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"Political Correctness in the Newsroom"

by Robert Novak
Syndicated Columnist, Host, "The Capital Gang"

Robert Novak writes "Inside Report," one of the longest-running syndicated columns in the nation. With his partner, Rowland Evans, he also edits a newsletter, the *Evans-Novak Political Report*, and hosts CNN's interview program, "Evans and Novak."

Additionally, Mr. Novak is a roving editor for *Reader's Digest*, a frequent cohost of "Crossfire," an interviewer on "Meet the Press," and the coexecutive producer and host of CNN's weekend roundtable, "The Capital Gang." He has written *The*

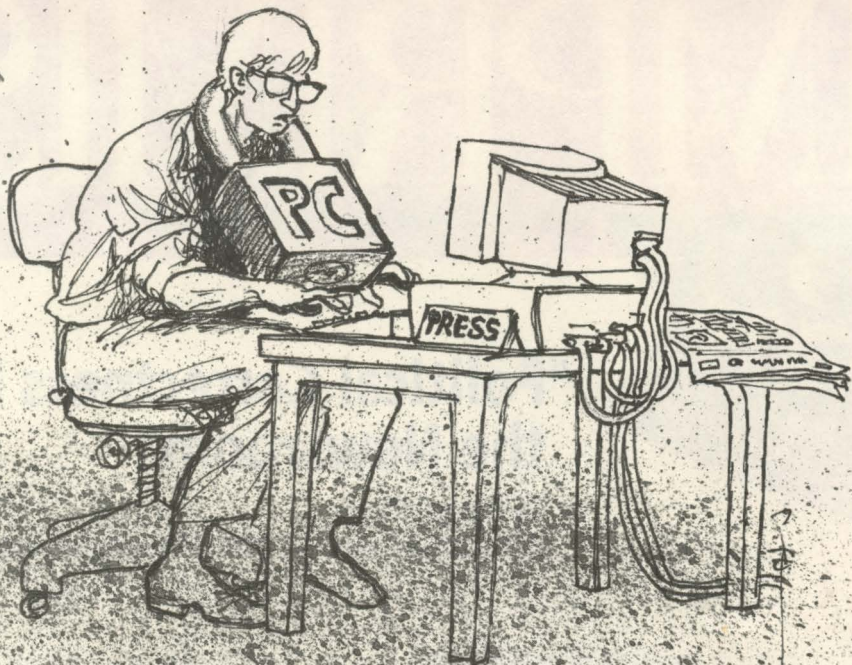
Agony of the GOP: 1964 and cowritten *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power*, *Nixon in the White House*, and *The Reagan Revolution*. ♣



A free press is one of the foundations of a free society. Yet Americans increasingly distrust and resent the media. A major reason is that many journalists have crossed the line from reporting to advocacy. They have, in effect, adopted a new liberal creed: "all the news that's 'politically correct' to print."

How does one define "political correctness" in the newsroom? One need look no further than the new style book of the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the largest, most influential newspapers in the nation. It forbids reporters to write about a "Dutch treat" because this phrase is allegedly insulting to the Dutch. Nor can one report that a person "welshed on a bet" because that would be insulting to the Welsh, and one certainly cannot write about a segment of our population once known simply as "Indians." They must always be referred to as "Native Americans." Jokingly, I asked one of the *Los Angeles Times* editors, "How do you refer to Indian summer? Is it now Native American summer?" He replied that he would substitute "unseasonably warm weather late in the year."

This is what political correctness can do to language; it destroys meaning. It also demeans the ethnic groups it supposedly protects. Do we really think that these groups are so unintelligent as to be unable to distinguish between conventional idioms and genuine prejudice? Is their identity so fragile that it must depend on censorship?



People who believe in the real dignity of the individual, no matter what his race, sex, ethnicity, or other condition, shouldn't embrace political correctness because it is bad philosophy—and reporters shouldn't because it is bad journalism.

Elitist Reporters

Twenty-two years ago, I wrote a paper in which I alienated many of my colleagues (and won the approval of a few) for publicly stating that the national media—the five hundred or so reporters and editors based mainly in Washington, D.C. who work for newspapers, wire services and television networks—had become elitist. I noted that reporters were no longer the typical working-class populists of earlier years who lived on small salaries and who had constant contact with ordinary people, problems, and views.

