

### Questions

1. On what basis does Bernard Goldberg argue that the media are biased toward the liberal side of the political spectrum? How does Jonathan Chait counter Goldberg's argument?
  2. What factors other than alleged bias might influence the behavior of reporters and editors?
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## 7.2 Bias (2002)

### Bernard Goldberg

On December 6, 1998, on a *Meet the Press* segment about Bill Clinton and his relationship with the Washington news corps, one of the capital's media stars, the *Washington Post's* Sally Quinn, felt she needed to state what to her was the obvious.

The Washington press corps, she insisted, was not some "monolith." "We all work for different organizations," she said, "we all think differently."

Not really, Sally.

Two years earlier, in 1996, the Freedom Forum and the Roper Center released the results of a now famous survey of 139 Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents. The results make you wonder what in the world Sally Quinn was talking about.

The Freedom Forum is an independent foundation that examines issues that involve the media. The Roper Center is an opinion research firm, also with a solid reputation. "No way that the data are the fruit of right-wing press bashers," as the journalist Ben Wattenberg put it.

What these two groups found was that Washington journalists are far more liberal and far more Democratic than the typical American voter:

- ◆ 89 percent of the journalists said they voted for Bill Clinton in 1992, compared with just 43 percent of the nonjournalist voters.
- ◆ 7 percent of the journalists voted for George Bush; 37 percent of the voters did.
- ◆ 2 percent of the news people voted for Ross Perot while 19 percent of the electorate did.

Eighty-nine percent voted for Bill Clinton. This is incredible when you think about it. There's hardly a candidate in the entire United States of America who carries his or her district with 89 percent of the vote. This is way beyond mere landslide numbers. The only politicians who get numbers like that are called Fidel Castro or Saddam Hussein. The same journalists that Sally Quinn tells us do not constitute a "monolith" certainly vote like one.

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From the book *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* by Bernard Goldberg. Copyright © 2002 by Medium Cool, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by special permission of Regnery Publishing, Inc. Washington, D.C.

Sally says they "all think differently." About what? Picking the best appetizer at the Ethiopian restaurant in Georgetown?

What party do journalists identify with?

- ◆ 50 percent said they were Democrats.
- ◆ 4 percent said they were Republicans.

When they were asked, "How do you characterize your political orientation?" 61 percent said "liberal" or "moderate to liberal." Only 9 percent said they were "conservative" or "moderate to conservative."

In the world of media elites, Democrats outnumber Republicans by twelve to one and liberals outnumber conservatives by seven to one. Yet Dan Rather believes that "most reporters don't know whether they're Republican or Democrat, and vote every which way." In your dreams, Dan.

After the survey came out, the *Washington Post* media writer, Howard Kurtz, said on *Fox News Sunday*, "Clearly anybody looking at those numbers, if they're even close to accurate, would conclude that there is a diversity problem in the news business, and it's not just the kind of diversity we usually talk about, which is not getting enough minorities in the news business, but political diversity, as well. Anybody who doesn't see that is just in denial."

James Glassman put it this way in the *Washington Post*: "The people who report the stories are liberal Democrats. This is the shameful open secret of American journalism. That the press itself . . . chooses to gloss over it is conclusive evidence of how pernicious the bias is."

Tom Rosenstiel, the director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, says, "Bias is the elephant in the living room. We're in denial about it and don't want to admit it's there. We think it's less of a problem than the public does, and we just don't want to get into it."

Even *Newsweek's* Evan Thomas (the one who thought Ronald Reagan had "a kind of intuitive idiot genius") has said, "There is a liberal bias. It's demonstrable. You look at some statistics. About 85 percent of the reporters who cover the White House vote Democratic; they have for a long time. There is a, particularly at the networks, at the lower levels, among the editors and the so-called infrastructure, there is a liberal bias."

Nonsense!

That's the response from Elaine Povich, who wrote the Freedom Forum report. No way, she said, that the survey confirms any liberal bias in the media.

"One of the things about being a professional," she said, "is that you attempt to leave your personal feelings aside as you do your work," she told the *Washington Times*.

"More people who are of a liberal persuasion go into reporting because they believe in the ethics and the ideals," she continued. "A lot of conservatives go into the private sector, go into Wall Street, go into banking. You find people who are idealistic tending toward the reporting end."

"Right," says Ben Wattenberg in his syndicated column. "These ethical, idealistic journalists left their personal feelings aside to this extent: When queried [in the Freedom Foundation/Roper poll in 1996] whether the 1994 Contract with

America was an 'election-year campaign ploy' rather than 'a serious reform proposal,' 59 percent said 'ploy' and only 3 percent said 'serious.'"

It's true that only 139 Washington journalists were polled, but there's no reason to think the results were a fluke. Because this wasn't the first survey that showed how liberal so many journalists are.

