

# Journalism: the myth of neutrality

(The following feature is an editorial essay by the Brunswickan's features editor on neutrality and objectivity in the media. The opinions expressed within are his own and are not necessarily those of the Brunns or its staff. I hope that it will spark your interest as it is a subject we at the Brunswickan face every day. The issue of objectivity can be related to all University papers. Although the Brunswickan does not wield the influential prowess that the Montreal Gazette or TIME magazine do, many students are influenced nonetheless by what they see (or don't see) in the Brunns. I believe that most students have an opinion on this subject and if so, we are always willing to listen to any ideas on the subject.

-Calum Johnston

In Canada today, and indeed in the whole world, one group more than any other forms public opinions: the media. To some, the film industry, the television networks, news papers, periodicals, and the people who run these enterprises have a disproportionate amount of power to their numbers and, unhappily, to their moral perception and compassion.

Franky Schaeffer in his book a "Time For Anger" puts forward the notion that; "members of the media share a set of attitudes that can be characterized as "liberal" and "humanistic" in such overwhelming numbers that our sources of information have become utterly biased. Schaeffer goes on to say that; "ideologically" a majority of leading journalists describe themselves as liberals.

What sort of responsibility does a journalist have to his readers, or to history? The press can both stimulate public opinion and miseducate it. Therefore if the press has become one of the most powerful influences within the western countries then by what "law" has it been elected and to whom is it responsible? Freedom of the press and the Fundamental right to free speech are constitutionally entrenched, but in recent history many questions as to what extent these rights should be tolerated have come to the fore.

U.S. President Reagan in reaction to security leaks (to the press) within the Pentagon and White House brought forward legislation that effectively made the passing of vital information to the press illegal and punishable in a court of law. As the president pointed out; "At no time should the security of our nation be threatened by the passing of vital secrets to the press."

Another key example of the often damaging role our press can play is the uniform view often expressed by major media outlets. These views may not be as objective as many would like to see and as Frank Schaeffer points out once more; "In essence, the major news organizations of the United States do not represent what can be called a free press. A free press requires the presence of organizations which compete not merely to see

whether CBS, NBC, or ABC can predict the outcome of an election thirty seconds ahead of its sisters, but organizations which represent "distinctly and substantially different points of view."

The shared humanistic concerns in all the major news organizations controls the "Free flow of ideas" in our press almost as surely as the communist party controls the Soviet press. The Soviet press dispatches those whom it dislikes with epithets such as "Antisocial" and "counter revolutionary". The Monolithic U.S. press performs a similar social service by labelling people "Fundamentalist, pro-life, devoutly Catholic, and right-wing." It is obvious that Mr. Schaeffer expresses a belief that; the main stream press is purposely suppressing certain Christian values and beliefs. If this is true then the question must be asked; whether such a suppression or "philosophical censorship" is really manipulation of public opinion?

Although Mr. Schaeffer's point is well taken, it must be noted that similar bias can be found in magazines such as the Christian Science Monitor which reflect a distinct and biased view of the world. Where I do agree with Mr. Schaeffer is in the fact that the 'mass' media such as Time, Newsweek, and Macleans are all similar in their approach to reporting and thus can effectively suppress the views of "political conservatives and moral Fundamentalist to a greater degree than can the Christian Science Monitor censor the views of liberals. There is no doubt that the 'mass' media is in the hands of basically liberal influences.

