

## Chapter Three - Sources

“...most newspapers do not deserve much public confidence.”  
--Edwin Leavitt Clarke

“Partisans of all stripes...value reliability over critical thinking.” --David Brock

“If you give your point of view often enough and loudly enough, it becomes true.”  
--Steve Hopcraft, Democratic political consultant

At the end of World War II, 80 percent of American newspapers were independently owned. When Ben H. Bagdikian published *Media Monopoly* (Beacon Press) in 1982, 50 corporations owned almost of all of the major media outlets in the United States. Fifty corporations owned 1,787 daily newspapers, 11,000 magazines, 9,000 radio stations, 1,000 television stations, 2,500 book publishers and seven major movie studios. By the time Bagdikian put out the revised edition in 1987, ownership had shrunk to 29 corporations. By 1999, nine corporations owned it all. (Molly Ivans -- from Robert W. McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communications Politics in Dubious Times* (University of Illinois Press).

### 1. Introduction

If our era is remembered for nothing else, it will be remembered as the age of entertainment. We live in an age of glitz and hype. It is called the information age and there is great talk about the information highway, but sifting out reliable and useful information from all the sexy garbage thrown our way is becoming nearly impossible for the average person. There is nothing wrong with being entertained and amused, but our society seems to have made amusement the goal of life (Postman: 1986). Even murder trials are televised and are not without their amusing moments as prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges play to the camera and an audience of millions. Formerly reliable and dependable newspapers and television networks now feel obligated to report on tabloid gossip as part

of their daily “news” coverage. At times it seems as if the news media pay more attention to the private lives of public figures than to their policies and decisions, although the latter are much more likely to affect us.

Several highly publicized cases of journalists plagiarizing and faking sources have marred the reputation of institutions like *USA TODAY* (Jack Kelly) and *The New York Times* (Jayson Blair). A panel investigating the Jack Kelly case reported:

“Again and again, facts--arson, plane crash, bomb [sex scandal]--are supplanted by controversies over how the stories were reported and who believes which version of reality.” --Kurt Andersen, “The Age of Unreason,” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 3, 1997.

Lax editing and newsroom leadership, lack of staff communication, a star system, a workplace climate of fear and inconsistent rules on using anonymous sources helped former *USA TODAY* reporter Jack Kelley to fabricate and plagiarize stories for more than a decade, an independent panel of editors has concluded. (Kevin McCoy, *USA TODAY*, April 22, 2004).

There must be something complex going on, because the consequences for a journalist of getting caught in a lie are terminal. Bill Vann, writing for the World Socialist Web Site, claims that Jayson Blair's flair for publishing interviews with people he never met and posting stories from places he'd never been, is not unusual among journalists. Vann blames “an unfortunate atmosphere of sensationalism combined with a competitive environment.” Vann considers Blair's sins to be minor, however, compared to Judith Miller's. Her stories, seeming to substantiate the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq, were published in the *Times* even

though her only source was the U.S. Military. Well, whether one considers plagiarism and faking news stories to be a greater or lesser evil than being manipulated, both kinds of grievances highlight the fact that there is a major credibility problem with today's mass media. Unfortunately, the media has a lot of company.

Police officers perjure themselves on national television (Mark Fuhrman); scientific researchers are caught plagiarizing or inventing data (Cyril Burt, Jan Hendrik Schön) to get grant money or to support personal agendas. Others pose as scientists and pass off worthless statistical data as if it were truth. Talk show hosts stand in line to present pseudo-scientists to their audiences because they often promote sexy themes, such as the kidnapping of hundreds of thousands of children (remember the photos on the milk cartons?), the sexual abuse of women and children, satanic ritual abuse of children, or the abduction of thousands of people by aliens from other solar systems. Reputable publishing houses seem to have little interest in the truth of what they publish, as long as it will sell. Many corporate executives seem to have little concern for their stockholders, the people who work for them, the law, or morals...until they get caught lying, evading taxes, paying bribes, or wasting corporate funds on personal pleasures.

How do we cut through the propaganda, the advertising, the hype and speculation of the mass media, the information and misinformation overloads? We are constantly blitzed with messages, images, phrases, notions, and ideas from myriad sources, some reliable and some not. Experts on every subject under the sun seem endless. With so many claims made by so many people, the critical thinker has a problem: Who do you trust? Who can you believe? Where is this unnamed 'reliable source' we keep hearing about but never seem to meet face to face?

As difficult as it is to know which sources to trust, there are some general guidelines we can follow. The guidelines will vary depending on whether we are evaluating an individual, a mass media corporation, or something as complex as the Internet. However, the rules will be basically the same whether we are evaluating a claim by a scientist, a newspaper reporter, a television or radio talk show host, a corporation CEO, or an author of a World Wide Web site.

The likelihood that a source is credible, unbiased, and accurate will depend on such things as the source's qualifications, integrity, and reputation. Does the source have the necessary qualifications for understanding and evaluating the kinds of claims he or she is making? Is there any reason to question the honesty or integrity of the source? Does the source have a reputation for accuracy? Does the source have a motive for being inaccurate or dishonest that is likely to outweigh the need to be accurate and honest?

Although the guidelines are the same for evaluating different types of sources, the *application* of the rules will vary for different sources.

## 2. Evaluating eyewitness testimony<sup>1</sup>

When evaluating the integrity and qualifications of an eyewitness, you should consider not only the reputation and motivation of the source, but also any environmental, physical, emotional, and intellectual factors that might significantly affect observation. Is the source physically and intellectually capable of making the observations he or she claims to have made? How reliable is the witness's eyesight or hearing? If the claim involves vision, consider whether the eyewitness wears corrective lenses or not. If the claim involves overhearing a conversation, consider whether the witness wears or needs a hearing aid. Consider the distance from the witness to what was observed. Consider the time of day or night, and factors such as the lighting. Consider whether the witness was under stress or in a state of excitement while making the observations. Consider whether any special experience or background knowledge is needed to make the observations in question. Does the witness have that experience or knowledge? If he says the gun he observed was a .22 caliber, for example, what qualifies him to describe the weapon that precisely? Consider the fact that eyewitness testimony involves interpretation of sense data and memory, both of which are fallible. Consider how long it has been since the observations were made.

Consider conflicting testimonies. The fact that a witness is confident and unhesitating in identifying someone or in describing something from memory does not mean the testimony is more accurate than that of a witness who hesitates or is cautious in giving testimony. Remember, too, that in choosing to believe one of two conflicting

testimonies, you are not implying that one of the witnesses is lying. He or she could be mistaken.<sup>2</sup> Two people may observe “the same thing” and give inconsistent accounts of what they observed, and yet neither be lying. Their interpretations of what they perceive will depend in part on their past experience and their background knowledge. In part, it will depend on their prejudices and assumptions, and in part on their anticipations in the present situation. If you are not looking for something or expecting something, your observations will differ from someone who *is* looking for or expecting something specific. Probably most important, though, is the fact that some people are simply more attentive in their observations than others are. They see differently because they observe more, and they observe more carefully.

Consider also whether or not the eyewitness is being paid for his or her testimony. Greed or revenge will sometimes motivate a person to say things that are not true. Such motives are almost certainly at work in some of the testimony yielded by checkbook journalism: the practice of paying people for interviews. How reliable is the testimony of a Henry Kissinger or a Richard Nixon when they are doing interviews for hundreds of thousands of dollars? How reliable is the testimony of Michael Jackson’s maid, Imelda Marcos’s servants, Elvis’s bodyguards, Elizabeth Taylor’s cleaning lady, a cutlery salesman who claims he sold O.J. Simpson a long knife, etc., when these people are paid for their testimony? Are such people likely to feel obligated to exaggerate and invent, to give their benefactors their money’s worth?

Be careful here. A person may have something to gain by lying, but it would hardly be worth it if discovery in a lie would mean the ruin of one’s reputation or career. A paid expert, such as a lawyer, doctor or repairperson, may have a lot more to lose by being caught at being dishonest than he or she could gain if not caught. A tipster who is paid for information may have a lot more to gain by telling the truth than by feeding false information to the goose laying golden eggs. Also, although someone accused of wrongdoing would have a motive for inaccuracy or dishonesty if guilty, he or she would usually have an equally compelling motive for accuracy and honesty if innocent. Hence, it would not be reasonable to assume that anyone accused of wrongdoing is probably untrustworthy in giving testimony about the alleged wrongdoing. And it would not be reasonable to assume that anyone with something to gain by fraudulence or lying can’t be trusted.

We should be most skeptical, however, of the testimony of those who not only have a lot to gain by false testimony, but also have nothing to lose if caught in a lie. We should be especially skeptical of the testimony of anyone who has much to gain by false testimony and who is the *sole source* of information. Such people know that they cannot be caught in a lie. There is no greater motivator to tell the truth than the certainty or high probability that a lie will be detected. The temptation to lie or embellish will be greater when one thinks that there is no chance of getting caught, e.g., when reporting “deathbed confessions” to which one is the only witness.

### 3. Experts

Remember how most of us had to deal with observation, memory, and authority as we developed from nearly totally dependent infants to independent adults. As infants we could not be critical thinkers. Our initial experiences were the basis for our earliest beliefs and those experiences were out of our control. We had to depend upon instinct and the guidance of others for our earliest beliefs. By the time we entered grammar school, we believed many things on the basis of untutored observation, untrained memory, and blind faith.

**“An expert is one who knows more and more about less and less.” --Nicholas Murray Butler**

As we passed through grammar school and high school, we may not have learned much about how to use authorities reasonably or how to become skilled observers. These matters may have been left to chance or—what is worse—were discouraged. Children are not often encouraged to question authority and those who do are not usually praised by parents or teachers, or by political or religious leaders. We come to resent many of those who do question authority.<sup>3</sup> Thus, forming a critical attitude toward the claims of experts and authorities may require much

effort and many years of practice. It is not something that comes naturally to most people. But sometimes we must question authorities and experts. Just because we must depend on experts at times, does not mean that we should take everything they say on blind faith.

### 3.1 Qualifications, reputation, and motives

Consider the qualifications of the one making the claim. Does the claim imply special knowledge or expertise and does the claimant have that knowledge or expertise? Before one should accept a claim solely on the basis of expert testimony, one should determine that the expert is qualified in the subject matter that he or she is testifying about. What is the expert's educational background? What degree or degrees does he or she have? What professional work is he or she known for? Has the expert had books or articles published in his or her field of expertise? What professional awards or prizes has the expert earned?

What is the expert's reputation in the field? Is he or she generally respected by others in the field? Is the expert considered a maverick or oddball by other experts? If so, is the expert really an expert or an outsider claiming expertise? If the maverick really is an expert in the field, then the fact that his or her material is controversial means that it is the *evidence*, not the source, which must be given your full attention.

Does the expert have a hidden agenda? Just because one is an expert, even a scientific expert, does not mean that one is necessarily above using one's position to further a racist, sexist, religious, political, or personal agenda.

Is the expert paid for his or her testimony? In itself, getting paid does not taint testimony, but experts who make a career out of getting paid for testimony should be looked at with a very careful eye.

Some experts acquire their expertise not from academies but from experience. Many arts, crafts, and techniques have been learned by doing, without any formal training. For some fields, there are no higher degrees.

Most of the time, we are at the mercy of experts because we are totally ignorant of their field and their reputation. Consider, for example, the automobile mechanic. Imagine a situation with automobile mechanics that parallels that of psychiatric testimony in the courtroom. If whenever you had car trouble it were possible to line up mechanics on one side to say the car needs new spark plugs and another group of mechanics to say the car didn't need new plugs, would you ever take your car to a mechanic? Would it make you feel more comfortable if the mechanics who always diagnosed "needs new spark plugs" were paid by The Spark Club Lobby for their opinion and those who always rejected that diagnosis were paid by The Tow Truck Society?

Usually, the best guide for deciding whether to accept the claims of an expert who gained his or her expertise from experience is the *reputation* of the person. Usually we should seek out the testimony of satisfied customers. That's why many advertisers hire actors to pretend they are satisfied customers. That's why one of the most common forms of deception used by infomercial makers is to hire actors or *real people* to testify to the wonders of some product. However, you want to talk directly to someone who used the product or the services of the expert. You want someone who is unbiased, who isn't being paid or rewarded in some way for their testimony, and who has no interest in whether you do or don't follow their recommendation.

