

## Slanted Journalism

The media have... provided the Devil with perhaps the greatest opportunity accorded him since Adam and Eve were turned out of the Garden of Eden.

Malcolm Muggeridge,  
*Christ and the Media*

Are newspapers and magazines still viable in an age of computers, Internet and television? Even reporters are raising questions about the future of the printed press as they sense a great deal of distrust. And does the printed press have a future as it faces fierce competition with the visual media?

Haven't many turned into couch potatoes in front of their television sets? Is it not much easier to watch the news than to read about it? Many people in North America, literate and illiterate alike, simply do not read. Since the introduction of the mass media, they rely for their information on what they see on TV. We have become a post-literate society. The electronic media seem to have taken over from the printed word. Many college educators have remarked about the poor reading and writing skills of their students. The art of letter writing has also disappeared. Recent developments in Eastern Europe show the importance of television. The Gulf Crisis of 1990 has been described as a television war between President Bush and Saddam Hussein. Pessimists, such as the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), have predicted the downfall of the culture of print and thus of the print media.

As I am writing this article, I am well aware that I am addressing the converted, people who take time to read and to reflect. Yet I want to state my case as clearly as I can. I am convinced that reading is vital.

There are many areas of learning that TV cannot provide. When a student wants to become acquainted with Islam or ancient Greek history, he will have to turn to books for research. For in-depth analyses of news events, background information and commentary, newspapers and magazines provide a service unlike that which TV is able to offer.

Someone once wrote, "The printed press is the queen of the world." Just Havelaar called the press "the cathedral of modern times." We can't agree with these statements as they conflict with the Scripture and the confessions. At the same time we must not underestimate the powerful role of the printed press for either good or evil. For some people, the editor of their daily paper is their shepherd and the editorial is the pulpit. Their paper is their spokesman on economic, social, technological, political and religious problems. Journalists are the pace-setters and the agenda-setters of society. They can and do manipulate public opinion. The press can undermine our Christian faith. Whether secular or Christian, the press has a missionary character. It does more than inform; it is out to persuade.

## News reporting

My concern is that even many Christians do not see the danger their daily newspaper presents to their faith. I wonder how many don't think it is necessary to interpret the news. I suspect that many Christians believe that news is just straight news. They don't even think about the need for a Christian interpretation of news. They say, "I saw it on television or read it in the paper. Therefore, it must be true."

But how straight is news reporting? When television is turned on, entertainment is expected. Martin Eslin suggests that "the language of television is none other than that of drama." Even the news uses dramatic forms. In-depth reporting is impossible. How can a reporter explain in 90 seconds the complexities of the tensions between Iraq and the U.S.? On television, the news broadcast is just another show. It mixes trivia with natural disasters, commercials, and war reports. To please the advertisers, the electronic news media keep "entertaining" at any cost. The size of the audience is more important than the news itself. News has become newszak.

The danger of television news is that it prohibits thought and reflection. One scene after another flashes before one's eyes. The genocide in Rwanda, the devastating earthquake in Afghanistan, the controversies over Canada's first gold medal at the Winter Olympics - all are reported with the same breathless urgency. The news allows each one of these stories to be nudged into oblivion. What was exciting news yesterday is forgotten today. And TV creates its own news. People who want news coverage for their demonstration might decide when and where to hold their rally in order to get the best coverage.

## No objectivity

American journalist Walter Lippmann (1880-1974), in his books *Liberty and the News* (1920), *Public Opinion* (1922), and the *Phantom Public* (1925), provided a rationale for a journalism guided by the new ideal of professional objectivity. He believed that truth "grew out of disinterested scientific inquiry; everything else was ideology."

But pure objectivity in news reporting and in commentaries is impossible. The men and women in the mass media are not neutral, unbiased reporters. They have definite lifestyles and values, which are often concealed under a cloak of objectivity. We need accuracy, but neutrality is impossible. In its founding year, 1923, *Time Magazine* announced that it would interpret the news. The first issue said, "The editors recognize that complete neutrality on public questions and important news is probably as undesirable as it is impossible." All writers have their own slant.

The slant can be quite obvious at times. *The Washington Post's* foreign editor, Karen Young, explaining her biased coverage of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, noted that "Most journalists now, most Western journalists at least, are very eager to seek out guerilla groups, leftist groups, because you assume them to be the good guys."

