



A

press conference opened my eyes. It was the early 1980s, during Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" days. Falwell came to my town for a fundraising dinner and held a press conference. As the new editor of a regional Christian newspaper, I joined my secular media colleagues to see what Falwell had to say.

After an opening statement, Falwell threw it open for questions. Everybody had questions about abortion, homosexuality, pornography and other "hot



# Mass Media: WEAPONS OF MASS DISTORTION?

by Doug Trouten

button” issues on the Moral Majority’s agenda—leading questions designed to provoke juicy sound bites.

One reporter asked him to comment on the protesters he’d attracted, a motley crew bearing signs with clever slogans like “Jerry Falwell go to Hell” and chanting “Two, four, six eight—Jerry Falwell stands for hate” (basic protesting rule: If it rhymes, it must be true). Falwell said his security people had warned him that there might be protesters, and that they might include members of the feminist community, the homosexual community and possibly even the American Nazi Party. He said he certainly respected their First Amendment right to protest outside the auditorium and hoped that they would show the same respect for his group’s right to meet inside.

Pretty reasonable, right? But the next day’s daily newspaper headline said, “Falwell calls protesters feminists, Nazis.”

In the accompanying story the crowd of protesters had grown to nearly 1,000 (my own count and police on the scene said fewer than 100). The story said the protesters were “peaceful,” although I saw police dragging screaming, spitting protesters away from the doors. Falwell’s many reasonable remarks didn’t make the story.

Reading the story of an event I had attended drove home this simple truth: What happens and what’s reported are sometimes two very different things.

## A Mediated World

You’ve probably never met Falwell or Bill Clinton or Madonna, and you probably don’t know anybody who knows them, but you have an opinion about each of them based on press reports. Nearly everything we know about national and international events comes through the media.

But can the media be trusted? Most Americans say no.

An extensive survey of public opinion regarding the media was done in 1997 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. It found that 67 percent of Americans believe that media coverage of political and social issues “tends to favor one side”—up from 53 percent in 1985. That response was found across the political spectrum, although it was more likely from Republicans (77 percent) than Democrats (58 percent) or independents (69 percent). A year later a survey commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found the same thing: 78 percent of Americans said the media was biased.

IMAGE BY WONDERFILE AND MARV WEGNER—PTM

# TR

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that of 1,037 reporters questioned, 61 percent identified themselves as “liberal” (compared to 15 percent self-identifying as “conservative”).

A *New York Times* reporter's informal survey of 153 journalists covering the Democratic National Convention found that journalists from outside of Washington D.C. favored Kerry over Bush by a three-to-one margin, while journalists based in the nation's capital favored Kerry 12 to one.

Former CBS news correspondent Bernard Goldberg, author of the popular media criticism book *Bias*:

It should be noted that people at both ends of the political spectrum see bias, and that a person's perception of media bias may say as much about them as about the news they watch. In other words, if you're on the far right, something in the center seems to be to the left. Still, a 1997 Harris Poll commissioned by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that those who see liberal bias outnumber those who see conservative bias by a two-to-one margin.

## Is It The People?

Experts also see problems with media reliability but offer a variety of explanations. Perhaps the most common explanation is that media bias reflects the personal views of media decision-makers.

In a groundbreaking 1980 study of the “media elite,” researchers Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman found that key decision-makers in the national press are out of step with most Americans. They found that 86 percent of media “gatekeepers” studied said they seldom, if ever, attend church, 90 percent approved

of abortion on demand, 75 percent approved of homosexuality and over half saw nothing wrong with adultery.

A 1996 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found

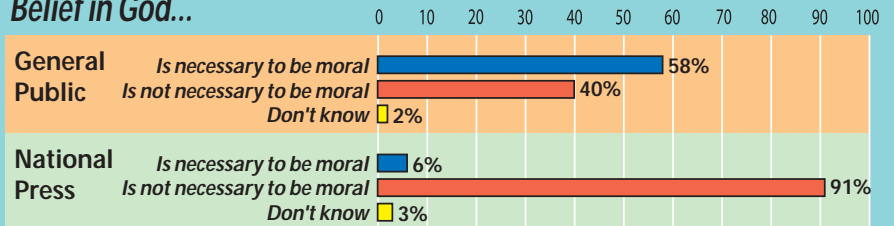
## Journalists REPORT ON Themselves

“These people [media elites] live in a very comfortable, elite, liberal bubble. Inside that bubble they can go for a week, a month or a year and not run into anybody who disagrees with them on the issues of the day”