But the members of the Washington press corps are even more elitist today. I am not just referring to “media stars” like, Diane Sawyer, who is earning \$7 million annually. Most run-of-the-mill reporters and editors in the national media are in the top 1-2 per-

cent of income earners in the nation. A Washington bureau chief makes over \$100,000 a year; a senior reporter makes over \$70,000 a year. Is it surprising that many of them have trouble understanding and appreciating the difficulties other Americans face or that they think differently from other Americans about such issues as taxes, government regulation, crime, family values, and religion?

I also declared twenty-two years ago that members of the national media tend to share a uniformly liberal ideology. This does not mean they are secretly meeting every other week in someone's basement to get their marching orders. Rather, their ideology originates from a number of left-of-center

experiences in their university education, in their tightly-knit peer groups, and in the milieu of popular culture since the Sixties.

Am I exaggerating the impact of this liberal ideology? Of the five hundred or so reporters and editors I mentioned earlier, I am aware of only two who are well known, admitted conserva-

tives. Nationwide, there are only about ten editorial pages in America that could properly be called “conservative” and that stance does not

“Most run-of-the-mill reporters and editors in the national media are in the top 1-2 percent of income earners in the nation.”

extend beyond the editorial page at more than a handful. At the very least, this striking imbalance speaks volumes about the potential for liberal ideology to dominate the news.

Liberal Axioms Held by the National Media

Of course, many journalists hotly deny that they are liberals. Others claim that they do not allow their liberalism to influence their reporting. But here are some unquestionably liberal “axioms” that I believe (based on polls and other sources as well as my own experience) are held almost universally by the members of the national media:

- 1) The “rich” (and this covers many middle-class Americans) are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The income of the rich should be redistributed to the poor.
- 2) Americans are undertaxed. Our taxes are well below those imposed in Europe, and the federal government should therefore raise rates, especially for those who earn more, save more, and invest more.
- 3) Government is, on the whole, a positive force in America that has done vastly more good than harm.
- 4) The balanced budget amendment is a dangerous idea.
- 5) Term limit amendments are even more dangerous and are also undemocratic.
- 6) There is a nationwide health care crisis, and only the government can solve it by establishing universal coverage for health insurance.
- 7) The “religious right” (a term that lumps millions of ordinary believers together with a few extremists) is a serious menace to the future of American society.
- 8) Being pro-choice is not enough; there should be absolutely no interference with the reproductive rights of women.
- 9) To support school choice, whether through vouchers or tax credits, is to support the destruction of all public education.
- 10) It is far better for the forces of the United States to be under multinational command than for them to be controlled by our own military commanders.
- 11) Conservatism is a narrow philosophy; liberalism, by contrast, is more broad, unprejudiced, and compassionate.

Advocacy Journalism

There is no doubt that the strongest trend in the media industry is toward advocacy journalism. The news sections of most newspapers are even more ideological than when I first criticized them twenty-two years ago. Once the editorial page was the place for journalists to express their opinions, but now they do so on every page, including the front page—under the misleading banner of objective reporting.

Increasing selectivity is also leading to increasing bias; members of the media are not only more subjective in determining whether a story will make it into the news but in determining what kind of “slant” it will be given and how much coverage it will receive. Even the wire services have succumbed, running (and not running) stories that in the past would have gotten the reporters and editors responsible for them fired. And, of course, the

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worst examples of bias and selectivity are seen on network television programs, which have come to value “entertainment” more than the news.

Liberals often argue that conservative bias—as evidenced by a growing number of conservative journalists ranging from William F. Buckley, Jr., to Rush Limbaugh—makes up for any liberal bias in the media and leads to “balance.” But they are being disingenuous, and not just because liberals greatly outnumber conservatives in the journalistic profession. Buckley, Limbaugh, and others like them are opinion journalists. They have never tried to

represent themselves otherwise. Moreover, bias of one kind cannot possibly "make up" for other kinds. By all means, liberal and conservative views are welcome in certain areas of journalism, but when they intrude on the objective reporting of the news, they are both equally harmful.

Reforming the American Media

How do we return to the old standards of objectivity and "a fair press"? It is important for Americans to make their views known and to convince the media that reform is not only desirable but necessary. But this is not enough. Twenty-two years ago, I remarked that the pressure of public opinion would surely force the media into more responsible behavior, but it has not happened.

