
Bias: How the Media Distort the News

Bernard Goldberg

Bernard Goldberg, the author of Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News, worked for nearly thirty years at CBS News, where, in addition to reporting on the CBS Evening News, he won six Emmys as a senior correspondent on 48 Hours. He now reports for HBO's Real Sports, for which he won a seventh Emmy in 2001. He anchored a CBS special titled "Don't Blame Me," which spotlighted how Americans are increasingly unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions, and another called "In Your Face, America," about the coarsening of our nation. He also wrote the Emmy award-winning HBO documentary "Do You Believe in Miracles?" about the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. He is a graduate of Rutgers University. Goldberg spoke at Center of the American Experiment's Fall Briefing in September 2002.

My subject is bias in the news, but before I begin, I'm wondering if any of you saw the Ann Landers column that says, "Dear Ann, I have a problem. One of my brothers is in television news, and the other was put to death in the electric chair for murder. My mother died from insanity when I was three years old. My sisters are prostitutes, and my father sells crack cocaine to high school students. Recently, I met a girl who was just released from a reformatory, where she

served time for smothering her seventh grade teacher to death, and I want to marry her. My problem is, if I marry this girl, should I tell her about my brother who's in television news?"

Apparently I'm not the only one who feels that way about television news people.

We just had primary elections in Florida, where I live, and once again it was an embarrassing fiasco involving votes that weren't counted, machines that didn't work, polls that weren't

open. The media have covered this recent example of stupidity very well, but they don't cover their own stupidity. Stupidity explains how they come to do some of the things they do—not everything is bias. Let me give you some examples of stupidity in the media.

In the early 1960s, the prime minister of South Africa was assassinated early in the morning, about the time of the 11:00 news on the East Coast of the United States. At a station on the East Coast—I'm told it was in Miami—the newscaster said, "This bulletin was just handed to me. 'The prime minister of South Africa has been assassinated.'" The next sentence in the bulletin from which he was reading began with the prime minister's Afrikaner name, which was unpronounceable in English. The newscaster looked down at the name and up at the camera, and down again and up again. He looked down one last time, looked up, and said, "His name is being withheld pending notification of next of kin."

There is no shortage of stupidity in the world of sports news. Joe Theisman, who used to be a great quarterback and now is a football analyst on television, once supposedly said, "Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein."

A reporter asked Shaquille O'Neal if he had visited the Parthenon on his vacation in Greece. Shaquille said, "I can't remember the names of all the clubs we went to."

Golfer Greg Norman allegedly said, "I owe a lot to my parents, especially my mother and father."

Frank Layden, who was president of the Utah Jazz basketball team, asked a player, "Son, what is it with you? Is it ignorance or apathy?" And the kid said, "I don't know and I don't care."

Don't Like It—Haven't Read It

Now here's my personal example of stupidity.

In 1996, while I was still a correspondent with CBS News, I wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* about liberal bias in the news. Some people have called this courageous, but as I look back at it, it was pretty stupid.

It was a presidential election year, and Dan Rather was in Iowa covering the caucuses. I called him to warn him that I had written something that he wasn't going to be too happy about, and before I could tell him what it was, Dan said, "Bernie, we were friends yesterday, we're friends today, and we'll be friends tomorrow."

"Danish" is a language that's spoken at the CBS broadcast center in New York City, not to be confused with the language they speak in Copenhagen. Danish is the language that Dan speaks. In Danish, "no problem" means "big problem." In Danish, "don't worry about it, amigo" means "you got a lot to worry about." And, in Danish, "Bernie, we were friends yesterday, we're friends today, and we'll be friends tomorrow" means "Bernie, you're dead." From that day in February 1996 until this very second, my friend Dan Rather literally has not uttered a syllable to me.

Now, I understand that if you work for IBM or General Motors, you can't

go around writing op-eds just because you don't like something. But a news organization is fundamentally different from other businesses. News organizations routinely look down everybody else's throat—they look down the throat of political people, business people, church people, sports people, educators—for a living. Frankly, I thought they should be a little more gracious when I looked down their throat, but it didn't work out that way. I became radioactive. People stopped talking to me. I stayed with CBS News for another four and a half years, and then I started writing *Bias*. *Bias* made me popular with many Americans, but it didn't make me popular at all with the people I used to work with and with the media elites in general. *Bias* is not a subject they like.

A couple of months ago, a friend of mine was on a flight from California to New York and, as fate would have it, he was sitting next to a well-known television news personality. The conversation got around to me and my book. The media star told my friend that he didn't like the book at all—and then he said he hadn't read it. A *Miami Herald* columnist devoted an entire column to panning *Bias*—which he said he hadn't read. It isn't the book that these people despise; it's the idea that somebody who was once one of them had the nerve to write about them.

If I worked for Enron and wrote about the shenanigans that were going on there, or if I were at Liggett and Meyers and wrote about what goes on behind the scenes there, the media would call me a hero. They would put

me on *60 Minutes* and make my birthday a national holiday. But because I wrote about them, I became a traitor. That's their word, not mine. What I did was treacherous and traitorous. They're not only thin-skinned, they're also hypocritical.