If we are uncertain of an expert's reputation, we can always seek a second opinion. Of course, experts can easily deceive us, since usually we lack the knowledge and experience necessary to judge their opinions. However, unless deceit is common in a profession or in a particular business, the fear of acquiring a reputation for dishonesty would be a major disincentive to deceive. If, on the other hand, there is little chance of getting caught and a good chance of making money by being dishonest, then the major disincentive to cheating is gone and the buyer should beware. Let's not forget the Sears Auto Shop scandal in California in 1992. A whole area of auto repair in Sears' Shops—brake and shock absorber repair and replacement—was discovered to be fraudulent. Sears' auto shop personnel systematically lied to customers about needing brakes and shocks. They took advantage of the customer's vulnerability and the fact that there was little chance they would be found out. Unfortunately for Sears, agents of the State of California brought in vehicles with known good brakes and shocks but they were told repeatedly in stores across the state that the brakes and shocks needed to be replaced. Sears

took out full-page ads across the state and said something like “mistakes were made” and they will not happen again. They sincerely regretted the loss of business.

Because some fields of expertise are so controversial, however, finding satisfied customers can sometimes be misleading. For example, it is easy to find many people willing to vouch for any number of phony healers. In evaluating an expert source, we must consider not just the reputation of the expert and the testimonials of the expert’s following; we must consider the field of expertise itself.

### 3.2 Fields of expertise

Some fields are so controversial that there is scarcely a claim in the field that is not defended by one expert and rejected by another. On the other hand, some fields are relatively free of controversy about facts and fundamental issues. For example, chemistry and physics are fields that use impersonal methods of inquiry and whose results can be tested by anybody with the proper training. The science texts you are likely to read will most likely be read mainly to learn factual information and established techniques and procedures. Yes, there are controversial areas in the sciences. But you can expect to find much more agreement about fundamental matters (facts, definitions of basic terms, and techniques of inquiry) in the sciences than in either the social sciences (such as history, psychology and sociology) or the humanities (such as philosophy, literature and art).

The humanities and social sciences are more personal than the physical sciences; they are more likely to be affected by individual interests, purposes, and beliefs. The great diversity of opinion in these fields is not considered a drawback, but reflects the richness of human interest and design. Usually experts in the humanities and the social sciences should be read not just to gather facts. Such experts are likely to express personal opinions in their professional publications more often than science writers. It is those *opinions* that should interest us. But all experts, regardless of subject matter, ought to be used with caution. Facts ought to be separated from opinions, and opinions ought to be appealed to more as stimuli to thinking than as oracles of truth.

Yet, sometimes it is difficult to separate fact from opinion, especially when self-proclaimed (or media-proclaimed) experts reinforce each other’s opinions to the point where they treat total fabrication as scientific fact. In chapter one we mentioned a group of authors who have written books on child abuse.<sup>4</sup> Through the communal reinforcement of many empirically unsupported notions, including the claim that about half of all women have been sexually abused, they have managed to get many people to treat this and other unproven claims as a facts. Psychologist Carol Tavis writes

In what can only be called an incestuous arrangement, the authors of these books all rely on one another’s work as supporting evidence for their own; they all endorse and recommend one another’s books to their readers. If one of them comes up with a concocted statistic--such as “more than half of all women are survivors of childhood sexual trauma”--the numbers are traded like baseball cards, reprinted in every book and eventually enshrined as fact. Thus the cycle of misinformation, faulty statistics and invalidated assertions maintains itself.<sup>5</sup>

The main difference between this group of experts and, say, a group of physicists is that the child abuse experts have achieved their status as authorities not by scientific training but either (a) by experience [they were victims of child abuse or they treat victims of child abuse in their capacity as social workers] or (b) by writing a book on child abuse. The child abuse experts aren’t trained in scientific research, which, notes Tavis, “is not a comment on their ability to write or to do therapy, but which does seem to be one reason for their scientific illiteracy.”

Whole industries have been built up out of the hysteria that inevitably accompanies charges of the sexual abuse of children. Therapists who are supposed to help children recover from the trauma of child abuse are hired to interrogate children to find out if they have been abused. But too often the therapist suggests the abuse to the child and the child develops false memories of being abused. The therapist is then ready to testify to the abuse,

but no reasonable person should find a parent or caretaker guilty *solely* on the basis of such tainted “expert” testimony.<sup>6</sup>

There are qualified experts in the field of child abuse, of course. They are trained in scientific methodologies, are *not* driven by extra-scientific

**“In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service.” --John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**

**“All men are partially buried in the grave of custom. . . .” --Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)**

motives, and do not use their science to promote personal agendas. For the critical thinker, however, it is often not an easy task to determine which experts to trust. Remember that some fields are controversial by nature, i.e., the experts in the field do not agree

on fundamental issues. The opinions of experts in such fields should never be accepted solely on the basis of expert testimony; otherwise, it would be reasonable to accept contradictory opinions. The humanities and many areas of the social sciences are such fields. So are all those fields introduced by the term “alternative”: *alternative medicine*, *alternative science*, *alternative history*, and the like. On the other hand, fields such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry are fields where the experts agree on fundamental matters and definitions of basic terms.

Also, simply because one is an expert in one field does not give one license to make proclamations in fields beyond one’s area of expertise. Of course, experts in one field are as free as anyone else to state their opinions in fields outside their sphere of expertise. But they should not expect us to treat their opinions in such matters any differently than we would treat any non-expert’s.

#### 4. Custom and tradition

Many of our beliefs are customary beliefs. They have come to us more or less unconsciously through our cultural traditions and social institutions. As such, custom and tradition can be seen as a powerful source of beliefs.

How much trust should we put in customary and cultural beliefs, in the traditional wisdom of our predecessors, in the advice and instructions of our parents, and in the claims of our religious, educational, and political leaders?

**“It is obvious that the mere fact that a belief is ‘old’ is no evidence in its favor. On the contrary: that merely means that the belief must have originated at a time when much less was known than is known today; and when people generally were more credulous about alleged ‘facts’; less critical of ideas; without the desire (or technique) to examine, test, and verify acceptance.” --A.E. Mander, *Logic for the Millions*, pp. 177-178.**

Our first guiding rule might be: *Rely on customary and traditional beliefs only if you must*. If the matter is something that you can easily discover for yourself, do so. Use your own knowledge and experience as a check against traditional, as well as against new claims.

Sometimes our specific knowledge in a field will be the standard against which we will measure a claim. But what if we have no specific knowledge about what is being claimed? And what if the claim is made in a field that requires special training and education? In that case, we will have to base our decision on the amount of trust we have in the one making the claim. When is such trust reasonable? And how far

should it extend? These are questions every critical thinker must consider.

#### Exercise 3-1

The following passages each contain claims made by different sources. In each case, identify whether the source is either (a) an expert or authority or (b) a non-expert. If the source is an expert or authority, state whether the expert’s

**field is controversial or not (do experts tend to disagree about fundamental matters in the field?). For each source, what would you need to consider to determine the source's credibility.** [Exercises with an \* are answered in Answers to Selected Exercises.]

- \*1. The President of the United States claims that his policies may reduce inflation by as much as 10 percent and increase employment by as much as 5 percent.
- 2. A police officer commenting on the behavior of a man who began shooting at investigators from the district attorney's office who had come to serve a warrant of arrest: "It was just happenstance. The same thing would have happened had he been pulled over for a traffic violation."
- \*3. "A state biologist said Tuesday that the deaths of thousands of fish each year above Sacramento [California] may be caused by a combination of problems, including a chemical in agricultural canals."
- 4. A chemist claims in a lecture that if gold is dipped in hydrochloric acid, the gold will not dissolve.
- 5. A philosopher declares that the essence of mind is thinking.
- \*6. A newspaper reports that there were three stabbings of inmates by other inmates at a state prison.
- 7. You are handed a flyer by a stranger. It says it's printed by the California Agrarian Action Project, and it claims that the department of Food and Agriculture has not released information regarding the health effects of pesticides.
- \*8. Fidel Castro accuses America of using germ warfare against his regime.
- 9. A speaker at a political rally claims that all persons have a natural right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
- 10. A psychiatrist declares of a person who has been serving time in a state mental hospital for the criminally insane that this person no longer has violent tendencies and is unlikely ever to rape and murder again.
- \*11. A philosopher declares that the essence of physical reality is extension in space.
- 12. A spokesperson for a Detroit automobile manufacturing firm asserts that Japanese automobile import quotas are too large.
- \*13. Loren Coleman, director of a suicide-prevention project at the University of Southern Maine (in Portland, Maine), says "the reappearance of Halley's comet brings forth the realization of larger cycles that interplay with the phenomenon of suicide." Coleman noted that a wave of teenage suicides and airline crashes coincided with the appearance of Halley's comet. He said that the word 'disaster' evolved from 'evil star' and that an analysis of suicides or epidemics and the appearance of comets "demonstrates some interesting correlations." "Halley's comet appeared like a 'sword' over Jerusalem in 66 A.D.," said Coleman, "foreshadowing its destruction at the hands of the Romans."
- 14. An art historian claims that cave paintings of animals done more than 25,000 years ago were done in order to assist the initiation of young men into the adult world of hunting.
- \*15. An expert from the New York Stock Exchange claims that interest rates will drop by as much as ten percent within the next six months.
- 16. A music reviewer writes: "A lively, lifelike, brilliant performance, extremely well-recorded, of one of Bach's greatest masterpieces."
- 17. A preacher says from the pulpit that faith alone will save your soul.
- 18. An actress on a soap opera which specializes in infidelity, adultery, lechery in personal affairs and dishonesty in business affairs, says that "the program saves marriages by providing a harmless outlet for fantasies of unfaithfulness."
- \*19. A newspaper article reports: "Lifesaving antibiotics are increasingly losing their disease-fighting power because of flagrant world-wide overuse, 150 doctors and medical scientists in 25 nations charged Tuesday. In news conferences in Boston, Mexico City, Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, and Sao Paulo Brazil, the group issued a joint statement urging international action to curb 'global drug abuse'."
- 20. Dean F. Martin, a professor of chemistry at the University of Southern Florida in Tampa said that he had discovered a marine organism which can destroy 'red tide' (a marine algae which can kill fish and irritate the eyes and throats of bathers). William Taft of the Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota said that he put a teaspoonful of Martin's marine organism in a 20-gallon aquarium with 20 million per liter of the red-tide organism. Said Taft, "It killed them all."
- 21. A theologian asserts that the soul has a beginning but is immortal.
- 22. An author of numerous books and articles on human relationships claims that people who love one another are happier and more productive than those who do not love one another.
- \*23. An eminent anthropologist claims that she has discovered conclusive evidence that human beings are not naturally aggressive.
- 24. You read an article in the newspaper which indicates it originated in WASHINGTON(AP). The article states that according to the Census Bureau one in nine American manufacturing workers owes his or her job to buyers in foreign countries.

- \* 25. James Woodford, an Atlanta chemist who frequently testifies in court cases concerning drug abuse, claims that pigments (viz., melanin) in dark-skinned people are chemically similar to marijuana (viz., THC, tetrahydrocannabinol) and may lead to wrongful accusations of marijuana use based on inaccurate urine tests.
26. An author of numerous books on astral projection [soul travel] says that anyone can have an out-of-body experience if they follow her easy ten-step plan.
27. Arthur McBay, a drug-testing expert with the state medical examiner's office in North Carolina, said that equipment used to test urine for evidence of marijuana usage will frequently produce positive results even with empty samples.
28. A famous talk show host announces that the guests on his program are just the tip of the iceberg in a nationwide network of Devil Worshipping Child Eaters.
29. Dr. Lenore Terr, psychiatrist and author of *Unchained Memories*, testified as an expert witness regarding repressed memory in the trial of George Franklin. Franklin's daughter, Eileen Franklin Lipsker, said she suddenly remembered, 20 years after the crime, that her father raped and then killed her best friend, 8-year-old Susan Nason. Lipsker had told Terr that as a child she had torn out her hair, creating a bloody bald spot on her head. In her book, Terr writes: "Most likely, young Eileen unconsciously set out to duplicate the horrible wound she had seen on Susan Nason's head." [By the way, Eileen's mother, Leah Franklin, says she does not remember seeing a bald spot on her daughter's hair during her childhood years when she combed, braided and cut her child's hair. Leah Franklin also says she gave prosecutors more than forty photographs of Eileen as a child and that none of them showed any hair problems.]
30. You are surfing the Internet and you come upon something called THE DRUDGE REPORT which has very impressive graphics. You read there that the President of the United States has been seen having sex with White House visitors by Secret Service Agents.