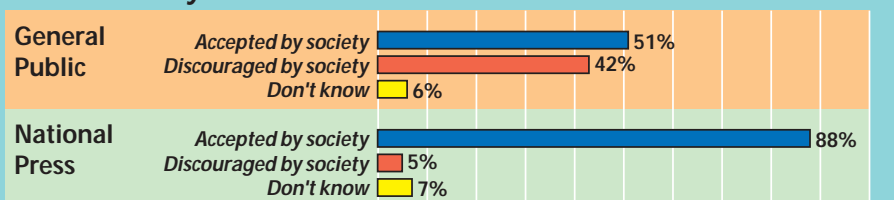
—Bernard Goldberg  
Former CBS news correspondent

## Values gap on social issues

### Belief in God...



### Homosexuality should be...



Information source: *How Journalists See Journalists in 2004*; Pew Research Center

A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News and Arrogance: Rescuing America From the Media Elite told Plain Truth, “These people live in a very comfortable, elite, liberal bubble. Inside that bubble they can go for a week, a month or a year and not run into anybody who disagrees with them on the issues of the day. Whether it’s abortion, feminism, issues about race—anything. As a result, they don’t intentionally try to stick it to anybody, but they have this group-think mindset, and because journalists are only human they carry their biases with them to work. They say they don’t because they’re professionals and can put it aside. But ask any journalist if they think a cop, a judge or a corporate executive can put their personal biases aside. All I’m saying is that when you have newsrooms that are overwhelmingly liberal, they see things in a certain way.”

#### Is It The Funding?

Duke University economist Jay Hamilton says the problem isn’t really the people—it’s how they’re paid. In his new book *All the News That’s Fit to Sell, The Death of Wisdom in an Information Age*, Hamilton argues that media bias, like the growth of fluff news and celebrity journalism, is symptomatic of a new industry obsessed with profits.

“At its heart, news is a commodity,” explains Hamilton. “It’s a product, and that really helps you understand the shape that a particular news story is going to take. We view news as either a mirror of reality or a distorted mirror, but we don’t necessarily think about what factors drive the formulation of a story. I think it’s important to understand the economics, because if you want to see news change—especially in policy—you need to understand how the market for information works.”

Hamilton presents evidence that evening news broadcasts became more partisan when networks decided to pursue young female viewers

by presenting stories aimed at their political interests.

#### Is It The News Itself?

Historian C. John Somerville of the University of Florida, Gainesville, sees an even larger systemic problem. In his book *How the News Makes Us Dumb*, he argues that the real problem with today’s media is that we insist on having it daily. The need to fill a 24-hour news cycle has created a bias toward what’s new, blurring the definition of what’s important and increasing the odds that the media will get it wrong.

**F**

### FAHRENHEIT 9/11: ALL HEAT, NO LIGHT

It’s hard to imagine that, even in the surreal confines of Cannes, Michael Moore’s “Fahrenheit 9/11”...(rated R for some violent and disturbing images, and for language) is disgusting, pathetic propaganda without the slightest shred of integrity. Reasonable arguments against the war in Iraq exist—but this unbalanced screen displays none of them. Moore and his supporters seem to think that the filmmaker’s freewheeling style exempts him from every standard of objectivity.

One example: In making the claim that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was completely ineffective (he might have, by the way, asked a few Afghans their opinion), Moore states that Osama bin Laden and “most of the Taliban” escaped the country. The image on screen is of a bunch of dark-skinned men piled on top of a tank, which is squealing around a corner on a dusty street. The

audience doesn’t know where this shot is from, who’s on the tank or where they’re going.

Moore cites no statistics to prove his point. Instead, he means for his audience to take his words at face value. That may sound like a minor point, but this is Moore’s technique throughout the film: Make ridiculous, vague assertions, then toss an out-of-context image on screen to bolster the argument on an emotional, not rational, level. Here’s another: When discussing the supposed lack of a threat posed by Iraq, the country is portrayed as a place of sunlight and smiles, with kids on bicycles and happy women (women!) shopping. When was the footage taken? Where was it taken? Is it at all representative of conditions in the country before the war? Moore couldn’t care less. With that attitude, how can he expect his audience to take him seriously?

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—Andrew Coffin



# H

## ow does Media Bias Show Up?

BIAS IN A NEWS STORY IS SOMETIMES SUBTLE, BUT HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO LOOK FOR.

