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Fair and Balanced News?

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Fair and Balanced News?

Abstract

"Without question, the media influence us — whether by regular news programs or through other entertainment programs that look like news."

Posting about thoughtful analysis of news coverage from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/fair-and-balanced-news/>

Keywords

In All Things, press, mass media, objectivity, news

Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Fair and Balanced News?

 [all in allthings.org/fair-and-balanced-news/](https://allthings.org/fair-and-balanced-news/)

Charles Veenstra

Many people seem to fear that they are being manipulated by the news media. Without question, the media influence us — whether by regular news programs or through other entertainment programs that look like news. Consequently, Fox News has come out with the mantra that it is “fair and balanced.” Is it really more balanced than other news media? How would one know?

Before looking at biases in particular news outlets, it is important to distinguish news programs from entertainment programs. Many of the cable channels carry programs that look like news but more often include comment rather than hard news. The issue is journalism versus entertainment.

We also need to separate editorial pages from news pages. For example, the *New York Times* editorial pages demonstrate a bias that recommends the government get more involved in solving problems. In other words, the editorials are liberal and anti-Republican. The news pages, however, are much more balanced.

Talk radio hosts are largely conservative and do not hesitate to blast other media for being unfair. For example, Rush Limbaugh claims that he is the only source people need for understanding political issues. However, following his advice would be doing oneself a disservice and is wrong. Never limit yourself to one source of news.

Fox News consistently has a more conservative bias that slips into news stories. MSNBC is on the other side. Some say that CNN is liberal, but I have not seen much of that in the actual stories. My comment on NPR is similar.

However, particular biases within news stories are less of a concern for me than what stories are covered. The media do not tell us *how* to think — at least overtly — but they tell us *what to think about*. In media studies we call this the *agenda setting* function of the media. *What* is reported may be more important than *how* a story is reported.

At the time I am writing this, the big story according to the news media is the billion-dollar Powerball lottery. We are being told that this story is more important than other stories because it is at the top of the news. Gambling is supposedly exciting, and people are anxious to get a lot of money through no work of their own. Winning is the only story. The fact that often it is the poor who buy the lottery tickets receives no attention. In essence, we are told not to think about the poor, when in fact God calls us to do otherwise.

Donald Trump continues to make headlines with his attacks on others and statements that he cannot back up. He gets so much attention that he claimed at one point that he did not need to advertise because the news media was doing it for them. Apparently the loudest voice gets the notice. Although the media do have some fact-checkers, they often do not cover the thoughtful and quieter opinions of other candidates. Careful reporting of each of the candidates' positions would serve the people better.

For a long time I have followed events in the Israeli/Palestinian struggle. The media rarely go to Palestine to report on stories — even stories of Palestinians who were killed by Israeli bombs. Instead, the reporting is done from Israel. Rarely are we given pictures of Israelis destroying Palestinian homes, but if a Palestinian kills an Israeli, that is reported. By choosing what to report in this struggle, the media are

influencing how people think.

A very significant issue worldwide is the persecution of Christians, but that receives very little coverage in the news media. When I asked some of our Core 399 students to look deeply into this issue in the last two years, most often students were amazed at how much persecution is occurring. They simply did not know about it because the news media do very little with it. By choosing to overlook this problem, the audiences are left with the mistaken understanding that persecution is not a huge problem.

What can be done to counter this agenda-setting function of the media? The above examples demonstrate that we should look first at what stories are provided by the media. Media set the agenda for what people will think about. I suggest that we take greater control of our listening. Often I ask why the media focus on certain stories. Do we really need to hear this? In many cases I simply refuse to listen to some stories — for example, stories about celebrities. On the computer news pages, I try to avoid clicking on links to stories that I do not need.

Pay attention to several news outlets, not only the ones in our country. I regularly check CNN, Fox News, Al Jazeera, New York Times, BBC, NPR, and sometimes the CBC. It is very helpful to see what stories the various networks cover. One soon begins to see the political slant within networks. For example, I have noticed that Fox News will highlight Hillary Clinton's misuse of email while CNN almost never covers that story. Getting stories from international networks often provides a significantly different view from what we get in the United States.

Surely training people to go into news media is part of our calling, and we are working on that at Dordt. The media belong to God, and He requires responsible use of them — both as senders and receivers. Communication is not one way. We are not sponges who can only soak up whatever comes our way. Thoughtful analysis requires action. Controlling our own listening is first. Then, as responsible Kingdom citizens, we are called to speak the truth.