The obvious bias of the press was clearly evident during the Vietnam war. In 1964, *The Post* insisted that America continue to show in Vietnam that "persistence in aggression is fruitless and possibly deadly." But *The Post* deserted President Johnson in summer of 1967. About the same time, TV became increasingly hostile toward the American involvement in Vietnam. The U.S. media became strongly biased in some cases. For example, a much published photograph of a "prisoner" being thrown from an U.S. helicopter was in fact staged. The media greatly contributed to the U.S. debacle in Vietnam.

In addition, the secular press does not know how to handle religion. It seems blind to the fact that Muslims have always relied on the sword and not on persuasion to win converts. In reporting on human rights abuses, ignorance and silence are the norms, as shown in the neglect to report on the horrific persecution of Christians in Islamic nations, communist China, and other parts of the world. A reporter who writes about creationism with appropriate sarcasm will receive praise; the one who quotes not only Darwinian sources but also creationism material is suspect of anti-intellectualism. When a reporter believes that Israel has a special place in Biblical prophecies, he will report on Zionism from a different perspective than the one who denies them.

Canadian journalist Robert Fulford argues that the ideology of Canadian journalists is the ideology of progress. Canadian newspapers are future-oriented. They dwell on social engineering.

In the United States a large number of studies have documented the profeminist bias of the media. For example, an "evaluation" of feminism in *Time* (December 1989) was written by Claudia Wallis, an admitted feminist. She neglected to recognize the needs of full-time mothers and housewives and gave the impression that feminism speaks for all women. The latter is not true at all. The REAL Women of Canada organization would certainly take exception to this arrogant view. Politically correct journalists call all churches sexist which refuse to ordain women. They accuse these churches of being behind the times. They don't seem to be aware that a faithful church derives its understanding of the role of men and women from Scripture and not from the agenda of the feminists. However, militant feminist pressure makes it very costly and arduous to challenge its position.

Blatant slanted news reporting is evident in the stories told about the mass rally of the Promise Keepers in Washington. Yet it received little attention in the media, especially as compared to the much smaller pro-abortion and gay marches in recent years. The Promise Keeper rally had three strikes against it; it was conservative, religious and pro-life.

The Canadian press showed its bias during the last federal election; it genuinely believes that the Reform Party is a greater threat to Canadian unity than the separatist Bloc Quebecois. It is convinced that the Reform leader Preston Manning is a religious fanatic and therefore cannot be trusted. He is suspect of wishing to introduce Puritanism and religious fundamentalism.

The Christian Heritage Party did not get much coverage at all. A secular journalist can't possibly conceive of a political party based on Biblical principles.

### **Anti-Christian bias**

The philosophy of many journalists has drastically changed. The Christian world and life view no longer functions in the modern press. Marvin Olasky points out that American journalism "is one of Christianity's prodigal sons." Until the mid-19th century, American journalism was Christian. It emphasized God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. The same was true in Canada, as I will show in a future article.

Today's journalists are influenced by humanism, postmodernism, and other -isms. Religion is now a separate feature in the Saturday issue of daily papers. And church bashing has become a favourite sport.

As I write about the demise of Christian journalism in North America, I don't want to glorify the past. There has never been a golden Christian era. Even the 17th century Puritan era in England had its villains and pagans. British author Os Guinness comments that while Puritanism was at its zenith "at the same time the sale of almanacs exceeded those of the Bible, and for all the intense spiritual devotion and theological discussion of the period, superstition, astrology and witchcraft were rife." Yet I believe that for Christians our times are more dangerous than ever before.

As I scan newspapers, I notice technological optimism as well as despair. Life seems to have no meaning. There are no longer any moral absolutes to shape behaviour. The media feature easy sex, looking young, quick divorces, broken relationships, violence, and death.

The scandalous rather than the good receive the attention. Sexual promiscuity is no longer a big deal, as long as it is "safe sex." Sex has become devoid of meaning. It is no more than a biological function. Yet the media are greatly indignant about rape and sexual abuse. Young people are taught the message of "freedom," but the media is outraged when youth practice what they have learned. As someone wrote, "We are told that we are like rabbits, but when we behave like rabbits, we get attacked as morally despicable." How ironic! The world has become a strange place. Opponents to capital punishment are often pro-abortion. The hunt for young seals is vigorously protested while euthanasia is considered by many to be a viable option to end human life.