A case that would help to show the power of the networks and their attempt to "over-step" objective journalism was brought forward (as unlikely as it might seem) in the May 29, 1982 issue of

T.V. Guide. In this issue T.V. Guide did an expose on one of the many campaigns of network television to target and destroy an individual or group. In this case the article was called "Anatomy of a Smear (How CBS broke the rules and got General Westmoreland.)" The T.V. Guide article found the following "Journalistic techniques" were used; "formulating a thesis (that a conspiracy had been perpetrated) and then ignoring evidence which suggested otherwise; rehearsing with a paid consultant before interviewing him on the air' screening for a sympathetic witness' asking friendly witnesses soft questions but grilling unfriendly witnesses mercilessly; presenting quotes out of context, etc. T.V. Guide then goes on in a lengthy article to carefully document its charges as listed above. At the end of the article the magazine makes the following statement:

The network's lapses in the making of this documentary also raised larger questions. Are the network news divisions, with their immense power to influence the public's ideas about politics and recent history, doing enough to keep their own house in order? If this documentary is any evidence then the answer may be no. The inaccuracies, the distortions, and the violations of journalistic standards in "The Uncounted Enemy" suggests that television news "safeguards" for fairness and accuracy need tightening if not wholesale revision."

A description of the modern journalist must include an obvious dedication to one's own philosophical point of view and a rejection of any "moral" imperative. Let us take

as a further example of a lacking moral context, our media's coverage of terrorist activities.

One of the basic purposes of terrorist bombings, hijackings, and kidnappings is the sensationalism

they create within the media. In this case the media serves as a propaganda outlet for radical groups. The coverage given these terrorists serves to politicize their causes within the public at large, it may also aid them in gaining sympathy and ultimately the notoriety that they seek.

It is a free press that has brought us to this current state of affairs. Although for the most part we are supportive of a free and liberal press, we must also see some limitations in the degree to which the press often hides behind the Fifth Amendment. Aggrieved targets of journalism have attempted on numerous occasions to use libel legislation against the press.

Many libel plaintiffs concede that they are not simply trying to get their side told. They are attempting to vindicate their positions and their conduct in office — to rewrite history. Some libel plaintiffs such as Ariel Sharon and General Westmoreland admitted they hope to have a "chilling effect" on what they see as bad journalism. On the other side of the libel issue, one must consider that, reasonable as the anguished claims of a public figure may sound, when it comes to discussion of vital public issues, a timid silence by the press is a price that no free society can afford to pay.

We are now faced with the obvious task of digesting information found in the media while at the same time recognizing obvious bias in reporting. When Time magazine uses the cover headline "Thunder on the Right" to introduce their feature issue on Jerry Fallwell, one gets the feeling that "fundamentalism" is a "threatening" movement.

To some extent this may be held as a truth, but to others such a title is a blatant attack on the moral fabric of the American church and as such is non-objective from the start.

To be fair, there have been voices raised within the press establishment itself, recognizing some problems related to those within this article. An example of someone who has spoken up is Mr. O'Neill, editor of the New York Daily News. In his speech, given to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on May 5, 1982 (printed in the Wall Street Journal May 6, 1982), he said among other things that: "While there has been an astonishing growth in the power of the media over the last decade or so, I am by no means sure that we are using it wisely. The tendency has been to revel in the power and wield it freely, rather than accept any corresponding increase in responsibility."

The extraordinary powers of the media, most convincingly displayed by network TV and the national press, have been mobilized to influence major public issues and national elections, to help diffuse the authority of Congress and to disassemble the political parties — even to make presidents or to break them. Indeed, the media now weighs so heavily in the scales of power that some political scientists fear we are upsetting the checks and balances invented by our forefathers.

"... we undermine public confidence and, without intending it, become a cause rather than just a reporter of national decline."

This is one point of view not held by all members of the press. One point, however, remains a universal truth ... power ... the press now holds more power than ever before. Whether or not this power is good or bad will remain to be seen, but some of its effects have already been felt. Watergate has forever limited the powers of office, the press has become relentless in its pursuit of political corruption, Westmoreland and CBS came to a draw, and the list goes on ... We, the public, must be careful in how we digest the media, we must be conscious of certain biases and we must learn to look further for facts; only then can we see the true deficiencies of today's press.

Richard Hutchins  
Feature Editor

On issues like abortion and capital punishment, we should be clear about what is involved and not paper the act over with clichés about choice and dignity.