## 5. Popular mass media

Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet are some of our main sources of information about the world. Special attention to evaluating claims made in the popular mass media is required by anyone desiring to become a critical thinker today.

One would think that journalists would be trained to be critical thinkers and observers, and that their training would reveal itself in their work, thus easing our task as critical readers and viewers. Even granting that journalists are trained critical thinkers, they are still human beings with worldviews, political affiliations, loyalties, ambitions, hopes, religious beliefs, biases, and prejudices. Like the rest of us, their patriotism, sexism, ethnocentrism, laziness,

**In December 1996, NBC reportedly paid more than \$500,000 to Richard Jewell, a security guard at the Atlanta Olympic games wrongly accused in the Olympic Park bombing. Why? Because Tom Brokaw announced on the evening news that the cops "probably have enough to arrest [Jewel] right now [and] probably enough to prosecute him."**

wishful thinking, greed, ambition, and the like will sometimes affect the way they go after or report a story. For example, in 1983 a Korean Air Lines plane [KAL 007] with 269 people aboard was shot down over the Soviet Union by the Soviet Air Force. Most of the headlines and stories in the American mass media regarding the

event clearly asserted that the Soviets knew the passenger airliner had accidentally drifted over Soviet territory. It is to the credit of the American free press that these assertions were later admitted to be wrong. We were eventually informed that the story was much more complicated than we had been led to believe by the initial reports coming from United States government sources. The Soviets, we were later told, were justified in believing that the plane was on a spy mission and their action could be seen not as a malicious act of mass murder but as a reasonable act of self-defense. Nevertheless, the initial reports and allegations are the ones that remain in the minds and hearts of many Americans.

**"TV news is just a tail on the dog of entertainment." — Walter Cronkite**

Some fifteen years after the KAL incident, Alvin A. Snyder, who was director of worldwide television for the U.S. Information Agency in 1983, revealed that he was pressured to lie about KAL 007 by the U.S. State

Department. Snyder claims he was given an audio tape and instructed to produce a video, based on the tape, to be shown to the United Nations Security Council two days later. The video,



he says, was beamed around the world by satellite. “It was powerful, effective and wrong,” says Snyder. Secretary of State George Shultz knew of the video and wrote in a memo to President Reagan that there would be a massive public disinformation effort “to exploit the incident.” Reagan was made fully aware by the State Department that the Soviet pilots were confused as to the identity of the plane they had intercepted and shot down. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, U.S. ambassador to the UN, introduced the tape, and the mass media passed on the propaganda piece.<sup>7</sup>

When the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian passenger jet over the Persian Gulf, killing 290 people, on July 3, 1988, the Iranian media treated the incident much as the U.S. media had treated KAL 007. The position of the U.S. government and of our mass media, however, was that the plane was shot down by mistake

The way the press handled the shooting down of KAL 007 by the Soviets and the shooting down of the Iranian passenger plane by the Americans is typical of American journalism. First, an *interested party*--in this case, the U.S. government--is the original source of the information. Then, the material is interpreted and edited by journalists before being passed on to you and me. Much of the information presented in the mass media is not the result of investigative or eyewitness reporting. It is handed to the media in the form of press releases by people representing those who have a stake in the public’s response to the information. The worst part of this is not that opinions are sometimes presented as facts or that outright lies are sometimes leaked to the press to misinform the public about some political enemy. The worst part is that only part of the story gets reported—at least initially—the part that favors the way of looking at things held by the source of the information.

Not only do mass media reports often serve the interests of those in power, they exaggerate the significance of much of what they report. We have become accustomed to being informed on anything the President of the United States says or does, no

**“...self-criticism and introspection are not the order of the day for people clinging to power.” --David Brock**

matter how trivial, personal, or political. If the President wants to help out a political ally, all he has to do is speak; the press will report whatever he says. For example, when conservative Republicans led the charge to oust California Supreme Court Chief Justice Rose Bird, President Reagan joined in the attack when he singled out Chief Justice Bird for special criticism as he “assailed judges who approve ‘outrageous’ awards in injury cases and drive up liability insurance rates,” according to an article in the *Sacramento Bee*.<sup>8</sup> The President’s assertions were headlined and reported. Although President Reagan’s remarks were criticized and challenged throughout the article as being misleading, incomplete, and erroneous, they were treated with the dignity and respect worthy of a Nobel laureate speaking in his or her field of expertise. Even the fact that on the same day in the same newspaper another article appeared that was headlined, “Report: Liability ‘crisis’ is a myth,” could not mitigate the impact of the President’s misinformed and misleading comments. The other article begins: “Sharp increases in liability insurance premiums for doctors, governments, businesses and other groups are caused by the insurance industry’s own decisions and not excessive lawsuits, according to a new study prepared for the nation’s attorney general.” The inconsistency of this information with President Reagan’s claims should alert the critical reader that something is awry. The newspaper did try to make the reader’s task easy, as it put the article claiming that the liability crisis is a myth on page 3 with a note about the Reagan claim and a reference to its location on page 22 of the paper. Yet, it is clear that the only reason Reagan’s assertions were published was that at the time he made them he was President of the United States.

Another way that the mass media exaggerate the significance of what they publish is the hype they use to sell what is called “news.” In 2004, as the latest edition of this book is being prepared, terrorism and America’s war against Iraq dominate the news. In 1999, when the previous edition of this book was being prepared, there was an extraordinary amount of attention being paid to Kosovo. The year before that, the hot topic was President Clinton’s sex life, as it was in 1994. Before that it was illegal aliens. Before that it was O.J. Simpson and battered women. In 1994, the focus was not only on Clinton’s sex life, but on child abuse and national health care reform. Before that the hot topics were the homeless, cocaine and ‘crack’ usage, and AIDS. Before that there was a great deal of attention paid to each of the following: drunken driving, teenage pregnancy, Eastern European nations and their struggle for democracy and freedom, the federal deficit, taxes, the Gulf War, droughts and floods, and the alleged kidnapping of thousands of children. One wonders how the nation continues to exist, given all the crises we’re

**“...raw news...is to the newspaper readers for the most part inedible and indigestible. The raw news has, therefore, to be processed in order to make it intelligible, for if it is not intelligible, it will not be interesting. And if it is not interesting, it will not be read....If we tried to print only the facts of what had happened...the news items would be like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle thrown in a heap upon the table.”--  
Walter Lippmann, Washington Post, September 24, 1949, p. 16. [From *Argument and Advocacy*, Russel R. Windes and Arthur Hastings (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 139-140.]**

certain kinds of events, greatly affect, in a perverse way, our overall outlook on life. Educational, judicial, and penal institutions are reported on primarily when the *unusual* occurs. We read about the student who graduates from high school although he or she is illiterate; we do not read about the hundreds of thousands of students who graduate and can read quite well. We read about the murderer who serves ten years in prison and commits a murder within a month of being released. Or we read of the innocent man who spent ten years on death row before being exonerated. We do not read about the thousands of criminals who are processed by our courts every day in an orderly and just fashion and who are punished appropriately. We read of the mentally ill person who shoots people in a shopping mall after warnings by her mother to the police. But we do not read about the thousands of police officers who in the course of an average day filled out thousands of reports, resolved thousands of disputes, and saved a few hundred lives. We rarely hear about any of our institutions until something goes wrong. The usual, the

**“I fear it is just a matter of time before newspapers will be considered the same as any business, a fit prize for investment by interests that do not care about the principles of good journalism.” --C.K. McClatchy, editor and Chairman of the Board of McClatchy Newspapers**

everyday efficient and appropriate functioning of our institutions, is ignored. It is the unusual which makes the headlines and, too often, affects our beliefs and attitudes. Of course, it is not only the unusual that grabs the attention of the mass media. There has been a noticeable decline in journalistic standards with respect to the privacy of public figures. Compounding this decline is a growing disregard for accuracy. Much of this decline is reflective of changes in American society. There is a growing acceptance of rudeness, invasion of privacy, and vulgarity. We have become a tabloid society. Our news and entertainment are a reflection of our growing indecency. We not only tolerate false and misleading stories if they are sexy enough, we encourage them by our support. As a nation, we seem less interested in truth than in our own personal titillation. Give us a story about President Clinton’s or Princess Diana’s alleged sex life. We not only don’t seem to care whether these stories are true, we don’t even ask whether this is the kind of story we should be demanding. Innuendo and rumor suffice. We do not demand good evidence. We certainly do not require that several sources be able to back up a claim which, if true, could ruin someone’s reputation. We do not seem to care that false claims can ruin lives. We do not seem to realize that

undergoing. Topics seem to take on a life of their own; they have a kind of ‘cash-value’ as a bizarre form of entertainment. Each topic is like a fireworks display. It appears in a blaze of glory and disappears as it is replaced by another.

If an alien were to fall to earth and read several daily newspapers, she might come to the conclusion that earthlings are devoted to war, violent crimes, natural and human disasters, drugs, sex, and sports. Despite the fact that most persons on earth are law abiding and non-violent, our mass media publications focus so much attention on violent criminals that it is not uncommon for children to grow up fearing most of the human race. Our worldviews are molded by what we deem significant, and the mass media, by their emphasis on

educational, judicial, and penal institutions are reported on primarily when the *unusual* occurs. We read about the student who graduates from high school although he or she is illiterate; we do not read about the hundreds of thousands of students who graduate and can read quite well. We read about the murderer who serves ten years in prison and commits a murder within a month of being released. Or we read of the innocent man who spent ten years on death row before being exonerated. We do not read about the thousands of criminals who are processed by our courts every day in an orderly and just fashion and who are punished appropriately. We read of the mentally ill person who shoots people in a shopping mall after warnings by her mother to the police. But we do not read about the thousands of police officers who in the course of an average day filled out thousands of reports, resolved thousands of disputes, and saved a few hundred lives. We rarely hear about any of our institutions until something goes wrong. The usual, the everyday efficient and appropriate functioning of our institutions, is ignored. It is the unusual which makes the headlines and, too often, affects our beliefs and attitudes.

Of course, it is not only the unusual that grabs the attention of the mass media. There has been a noticeable decline in journalistic standards with respect to the privacy of public figures. Compounding this decline is a growing disregard for accuracy. Much of this decline is reflective of changes in American society. There is a growing acceptance

anyone with enough money can buy journalists to dig up dirt on anyone. Just give us the dirt. We do not care whether it is real dirt or where it came from or who paid for it.

Our own standards have declined in other ways as well. We seem to accept the notion that even if one story has about zero credibility, when we add up a half dozen such stories we now have credibility. Yet, no matter how many zeros are added together the result is still zero.

I do not advocate different goals for the mass media. What I am advocating is that as critical thinkers we put the reports of the mass media into proper perspective. Recognize them for what they are: almost always one-dimensional and relatively superficial accounts, often biased or slanted, one-sided or even false. While the purpose of the mass media includes providing information, it often seems that the main purpose of most media work is entertainment. The news media provide us with accounts of generally unusual or entertaining events whose significance is often to be found in their tragic or comic entertainment value. This function of the mass media is most obviously witnessed every evening on television where not only are accounts of mass murders and military invasions sandwiched around commercials for laxatives, but stories about the sex lives of celebrities are juxtaposed to stories about sexual harassment and rape, and accompanied by commercials featuring sexy men and women using sex to sell everything from automobiles to refrigerators.