That is why we must also take special care to educate properly the young men and women who want to pursue a career in journalism. This is not an automatic recommendation for

journalism school; unfortunately, most of these institutions are in the business of spreading bias and political correctness, not curbing them. And there are none (with the notable exception of the National Journalism Center in Washington, D.C.,) that challenges the dominant liberal ideology in the media. But one does not have to attend journalism school to learn the fundamental principles of good writing, reporting and editing, or to understand bias and how to avoid it. A good liberal arts education can provide ethical as well as academic training.

Finally, action must be taken at the top; people who are dedicated to the principles of good journalism as well as the principles of good business must take leadership positions at or even buy newspapers, magazines, and television stations. They cannot merely wait for the current establishment to change—they must lead the way.

The stakes are high. When the media is out of touch with its citizens, the nation is vulnerable—when facts bow to bias, truth is also in jeopardy. ▲

Newsmakers and Mythmakers

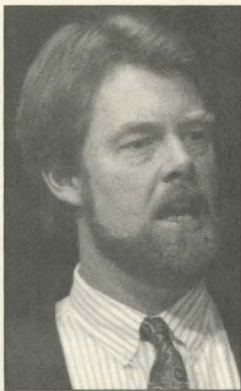
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"A Case Study in Media Bias: Reaganomics vs. Clintonomics"

L. Brent Bozell

Chairman, Media Research Center



In the 1980s, there was a consensus among the members of the national media that Ronald Reagan was going to fail and that he was going to bring on economic disaster. But that consensus proved to be wrong; the economy didn't collapse. In fact, it soared to unprecedented levels.

The media stubbornly refused to admit that "Reaganomics" was responsible. The drumbeat of negative opposition to the president's

policies continued through the 1980s. By 1986, major television network coverage of the economy was down by 64 percent, and the ratio of negative to positive stories was seven to one. In other words, as the economy was improving, media reports on the economy were becoming increasingly negative.

One of the most common allegations in these reports was that the poor got poorer under Ronald Reagan, even though the actual number of poor declined from 14 percent to 13 percent during his administration, and the average income for the lowest one-fifth of Americans rose from \$7,008 to \$9,431.

Inflation declined from 8.9 percent to 4.6 percent—a reduction of 48 percent. Unemployment declined from 7.5 percent to 5.2 percent—a reduction of 45 percent. Interest rates declined from 21 percent to 5.9 percent—a reduction of 71.9 percent. Twenty-one million new jobs were created. The so-called "greedy eighties" witnessed the largest peacetime economic expansion in our nation's history, yet the media remained deaf, dumb and blind. ▲

"President Clinton and the Press"

Fred Barnes

Senior Editor, the New Republic



Noticeably absent in the media's attitude toward Bill Clinton is the personal and ideological hostility that was directed toward Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. The media is not giving President

Clinton a free ride, but it is not giving him even a quarter as rough a ride as they would be giving a Republican president under the same circumstances.

Why is the media predisposed to go easy on President Clinton? One reason is that most reporters belong to the same generation. They relate to him because they, too, protested the Vietnam War and were part of the counterculture of the sixties. Another reason is they share the president's ideology. They believe in the liberal agenda and big government.

President Clinton's personal charisma has also been an influential factor and particularly affects upper middle class journalists. John Correy, a former reporter for the *New York Times*, explains: "A charismatic politician liberates the press's imagination and allows it room to maneuver. The press sees stories where there really are none and embellishes them with a romantic glow."

The most striking example of the media's bias in favor of Bill Clinton was the instant shift in economic reporting that occurred after his election. In the months leading up to November of 1992, coverage was overwhelmingly negative. But in the months after the election, it was suddenly overwhelmingly positive, even though the economy hadn't changed. There is also a blatant double standard in the media that works to Bill Clinton's advantage when negative stories do make it into the news, as we have seen with the \$200 hair cut story; "Travelgate"; alleged cases of sexual misconduct; and the Whitewater investigations. ▲

"America's New Power Brokers"