A poll back in 1972 showed that of those reporters who voted, 70 percent went for McGovern, the most liberal presidential nominee in recent memory, while 25 percent went for Nixon—the same Richard Nixon who carried every single state in the union except Massachusetts.

In 1985 the *Los Angeles Times* conducted a nationwide survey of about three thousand journalists and the same number of people in the general public to see how each group felt about the major issues of the day:

- ◆ 23 percent of the public said they were liberal; 55 percent of the journalists described themselves as liberal.
- ◆ 56 percent of the public favored Ronald Reagan; 30 percent of the journalists favored Reagan.
- ◆ 49 percent of the public was for a woman's right to have an abortion; 82 percent of the journalists were pro-choice.
- ◆ 74 percent of the public was for prayer in public schools; 25 percent of the journalists surveyed were for prayer in the public schools.
- ◆ 56 percent of the nonjournalists were for affirmative action; 81 percent of the journalists were for affirmative action.
- ◆ 75 percent of the public was for the death penalty in murder cases; 47 percent of the journalists were for the death penalty.
- ◆ Half the public was for stricter handgun controls; 78 percent of the journalists were for tougher gun controls.

A more recent study, released in March 2000, also came to the conclusion that journalists are different from most of the people they cover. Peter Brown, an editor at the *Orlando Sentinel* in Florida, did a mini-census of 3,400 journalists and found that they are less likely to get married and have children, less likely to do volunteer community service, less likely to own homes, and less likely to go to church than others who live in the communities where they work.

"How many members of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*," he asks, "belong to the American Legion or the Kiwanis or go to prayer breakfasts?"

But it's not just that so many journalists are so different from mainstream America. It's that some are downright hostile to what many Americans hold sacred.

On April 14, 1999, I sat in on a *CBS Weekend News* conference call from a speakerphone in the Miami bureau. It's usually a routine call with CBS News producers all over the country taking part, telling the show producers in New York about the stories coming up in their territories that weekend. Roxanne Russell, a longtime producer out of the Washington bureau, was telling about an event that Gary Bauer would be attending. Bauer was the conservative, family-values activist who seven days later would announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president.

Bauer was no favorite of the cultural Left, who saw him as an annoying right-wing moralist. Anna Quindlen, the annoying left-wing moralist and columnist who writes for *Newsweek*, once called him “a man best known for trying to build a bridge to the 19th century.”

So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by what I heard next, but I was. Without a trace of timidity, without any apparent concern for potential consequences, Roxanne Russell, sitting at a desk inside the CBS News Washington bureau, nonchalantly referred to this conservative activist as “Gary Bauer, the little nut from the Christian group.”

*The little nut from the Christian group!*

Those were her exact words, uttered at exactly 12:36 P.M. If any of the CBS News producers on the conference call were shocked, not one of them gave a clue. Roxanne Russell had just called Gary Bauer, the head of a major group of American Christians, “the little nut from the Christian group” and merrily went on with the rest of her list of events CBS News in Washington would be covering.

What struck me was not the obvious disrespect for Bauer. Journalists, being as terribly witty and sophisticated as we are, are always putting someone down. Religious people are especially juicy targets. In a lot of newsrooms, they're seen as odd and viewed with suspicion because their lives are shaped by faith and devotion to God and an adherence to rigid principles—opposition to abortion, for one—that seem archaic and closed-minded to a lot of journalists who, survey after survey suggests, are not especially religious themselves.

So it wasn't the hostility to Bauer in and of itself that threw me. It was the lack of concern of any kind in showing that disrespect so *openly*. Producers from CBS News bureaus all over the country were on the phone. And who knows who else was listening, just as I was.

So I wondered: would a network news producer ever make such a disparaging remark, so openly, about the head of a Jewish group? Or a gay group? Or a black group? . . . ■

### 7.3 Victim Politics (2002)

Jonathan Chait

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When [former CBS journalist Bernard] Goldberg goes beyond his first-person observations at CBS, . . . he does little more than recycle long-standing conservative complaints. He notes, for instance, that news accounts describe Republicans as “right-wing” far more than they call Democrats “left-wing.” This may sound like a perfectly impartial objection—mustn't there be

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Jonathan Chait, “Victim Politics.” *The New Republic*, March 18, 2002, pp. 22–25. Reprinted by permission of *The New Republic*, © 2002, The New Republic, LLC.

as many left-wingers in American politics as right-wingers? If you consider Clinton a leftist, as many conservatives do, then the answer is yes. But the center of American politics has moved rightward over the last 25 years. By historical standards—not to mention the standards of other democracies—American liberals today are rather conservative. Clinton was probably further to the right on domestic policy than Richard Nixon, and he was almost certainly further to the right than European conservatives such as Helmut Kohl and Jacques Chirac. So from these broader perspectives, it's entirely natural that reporters would label more contemporary American politicians "right-wing" than "left-wing."