The mass media must cater to their audience, of course. The things the media emphasize seem to be the things the masses desire to see or read and hear about. The way the mass media present material reflects their audience. We complain loudly about negative ads during political campaigns, where candidates are advertised as if they were a better deodorant or a can of soup while their opponents are accused of stinking up the world with their presence. However, how many of us would tune in to a rational debate (assuming it were even possible) that focused on specific issues of concern to the nation? How many of us would be willing to try to follow a complex political issue for more than five or ten minutes, were the media willing to present it? Such programs are presented occasionally, either on television or in print or in public halls, and they are attended by goodly numbers of people at times. Nevertheless, nobody ever got rich catering to the good citizenship of our fellow Americans.

Besides being oversimplified, the information in the mass media is likely to be incomplete and one-sided. On the one hand, journalists report what they take to be news; they do not necessarily evaluate or judge what they report on. If a district attorney charges several day care operators with sexual abuse of children, the reporter will report it. It is not the reporter's job to investigate the district attorney to make sure that the charge is justified before anything is printed in the paper. If it turns out that the district attorney drops all the charges at a later date, the news media sees its job as being done if it simply reports that the charges have been dropped, and perhaps states why. No matter that lives may have been irreparably harmed by the initial charges and reports. That is how we run things in this country. The news media may report anything about a current court case, unless specifically ordered not to by a judge.

Brit Hume and T.R. Reid, in their syndicated column *Computing*, claim that "Most of the computer trade press is not a skeptical outside observer of the industry it covers; it is, instead, very much a part of that industry." They cite *PC Magazine* in particular as one which calls itself "The Independent Guide to IBM-Standard Computing", but which in fact steers and advises companies on programs it then reviews and recommends.

*PC* defends this practice on the grounds that it leads to better products for computer users. Maybe. All we can be sure of is that it leads to products favored by the editors of *PC*. How much computer users benefit from this intimate relationship is questionable, according to Hume and Reid. See their column "Computer mag's no Consumer Reports," *Sacramento Bee*, July 16, 1990, p. C3.

In the same issue of the *Bee* (page C2), there was another article titled "Magazine radiation piece irks advertisers." It seems that *MacWorld*, a magazine for Apple MacIntosh users, is not one of those in the trade that is in cahoots with the industry. They printed an article in their July 1990 issue on the possible health hazards caused by the electromagnetic emissions of computer terminals. The article angered some important advertisers. James Martin, president of MacWorld Communications, said that other articles critical of computer hardware and software products had cost the magazine as much as \$500,000 annually in lost ad revenue. "We're walking a thin line between helping our readers and hurting our advertisers," said *MacWorld* staffer Jerry Borrell. The article noted that relations between Apple and Macworld have become strained over the past two years because of articles criticizing Apple.

The critical reader must be careful to separate what is reported from what may really be the case. Charges do not imply guilt. Accusations do not imply facts. Yet, it is easy to draw conclusions when a reporter, while not specifically asserting his or her own opinion about a matter, quotes from this or that source. It is a perfectly legitimate reporting practice to quote anyone, no matter how idiotic, misleading, or reprehensible. Thus, one can easily slant or slip in judgments on events by quoting people who express one's own sentiments or who express, in a foolish way, ideas one opposes. Also, it ought to be remembered that "news" must go through several screenings before it is presented to readers or viewers. Events must occur and be witnessed. Decisions must be made as to which events are worth reporting on. Reports of those events must be made; to do so, the reporter must select what to report and, necessarily, what *not* to report. Or, press releases and so-called 'public information' releases are received by an editor. Decisions must be made as to which reports and releases will be published. Before they are published, they may have to be edited. Then, when what is to be reported has been selected, decisions have to be made

**"Since 1993, the homicide rate nationwide has dropped by 20 percent. Yet in the same period, the coverage of murders on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news has increased by 721 percent." -- Vincent Schiraldi, director of the Justice Policy Institute, 1998.**

**The homicide rate went down 13% between 1990 and 1995. During the same period, network news coverage of homicide increased 336%. --"Living in Fear," Los Angeles Times, August 23, 1998.**

as to how to present it. Judgments will be made as to where to place a story, how big a headline to give it, what kind of language to use in presenting the story, etc. For television, decisions will have to be made as to what order to present material, what film footage to show, etc. In other words, what and how the mass media present material depend on many judgments made by many people.

Some of those judgments may be affected by the very nature of the mass media. Newspapers and television networks are businesses that depend on advertising for their survival. They are also legislated and government regulated businesses. What is the likelihood that a local newspaper is going to initiate an investigation of local supermarkets (say with regard to the accuracy of their scales) or of local

department stores or automobile dealerships? What is the likelihood that a magazine that depends heavily on cigarette advertising revenue to pay its employees their monthly checks is going to launch an all out media blitz on the hazards and social harms caused by smoking? Is a psychology magazine that has an advertisement for hard liquor on every fourth or fifth page likely to present its readers with a fair and honest portrayal of the social and psychological effects of alcohol?

Personal interest may affect not only what does get reported but also what does *not* get reported. "During the enormous business enthusiasm for mergers, acquisitions, junk bonds, deregulation, 'getting government off the backs of business,' the news was full of the glories of these policies."<sup>9</sup> Little was offered from economists with opposing views. A critical reader and viewer of the mass media must pay attention not only to what is presented but also to what is being omitted.

One wonders where the mass media was while billions of dollars were being ripped off by wealthy bankers and investors following President Reagan's decision to deregulate the banking industry? The most expensive public finance scandal in our history was not treated with much significance by the mass media until most of the damage had been done. Why? Ellen Hume, executive director of Harvard's Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, offers these reasons:

1. The Savings and Loan scandal was a *numbers* story, not a *people* story. It was complicated and boring to many mainstream journalists. There were articles written on the subject in the early 1980's but they appeared in local papers or in the trade press, e.g., the *National Thrift News* (now called the *National Mortgage News*). Local reporting "generally isn't read by journalists from the national news organizations." "Financial stories are particularly hard for television." NBC president Michael Gartner commented that the S & L story didn't lend itself to images. Without images, he said, "television can't do facts."
2. Many relevant documents were kept secret by law. Reporters didn't have access to credit reports and crucial loan documents. So, even if they had wanted to, they couldn't have examined documents protected by law because lawmakers fear such information might cause bank panics.

3. The victims didn't complain. After all, the federal government was covering the losses. "There weren't any pictures of anguished citizens lining up outside closed savings and loans" in the early days of the scandal. There were in the final days and those pictures began to make the nation realize just how bad things were.<sup>10</sup>

Hume also claims that the mass media did not pick up on the Savings and Loan scandal until very late in the game because the villains were a politically powerful bipartisan group. But three reasons she lists especially interest us:

1. "The press simply isn't equipped to do everything the public expects it to do...."
2. Journalists have gotten used to having their information predigested" and
3. "Serious investigative journalism is considered too wasteful for today's bottom-line oriented journalism corporation managers."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, had some of these bank robbing executives been caught having sex with children or murdering one another, some journalist might have investigated them and uncovered, purely by accident, the S & L scandal.

Finally, the critical thinker ought to consider the conditions under which the news is gathered and reported. For example, what is the likelihood that correspondents in foreign countries where there are civil wars and revolutions going on are going to be able to have free access to all the information they desire? What government is going to allow journalists to freely roam amongst the enemy? How complete is information likely to be issuing from a country where journalists are licensed by the government, as is the case in many countries?

## 5.1 Accuracy of the mass media

Just how accurate is your daily newspaper or the national evening news? Milton Mayer analyzed a page-one story in the *Chicago Tribune* of about 2,500 words and found at least 122 inaccuracies and distortions in it.<sup>12</sup> Accounts of reporters writing of events they didn't attend or making inaccurate quotes (many times invented by the reporter), are well-documented.<sup>13</sup> A study done by Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz examined news articles on the Russian Revolution in the *New York Times* from March, 1917, until March, 1920.<sup>14</sup> What they found was paralleled during the Vietnam War, and, more recently, during the revolutions in Eastern Europe which in no way were anticipated by our general press. The optimism about a U.S. victory during Vietnam was as unjustified as was the optimism that the Russian Revolution would be crushed eighty years ago. Lippmann and Merz concluded that "a great people in a supreme crisis could not secure the minimum of necessary information on a supremely important event." Why? "Because," they said, "Reports on extremely important events are likely to be written to harmonize with generally accepted beliefs and prejudices." Official sources of information are likely to be partisan and less than honest in their reports to the reporters. "Most men...tend to accept or to reject in the light of their prejudices" (Clarke 1929: 276).

In 1922 the Chicago Commission on Race Relations published a report entitled *The Negro in Chicago*. The Commission had studied articles dealing with the Negro that had appeared in 1916 and 1917 in the three Chicago daily papers with the largest circulations.<sup>15</sup> The Commission wrote:

**"We have thousands of highly trained, experienced American correspondents in Washington, but despite many early warnings available to all, they never caught or ran with the depth of the Iran Contra scandal, corruption and waste in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the savings and loan industry, large-scale nuclear poisoning of community water supplies, mismanagement of our nuclear weapons plans, and so on."**  
**-- Ben H. Bagdikian**

Generally these articles indicated hastily acquired and partial information, giving highlights and picturing hysteria.

Frequently they showed gross exaggeration....The subjects receiving most frequent and extended treatment in these three papers were: crime, housing, politics, riots, and soldiers....For a public which depends upon newspapers for its information an inordinately one-sided picture is presented. This emphasis on individual crimes specifying Negroes in each offense tends to stamp the entire Negro group as criminal.

We hear African-American leaders making the same charges today. The only difference is the word "Negro."

On October 23, 1989, it was reported by the Boston mass media (and then around the nation) that a black man

**"...damn it, we make too many mistakes of fact and context. Then too few of us hurt enough inside when we do make mistakes. Too few of us correct those mistakes forthrightfully." --David Lawrence Jr., Executive Editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, "Is the Press Fair?" *Parade Magazine*, August 19, 1984, p. 8.**

in a jogging suit had shot Charles and Carol Stuart as they got in their car at a busy intersection in Boston. They had just attended a childbirth class; Carol was 6 months pregnant. The next day doctors performed a Caesarean section on Carol. She died, but delivered an 8-week premature child who also eventually died (on November 9). Charles Stuart, who was shot in the abdomen, described the killer as a black man in a jogging suit with a raspy voice.

Boston mayor Ray Flynn ordered every available cop to hunt for the black killer. *Newsweek* reported that

residents of the racially mixed area where the Stuarts had been attending the birthing class "complained that as many as 150 black men were illegally stopped and frisked every day."<sup>16</sup> The police arrested William Bennet, "a two-time loser with a long rap sheet." On Nov. 21st Charles Stuart reportedly had shown "a strong physical reaction" when shown a mug shot of Bennet. On December 28, Stuart identified Bennet from a lineup saying he looked "most like" the killer. *Newsweek* also reports that "A court document submitted by the prosecutor cited five witnesses as a reason to suspect Bennet...Only a day after the murder, the document said, three teenagers told police that Bennet's nephew had 'said his uncle shot the Stuarts.' A woman also said she saw Bennet on the night of the shooting with jewelry and a gun similar to the one Charles Stuart had described. Another woman reported that Bennet told her Stuart owed him money for drugs; she said Bennet added that the bullet 'wasn't meant for the woman, it was meant for the man'."

On January 4, 1990, Charles Stuart committed suicide. The day before, his brother Matthew had gone to the police and gave them Carol Stuart's wedding ring (which had allegedly been stolen by the killer) and told them that Charles had murdered Carol Stuart and had shot himself in an effort to make it look like someone else had done it. Not long afterwards the gun and Carol's handbag were found in a river where they had been thrown by Jack McMahon, Matthew's friend who had helped him dispose of the incriminating evidence.