S. Robert Lichter

Codirector, Center for Media and Public Affairs



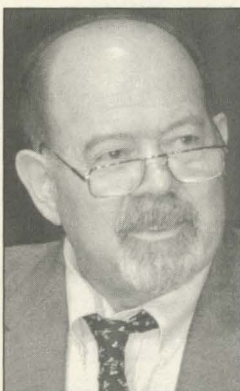
If there is one thing that has changed American politics in the 20th century, it is the media. Journalists are America's new power brokers. Politicians no longer fear the publishers of newspapers; they fear the network anchors, the investigative

reporters and the syndicated columnists. Ordinary journalists have become the arbiters of political life. They have also become the interpreters rather than the mere reporters of the news. They don't simply tell you what is happening in the world; they tell you what you should think about it. ▲

"The Press and Presidential Politics"

Lyn Nofziger

Former Presidential Assistant



The press wants absolute freedom for itself, but it often sides with the actions of the government and the proposals of presidents that take freedom away from individuals, from colleges and universities, from businesses and industries, and from the states. They are zealous defenders of their First Amendment rights, but they ignore the Tenth Amendment, which reserves to the states and to the people those powers not specifically granted to the federal government. ▲

"Television's Impact on the News"

Brit Hume

ABC News White House Correspondent

Television news, like no other form of journalism, gives you a feel for what it was like to "be there" as the news is happening. And it lets you hear exactly what people have said and the way they said it.

Television news is up against the same competitive pressures as all other news businesses—it has to be accurate as well as interesting. Sometimes, critics can rightly claim that the networks place too high a priority on "sensational" stories, but the truth is that much of the news *is* sensational, i.e., it is compelling, striking, and absorbing.

Television has made the news more accessible and more immediate. People turn on the television at night and want to see what happened earlier the same day. They don't expect to be given an encyclopedic review of each event. They don't expect in-depth analysis in every story. They do understand the limits of television news as well as its unique benefits. ▲

"Debate: Do Liberal Biases Dictate the News?"

Heather Richardson Higgins

Executive Director, Council on Culture and Community

vs.

Eleanor Clift

Newsweek White House Correspondent



Heather Richardson Higgins: There are a number of structural biases built into the media. First, there is the media's natural preference for simple, two-sided debates. It likes to reduce every issue to two extremist positions.



The second bias in the media comes from its emphasis on personalities rather than concepts. It is hard to cover intangible principles and complex ideas, but it is easy to cover people and events.

The third bias regards the question of reportable data. The media thrives on negative statistics: It can tell you, for example, how many people were killed by handguns this year, but not how many lives were saved by handguns.

The fourth bias is the bias of the media itself. Fifty-five percent of all journalists identify themselves as liberal, and at least 80 percent are members of the Democratic party.

There is a great pretense of objectivity in the news even though most journalists have become subjective storytellers. Why is objectivity important? In a recent Times-Mirror poll, Americans were asked who sets the national agenda. Only 22 percent cited politicians; 43 percent cited the media. The stories that we hear and see in the news become our reality.



Eleanor Clift: When discussing the news, we should remember that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is elusive; truth can only be partially understood. Therefore no one can be totally objective.

But I would argue that the media's real bias is not political or ideological. It is a bias for bad news, sensation, and controversy. The labels liberal and conservative are out of date; they really have nothing to do with the way news is covered today. The name of the game

in the Washington press corps is to "kill the king." Whoever is president is the king, and liberal reporters are *not* coming to President Clinton's rescue.

Nor are all members of the media liberal. Conservatives, for example, dominate am news radio. In the major television networks and print media, journalists can't be too liberal or too conservative, or they'll lose their jobs. And in the boardrooms of most media organizations there are numerous members of the Republican party. ▲

"Old Fashioned Ethics and Newfangled Technology"

Tom Bray

Editorial Page Editor, Detroit News

The public wants less bias in the news—whether the bias is liberal or conservative makes no difference. In addition to entertainment, people want more information and more facts.

The information revolution has created more competition in the media industry, and this is bound to have a healthy effect on the

news, but it is not a magic bullet. Much depends on the public's willingness to demand that news is fair and balanced. Reporters need better education, especially about history and economics, so they don't fall back on ideology as a substitute for knowledge. Consumers need

to get more involved with their hometown newspapers and electronic media. Most important, they should assess the news critically; they shouldn't believe everything they see or hear. ▲



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