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Christian Citizens and the News Media—Part One

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Monday, September 27, 2004

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Principle One: In a fallen world, everyone is biased. There is no such thing as absolute objectivity. As a matter of fact, everyone comes to the news with some bias. We are all creatures of our own limited experience and information, and we all come to the issues of the day—controversial or otherwise—with a specific worldview. Even research scientists acknowledge that absolute objectivity is an impossible achievement. This is especially true when dealing with issues of worldview consequence. As Christians, we recognize that bias is not merely a matter of political interest or ideological conviction; it is evidence of sin. In a sinful world, bias creeps into every discussion, every judgment, and every news report. Evangelical Christians therefore have no excuse for being surprised when bias appears—we should expect it, and judge accordingly. At the same time, we should be aware of our own bias and submit our own assumptions to careful analysis. Every single individual confronts the issues of the day from specific worldview commitments. There is no escaping this reality.

Principle Two: News reports are heavily filtered—and the filters matter. The news we receive on televised broadcasts, in newspapers, and in virtually any other form, come to us only after passing through numerous filters. All along the process, reporters, editors, producers, executives, and others are making judgments about what stories are important, how stories should be reported, what sources should be used, and what perspectives should be included. These filters are extremely significant, and the news reports we receive are but a fraction of what could be published and presented. Someone is making those decisions, and the worldview of those decision-makers is of the utmost importance. The decision about what to cover is as important as decisions about how to cover any given issue or event. If we are unaware of these filters, we will assume that the news presented to us reflects what is ultimately most important. Actually, it may reflect only what individuals in the filtering process want us to see, read, or hear. As Marvin Olasky argues in *Prodigal Press*, “Many scholars suggest that journalists have their prime influence on society not so much by coverage of particular stories as by the choice of what to cover; journalists are sometimes called ‘gate-keepers’ or ‘agenda-setters.’ Readers and viewers should keep asking: Why was this story considered newsworthy?”

Principle Three: The media are driven by commercial interests. The vast majority of media outlets are commercial enterprises, driven by a bottom-line desire for profit. This has a great deal to do with how the news is presented, how the readers or audience are addressed, and how issues are framed. As Neil Postman and Steve Powers explained, much of what we see on television news is designed “to keep viewers watching so that they will be exposed to commercials.” Thus, producers and news directors are driven to cover stories that offer visual interest, regardless of news value. As the old newsroom adage goes, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Images often displace words, and a distorted picture of reality results.

Furthermore, the commercial interest of broadcast news means that viewers must be held over a period of time by enticements. That is why news anchors advertise upcoming stories and, as C. John Sommerville of the University of Florida explains, “string us along.” As Sommerville argues, “The techniques of stringing us along show that the news industry is not as interested in satisfying a hunger as in creating an addiction.” The media have a commercial product to sell, and that product is television commercials.

Principle Four: The media elite is demographically and ideologically removed from the world inhabited by most Americans. As researchers S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter argued over two decades ago, the news business is now largely in the hands of a “media elite.” As these researchers made clear, this media elite is comprised of persons from a very thin slice of the American population. They are highly educated, socially mobile, metropolitan in focus, and overwhelmingly liberal in terms of ideological bias. They have often attended America’s most prestigious universities, they were often radicalized by the 1960s, Vietnam, and the Watergate experience, and they see the news media as an opportunity to revolutionize society. As Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman described the media elite, “In their attitudes toward sex and sex roles, members of the media elite are virtually unanimous in opposing both governmental and traditional constraints. A large majority opposes government regulation of sexual activities, upholds a pro-choice position on abortion, and rejects the notion that homosexuality is wrong. In fact, a slight majority would not characterize adultery as wrong.” Does the coalescence of leading journalists into a media elite make a difference? Bernard Goldberg, a long-time veteran of CBS News, poses the questions this way: “Do we really think that if the media elites worked out of Nebraska instead of New York, and if they were overwhelmingly social conservatives instead of liberals, and if they overwhelmingly voted for Nixon and Reagan instead of McGovern and Mondale . . . do we really think that would make no difference? Does anyone really believe that the evening newscast would fundamentally be the same?” No sane person can believe this would make no difference, and in the case of media bias, naivete is deadly.

Principle Five: Headlines often lie and language often misleads. Readers of newspapers are often unaware that the reporter usually has nothing to say about the headline of an article or report. Headlines emerge from the copy-editing process, and are used to draw attention to a story and attract readers. Furthermore, the headlines are powerful editorial devices, casting a story in a particular context of meaning, even before the article is read. But headlines often lie—and careful readers will often discover that the claim made in the headline is completely undermined by the content of the article. Some newspapers are particularly offensive in this regard, showing clear bias in their headlines and article contexting. Similarly, language and terminology within an article or broadcast can be used to mislead the public. What words are used to describe principle figures in a story? Will the reporter describe a suicide bomber as a terrorist, or as a freedom-fighter? Will an individual be identified as a presidential aide, or a political operative? Will a spokesperson be identified as an opponent of same-sex marriage, or as a defender of traditional marriage? These decisions amount to both distinction and difference, and can often mean the difference between understanding or misunderstanding. The choice of language is of vital importance, and with the culture of political correctness now invading newsrooms across America, this usually means that those arguing for an overthrow of moral restraint are referred to in a positive light, while defenders of traditional morality are referred to as repressive and negative. Beware the power of words!

Christian engagement with the news media requires intelligence, thoughtfulness, and an awareness of how the media elite really think. As always, knowledge is power.