Nothing is sacred. Reverence seems to be an unworthy relic of the past. The Bible is debunked as a patriarchal establishment text; one wonders how long ago secular journalists have read it. Religious liberalism is called progressive. Its advocates are portrayed as enlightened scholars dedicated to liberate Christianity through the promotion of gender neutral pronouns for God and Christ, while dedicated to twisting Scripture to condone homosexuality and social engineering.

The cultural elites in North America have lost their faith. *Time's* Winter 1997/98 issue "The New Age of Discovery: A celebration of mankind's exploration of the unknown"

illustrates the secularism of our age. The answers to the fundamental questions of life, "Who are we and why are we here?" are given from a totally non-Christian perspective. When one reads *Time* magazine, one gets the impression that God does not exist. *Time* doesn't even have a "religious" section anymore. The stranglehold the secular media has on our culture is a frightening thing. Yet studies show that Canadians tend to be more trusting of their media than the Americans. Consequently, Canadian Christians are not as alarmed about the moral decline of their nation as their American neighbours.

Journalist and theologian Dr. Carl F. Henry states that in the television media world, 92 per cent of professionals do not regularly attend church, 86 per cent seldom or never attend, and 45 per cent claim no religion at all. And the print media people are not far behind. Henry also observes that *Public Opinion* magazine revealed that 85 per cent of the media elite sees nothing wrong with homosexual practice and 54 per cent see nothing wrong with adultery.

### **Free press**

Although many questions are raised about the press, the liberty to publish news and information should be highly treasured. In our age of concentration of power in a few hands, a free press is essential to preserve democracy. In 1947, a private commission of the freedom of the press declared:

Freedom of the press is essential to liberty. Where men cannot freely convey their thoughts to one another, no freedom is secure. Where freedom of expression exists, the beginnings of a free society and a means for every extension of liberty are already present. Free expression is therefore unique among liberties: it promotes and protects all the rest.

In many countries censorship is the norm. Although "freedom of information" is often defended as a basic human right, it is denied by dictators. In 1790 Paris alone had 133 journals; nearly all followed a radical line. Napoleon acknowledged the contribution of a free press to the French Revolution, when he said, "The old nobility would have survived if it had known enough to become master of printing materials... The advent of a cannon killed the feudal system; ink will kill the modern system." Journalists and the press were more influential than schools in forming the mind and the mood of France in those years of revolutionary turmoil. The people of Paris eagerly read their papers. Satirical sheets prospered, mocking pundits and politicians to the delight of the public.

But in 1793 the French republic decreed death for "whoever should be convicted of having composed or printed works or writings which might provoke the... reestablishment of royalty, or any other power injurious to the sovereignty of the people." During the Reign of Terror all liberty of speech and press disappeared. By the time Napoleon came to power, liberty of speech and press was dead. In 1800 he remarked, "Three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets." He wrote that he would never tolerate newspapers that would say or do anything against his interests.

Totalitarian regimes always fear the press. When we were in the Philippines, I wrote a regular column for Bacolod City's weekly. Since President Marcos was in power, I talked to a lawyer about journalistic freedoms. He told me that in the beginning of the takeover by Marcos, the only safe subject to write on was "the love life of a butterfly." Not a very exciting topic! By the time we arrived on the scene, the attitude toward the press had become more relaxed, but journalists were not allowed to criticize Marcos and his family.

In Canada the civil liberties of its citizens are endangered by the concentration of newspaper ownership. Newspaper competition has become virtually dead. The 1980 Royal Commission warned:

Freedom of the press is not a property right of owners. It is a right of the people. It is part of their right to free expression, inseparable from their right to inform themselves. The Commission believes that the key problem posed by its term of reference is the limitation of those rights by undue concentration of ownership and control of the Canadian newspaper industry.

## **Conclusion**

As I think of the press and its responsibility toward the reading public, I am reminded of Question and Answer 112 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

What is required in the ninth commandment?

I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning someone rashly and unheard.

Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath.

In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation.

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