Why did Charles Stuart do it? Who knows, but the evidence seems to indicate that he did not want a child and he did not want a wife who did not work. A friend of Charles Stuart, David MacLean, testified before a grand jury that Charles and he were out drinking in September when Stuart had asked him if he knew anyone who would kill his wife. MacLean said that Stuart had told him that Carol had refused to have an abortion and that he was afraid she wouldn't return to her job as a tax attorney after the baby was born. Carol made \$41,000 a year; Charles made about \$100,000 a year as a manager of a fur store. MacLean said that Charles told him he wanted the insurance money to open a restaurant, that he "didn't want to spend the rest of his life busting his ass for somebody else."<sup>17</sup>

The press just reported what the police and Charles Stuart asserted. When Charles made a tearful wheelchair visit to his dying newborn son, the TV cameras were there. When a friend of Charles read a letter at Carol's funeral, it was reported by the press. ("Good night, sweet wife, my love," wrote Charles, "Now you sleep away from me. I will never again know the feeling of your hand in mine, but I will always feel you...")

*Newsweek* wrote: "If it does nothing else, [Stuart's] suicide may help clarify the double standards and prejudices that allowed Stuart to succeed with his plot in the first place." After describing the "media circus," the "rationalized racism," and other inadequacies and failures of the press and police to be fair, skeptical, non-judgmental, and honest, *Newsweek* wrote: "When the police, under pressure from frenzied press coverage, are desperate to make an arrest--that's the time when the standards of evidence should be at their strongest, not weakest."<sup>18</sup>

A final note on the affair: minutes after she heard about Stuart's suicide, literary agent Jane Dystel phoned writer Joe Sharkey. That afternoon Sharkey was in Boston interviewing figures in the Stuart case. A few days later,

Dystel and Sharkey had a 26-page book proposal on an editor's desk. As news stories get turned into books and movies almost as soon as they are reported, the line between news and entertainment gets blurrier and blurrier. Before the year was out, "Good Night Sweet Wife: A Murder in Boston" showed on TV and was billed as a "fact-based story." Authorship was credited to Daniel Freudenberger.

As further evidence of how entertainment drives the news—even news regarding brutal murders—witness the number of books written by the attorneys involved in the O.J. Simpson trial. Prosecution lawyers have two books out; and at least two defense team members have published books on the trial. Marcia Clark of the prosecution and Johnny Cochran of the defense have each found work on television doing talk shows on law and crime. Even O.J. Simpson was hired to do commercials for a legal firm.

## 5.2 Managing the news

After the Geneva Conference in 1955, the term "managing the news" was coined by James Reston of the *New York Times* to describe "any governmental policy of issuing false evidence, suppressing evidence, distorting evidence, or harassing unfriendly critics." About the Geneva conference, Reston wrote:

I think there was a conscious effort to give the news. . .an optimistic flavor. I think there was a conscious effort there, decided upon even perhaps ahead of time, for spokesmen to emphasize all the optimistic facts coming out of that conference and to minimize all of the quarrels at that conference. . . .

After the Geneva conference a decision was taken in the government that perhaps this was having a bad effect, that the people in the Western countries were letting down their guard, and therefore a decision was made . . . that the government should strike another note. So that after the Geneva smiling, the new word went out that it might be a good idea now to frown a little bit, so the President made a speech at Philadelphia, taking quite a different light about the Geneva Conference. That is what I mean by managing the news (Clarke: 148).

The actions of modern politicians to manage the news are not completely without precedent. Abraham Lincoln suppressed the Emancipation Proclamation for three months because his advisers feared its release might cost the Republican Party an election. Today's presidents manage the news in ways Lincoln could not have imagined. We will give two examples. The first concerns President Bush and how he allowed himself to be manipulated for political reasons by a public relations firm representing the emir of Kuwait. The other concerns the way Presidents Clinton and Bush used the press.

### 5.2.1 Hill & Knowlton manipulate a nation

One of the more egregious examples of TV news manipulation is the work done by the public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton after the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. Hill and Knowlton worked for *Citizens for a Free Kuwait*, funded by the emir of Kuwait. Hill and Knowlton ignited public opinion to go to war in Iraq by coaching the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the U.S. to lie about herself to a Congressional committee (she said she was Nayirah, a Kuwaiti refugee) and claim that she had witnessed atrocities against babies by Iraqi soldiers. She claimed the soldiers stormed a hospital in Kuwait and pulled premature babies from their incubators, leaving them to die. President Bush cited the infants' deaths as an example of the kind of brutal aggression these modern day Nazis would continue to engage in if they were not stopped.<sup>19</sup> Hill and Knowlton also made available to news agencies videotapes of Kuwaiti refugees whose stories served their client's interests. At the time, Craig Fuller, President Bush's former chief of staff, headed Hill and Knowlton. The public relations firm had unrestricted travel privileges in Saudi Arabia, while journalists were severely limited in where they could travel to. The PR firm also

was the source for many amateur videos shot inside Kuwait and smuggled out to be edited and distributed by Hill and Knowlton on behalf of their client. These videotapes were widely used by TV news networks. The PR firm also coached Fatima Fahed for her lying testimony before the United Nations Security Council about atrocities she alleged she had witnessed in Kuwait. Morgan Strong interviewed Fahed, a close relative of a senior Kuwaiti official and the wife of Kuwait's minister of planning, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, *before* her UN testimony and she told him she had no firsthand knowledge of atrocities.<sup>20</sup> Says Strong, "It is an inescapable fact that much of what Americans saw on their news broadcasts, especially leading up to the Allied offensive against Iraqi-occupied Kuwait, was in large measure the contrivance of a public-relations firm."<sup>21</sup>

### 5.2.2 Clinton & Bush manipulate the press

Another example of managing the news is the way President Clinton used local television stations to bring his agenda to the American people on issues such as health care, the U.S. role in Somalia, tax reform, etc. For example, Mr. Clinton appeared on a television program in Sacramento, California, in October 1993, called "California Town Hall." It was moderated by KCRA Channel 3 anchor Stan Atkinson. The ninety minute program was broadcast statewide to NBC affiliates. After Sacramento, Clinton would take his "town hall" show to some other town in some other state. Why not just have a press conference in Washington, D.C., with the national and international press asking the questions? Because you cannot manage the Washington press corps the way you can local anchors or "town hall" sessions. The town hall audience and the questions they would ask the president were screened and selected by KCRA. We wanted "real people, not political types" in the audience, said KCRA new director Bill Bauman. "We tried to pick questions that deal with a wide variety of issues."<sup>22</sup> *Real people* asking a *variety of questions*: what more could a president ask for? No seasoned veteran of Washington manipulation asking follow-up questions to pointed inquiries. No relentless pressure to address rather than evade issues. Just soft questions, maybe a few tears and heartfelt expressions of sympathy to someone in the audience. Clinton could get out his message in a no-risk, easy-to-control, non-threatening setting.

A similar technique was used by both Bush and Clinton during their presidential campaigns. They would rent a small TV studio and satellite time. They would beam to local stations so that they could be interviewed by local anchors. These were paid interviews. That is, the candidates paid for the studios and the use of the satellite transponder. The candidates could get their messages out to a large television audience while appearing to be interviewed by the local anchor of every city in America. From a studio in Arkansas, Clinton conducted 40 interviews with stations in 25 states. His campaign paid for the interviews. He was doing commercials, in fact, but it is much cheaper this way.<sup>23</sup>

**Paramount studios stopped all company advertising in *Daily Variety* because of a scathing review by Joseph McBride of Paramount's "Patriot Games." McBride has been a staff critic and reporter for *Daily Variety* for over 20 years. He described the movie based on the novel by Tom Clancy a "right-wing cartoon of the British-Irish political situation." How did the editor of *Daily Variety*, Peter Bart, respond to McBride's politically influenced review of a politically influential movie? He apologized to Paramount and said not only would McBride not review any more Paramount films but his "situation as critic is being reviewed." Bart said he was especially disturbed by "the political nature of the review." Would Bart have been disturbed if McBride's review had expressed political sympathy with Clancy's?**



### 5.2.3 Special interest groups

Presidents and powerful PR firms are not the only ones who manage the news. Special interest groups also actively attempt to manage the news and manipulate public opinion. For example, on June 13, 1991, the *CBS Evening News* did a story on the hazards of automobile safety belts. A videotape was shown of a car tipping on its side, the car door opening, and the shoulder strap failing to hold a dummy, which fell out of the car and was crushed. CBS news correspondent Mark Phillips stated that shoulder straps are “a labor-saving device that may be costing lives instead of saving them.” CBS’s “eye” logo ran throughout the video segment of the story. The video, however, was not done by CBS. It was a video news release (VNR) sent to CBS by the Institute for Injury Reduction (IIR) which, says David Lieberman, is “a swell-sounding name for a lobby group largely supported by lawyers whose clients often sue auto companies for crash-related injuries.”<sup>24</sup> Lawyers for IIR often show reports like the CBS segment in court, hoping it will help them win cases and increase their settlements and thus increase their fees. Juries find reports aired by CBS and other major news agencies to be more credible than some taped test by a lobbying group with an obvious axe to grind.

According to Lieberman, some 4,000 VNRs were made available to newscasters in 1991. A Video News Release is the video equivalent of printed propaganda provided by interested parties to newspapers and magazines. One firm, Medialink of New York, distributed about half of these VNRs. About 80 percent of the country’s news directors say they use VNR material at least several times a month. The opportunity for manipulation of the TV news media is perhaps better than that for print media being influenced by press releases simply because the value of video footage can be completely independent of its news value. The image, not the information, will capture the audience.

*TV Guide* recommends that the label **VIDEO SUPPLIED BY [COMPANY OR GROUP NAME]** be visible for as long as VNR material is on-screen.<sup>25</sup> Something similar should be required of all infomercials, those half-hour or hour-long commercials that are presented as if they were news or entertainment programs. David Bartless, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, believes that stations should tell their viewers when they are watching a campaign-supplied interview. Such interviews, he believes, should be treated as if they were VNRs.<sup>26</sup>

In March, 2004, nineteen journalist groups asked “that public agencies stop producing videos that imitate television news stories or use announcers that identify themselves as reporters. Viewers expect a reporter to be a journalist employed by a news organization.” In VNRs, so-called reporters are often working for a public relations firm hired by a government agency. “We find that misidentification unacceptable,” they said. About the same time the journalist groups were complaining about the misuse of VNRs, Congress was investigating a claim that VNRs were produced by the Bush administration in which actors posed as journalists praising the benefits of the new Medicare law.

In considering the issue of managing the news, we must remember that many news organizations are part of huge conglomerates that have many special interests. For example, General Electric owns NBC, the

**“No people can be really free if its press is spoon-fed with government pap or if the news which provides a democracy with the rationale for its actions is so controlled, restricted, managed, or censored that it cannot be published.”--Hanson W. Baldwin, “Managed News: Our Peacetime Censorship,” *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1963), pp. 53-59.**

PAX Television Network, Telemundo Communications Group, CNBC, MSNBC, and Bravo, in addition to numerous local television and radio stations. When the *Today* show (NBC) did a program on shoddy products and their manufacturers that originally mentioned General Electric as one of the manufacturers, the GE name was deleted.<sup>27</sup> GE invests heavily in defense and nuclear power. When do you think we will see a major documentary on NBC on either of those subjects? Also, soon after GE bought NBC in 1986, a corporate executive sent out a memo advising NBC employees to start a political action committee with the aim of influencing congressional legislation on favored company projects. Failure to do so would raise questions about an employee’s “dedication to

the company.” When GE sold its home appliance division (which is what most Americans identify GE with, thanks to decades of advertising) to a foreign firm, the news was not reported by NBC. It was reported by ABC and CBS.

On the other hand, Disney owns ABC, which was one of the first to report that Kathy Lee Gifford’s Wal-Mart clothing line is made by child laborers making pennies a day. Gifford’s TV talk show was on rival CBS. However, no ABC newscaster mentioned that much of Disney’s clothing is also made by children in foreign countries. Disney also owns A&E, the History Channel, ESPN, and Lifetime, as well as many local television and radio

stations.

**“In a universe that values entertainers more than it values journalists, the journalists are becoming entertainers....partly paid for by profits from entertainment shows....”The greatest risk in this news-as-entertainment urge is the most obvious--the trivialization of important issues once deemed worthy of serious treatment even at the cost of lower ratings.... -- Peter J. Boyer, *Who Killed CBS?- the undoing of America’s number one news network* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).**

The other major network, CBS, is owned by Viacom, which also owns Simon and Schuster, Blockbuster, Paramount Pictures, and numerous radio stations. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation Limited owns Fox Broadcasting, 20th Century Fox film productions, numerous television stations and newspapers (mostly in Australia and the United Kingdom), HarperCollins publishing house, and TV guide, among other things. Time-Warner is the largest media company in the world. It owns CNN, Court TV and Turner Broadcasting. It owns AOL and

MapQuest.com, in addition to TimeLife Books, numerous magazines, and many film, TV, and music production companies.