This same rightward drift has made liberalism less fashionable. So, over the last decade, major newspapers have used the pejorative phrase "unreconstructed liberal" more than five times as often as they've used "unreconstructed conservative." Why isn't this disparity evidence of anti-liberal bias? For basically the same reason Goldberg's example isn't. Reporters are more likely to call liberals "unreconstructed" not because they consider liberalism out of date, but because in recent years liberals have indeed felt the need to reconstruct themselves more than conservatives have. . . .

Another bias that Goldberg repeatedly notes stems from the crass imperative for commercial success. Ratings, he writes—again, apparently without recognition that he is undermining his thesis—are "the reason television people do almost everything." But if networks care only about ratings, why do they risk their profits by offending the political views of their audience? Indeed, in a free market, how could an overwhelmingly liberal media even exist? Even though the conservative FOX NEWS network has increased its share in recent years, "liberal" networks like ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC still control the bulk of the TV news market and "liberal" newspapers the bulk of the newspaper market. If you believe that the media tilt left, then you must either believe that the public has no objection to this slant, or that the news business is unaffected by the forces of supply and demand.

To avoid such sticky questions, most conservatives ignore the political inclinations of both media owners and media consumers, and concentrate instead on the biases of reporters and editors. And here the right has its strongest case. Reporters, as numerous studies have established, overwhelmingly vote for Democrats. The most famous survey, taken after the 1992 elections, found that 89 percent of Washington journalists had voted for Clinton, 7 percent for Bush père, and only 2 percent for Ross Perot (as compared with 43, 37, and 19 percent, respectively, for the voters at large).

But this doesn't prove quite as much as one might suspect. Reporters may hold liberal views, but not on everything. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a left-wing media watchdog, polled Washington journalists and compared the results with those of the public. It found that, while reporters generally hold more liberal views on social issues, they often take more conservative stances on economic questions. The public was far more likely than were media elites to think that Clinton's tax hike for the wealthy didn't go far enough and that the government should guarantee medical care. Reporters were far more inclined to support free trade and cutting entitlement programs.

This should come as no surprise. The views of the Beltway press reflect the ideology of the socioeconomic stratum in which they reside: secular, educated, urban or suburban, liberal on the environment and social issues, moderately conservative on economics. Indeed, the greatest statistical discrepancy in the 1992 voting pattern is not Washington reporters' lack of support for Bush, but their lack of support for Perot—they were one-fifth as likely as the public to cast a ballot for the GOP candidate, but only one-tenth as likely to support the Texas billionaire. Perot, of course, appealed to the disaffected working class, railing against free trade and immigration. Naturally, this brand of populism held little appeal for the media elite. . . .

On the whole, this set of biases disproportionately benefits Democrats and liberals. The media's aversion to the cultural right is more pronounced than its aversion to the economic left, and, since reporters tend to label politicians according to their social views, they're more apt to consider Democrats moderate. This is the kernel of truth underlying Goldberg's hyperbolic screed.

But there are two important caveats. First, the professional constraints and institutional tendencies of political journalism—which value neutrality, tend to follow compelling story lines, and place a premium on maintaining good sources within both parties—often overwhelm reporters' ideological predilections. Second, conservative Republicans who understand these predilections can turn them to their own advantage. The recent revelation that the 2000 Bush presidential campaign kept Ralph Reed off its payroll is instructive: The reason, according to the *Times*, was that associating Bush too publicly with a former director of the Christian Coalition would complicate his efforts to portray himself as a "compassionate conservative." Bush's advisers understood that reporters would gauge his moderation largely by his distance from social conservatives. (They also no doubt understood that retaining Larry Lindsey, a fervent supply-sider, as his main economic adviser would set off no such alarms in the press.)

Bush outlined his plan to handle the press in a 1999 interview with *National Review*. "I do think [the media] are biased against conservative thought," he said in a forum that received little attention outside the right. "And the reason is that they think conservative thinkers are not compassionate people. And that's one of the reasons I've attached a moniker to the philosophy that I espouse, because I want people to hear a different message." As the Bush campaign understood, reporters are predisposed to seeing conservatives as temperamentally mean-spirited—an idiotic notion (think of Ronald Reagan or Jack Kemp), but a deeply rooted one nonetheless. Therefore, they viewed Bush's cheerful demeanor and apparent affinity for the poor as evidence that he was not all that conservative, and this conclusion permeated coverage of the entire campaign. . . .

It is ironic, then, that at this moment in history, a book alleging liberal media bias would top the best-seller list. And more ironic still that Bush would give it his tacit endorsement. Conservatives like Goldberg may believe that he overcame the systematic liberal bias of a hostile media, but Bush, surely, knows better. ■