**Word Choice:** Ideological labels are used to marginalize groups. If a group is pigeonholed as “far-right” or “far-left,” the audience may discount

their opinions before hearing them. Repeated studies have found that mainstream media label the right far more than the left. A computer database search of a year’s worth of stories from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* found the word

“ultraconservative” used 14 times, compared to three times for “ultraliberal.” “Far right” appeared 86 times, compared to 26 for “far left.” There were 316 references to “right-wing” and only 68 to “left-wing.” And the “religious right” showed up 47 times, but the “religious left” only once.

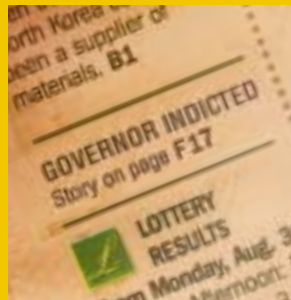
**Omission:** Sometimes stories go unreported, simply because journalists don’t think they’re important. At a Columbia University seminar in 1992 CBS reporter Betsy Aaron said, “We have an opinion because we’re breathing, and the largest opinion we have is what we leave out. I mean, it sounds simplistic, but I always say worry about what you’re not seeing. What you are seeing you can really criticize because you are smart and you have opinions. But if we don’t tell you anything, and we leave whole areas uncovered, that’s the danger.”

Religion is often omitted. Out of 18,000 evening news stories broadcast in 1997, fewer than 300 dealt with religion. On any given Sunday more people are in church than will attend all major league

sporting events all year. But while every daily paper has a daily sports section, most have only a few pages a week for religion.

**Inclusion:** The opposite of omission is inclusion—inclusion of a story because it makes a political point. In late September, CBS News apologized for using what now appear to be fabricated reports that attempted to discredit President Bush’s military service. In its apparent zeal to rock the sitting President’s campaign, it seems CBS ignored warnings from its own experts about the veracity of the story’s evidence, first reported in early September on the network’s prestigious news magazine, *60 Minutes*.

**Frequency:** The combination of omission and inclusion creates frequency. The more often a story is covered, the more important people will think it is. Sometimes very similar stories get very different play for reasons that seem purely political. For instance, one of the shortest conversations in history would take place if Bill Clinton and Dan Quayle got together to swap war stories. Both found ways to avoid the Vietnam draft, but the media handled their stories very differently. In the 10 days after Quayle’s alleged



draft-dodging was made public in 1988, network news ran 51 news stories on Quayle’s national guard service. In the 10 days after the public learned about Bill Clinton’s alleged draft dodging, the same networks ran only 13 stories.

**Placement:** Another kind of bias involves placement. The front page of a newspaper is read more than the inside pages. The top story in a newscast is heard more than stories

in the middle. The more time or space a story receives, the more important it seems.

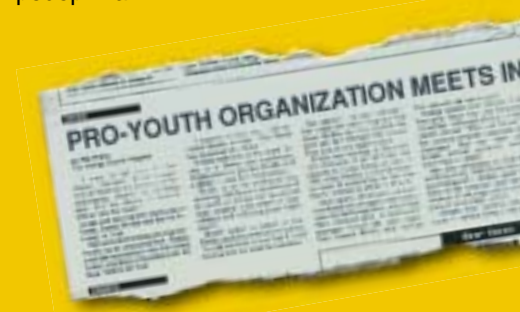
**Sources:** Does the story quote the liberal National Organization of Women, but not the much larger conservative group Concerned Women for America? Does it include a spokesperson for the National Council of Churches, but nobody from the National Association of Evangelicals? If two sides are included, do they get the same treatment? Are they quoted directly or just paraphrased?

**Headlines:** Headlines have much more readership than articles and can tell a different story. For instance, a story about an NBC miniseries on the story of Noah ran with a headline noting complaints



about accuracy from “purists.” You had to read the article to learn that NBC had made Lot and Noah contemporaries and moved the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to a time before the flood—the historical equivalent of having Lincoln end the civil war by dropping a nuclear bomb on Atlanta. And if the head of the National Organization of Women speaks out on something, it’s not unusual to see a headline claiming “Women oppose...” as though this person spoke for her entire gender.

**Sanitizing:** Sometimes horrible things are cleaned up when the truth would lead audience members to undesired conclusions. I once covered a meeting of the North American Man-Boy Love Association, then read a daily newspaper report of the gathering which all but obscured the fact that the group advocates pedophilia.





**N**ewsrooms lean toward left. Conservatives are a rare breed.

He notes, "Its most troubling effect is on the religious mentality, since religion tries to see things in an eternal context."