In addition, the Sinclair Broadcast Group controls more television stations (62) in the U.S. than anyone outside the major networks. Sinclair Broadcast Group reaches about one-fourth of U.S. households. Like Fox Broadcasting, it uses its power to promote a conservative political agenda in its news department. For example, in April of 2004 it ordered its seven ABC stations not to broadcast "Nightline" because it planned to broadcast the names and photographs of the more than 500 U.S. troops that had been killed in the Iraq war. The Sinclair Group said it thought the program was trying to undermine the war effort. Shortly before the 2004 presidential election, Sinclair ordered its stations to show an anti-John Kerry film. It offered Kerry time to respond after the film aired, but it was not required by law to do so. In 2000, the “personal attack” law, which gave politicians the right to respond to television attacks on their honesty or integrity, was abolished. The “fairness doctrine,” which was adopted by the Federal Trade Commission in 1949 out of concern that stations would use their power to advocate single perspectives, was abolished in 1987 by the Reagan administration.

Sinclair fired its Washington bureau chief because he publicly criticized the company for ordering the anti-Kerry film to be shown. Sinclair relented when shareholders, concerned that the value of their stock would diminish, challenged the plan to air the program. Sinclair announced that only parts of the anti-Kerry program would be shown during a program that would examine the use of documentaries such as Michael Moore’s "Fahrenheit 9/11" and "Celsius 41.11" to influence elections. Michael Moore’s attempt to have his anti-Bush film “Fahrenheit 9/11” shown on pay-per-view cable TV the night before the 2004 election added fuel to the speculation that eventually media politics will abandon all pretense at being fair or balanced and will degenerate into a propaganda war by competing political viewpoints (“Politics and TV: An explosive mix?” J. Freedom du Lac, *Sacramento Bee*, Oct. 17, 2004, p. 1.) The producers of "Celsius 41.11," a pro-Bush film aimed at refuting many of the claims made in Moore’s film, scheduled its release for shortly before the 2004 presidential election.

So what is new? What is new is the kind of ownership of today’s TV and radio stations and newspapers. Most are not family or locally owned. Today, multinational corporations own many of the mass media broadcasting or newsprint businesses. They are in competition with each other for more than just news stories. They have many economic interests, and their reports can affect those interests. Is this situation ideal for assuring that the public gets fair and accurate information from the sources of that information?

Finally, individual rich persons can manage the news because they can either buy newspapers and television stations or they can hire journalists to produce stories for them: e.g., Rupert Murdoch (Fox network and various publications), the Rev. Sun Myung Moon (*Washington Times*), Bill Gates (richest man in the world and owner of Microsoft) or Richard Mellon Scaife. In the case of Microsoft’s Gates, they can wage fake “grassroots” support for their company by soliciting opinion pieces from free-lance writers and letters to the editor from business leaders

expressing their support of Microsoft in one of its many anti-trust battles with the government. Scaife has spent millions of his inheritance from the Mellon banking family to hire “journalists” to destroy President Clinton’s reputation by proving that deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster did not kill himself. Scaife also owns the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* whose Clinton-bashing reporter Christopher Ruddy has financial ties to Jerry Falwell and others on the Christian right who would like to replace Clinton with one of their own. Falwell’s associates produced *The Clinton Chronicles* (1994), a videotape accusing Clinton of everything from Foster’s murder to cocaine smuggling. The video was narrated by Larry Nichols, who was fired from a state agency for malfeasance in 1987 by Arkansas Governor Clinton. Nichols received more than \$89,000 from *Citizens for Honest Government*, the front name for the group that produced the video. Falwell’s buddies have set up the Rutherford Institute which, among other things, funded the Paula Jones’ sexual harassment suit against President Clinton. The Rutherford Institute pretends to be a “civil liberties” group, but its main aim seems to promote hatred of Clinton and saving the world through prayer in the schools and opposing abortion. Its founder, attorney John W. Whitehead, worked for Falwell’s Moral Majority Legal Defense Fund. Add to this mix R. Emmet Tyrell’s *American Spectator*, and you have what Hillary Rodham Clinton referred to as a “vast right wing conspiracy” to smear and ruin her husband. David Brock, who used to be one of the darlings reporting for *American Spectator*, fell out of favor with the entire conservative community when he wrote a book on Mrs. Clinton that did not demonize her. Brock was the one who started the Paula Jones debacle by writing an article based on the claims of Arkansas state troopers Larry Patterson and Roger Perry who claimed they witnessed Clinton in various sexual escapades when he was governor of Arkansas. Brock now doubts the veracity of the troopers’ story and admits that his purpose in writing the story was “ideological.” He now claims that “in 1994, Nichols and state trooper Patterson opened a joint bank account and began making payments to at least six other people from Arkansas who made allegations about Clinton’s personal life.” Patrick Matrisciana, the president of *Citizens for Honest Government*, held a joint bank account with Christopher Ruddy with total assets of \$3.069 million which was used to make “payments to critics of the president.”<sup>28</sup> Many of the claims originating with these conservative groups were reported without further investigation by mainstream newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Dallas Morning News*. Each of those newspapers reported and then retracted false stories about an eyewitness to sex between the President and Monica Lewinsky. The irony is that Clinton’s behavior was so reckless that very little effort would have been needed to discredit him.

These efforts to inform, misinform, and disinform (purposely provide false and misleading claims as if they were accurate information) cross the line between managing the news and *faking* the news, the topic to which we now turn.

### 5.3 Fake news

In 1985 the syndicated columnist Richard Reeves claimed that “The people taking over television are blithely going about the business—the very profitable business—of screwing up America’s heads so bad that by the time they’re finished we won’t know up from down, truth from fiction.”<sup>29</sup> Reeves feared that a new generation of television journalists “trained in sales conferences and dressing rooms” would significantly affect our perception of reality with its penchant for “fiction news.” Today it is not called “fiction news” but *docudrama* or *news re-enactment*. Reeves was concerned that programs such as NBC’s mini-series *Fatal Vision* would be just the beginning of presenting fictionalized accounts as if they were documentaries. *Fatal Vision* was about the murders of the wife and children of Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald, who was found guilty of the crimes. A poll done in MacDonald’s hometown by *Newsday* found that before the film was shown 20 percent thought MacDonald was guilty; after the film was shown 50 percent thought he was guilty. Many people, said Reeves, “believe that the camera doesn’t lie.”

Reeves was ahead of his time. Re-enactments present fiction as fact, and they do so in a medium that uses images to give the illusion of reality. Re-creations of events can be misleading and deceptive, making the viewer think an alleged event actually occurred. The opportunity for abuse of journalistic power has rarely been as great. For example, ABC’s *World News Tonight* aired a dramatization of alleged spy Felix Bloch passing a briefcase to a

Soviet agent. The scene looked like the real thing and it was not labeled a simulation. It made an alleged event look like it was a recorded fact.<sup>30</sup>

### 5.3.1 Faking crimes: the American posse

Presenting re-enactments of crimes, as in the programs *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries*, has become very popular. These programs worry some people other than wanted criminals. Civil-liberties lawyers and media-ethics experts "have become increasingly uneasy" about such programs, according to Edward Felsenthal of the *Wall Street Journal*. "They argue that the shows present a one-sided version of how a crime took place, often pinning blame on suspects before they've even been indicted. And they worry that suspects won't get a fair trial if potential jurors form opinions on the basis of the television show, even though judges often disqualify jurors who have been exposed to pretrial publicity."<sup>31</sup> Not only are the crimes presented from the point of view of the police, but also the concern for ratings may have the shows turning petty crimes into major ones and minor offenders into major criminals.

More important, though, than the potential for distortion and prejudicing a criminal case, is the fact that such shows require an intimate rapport between the police and journalists. According to Felsenthal, law-enforcement officials praise programs that turn millions of viewers into "the largest posse in the history of police work." At least one viewer, Tom Goldstein, is concerned. "One of the roles of the media is to be a watchdog on law enforcement," says Goldstein, dean of U.C. Berkeley School of Journalism. "When the two become partners, it leads to mischief."<sup>32</sup>

It should be added that it is not just *fiction* news that concerns lawyers and media-ethics experts. The way the news media covers ongoing criminal investigations, preliminary hearings, and trials in high profile cases can be just as one-sided and manipulative as faked news.

### 5.3.2 *Dateline*: the faked truck explosion

Advertising executive Jim Morrissey said: "The facts are never enough....Imagery lives on." Unfortunately, sometimes the desire for vivid imagery compromises the presentation of the facts not only in advertising but also in news reporting, leading some television news programs to commit serious violations of even the most lenient media-ethics. I am referring to the practice of not just re-creating the news but of *faking the news entirely*.

One of the most publicized example of fake news in recent times is the case of NBC's faking a crash test in a story about trucks made by General Motors. The story, labeled "Waiting to Explode?", first appeared on

*Anyone who thinks the camera doesn't lie, doesn't think.*

*Dateline*, which was then cited as the source for the "news" story on NBC and other networks. In explicit video, NBC "proved" that GM trucks with gasoline tanks mounted outside the trucks' underframe are prone to explosion when hit from the side. In the NBC demonstration video, a GM truck burst into flames after being hit from the side. A man identified as Byron Bloch, safety consultant, went on the air and described the fire as a "holocaust." NBC reporter Michele Gillen claimed that the crash had punctured a hole in the gasoline tank. No mention was made of the fact that the producers of the show had attached toy rockets to the truck's fuel tank and then detonated the rockets by remote control at the moment of impact. Nevertheless, even when this fact became known, Michael Gartner, president of NBC at the time, said: "The segment that was broadcast on *Dateline NBC* was fair and

accurate.”<sup>33</sup> Harold Pearce, GM’s executive vice-president and general counsel, did not think so. He called the NBC program “outrageous misrepresentation and conscious deception.”

The truth about the fake news came about due to the investigative journalism of Pete W. Pesterre, editor of *Popular Hot Rodding* magazine, and GM itself. For reasons unrelated to the faking of the story, Pesterre had criticized the *Dateline* show in an editorial. A reader called him and told him of Fire Chief Glen R. Bailey Jr., who was at the scene and thought the test was rigged. GM hired its own investigators who asked NBC to let them look at the trucks used in the tests. NBC refused. The investigators checked 22 junkyards before they found the trucks, but the fuel tanks were missing. Bruce Enz, who calls himself a “news gatherer,” was president of the consulting firm hired by NBC to do the crash tests. He had given the tanks to a neighbor. GM got the tanks but Mr. Enz would not answer any questions about the faked test, claiming he had First Amendment protection from interrogation.<sup>34</sup>

So, with little or no help from NBC, GM discovered that the fire that was described as a “holocaust” was a small, 15-second flame; that a non-standard gas cap was used and it blew off at impact, releasing gasoline that caught fire; and that X-rays showed no puncture in the gas tank. It cost General Motors nearly \$2 million to investigate a piece of faked news. Who knows what it cost NBC to fake the story.

The question that must be asked is: Was this just a lapse of judgment of one TV news network or was it symptomatic of more widespread dishonesty, or at least incompetence, in the media?

Expert opinions are divided on this issue.

## 5.4 Experts on the news

My father-in-law’s favorite television program was the McNeil/Lehrer Report (now the “NewsHour with Jim Lehrer”), a public television program that focuses on one or two issues in more depth than the evening news. The common format is to interview experts and major players. One thing my father-in-law did not like about the program, though, was that he thought they kept interviewing the same people. He was right. This is a problem with all major news organizations. They keep interviewing the same experts.