The point I want to make about the conversation my friend had with the media star is this: the media star said that he wasn't surprised at the success of the book "because of all those right-wing nuts out there." Anybody who thinks there's bias in the media is conservative, which means right-wing nuts. Millions and millions of decent Americans who have been made uncomfortable by this bias have been written off as right-wing nuts. *Conservative* and *right-wing nut* are synonymous to these people. If I run into this media star, I'm going to have to ask him if *liberal* and *left-wing nut* are also synonymous. That's something you don't hear very much about.

The salesman who came up to me at the airport in Akron, a total stranger, and asked me if I would sign his book didn't strike me as a right-wing nut. The City College of New York professor who wrote me a letter that said I was right on the money didn't strike me as a right-wing nut. I've met a lot of people who agree with me who don't strike me as right-wing nuts. The media are dismissive of anybody who disagrees with them.

An Ideological Echo Chamber

Let me tell you what liberal bias is *not* about. Despite what some people

on the right think, there is no conspiracy. News people don't come in in the morning, go into a dark room, pull the shades, lock the door, give the secret handshake, and say, "How are we going to fulfill our liberal agenda today, and also stick it to those conservatives?" It doesn't happen that way.

News people travel in liberal circles. They go to cocktail parties and dinner parties in Manhattan and Washington with their liberal friends. The media elites overwhelmingly live in those two places. After a while, they don't even realize that liberal opinions on all sorts of big social issues—race, feminism, gay rights—are liberal. They think the liberal positions are mainstream because all their friends think the same way about these issues. It's an ideological echo chamber: they just keep bouncing off each other. Often they don't even know that there's another reasonable side to controversial issues.

In their newsrooms, the overwhelming majority of the people think alike. We've heard a lot about diversity over the years, but there's no diversity of opinion, the most important kind of diversity, in America's newsrooms. I'm not saying that 100 percent of the news people are liberal, and let that liberalism affect their news, but the dominant culture of the big important news organizations is definitely liberal.

In this ideological echo chamber, where you don't even know you've got liberal views, a real danger is that all sorts of other views don't make their way onto the air. I'm not arguing for a

conservative or a right-wing newscast, but for more intelligent conservative voices on the news.

A major Harris poll—bigger and therefore more reliable and more revealing than most—that came out a few years ago found that 74 percent of Americans see either a great deal or a fair amount of political bias in the news; 63 percent believe the news media "tend to favor one side in delivering the news about political and social issues"; 43 percent said that the news media are either very or somewhat liberal; and only 19 percent said the media are very or somewhat conservative.

They broke this poll up into 75 subgroups: by age, religion, education, all sorts of things. One of the subgroups was self-described liberals, and 41 percent even of this group thought the news was too liberal. The only people who are still arguing that the news isn't liberal are the people who are perpetuating it, the media elites. A lot of newspaper people swear that they're not liberal and they're fair and all that, and I've spoken to some of them who don't see any liberal bias, but just about everybody else has seen it.

It's not worth trying to prove this point, but here's an example of it. Have you ever noticed how conservatives are always labeled in news stories? It's a warning label: You need to know that this person is conservative so you know that he's got an axe to grind, that he isn't mainstream. I wouldn't have a problem with that if liberals were identified too, but news people don't see

liberals as out of the mainstream; they see liberals **as** the mainstream. This is why we hear the term “right-wing” on the news all the time. We hear about right-wing Republicans, right-wing Christians, right-wing radio talk show hosts, right-wing Miami Cubans. The only time we heard the term “left wing” is when they’re talking about part of an airplane.

During the Clinton impeachment proceedings, before the trial in the Senate actually started, the senators signed an oath book. Peter Jennings was doing a live play-by-play on ABC News, and he spotted every conservative who went up to sign the book: That’s Senator McConnell, a determined conservative from Kentucky, who is signing the book right now. And that’s Senator Santorum, a young conservative Republican from Pennsylvania, who’s signing the book. And there’s Senator Smith, a very, very conservative Republican from New Hampshire.

Peter thought we needed to know that they were conservatives because impeachment is a political process as much as anything else, and we needed to know they were conservatives so we would know how that might affect their vote. I totally agree.

Then Barbara Boxer came up. She was simply Senator Boxer from California. Ted Kennedy was Senator Kennedy from Massachusetts. As I say in the book, there was a better chance that Peter Jennings would identify Mother Teresa as “that old broad who used to work in India” than that he would identify a liberal Democrat as a liberal Democrat.

No News Is Bad News

My book was on the *Times* best-seller list for five months or so. I was on about 400 radio stations across America, and about forty cable TV shows. I was interviewed in Australia, New Zealand, China, Brazil, Sweden, Israel, Russia, England, Canada. The Italian *Nightline* asked me to be on the show; the American *Nightline* had no interest.

