

AlbertMohler.com

Christian Citizens and the News Media—Part Two

We are living in an age of unprecedented media access and almost every American home has access to multiple media options. Cable news channels provide a constant stream of reports even as the Internet erases the final geographic barriers to information transfer. Newspapers, talk radio, and the older network news broadcasts must be added to the mix, providing citizens with an overload of information and images.

Tuesday, September 28, 2004

We are living in an age of unprecedented media access and almost every American home has access to multiple media options. Cable news channels provide a constant stream of reports even as the Internet erases the final geographic barriers to information transfer. Newspapers, talk radio, and the older network news broadcasts must be added to the mix, providing citizens with an overload of information and images.

Most Americans never even stop to recognize how revolutionary this level of information access really is. Previous generations relied on word of mouth, handwritten communications, the Pony Express, the telegraph, or radio broadcasts. Those over 40 years of age can remember the limitations of a black-and-white television with news packaged in the form of 30-minute network broadcasts, supplemented by occasional special reports. If you missed the nightly broadcast, you were out of luck and uninformed. No longer. Now, the older networks are just trying to stay relevant in the news universe.

The really important question is this: Are we any wiser? The explosion of media access has provided some real benefits for viewers. Competition has led to improvements in both style and substance, and the expanding number of news organizations has added new checks and balances to the system. Still, much of the additional coverage is more concerned with “infotainment” than information or analysis. Furthermore, many citizens feel as if they are drowning in an ocean of competing reports and programs.

Is there a way toward media sanity? Here are five more principles for Christian engagement with the news media.

Principle Six: The likelihood of being uninformed and misinformed increases as the number of news sources decreases. Dependence on just a few media sources, whether newspapers, Internet sites, or television news programs, is dangerous. We can grow far too comfortable with familiar faces, trusted reporters, and patterns of habit. The reduction of news sources means that the filtering process poses an even greater danger, and viewers or readers are far more susceptible to influence and bias. This is also true when it comes to the form of media input. Television reports must be visually interesting, fast paced, and energetic—regardless of the story. Furthermore, television news broadcasts tend to rely on reductionism, making it more likely that bias can creep into a reporter’s summarization without notice. Christian citizens should develop the discipline of wide reading and selective viewing—checking reports against each other for accuracy and bias. Do not trust just one network, one cable news program, one newspaper, or one commentator.

Principle Seven: Beware the error of following the crowd. As a commercial business, the media industry must produce a mass audience and must compete for viewer attention. Thus, the network or program that offers the most drama, controversy, and excitement often draws the largest viewership. Similarly, the newspaper that is most salacious, most sensational, and most superficial may well draw the largest readership. In other words, the crowd is often drawn to a spectacle, just as the ancient Romans demanded bread and circuses. As the crowd grows larger and larger, the content may grow smaller and smaller, and the opportunity for thoughtful engagement with the issues of the day may virtually disappear. When this phenomenon takes place, celebrities often replace specialized authorities in matters of public debate, energy substitutes for information, and the whole enterprise produces far more heat than light. As your parents warned

you long ago—beware of following the crowd. Far too many Americans rely on superficial reports and on news wrongly packaged as entertainment.

Principle Eight: Those who get their news only from broadcast media are missing much of the story, and much of its significance. Limiting news intake to television programming is a special danger. Televised news reports tend to be image-driven, more superficial, and more simplistic than the print media. Now, television news broadcasts tend to be framed as conversations, producing “talking heads” who often provide more drama than content and information. This produces an artificial understanding of reality. As Sommerville explains, “It turns out that being informed really means knowing what the people around you are talking about. Our reality is the news, not the world.” There is no substitute for reading, and a diet limited to broadcast news will impoverish the mind. As Postman and Powers argue, “anyone who is not an avid reader of newspapers, magazines, and books is by definition unprepared to watch a television news show, and always will be.” There is no substitute for careful and thoughtful reading. The visual medium is given to entertainment and visual dependence over content and careful analysis.

Principle Nine: When it comes to issues of importance, turn off the tube and think. As veteran newscasters sometimes lament, matters of grave and great significance are often strung together on the news and mixed with unimportant and inane items with the familiar formula, “and now this.” A report about genocide in Sudan can be followed by the latest development in reducing auto emissions, which can be followed by a story about a talking parrot. This leveling of significance produces a distortion of reality. Christians must learn to think about the issues covered in media reports, and resist the temptation to be narcotized by an endless stream of disconnected reports of unequal significance. This requires discipline and focus, which in turn require silence—which means turning the television off.

Principle Ten: Use the news media as material for worldview analysis. When watching the news or reading the newspaper, Christians should learn continually to reframe the question. Thinking in explicitly Christian terms, armed with the full measure of Christian conviction, the Christian must reason from biblical truth to the issues of the day. We cannot accept the issues as framed for us by the news media, but we must continually reframe in light of Christian truth. For example, controversies about everything from the economy and abortion to the environment and animal rights must be reframed in terms of a biblical perspective. Otherwise, we will commit the error of attempting to reason to a Christian worldview from a secular premise. We must reverse the question, reframe the issue, and subject every controversy and question to careful worldview analysis. This is important for all Christians, but is especially important for parents as careful engagement with the news media affords an excellent opportunity for training children in Christian worldview thinking. They will be engaging the media for the rest of their lives, and faithful Christian parents will prepare their children for media engagement that is genuinely Christian.

As with every dimension of life, our engagement with the news media reveals our deepest convictions and our true beliefs. Christians must engage the news media as Christians, ready to think, to analyze, to make judgments, and to draw accurate conclusions. Inevitably, Christians will either lead or be led.