Stephen Hess is one of those experts the media keep interviewing. He is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., “think tank” that specializes in research into economic, governmental, and international problems. In an article he wrote for the *Washington Post*, Hess claimed he got 301 calls the previous year from TV journalists. “Basically, this is what happens,” writes Hess. “A producer calls to check me out asking enough questions to know whether I am likely to say what they are after. If I do not respond appropriately, they say they will get back to me. Which means they won’t. This is a big city and someone else is sure to have the magic words they are looking for.” Hess admits that the producers never tell him what to say. “If they choose to interview me on camera, someone shows up and asks a question in as many permutations as it takes to get the answer that is the chip that I’m supposed to represent in the mosaic that is their ‘package’.” In short, Hess believes experts like him are used not to test hypotheses or get information, but to find facts or quotes that fit a preconceived hypothesis. This, Hess notes, is dishonest. “TV news is increasingly dishonest in that increasingly its stories are [a] gathering of quotes or other material to fit a hypothesis....Reporters tend to interview only those who fit a preconceived notion of what the story will be, and a story’s hypothesis becomes self-fulfilling.” It is interesting to note that Hess does not feel that print journalists shop for quotes the way TV journalists do. Hess bases his opinion on the 789 calls from print reporters that he received in the previous year.

Thus, when evaluating the claims of experts used in TV sound bites, we have to consider the possibility that the expert is being used to bolster the viewpoint of the TV journalist or news producer. What the expert says may well be true or reasonable, but what other equally qualified and reasonable experts would say, if they were given the opportunity, might contradict the “news” we have been given.

## 6. Liberal bias in the media

One common complaint about the media is that they have a liberal bias. This complaint frequently comes from anti-liberal members of the media. Popular media figures like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, George Will, or Sean Hannity try to promote themselves as antidotes to this liberal bias. Former TV journalist Bernard Goldberg wrote a book of anecdotes about the liberal bias of the media (2003: Perennial), but it was countered by another journalist, Eric Alterman, who claims that conservative journalists, politicians and talk show hosts are wrong about liberal bias. Alterman argues that the perception of bias has intimidated many media outlets into presenting more conservative opinions to counterbalance a bias that does not exist (2003: Basic Books).

Is there a liberal or conservative bias in the media? It depends on your viewpoint. If you are liberal, you probably think the media slant news and information toward the conservative side. If you are conservative, you probably agree with Goldberg. My view is that most criticism of the media for being either too liberal or too conservative is misguided. Most of us would like the media to be an advocate for our own viewpoint. Unmasked, most complaints about media bias are really laments over the lack of power to control what the media present and how they present it. For example, conservative Christians would like the media to portray gay marriage and abortion as sinful. Some critics would like the media to play down reports of U.S. soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq. The President would like only the good news about the economy to be publicized. Atheists would like to see newspapers drop their sections on religious issues.

The fact is that if anyone controls the bias of the media it is the *owners* and their CEOs, not the managers, reporters, and editors. Owners and CEOs tend to be more conservative than liberal.

It may be true that the majority of journalists are more liberal than conservative. However, it does not follow from that fact, if it is a fact, that journalism has a liberal bias. It is not justifiable to assume that a liberal (or conservative) journalist can't be fair when doing a story on an issue unless it fits with his or her own biases.

Some critics think the concern over liberal bias is a diversion from other serious problems with the media. They think the media promote superstition and pseudoscience when they produce positive stories about such things as graphology, alleged psychics, the polygraph, or astrology. Rather than encourage people to think more critically, the media too often encourage lazy thinking—locking onto paranormal or supernatural explanations for events rather than stimulating viewers, listeners, or readers to investigate natural and scientific explanations. Some take the media to task for their use of fear to attract audiences (Glassner: 2000) and their devotion to superficial issues like the private lives of politicians and other famous people. Real news—the stories about the kinds of things that have real impact on many people's lives—are neglected for scare stories and celebrity anecdotes (Radford: 2003). Scare stories are especially popular on local TV news programs: *How household items like toothpicks and staples are shaving off years of your life! Tune in tonight to find out what you can do about it and lose weight in the bargain!*

In the fall of 1995, Rocky Mountain Media Watch analyzed tapes of local evening news programs of 100 television stations in 35 states that aired the same day. Thirty percent of the news was devoted to crime. Coverage of government came in a distant second at 11 percent and environmental stories accounted for 2 percent of the stories covered that day. Poverty received 1.8 percent of air time. Unions and labor got 1.6 percent and civil rights got 0.9 percent. Other news of the day included a Miss Bald USA contest, a beauty contest for cows, a bourbon-tasting contest, and a story about a kangaroo who fell into a swimming pool in Australia. The motto of local TV news seems to be *if it bleeds, it leads*. "Stories about crime, disaster and war averaged 42 percent of the news on all 100 stations."

There does seem to be a bias here, but it does not seem to be either liberal or conservative. In 1990, the *Columbia Journalism Review* published an article by John McManus, who spent 50 days inside TV newsrooms in several metropolitan areas. According to McManus, "Overall, 18 of the 32 stories analyzed—56 percent—were inaccurate or misleading." There was a pattern, too. "There is an economic logic to these distortions and inaccuracies. All but one...were likely to increase the story's appeal, help cut down the cost of reporting or oversimplify a story so it could be told in two minutes." The bias is toward cutting costs while increasing ratings.

## 7. The Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW)

The Internet is more a *conduit* of sources than a source itself. Millions of people use the Internet to post facts and opinions. One site links you to many other sites. The accuracy and reliability of the data vary from site to site, just as they do with information in newspapers, magazines, and books. The same critical thinking skills needed to evaluate information from traditional print, audio, and video sources are needed when researching on the Internet. However, a few unique qualities of the Internet require special consideration. (While there are other parts of the Internet, the comments below are intended to apply only to that part of the Internet known as the World Wide Web. Claims made in chat groups or on Usenet sites should usually be considered anonymous hearsay.)

**It is often difficult to know the purpose of a World Wide Web site.** This often makes it difficult to evaluate the claims found there. Whether a site is an attempt at news, parody, satire, or fiction is not always immediately apparent. Before you can evaluate the claims on a site, you must first determine what the purpose of the site is. This is not typically a problem with printed materials. There is a similar problem at times with television programs, however. When you first tune into a program, it is often not immediately apparent whether the show is aimed at entertaining, educating, or selling a product. However, one can usually figure out the purpose of a television program by watching it for a few minutes or looking up a description in a television program guide. To determine the purpose of a website, you may have to go to a Main Page or Home Page from the site and use data provided there to determine its purpose. If you cannot determine the purpose of the site, then you should not rely on the claims made there.

**The author of a website is not always identified.** This makes it impossible to evaluate the author's credentials, background, track record, etc. If the author is anonymous to you, you cannot assume he or she is credible.

**There is often no screening process for a website.** Literally anyone can now be an internationally published author simply by having a website. There is no screening process, no credentials or degrees required, no training necessary. With many other forms of publication, one can depend somewhat on others to do a fair amount of screening, not for the *truth* of claims, but for competency and general reliability. Incompetent and unreliable authors do not usually succeed in getting published in the real world. Some do, of course, but editors and referees at journals, newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses do a great deal of screening. Nevertheless, one cannot assume that just because something is printed in a reputable newspaper or in a book by a reputable publishing house that it is true. One still has to use one's critical reading and thinking skills to ferret out what is reasonable to believe from what is likely to be speculation or false. One still has to be able to tell the difference between statements of fact and statements of opinion. One still has to learn as much as possible about a source and rely on what is known about a source to determine who is reliable and who is not.

There is no policing on the Internet, either. Thus, anyone can say he or she is a Ph.D. or a rocket scientist or works for a secret government organization. It is often impossible to verify such credentials. If a person claims he or she is affiliated with an educational institution, one can usually verify that since most such institutions have their own websites (which will have *.edu* in their URLs, i.e., uniform resource locators, or addresses) and they often publish lists of their faculties. If not, one can usually contact the universities to verify the claims made. A URL ending in *.gov* is a government site and is probably well monitored.

**The currency of data is often difficult to establish for a website.** Many websites do not provide a date when the data was posted nor do they have copyright notices. With newspapers, magazines, and books, one usually can figure out quickly whether information is outdated. This is not always possible with a website.

**Disinformation is often difficult to correct because of the high transmission speed of information on the Internet and because of the number of people who will repeat false or questionable claims as if they were authoritative.** One problem the Internet poses is that the same story can get repeated by a thousand different people in a dozen countries and yet the basic claims of all these documents might issue from a single source deliberately planting false information or speculating about a favorite paranoid fear. Rumors spread in any medium, but on the Internet they can spread around the world almost instantly. When newspapers and television people are

used as conduits of disinformation, they can try to make amends by retracting or correcting false stories. There is no such thing as retraction or correction by the Internet.

**Publication on the Internet is ephemeral.** It is common to find that an Internet site you once visited no longer exists. This makes it difficult or impossible to reference websites the way one can reference a book, magazine, or television program. The book may go out of print, but it will always have a publication or copyright date. With the Internet, material you cite today may be gone tomorrow, or it may have “moved” (i.e., have a new “address” or URL).

Despite the above caveats, the Internet can be an excellent source of reliable information provided by credible sources. Many sources do identify their authors and provide enough information for one to determine their credibility. Many sources are recognizable as generally reliable; for, they are the same sources one finds off the Internet: *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *The Smithsonian*, *Nova*, *Scientific American*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, etc., as well as authors who are known to you from their print publications.

**Note: any messages in unsolicited e-mail should be regarded as suspect. If in doubt, consult *snopes.com*, the Urban Legends Reference Pages of Barbara and David Mikkelson, who make a living tracking down rumors and questionable claims.**

### Exercise 3-2

Compare the treatment of the same news story by two or three daily metropolitan newspapers. Examine the articles for similarities and differences in sources, language, slant or bias, positioning (where is the article located?), headlines, etc. Do the same for two or three newsmagazines (e.g., *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *National Review*).

### Chapter Three Self-test: true or false? (Check your answers in Answers to Selected Exercises.)

1. Whenever possible one should use one's own knowledge, general and specific, to determine whether to believe a claim.
2. Greed or revenge will sometimes motivate a person to say things that are not true.
3. When evaluating the credibility of a source it is not important to consider the source's motives.
4. Checkbook journalism is the practice of paying people for interviews.
5. We should be especially skeptical of the testimony of anyone who has much to gain by lying and who is the sole source of information.
6. If a claim is made by an eyewitness, you should consider not only the integrity of the source but also the environmental, physical, emotional, and intellectual factors that might affect observation.
7. The fact that a witness is confident and unhesitating in identifying someone or in describing something from memory indicates that the testimony is probably accurate.
8. In choosing to believe one of two conflicting testimonies, you are not implying that one of the witnesses is lying.
9. Some people are more attentive in their observations than others are.
10. Before one should accept a claim solely on the basis of expert testimony, one should determine that the expert is really qualified in the subject matter that he or she is testifying about.
11. If one is an expert in one field, one's testimony in other fields becomes more reliable than other non-experts in those other fields.
12. Some fields are so controversial that there is scarcely a claim in the field that isn't defended by one expert and rejected by another.
13. You should not expect to find more agreement among experts about fundamental matters in the sciences than among experts in either the social sciences or the humanities.
14. The great diversity of opinion in the humanities and social sciences reflects the lack of useful information and opinion to be found in those disciplines.
15. False or unsubstantiated claims can come to be accepted as true among experts in a field through *communal reinforcement* (the process of self-proclaimed or media-proclaimed experts reinforcing each other's opinions).
16. Those who have the authority of power also have the authority of knowledge or experience.