Sommerville's book is filled with examples of the daily news cycle creating a lack of accurate perspective. For instance, in 1988 a *Washington Post* headline said, "Zia death probe said to indicate sabotage." On the same day the *New York Times* ran a headline stating, "No sabotage clues seen in Zia crash." In 1989 the *Boston Globe* reported, "No improvement cited in Marcos' condition," while on the same day the *Boston Herald* said, "Marcos shows improvement."

Humor columnist Dave Barry observed this when he wrote, "If the news media owned airlines, there would be a lot less concern about how many planes crashed and a lot more concern about whose plane hit the ground first." Barry saw this in the chaotic coverage that followed the 2000 presidential election. He wrote, "If you had hoped to inform yourself



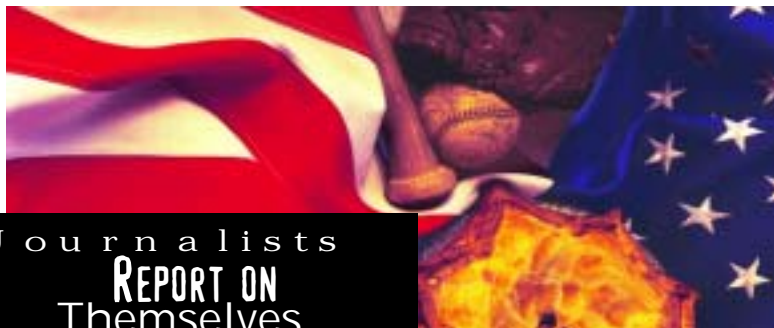
## 24-Hour News Cycle Newsroom Survival through Schlock

According to journalists, the constantly demanding 24-hour news cycle is increasingly impacting the quality of coverage (see graph on next page). What has happened? What's so new about the news?

With the advent of cable news networks the entire news reporting landscape has changed. More players in the news business means more competition for ears and eyeballs. News can't just be news anymore, it must also be entertaining and attention-getting as networks chase the ever-shrinking attention spans of evermore jaded viewers.

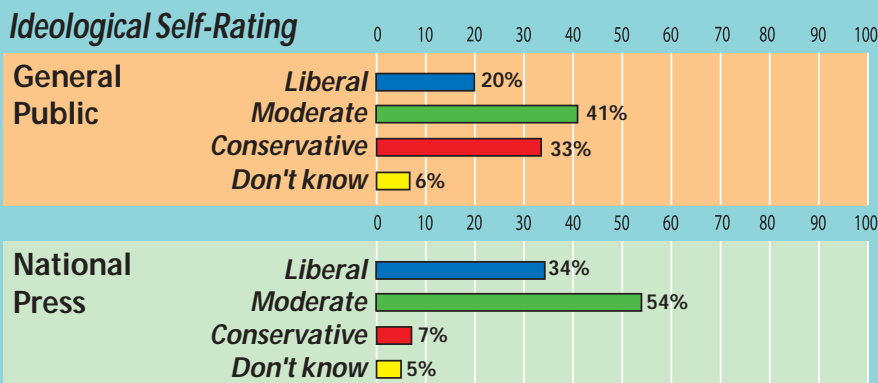
This change in news reporting has wreaked havoc on journalists fighting to keep their heads above water as today's spectacular events are swept in on a wave of excitement until they are washed away by tomorrow's even more spectacular stories.

In this new news environment—because there are now 24 hours of news to fill—small stories become elevated to the status of major events. Truly major events that would have been in the public eye for weeks in the pre-cable news days are now trotted on and off stage within a day or two. Bottom line: When news and entertainment merge, substantive reporting, reasoned debate and discussion of the issues get squeezed out.



### Journalists REPORT ON Themselves

#### Newsrooms: Moderates Many, Conservatives Few



Information source: *How Journalists See Journalists in 2004*; Pew Research Center

about the most important story in the world by watching network T.V. news—the most expensive and sophisticated news-gathering operation in history—you actually wound up less informed than if you had spent the night staring at your refrigerator.”

Sommerville notes that the Internet offers people the ability to cobble together their own view of the world from a wide variety of sources—similar to what once happened in colonial-era coffee-

lem is the people in charge, while others see larger systemic issues. But nearly everyone agrees that the press doesn't provide the unvarnished truth. So what's a news consumer to do?

Sommerville offers perhaps the most radical solution: Simply stop paying attention, at least to daily news. “There are things in the newspaper that are valuable—they just don't appear on the front page,” he says. Christian magazines are a good alternative, he notes,

television the channel has to tell the same story to everybody, while a newspaper is a portfolio of stories, and you can select among them. And on the Internet you don't need to be profitable—you can be a blogger.” Hamilton also suggests that consumers offer financial support for non-profit media outlets they find beneficial.

