything that is printed in the secular press. Blair was a young ambitious journalist with the venerable *New York Times*, who was seemingly desperate to get ahead. To their dismay the editors discovered that Blair had plagiarized or fabricated a string of stories. And Blair did not content himself with falsifying his work. He also over-spent his expense account and lied on his expense forms.

Newspaper reporting is never a neutral activity. Each news report depends on a choice, as there is always too much to put into the paper or radio/ TV broadcasts. The British journalist Claud Cockburn wrote in 1967, "all stories are written backwards – they are supposed to begin with the facts and develop from there, but in reality they begin with a journalist's point of view, a conception." Journalists have belief systems, social positions, and professional obligations which affect their selection and presentation of news stories. For example, Canada's public-funded CBC is notorious for its left-wing, pro-abortion, and pro-gay agenda.

Postmodern Journalism

Nowadays people are more controlled by the mindset of postmodernism than by any other "ism." In our postmodern world, religion has become something many journalists cannot deal with or comprehend. They display a dazzlingly level of ignorance about its basic facts. Since religion is considered irrelevant, few newspapers, TV, or radio stations have journalists with professional training to report on religion.

Many journalists are even opposed to religion, especially the Christian religion. They frequently point an accusing finger at Christianity. In fact, they accuse it of impeding progress. In other words, journalism has become a wasteland for religion. Journalists will diligently report on a sexual scandal in a Newfoundland orphanage or on a fraud by an American television evangelist but are unable to report on religion as a human experience. And since political correctness has become "sacred," conservative Christians don't get a fair hearing. As soon as somebody takes a stance on an important issue, someone else says that the person is judgmental. When Christians protest "pro-gay" propaganda, the "tolerant" reporters pour out their own vitriolic scorn. They label these Christian protestors "homophobic," "intolerant" or "bigoted." End of the discussion.

In his article *Making the world safe for ...theocracy?* (*Globe and Mail*, Aug.30, 2003), Doug Sanders calls conservative American Christians, who support President Bush, religious extremists. He even wonders whether "American fundamentalism" is a close sibling of the Islamic kind, posing a similar threat. The bias against the Christian faith is demonstrated also in the scant attention paid in the media to religious freedom issues around the world. How often do we read reports on persecution of Christians in the secular press? We may hear about the bloodshed in Tibet or Myanmar/Burma, but the violent persecution of Christians merits little attention.

Since most journalists are products of postmodern colleges or universities, we should not be surprised by their inability to understand "religion." In that environment God has been dethroned and humans enthroned. Humans believe and act as if they are the "lords and masters" of the world. They recognize no meaning or direction from without. They think they are accountable only to themselves. All responsibility seems to have disappeared, because there seems to be nobody who calls people to responsibility.

Postmodern journalists look for answers in technology. They uncritically advance information technology, genetic manipulation and biotechnology as self-evident solutions for environmental, educational, ecological and health problems. They give the impression that everything is technologically possible and technologically permissible. But they seldom ask whether in taking this approach to life we are headed in the right direction. However, the real problems of humanity such as the questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life cannot be solved by 21st century technology, the electronic information revolution, and ethics based on "evolving" community standards.

A Christian Response

Journalists relish freedom of the press. This freedom is defined negatively as – *freedom from* and positively as – *freedom for*, a positive purpose. I believe that journalism should use the positive definition of freedom.

News has been described as "new information about a subject of some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public." And a news reporter has a responsibility to provide "a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning." What a challenge!

Journalists have a powerful social role. In 1889 the *Toronto Telegram* noted that the role of journalist is to be "the lungs of civilization." The international famous journalist Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) said of the role of journalists: "We perform an essential service. It is a calling and we have a right to be proud of it, to be glad it is our work."

Christian journalists have their own bias. They are called by God to serve Him in their activities and to be a blessing to their neighbors. They serve as agents of righteousness and try to bring God's standards to bear on public life. In our pervasively post-Christian culture they seek the welfare of their nation (Jer. 29:7). They report news from the perspective that there is a fundamental antithesis between Christ's way and the ways of the world. They know of sin and evil, which plague history. But they do not ignore a lot of good news that happens every day. They are permeated by the consciousness that they live and work before the face of God. In other words, they use the freedom of the press to report from the perspective of the righteousness of the Kingdom

of God that has come and is coming in Christ. "For here we have no abiding city but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). They have the Bible as their infallible "touchstone." They maintain that God's Word is the objective authority for all people. Truth and morality are not simply what a community decides they are. The Bible discloses contrasts between belief and unbelief, salvation and corruption, and heaven and hell. It unmask false ideologies, exposes the poverty, the lostness and decadence of the current trends in society. It regularly tells us to exercise judgment about questions of truth and value: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil " (Isa.5:20); "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1).

In the rough and fiercely competitive world of journalism, Christian journalists know "the thorns and thistles" of their occupation. They realize they must apply ethical standards to news reporting. But this is difficult. However, the Bible recognizes the difficulty of maintaining convicted civility and compassion. The writer of the *Epistle of the Hebrews* urges the followers of Christ to " make effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy" (12:14). And "love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6).

Journalism is an exciting and highly responsible calling. Above all, we need Christian journalists who integrate their faith and work. I hope that Christian young people with talent for writing will seriously consider journalism as their full time occupation. A real participatory democracy simply can't survive without the media providing the raw material for public debate and public opinion. Journalists should make news reports as interesting as possible, but never at the cost of distortion. I believe it is a travesty whenever a journalist, who claims to be a Christian, privatizes his faith. Religion cannot be separated from everyday life. It is a life principle that ought to be united and interwoven with our entire existence.

Readers interested in becoming journalists should take a long look at the WORLD JOURNALISM INSTITUTE. WJI runs short courses focused on helping young Christian journalists properly integrate their faith into their work. They focus on the big question, "How does a Christian do news differently?" Their website is www.worldji.com. If anyone, after looking at this website, wants more information on what the courses are actually like, please write the editor (an alumni of the program) at editor@reformedpersepective.ca. He would love to answer any questions you may have.