

Newspaper bias impells readers to read "Between the Lines"

by Ken Burke

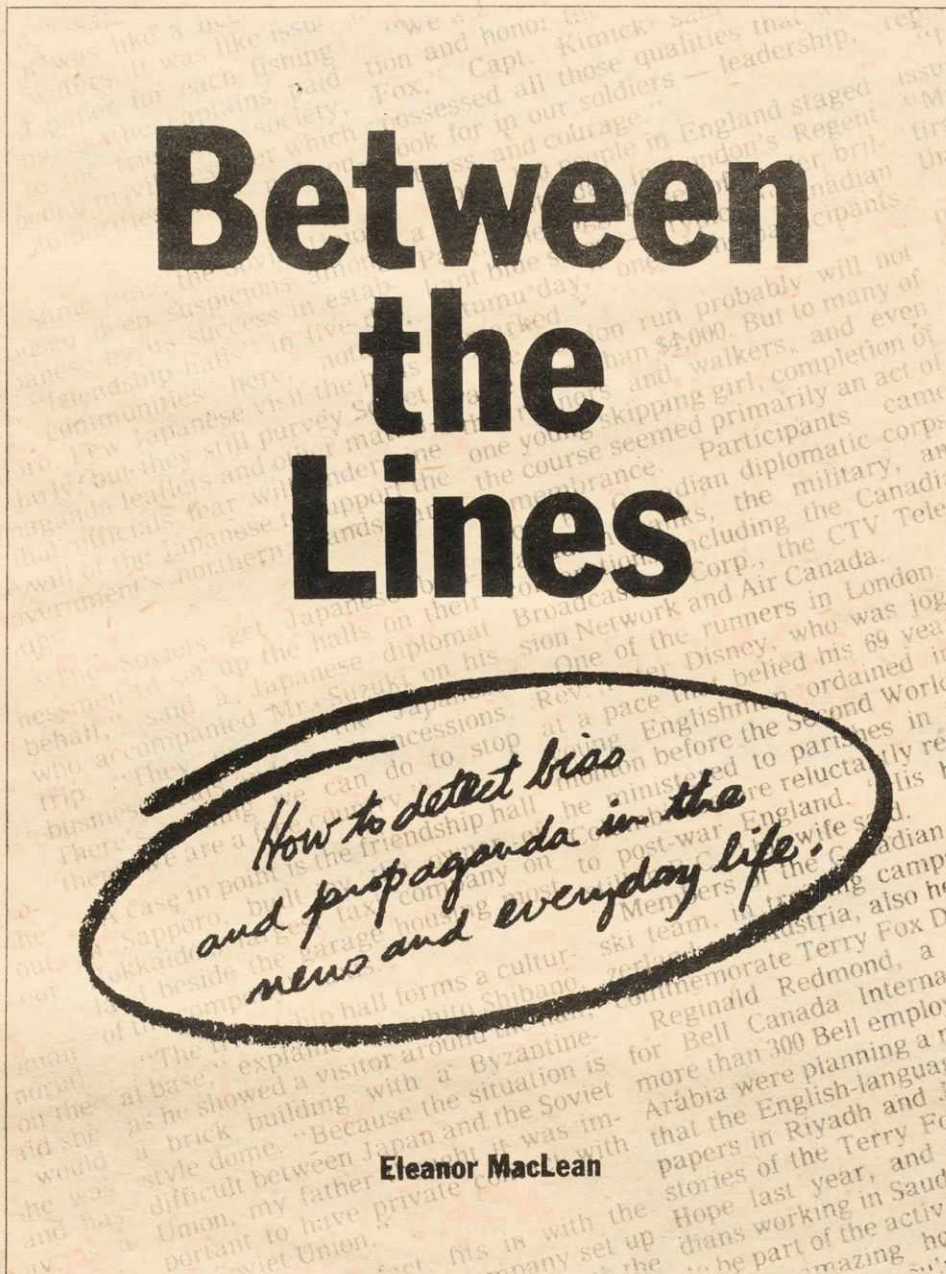
"Don't believe what you read." It's one of the oldest cliches still in operation. It's also one of the most ignored. Every day, millions of people around the world read magazines and newspapers, listen to the radio, watch T.V. - and accept unquestioningly what the media tells them as the one and only truth. Quite simply, regardless of how cynical most people are concerning the press today, their main source of information on events in the world around them is still the North American commercial media. If one Halifax resident has her way, however, people will do more questioning of what they read, and will sift through the levels of bias and opinion in the news to reach a more accurate view of world and local events.