Goldberg says the solution may be a sort of ideological affirmative action in the media. “Let's go out and consciously try to hire people who don't just 'look like America' but who think like America—people who go to church on Sunday, who are from blue collar backgrounds.” He also suggests getting news from multiple sources to get different perspectives.

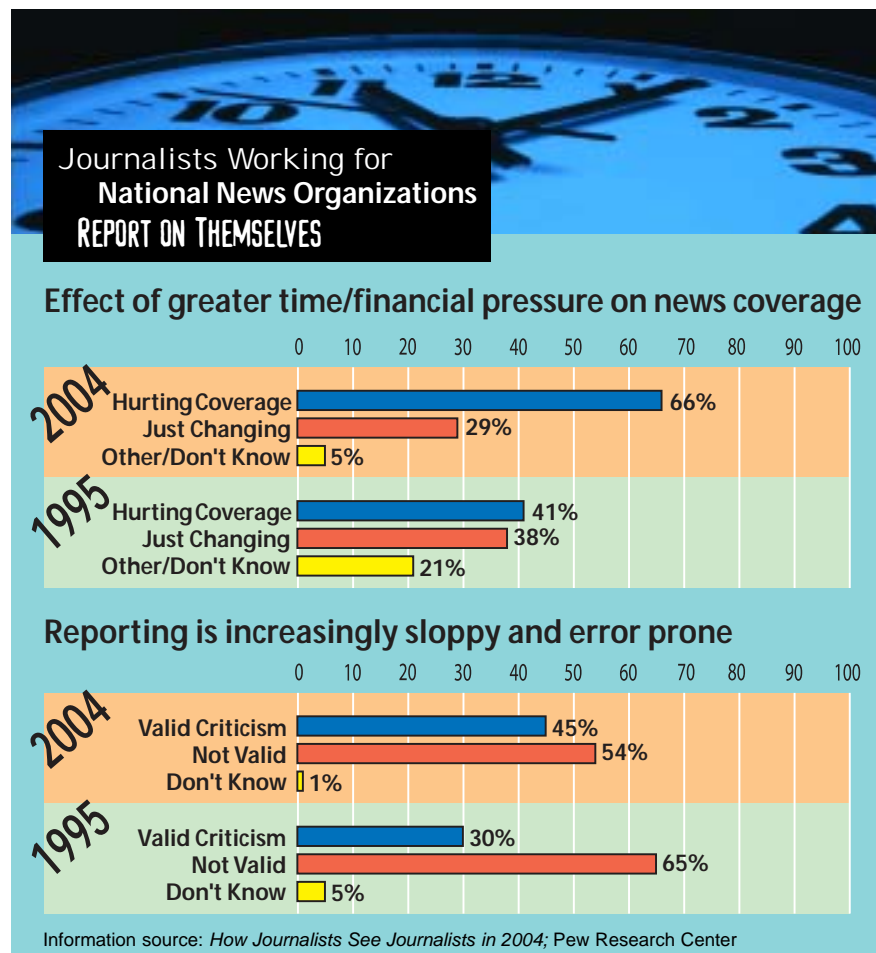
Other suggestions:

- Don't believe everything you hear. Be a little skeptical.
- Learn about media. Reading stories by “insiders” can help you understand the process and how it can break down.
- Read widely. Expose yourself to varying viewpoints and use that wide range of information to put together your own world view.
- Realizing that some bias is inevitable, find a news source whose bias matches your own world view.
- Directly question the people involved. Journalists are surprisingly accessible, both by phone and by e-mail. Be polite, but let them know when you think they've missed the mark. Your comment might help them do a better job next time.

• Write letters to the editor. The letters column is one of the most-read items in a daily newspaper and is your opportunity to present a different viewpoint to a paper's readers.

• Support media you agree with. Subscribe to magazines that do a good job. Let advertisers know you appreciate their support of your favorite media. □

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houses. But, he says, “I think people are too lazy in the final analysis to use the Internet. It's amazing what they're satisfied with today. You look at headline news and try to watch it, and the mixture of insignificant news and advertisements is staggering.”

What Can We Do?

Some say the media leans left, some say right. Some say the prob-

lem is the editors sort through the news to find items of significance.

Hamilton believes media economics need an overhaul, with non-profits playing a larger role and government working to reduce the cost of covering hard news. He also points to media outlets with lower costs as part of the solution. “A good thing about print is that you can afford to be boring in print,” he explains. “In