

"How the Media Twist the News"

Sheila Gribben Liaugminas. *Crisis* 20.9 (October 2002): 14-18.

Sheila Gribben Liaugminas, a 20-year veteran of a major national news magazine, tells you how to look out for media bias.

In a most ordinary moment on a normal day at work in the Chicago bureau of a major national newsmagazine, I came to a realization that has bothered me ever since. Everyone knows how much power the press has in shaping the news, how its choice of stories and words influence readers. But one afternoon, talking about a rather silly feature story we were doing on pop culture, someone joked, "You know, we can start a trend just by calling it a trend!"

I stopped dead. It was true. But I was the only one not laughing.

Of course, this was hardly an original insight. Walter Lippman — journalist, military intelligence specialist during World War I, propagandist, political scientist, author, and adviser to the presidents — made the same observation a generation ago. These words from his book, *Public Opinion*, bear repeating: Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections.... In order that [the reader] shall enter he must find a familiar foothold in the story, and this is supplied to him by the use of stereotypes. They tell him that if an association of plumbers is called a "combine" it is appropriate to develop his hostility; if it is called a "group of leading businessmen" the cue is for a favorable reaction. It is in a combination of these elements that the power to create opinion resides.

Why is it so easy to lead people into new behaviors, desires, and attitudes? Why don't people think more critically and see through some of the airy media stories that have no real substance — the stories that are less news than public relations or marketing? As Lippman noted, it's the result of "apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three-legged calves."

These days, sideshows and curious trivia have actually gained even greater importance in an industry that has become a confusing mix of news and entertainment. Still, there are people who would like to pay attention to the more consequential events and issues that used to be called news. These can be hard to discern when politics itself has become trivialized. Hence the need to become intelligent news consumers: to learn how to pick through massive fields of information for substantive and fair reporting. This is a tall task. The manipulation of public opinion is of great importance to both the government and the media. And it takes on added urgency in the months before an election.

Shaping the News

Last year, veteran CBS newsmen Bernard Goldberg shocked the media world with his book, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. He minced no words in laying out the fundamental problem. "The old argument that the networks and other media elites have a liberal bias is so blatantly true that it's hardly worth discussing anymore," he writes. "No, we don't sit around in dark corners and plan strategies on how we're going to slant the news. We don't have to. It comes naturally to most reporters.... When you get right down to it, liberals in the newsroom see liberal views as just plain...sensible, reasonable, rational views, which just happen to coincide with their own."

Consider this exchange from CNN's American Morning show. The panelists are talking about the quality of the reporting from the Middle East. Anderson Cooper says, "On both sides of this issue, people see this so clearly one way or the other. It's really fascinating." Paula Zahn: "And it clearly colors their reaction to reporting, and I think it's, you know, very difficult for people to separate their own personal views from the way they interpret the news." Jack Cafferty: "The news media is [sic] only objective if they report something you agree with." Zahn: "Right." Cafferty concludes: "Then they're objective. Otherwise they're biased if you don't agree, you know."

For these three CNN personalities, the news media themselves are impervious to the predispositions and prejudice that afflict their audience. But contrary to what CNN might have us believe, bias is a real problem. You can see it in all the ways the media interpret, frame, and produce the great issues of our day. They slant the news according to their ideologies and find sources who will back them up. Over my 23 years with a newsmagazine, it often did a good — sometimes very good — job of reporting and analyzing news and its impact. But sometimes it didn't. Sometimes the editors assigned reporters to a story that had been preconceived in the New York headquarters — a story with a foregone conclusion. . .

Stopping the Spin

In a world of media spin, it's not easy to keep one's own balance. First, know what your core values are, what you hold to be objectively true. Be discriminating in your selection of news sources and carefully scrutinize everything you hear and read — see how it resonates with what you believe.

Note how news gatherers select subjects and how they cover them. What photographs do they choose? Do their accounts sound slanted, or do they present compelling voices from both sides of an issue? Notice their sources: Do you hear from the same set of "experts" again and again? I find this especially annoying. The newsmagazine I worked for is still using some of the same old liberal "news analysts" they used when I first arrived in the Midwest bureau more than two decades ago. And you see them all over television news as well. When the topic is Catholicism, the networks all call on the same dissident priests and ex-priests, feminists, and "Catholics for a Free Choice": Andrew Greeley, Eugene Kennedy, Charles Curran, Richard Sipe, Frances Kissling, and so on. Paula Zahn has continually used Sipe as the go-to expert on the troubles within the Church, always describing him as a "retired priest." He's an ex-priest, Paula. There's a difference.

"They don't want our new, fresh sources when they've got flip the regulars who give them the quotes they want," Ruderman says, sharing my observation that the major media, like the newsmagazine we worked for, have all taken the easy route of using dog-eared Rolodexes to call on the same talking heads. "They never wanted my sources when they didn't fit the mold of what they wanted the story to say. They had a preconceived idea of the status quo, and so they would always go to the status-quo sources for their standard comments."...

Democracy and the Press

It's interesting how much of Lippman's analysis from 70 years ago still applies to the media. In the foreword to the 1997 edition of *Public Opinion*, Ronald Steel recalls that from a young age, Lippman studied politics and the press. "In *Liberty and the News* he concluded that the newspaper stories of one of the seminal events of the century (the Russian Revolution) were distorted and inaccurate, based not on the facts but on the 'hopes of the men who composed the news organization.'"

Lippman then posed a more fundamental problem, as Steel relates: "How could the public get the information it needed to make rational political judgments if it could not rely on the press? Unbiased information had become essential, he argued, because 'decisions in a modern state tend to be made by the interaction, not of Congress and the executive, but of public opinion and the executive.' ...For this reason the accuracy of news reporting, the protection of the sources of public opinion, had become the 'basic problem of democracy.'"

The power of public opinion, which is supposed to be the driving force behind most important decisions in a democracy, can itself be driven or steered by the prejudices of unofficial opinion-makers. Vigilance and self-awareness are its only protection. Which is why, wherever they get their news, intelligent citizens will take nothing for granted except their principles.

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