

Review of the Arts

THE CULPABILITY OF THE MEDIA

Don't Blame the People by Robert Cirino

Diversity Press \$2.95

"News reporting should be factual, fair and without bias."—The Television Code.

"News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind."—The Canons of Journalism of the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

"The American people should be made aware of the trend toward monopolization of the great public information vehicles and the concentration of more and more power over public opinion in fewer and fewer hands."—Spiro Agnew.

Harrumph, which is to say, bullshit. The Great Media Bias Debate has been going on for nearly two years now. On November 13, 1969, in Des Moines, Iowa, with one speech, Vice President Spiro Agnew accused major news agencies of favoring liberals, the Liberal Establishment, and even "radic-lib." His charge received front page banner headlines in thousands of daily papers the following morning. Nearly all those papers printed a rebutting editorial, and one television network even pre-empted a regular prime time program to debate Agnew's charges. For the first time in recent history, bias in news media became the number one issue of the country. The journalists and scholars who for years have been criticizing the media for its bias must have been puzzled to note the auspices under which the issue finally emerged to claim public attention.

But, as has been said before, bullshit. It's an empty issue. Of course the news media are biased. They always have been, and always will be. Even the *New York Times*. Even *The National Observer*. Even the *Oregon Daily Emerald*.

Objectivity is rare. Newspapers purport to be objective, fair, complete and accurate. They rarely are any one of these. The *Register-Guard* has a thing about the Boy Scouts. Bunky Baker, the publisher of the *Guard*, is big in the Boy Scouts. So the war may end tomorrow, and if the Boy Scouts are doing something, they'll be on Page One. The *Oregonian*, part of the Newhouse empire, is much worse. A few weeks ago, when the FBI admitted it had the names of 25 million Americans in special files, *The Oregonian* somehow forgot to run the wire story. In nearly all major elections, both papers, and really all but two others in this state, endorse the Republican candidate. That doesn't mean that much. But the papers also give more coverage, and more favorable coverage, to the Republican candidates.

The debate, as pictured in the national press, revolves around the question: Does bias exist? Is this newspaper biased, was that story balanced, was the reporter objective? All of this is nonsense. Pure, grade A, 100 per cent bullshit. At every step of the game, bias enters the news process. Value judgments are made as to what news to cover, how much coverage is

adequate, where the story should go in the newspaper, what the lead of the story should be, what the headline should say, who should be quoted as a source of information, and who should be quoted as opinion. You know, Attorney General John Mitchell announced—but Bobby Seale alleged. Manipulation

The real question is whose bias dominates the news media? *Don't Blame the People* (Diversity Press; \$2.95) by Robert Cirino answers the question about as substantially as you could want. For those of you who are already convinced that Spiro Agnew is closer to the news media's seat of power than any liberal, this book will bolster your opinions with specific cases on nearly any newspaper, magazine or television network. But if you still believe what you read in the newspaper, the 340 pages of tables, charts, footnotes, case histories and other documentation should change your mind.

Cirino, a young high school teacher from Los Angeles, is no great authority on contemporary journalism—which doesn't break my heart—but he has done his homework. After laboriously spelling out, in his words, "how the news media use bias, distortion and censorship to manipulate public opinion," Cirino makes a case for equal access to the media by all political, social, economic and ethnic groups.

Facts

That's not a new concept. It's been bandied about by the Black Panthers, SDS, and even most good liberals for years. Politically, there is nothing very exciting in Cirino's book, and it is, like most recent power elite studies, ideologically weak. But again, like Domhoff's *Who Rules America?*, Niebuhr's *In the Name of Science*, and Ridgeway's *The Closed Corporation*, it gives you the facts—and more facts; dry, excessive, tedious and necessary. America's favorite pastime is knocking the local paper, but it takes loads of information to do so intelligently.

The news media control public opinion in three ways, what Cirino calls bias, distortion and censorship. Those are simply three options which the various media have to suppress information that their owners, advertisers or political allies don't like. The options, in practice, boil down to 1) injecting opinion into a supposedly objective report of a news event, 2) inaccurately reporting the news event, or 3) not reporting the news event at all.

Censorship

Censorship, really, is the first obstacle any new, anti-establishment movement or crisis must overcome. If something new happens which isn't in the best interests of the owners or advertisers, it simply isn't newsworthy. Consider an issue as minor as smoking.

In 1938, an Associated Press story presented the findings of Dr. Raymond Pearl of Johns Hopkins University, who had researched 200,000 smokers and non-smokers and compared their life-spans. Pearl discovered non-smokers had a 30 per cent greater chance of living to the age of 60 than heavy smokers. He noted that the shortening of life was proportional to the amount of tobacco smoked.

Six out of ten New York daily newspapers surveyed afterward censored the story completely. The *New York Times* didn't; it merely ran the four paragraph article inconspicuously in the middle or back pages of the paper. Newspapers across the country continued to suppress and censor research on smoking for the next 25 years. The broadcasting industry never said anything about it until two years ago, when they were

hunger. During the same two months it published 11 front page stories on movie celebrities and other trivia. The *L.A. Times* fared better: one item on population, 10 items on pollution (most local smog alert stories), and no items on hunger. The *L.A.* paper put five articles on the entertainment world and other trivia on page one.

Conditioned Demand

Censorship is not simply a matter of news judgment or news priorities. Newspapers print what the reader has been conditioned to want. And that conditioning begins with reading the newspaper. Movie stars are supposed to be important—because their names always appear in the paper. On the other hand, hunger must not be that critical an issue, since you never see anything in the papers about it.



required to by federal law. The reason, unfortunately, is that the tobacco companies pay the salaries of news media people.

Domestic Censoring

The same kind of censorship has been applied to the domestic problems of hunger, pollution, overpopulation, auto safety, the drug industry, racial inequality, and a thousand other things we aren't being told about. Hunger and starvation have always been a problem for a significant minority of Americans, yet until 1960, the news media consistently played up affluence and food surplus, and buried statistics about malnutrition and hunger. While public attention has recently forced the media to print news on hunger, population and pollution, the coverage is still less than adequate. Cirino surveyed the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* during June and July, 1969. That year was the big one for ecology, and was also marked by Sen. McGovern's hunger campaign. In June and July, the *New York Times* printed on its front page one item on population control, two items on pollution, and no items on

The media's suppression of news is even greater when the news occurs beyond the borders. The *New York Times* knew about plans for the Bay of Pigs invasion early in 1960, but never published their reporter's article on the CIA-sponsored attack until after it occurred. Two journalists attempted to sell accounts of the My Lai massacre in the early fall of 1969 to daily papers, *Life*, *Look*, *Newsweek* and *Harper's*, without success. Seymour Hersh finally sold the story to *Dispatch News Service*, and it broke on Nov. 13, 1969. Even after the news service distributed the story, 13 out of the 45 papers who had a chance to run it refused to.

Biased

Eventually, a previously suppressed issue will find national attention, usually due to the efforts of a mass movement, so that the news media can no longer ignore. When this happens, such as it did over the Vietnam war or racism, the media switch their tactics. The news is reported, but it is either distorted or biased. Every

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