That woman is Eleanor MacLean, author of **Between the Lines: How to Detect Bias and Propaganda in the News and Everyday Life**, and her book sets out to instruct people on how to do just what the title suggests. Published by Halifax's DEVERIC (Development Education Resource and Information Centre), and available at Red Herring Co-op Books for seven dollars, the book is an intensely readable introduction to the many conscious and unconscious ways in which biases creep into the coverage of news.

The large, eye-catching softcover book was specifically written as a textbook on the topic of the media's hidden biases. However, this textbook style (complete with frequent sets of questions and discussion topics) may seem a joy to read for those who find school texts a punishment. Personally, I would suggest reading the entire text, but leaving the questions until the end.

The introductory chapter begins rather dryly, stating the basics of learning and perception and the steps involved in questioning what you read. But after the first chapter, it becomes progressively more interesting, and also more explicitly political as well.

One of the most basic problems with the public's perception of news is that the myth of "objective reporting" is still widely believed. The concept of "objective" reporting implies that the writer of a news story can remain personally uninvolved with the subject they are reporting on. These "objective" stories are mainly written in a no-nonsense, "factual" style, with the reporter not having any active presence in the article itself. Often these stories seem machine-crafted, as if some omnipotent telex were typing out the stories at the exact moment of their occurrence, with no human beings involved in the process.



However, after reading MacLean's book and working on **The Gazette** for one term, it is obvious to me that there is no such thing as "objective" reporting. Decisions are made as to how a story will be written. These decisions are **subjective**. For example, a reporter decides who to interview, what questions to ask, what facts to include in the story, and so on.

*A reporter's choice of adjectives can greatly influence the way in which the facts will be interpreted, as evidenced by the examples in **Between the Lines**. The*

connotative difference between a "freedom-fighter" and a "guerrilla" is obvious, but most people don't examine **why** one is used and not the other. So if there is no such thing as objective journalism, what does exist? The answer is, subjective journalism. Subjective reporting doesn't mean that what is printed is **all** bias, and point of view; it simply means that there are factors which mold the way in which any article is written. What all responsible journalists strive for is to be fair-minded and open in the manner in which they approach a story.

Besides dispelling the myth of objectivity, the book deals with specific social implications of the biases of the Canadian commercial press. The sexism inherent in many articles, including cartoons, is also discussed.

The important issue of press ownership (who owns what, and how many) is the focus of a good deal of MacLean's interest. She has included information and charts concerning newspaper monopolization in the Atlantic provinces, the Thomson family's chain of investments and Southam's empire.

In examining the biases of the commercial press towards certain topics, MacLean uses many examples from magazines and newspapers to demonstrate the truths of her arguments. These examples are where **Between the Lines** really proves its worth. By reprinting several examples of poor journalism involving bias (and at times including an opposing article), MacLean lets the reader pick out the distortions by themselves. Two pro-Ian Smith (Zimbabwe's P.M., when it was Rhodesia) articles from **Weekend** magazine are among the items examined. Other topics range from the Nestle infant formula debacle, to Canadian corporate investment, to the media's rather kindly treatment of oppressive regimes around the world.

This book, in examining the slanted coverage that the commercial press provides, may draw flak for being "leftist". This isn't by any means a horrible thing, because the Canadian commercial press, wrapped up in corporate interests as it is, generally sticks to the "right". However, since the first thing MacLean sets out to do in her book is to instill a questioning spirit in the reader, her personal biases are far more visible than those of the commercial press (or should I say, up front?).

At any rate, the book in itself, is a counter to the one-sided coverage of the press. It sets out to expose readers to information not readily available in their local paper or whatever magazine they happen to pick up. Since Third World issues are among those topics most often swept under the Canadian journalistic rug, they naturally figure prominently in this book.

The most commendable thing about the book is its seeking to examine the issue of journalistic bias rather than merely sensationalizing the problem. In my opinion, it's a book everyone in, or thinking of entering, the mass media should read, especially those involved in news. It also deserves to be read by anyone interested in finding out why the news arrives in the shape it does, and how they can begin to read **Between the Lines**.

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time, to take more chances. The sort of story that needs research, and may result in no story, there's an unwillingness to invest time on that.

But there's no evidence that chains are more guilty of this than independents. That's the conclusion of the Royal Commission, but evidence doesn't prove it.

There couldn't be a paper more dedicated to surface events than the *Chronicle-Herald*, and it's independent. On the other hand, some of the chain papers are quite good at in-depth reporting, for example the *Globe* (Thomson), or the *Edmonton Journal* (Southam) -- it's a good, aggressive newspaper."



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