17. Journalists have worldviews, political affiliations, loyalties, ambitions, hopes, religious beliefs, biases, and prejudices, and are subject to the same hindrances to critical thinking as the rest of us.
18. The worst part about journalism based upon information provided by interested parties is that only part of the story gets reported—at least initially—the part that favors the way of looking at things held by the source of the information.
19. Not only do mass media reports often serve the interests of those in power, they exaggerate the significance of much of what they report.
20. Our worldviews are molded by what we deem significant.
21. In general, the fact that experts are paid for their expertise is a good reason in itself to distrust them.
22. The *reputation* of a person is the best guide for deciding whether to trust an expert who gained his or her expertise from experience.
23. Experts can easily deceive us, since we usually lack the knowledge and experience necessary to judge their opinions.
24. According to Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, the stories of journalists on important events are likely to be written to harmonize with generally accepted beliefs and prejudices.
25. According to Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, most of us tend to accept or to reject news stories according to our prejudices.
26. Police officers, district attorneys, and newsmen do not mirror the society in which they live; they are not subject to the same prejudices and failures as the rest of us, and they are rarely led by their emotions instead of their brains.
27. “Managing the news” was coined by James Reston of the *New York Times* to describe the government’s policy of issuing false evidence, suppressing evidence, distorting evidence, or harassing unfriendly critics.
28. According to Morgan Strong, much of what Americans saw on news broadcasts leading up to the offensive against Iraqi-occupied Kuwait was in large measure an example of managing the news by the public-relations firm of Hill and Knowlton.
29. According to David Lieberman, about 80 percent of the country’s news directors say they use Video News Releases at least several times a month.
30. A Video News Release (VNR) is the video equivalent of printed propaganda provided by interested parties to newspapers and magazines.
31. There is careful screening by the International Truth Organization of all claims posted on the Internet.
32. An example of managing the news is the way President Clinton used local television stations to bring his agenda to the American people on issues such as health care, the U.S. role in Somalia, and tax reform.
33. Special interest groups rarely attempt to manage the news but when they try, they are never successful.
34. The ability to manipulate TV news with VNRs is enhanced because the value of video footage can be completely independent of its news value.
35. Experts are often used by the mass media not to test hypotheses or get information, but to find facts or quotes that fit a preconceived hypothesis.
36. Besides being oversimplified, the information in the mass media is likely to be incomplete and one-sided.
37. A journalist can easily slant or slip in judgments on events by quoting people who express the opinion the journalist wishes to express.
38. The Internet can often be a source of reliable and credible information.
39. The news media are highly reliable sources of information about government and special interest blocs although the government and special interest groups themselves are managing information that might affect our opinion of them.
40. The way the news media cover ongoing criminal investigations, preliminary hearings and trials in high profile cases can be just as one-sided and manipulative as faked news.
41. Re-creations of events for television docudramas can be misleading and deceptive, making the viewer think an alleged event actually occurred.
42. Many civil-liberties lawyers and media-ethics experts believe that a docudrama of an alleged crime presents a one-sided version of how a crime took place, often pinning blame on suspects before they’ve even been indicted.
43. Mass media do not depend on advertising for any significant income.
44. The potential for distortion and prejudicing a criminal case exists when an intimate rapport exists between the police and journalists.
45. The members of the mass media can be diligent watchdogs on law enforcement when they become partners with law enforcement.

## Further Reading - Chapter Three

Alterman, Eric. (2003) *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News*. Basic Books.

Clarke, Edwin Leavitt. (1929) *The Art of Straight Thinking*. D. Appleton-Century Company.

Glassner, Barry. (2000) *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. Basic Books.

Goldberg, Bernard. (2003) *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. Perennial.

Postman, Neil. (1986) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Viking Press.

Postman, Neil and Steve Powers. (1965) *How to Watch TV News*. Penguin Books.

Radford, Benjamin. (2003) *Media Mythmakers: How Journalists, Activists, and Advertisers Mislead Us*. Prometheus Books.

Windes, Russel R. and Arthur Hastings. (1965) *Argument and Advocacy*. Random House.

## Notes - Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup>Testimony here refers not only to testimony under oath in a court of law, but also to testimony given to reporters or others where no such oath is involved.

<sup>2</sup>Adolph Beck served seven years in prison after being mistakenly identified by twenty-two eyewitnesses. Seven eyewitnesses identified Bernard Pagano, a Catholic Priest, as having robbed them at gunpoint. Robert Clouser confessed to the crimes when it became apparent to him that the priest was going to be convicted. More recently, Randall Lynn Ayers spent eight years in prison for the rape, robbery and shooting of a 15-year-old girl. Randall was 17 when he was convicted in 1982. Eight years later Robert Minton, charged with slaying two Cincinnati women, confessed to the earlier crime. Minton offered details of the crime that convinced investigators he was telling the truth. When the victim of the 1981 attack looked at Ayers and Minton, who strongly resembles Ayers, she could not identify which was her assailant. *Sacramento Bee*, July 22, 1990. See *Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness and the Expert Who Puts Memory on Trial* by Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketchum (St. Martin's Press 1992).

<sup>3</sup>We do admire some people who question authority. For example, if the challenger is attacking someone we disagree with. Criticism of one's own democratic government is often attacked as treasonous, but the same people admire critics in non-democratic countries who attack their government's policies.

<sup>4</sup>Ellen Bass, Laura Davis, Wendy Maltz, Beverly Holman, Beverly Engel, Mary Jane Williams and E. Sue Blume. See above, page 10.

<sup>5</sup>Carol Tavris, "Hysteria and the incest-survivor machine," *Sacramento Bee*, Forum section, January 17, 1993, p. 1. Tavris is the author of several works in psychology, including *The Mismeasure of Woman* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1992). She is also the editor of *Every Woman's Emotional Well-being* (Garden city, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986).

Here are a few of the unproved, unscientifically researched notions that are being bandied about by these child abuse experts: (1) If you doubt that you were abused as a child or think that it might be your imagination, this is a sign of "post-incest syndrome" [Blume]. (2) If you can't remember any specific instances of being abused, but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, "it probably did" [Bass and Davis]. (3) When a person can't remember his or her childhood or has very fuzzy memories "incest must always be considered a possibility" [Maltz and Holman]. And, (4) "If you have any suspicion at all, if you have any memory, no matter how vague, it probably really happened. It is far more likely that you are blocking the memories, denying it happened" [Engel].

<sup>6</sup>Yet, it has happened. In a modern version of the Salem witch hunts, the McMartin pre-school case exemplifies the very worst in institutionalized justice in the hunt for child molesters. See Mary Ann Mason, "The McMartin case revisited: the conflict between social work and criminal justice," [on evaluating the credibility of children as witnesses in sexual abuse cases] *Social Work*, v. 36, no. 5 (Sept, 1991), pp. 391-396, and Marion Zenn Goldberg, "Child witnesses: lessons learned from the McMartin trials," *Trial*, v. 26, no. 10 (Oct, 1990), pp. 86-88. See also Richard Lacayo, "The longest mistrial; the McMartin Pre-School case ends at last," *Time* (August 6, 1990), p. 28; Frank McConnell, "The trials of television: the McMartin case," *Commonweal* (March 23, 1990), pp. 189-190; Douglas J. Besharov, "Protecting the innocent," *National Review* (Feb 19, 1990), pp. 44-46; Margaret Carlson, "Six years of trial by torture: children, defendants, jurors and judge were all abused in the wasteful McMartin case," *Time* (Jan 29, 1990), pp. 26-28; and "The child-abuse trial that left a national legacy," *U.S. News & World Report* (Jan 29, 1990), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Alvin A. Snyder, "Lies the government made me tell about KAL 007," *Sacramento Bee*, Forum 2, September 8, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> "Reagan ties Bird to insurance bind," by Leo Rennert, *Sacramento Bee*, May 31, 1986, p. A22.

<sup>9</sup> Ben H. Bagdikian, "Journalism's sins of omission," *Sacramento Bee*, Jan 24, 1990 p. B5.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* Hume also notes that the media's handling of the S&L scandal was not much different from "our inability to unravel and explain the importance of the Iran-Contra abuses, [and] the Housing and Urban Development influence-buying schemes.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> "How to Read the Chicago Tribune," *Harpers Magazine* (April, 1949). pp. 24-35.

<sup>13</sup> Here is just one example. Reporter Don Stanley once wrote an article for the *Sacramento Bee* that gave every appearance of being an eyewitness account of a talk given by Gloria Steinem at U.C. Davis. In fact, Stanley left the lecture hall before the talk began. He had an 11 p.m. deadline to meet and the talk was delayed until after 9 p.m. due to a bomb threat. Stanley didn't even know there was a bomb threat, though it was announced over the public address system. He claims he "asked the guy alongside me" what was announced on the P.A. and "he simply told me that the hall was going to be cleared and the talk started at 9 p.m." Steinem gave Stanley a personal interview and summarized for him what she was going to talk about. Unfortunately for him she changed her mind. Those who read his article and had been at the talk were very confused as he (1) made no mention of the bomb threat and (2) reported on a speech nobody heard. See the *Sacramento Bee*, Nov. 27, 1983, p. B1. Some high profile journalists caught faking it (besides those already mentioned in this chapter) should be noted: Janet Cooke (*Washington Post*), Steven Glass (*New Republic*), and Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle (*Boston Globe*).

<sup>14</sup> "A Test of the News," *New Republic*, Supplement. Aug. 4, 1920 (Windes and Hastings, 276 ff.).

<sup>15</sup> *The University of Chicago Press*, 1922. See Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup> "A Murderous Hoax," January 22, 1990, pp. 16 ff.

<sup>17</sup> "Race and Hype in a Divided City: the double standards of police and press," by Jonathan Alter and Mark Starr, *Newsweek*, January 21, 1990, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> After the war ended, ABC television reported (March 15, 1991) that it was true that 312 babies had died in a maternity hospital but they had not died because Iraqi soldiers killed them or stole their incubators. The babies died because the doctors and nurses abandoned the hospital. Dr. Mohammed Matar and his wife, Dr. Fayeza Youssef, who ran the hospital, said that the babies died because "no one stayed to care for them" after the invasion. Matar admitted that the reports on Iraqi atrocities about the babies were "for propaganda." See *Sacramento Bee*, "Iraqis didn't kill babies, ABC says," March 16, 1991, p. A-19.

<sup>20</sup> "Portions of the GULF WAR were brought to you by...the folks at Hill and Knowlton," Morgan Strong, *TV Guide*, February 22, 1992, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

---

<sup>22</sup> “Spontaneity scripted at town hall/ KCRA’s staff doesn’t want any surprises during Clinton Forum,” by Jennifer Bojorquez, *Sacramento Bee*, September 29, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> David Lieberman, “Fake News,” *TV Guide*, Feb. 22, 1992, p.16. According to Frank Geer, a Clinton media advisor, it costs about \$600 an hour to rent a satellite transponder.

<sup>24</sup> “Fake News,” *TV Guide*, Feb. 22, 1992, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> “Journalism’s sins of omission” by Ben H. Bagdikian, former reporter and editor who now teaches at UC Berkeley in the Graduate School of Journalism. The original article was in *Newsday*; it was reprinted in the *Sacramento Bee*, Jan 24, 1990, p. B5. The information on General Electric and NBC is taken from Bagdikian’s article.

<sup>28</sup> The information regarding the right-wing conspiracy outlined in this section came from two Internet sources: *Conspire.com Weekly* (conpire.com) and *Salon* (salonmagazine.com). Evaluating Internet sources is discussed below in section 6 of this chapter.

<sup>29</sup> “Re-Creating News for Television,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 13, 1985, FORUM, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> “TV News Goes Hollywood,” by Richard Zoglin, *Time*, October 9, 1989, p. 98. In an accompanying article, “Truth and

Consequences,” *Time* reports that CBS anchorman Dan Rather was charged with using faked footage of events in Afghanistan. The images were of troops in battle and suffering civilians. They won CBS an award for news coverage. An Afghan rebel claimed that the photographer of the events arrived twelve days after they had happened and persuaded the rebels to restage their blowing up of electric-power pylons. The action was supposed to have been the “largest sabotage operation of the war.” Other events were allegedly staged as well, or misrepresented. *ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>31</sup> “TV Cops May Right Wrongs, Wrong Rights,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 1993, p. B1.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> “GM Accuses NBC of Rigging Test Crash of Pickup Truck on ‘Dateline’ Program,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 9, 1993, p. A6.

<sup>34</sup> “How GM One-Upped an Embarrassed NBC on Staged News Event,” *Wall Street Journal*, Vol. cxxviii No. 29; “Exposing the ‘Experts’ Behind the Sexy Exposés: How Networks Get Duped by Dubious Advocates,” Walter Olson, *The Washington Post* (Sunday “Outlook”), February 28, 1993.