With one tiny exception, I didn’t get on ABC, NBC, or CBS news for five seconds to talk about **Bias**—and they say that there’s no bias and they have no agenda. This is a subject that millions of Americans think is either important or interesting or both. The networks just gave the back of their hand not to me—I’ve got better things to do at six in the morning than to be on *CBS This Morning*—but to all those people who think this is a subject of some interest and importance. But the networks own the studios, the cameras, the microphones—and if you don’t like it, that’s your problem. That’s their attitude. In 1980, 75 percent of all the people watching television at the dinner hour were watching one of the network newscasts. When I wrote the book, it was 43 percent. Today, it’s down to about 40 percent, and the numbers are continuing to head south.

Earlier this year, the president of the United States walked out of the White House with **Bias** under his arm, the title facing outwards—a nice touch. A few days later, the president of CBS News was bragging at a news conference in Pasadena, California, to a collection of American TV critics

that he hadn't read the book, wouldn't read the book, and had no interest in the book. This is the kind of arrogance I'm talking about.

Let's assume for the moment that I'm wrong. Let's assume that everything I've said is well intentioned but wrong, that the networks and the people on the left who have dismissed this book can rightfully dismiss me, also. But what about the millions of Americans who think I got it right? Do the media elites think those people are all stupid or delusional? Do they think that they're all media haters? Do they think that they've fallen under some kind of mass hypnosis and crazy right-wingers are pulling the strings? I know these choices sound crazy, but think about it. What other choices are there? They must think that about the people who thought *Bias* said something worth saying: that they're either dummies or ideologues, or are under the spell of people who are. Which is it? I'd like to ask Rather, Jennings, and Tom Brokaw, but that's not going to happen.

Rooney versus Rather

I was on forty cable TV shows, but Larry King won't let me on his show. Larry once had an impeachment panel, and one of the panelists was Judge Wapner of *Animal Court*. He interviews people who swear that they've just spoken to dead people. But *Bias* was too controversial for him.

Andy Rooney, one of the most respected people in all of broadcasting, was on the Larry King show recently. He usually talks about how we're not getting as many cornflakes as we used

to get, or how much string we collect. Stuff like that. But on this show, Larry King asked Andy Rooney, "What did you make of Bernard Goldberg's book, which was critical of television, liberal bias, and especially harsh on some of your folks at CBS?" Andy Rooney said, "I thought he made some very good points. There's no question that I, among others, have a liberal bias. I'm constantly liberal in my opinions."

That's the first time that any big name media guy said that. I don't care if Andy Rooney is liberal in his opinions—he's a commentator, no problem—but he said "among others," so I was wondering who these others are. And then he said, "I think Dan"—referring to Dan Rather—"is transparently liberal. Now, he may not like to hear me say that, I always agree with him, but I think he should be more careful."

Andy Rooney said what millions of conservatives have been saying for years: there's a liberal bias in the news, and Dan Rather is transparently liberal. How many newspapers picked up this story? One—the conservative *Washington Times*. Only one newspaper in this country thought this was worth reporting.

Now, here's the last thing. Andy couldn't leave it at that. He said, "Bernie was a very good reporter. He said some things that were very true. There's just one thing: Bernie has a knack for being a jerk."

It's hardly an original thought, and I don't think I said anything here that will change Andy Rooney's mind.

Following his talk, Bernard Goldberg answered questions from his American Experiment audience.

Has there been legitimate criticism of your book?

When I talked in the book about often labeling conservatives versus seldom labeling liberals, several academics asked, “What are the numbers?” It was so obvious to me—and subsequent research has proved how obvious it is—that I didn’t mention it. But a certain segment of the audience was looking for footnotes and data and a scholarly explanation of every point that I made, although the book is part memoir. Certain points were so obvious to me that they didn’t seem to need documentation, but to some people, this weakened the argument and, at least in theory, I guess they’re right.

Has anything gotten better since you wrote the book?

There are some slivers of sunshine. A CBS News correspondent told me recently that when the senior producers see pieces before they’re aired, it isn’t unusual anymore for somebody to point out an example of bias. That’s a good thing.

Howard Kurtz, the *Washington Post* media critic, was asked why in a recent story he had identified every conservative as a conservative and didn’t identify any of the liberals. He replied that it was a good point and that it was important to be careful of that. I think maybe *Bias* had some influence there.

The issue is now out there in a way that it wasn’t before. I’m well aware

that I caught up with the American people about this issue, that you people were way ahead of me on this. But now, it’s out there, and I think news people have to be more careful. They are arrogant people, though, and they don’t admit there’s a problem. They think if you think there’s a liberal bias in the news, that proves *your* bias, not theirs. They call it a myth and a canard that there’s a liberal bias. So, while there are little areas of progress, overall they are going to change only when enough Americans tune out and they become so irrelevant that they will either have to change or go off the air.

What are your thoughts on liberal bias in entertainment programming? For example, would the conservative characters on West Wing who exist only to be rebutted be a relevant example here?

There is no more liberal community in America—except for maybe Madison, Wisconsin, and the People’s Republic of Berkeley—than Hollywood. I don’t watch these shows, and it’s not for a snobby reason. I just don’t think they’re interesting. But there is no question that the Hollywood elites see things through their liberal prism and they’re not afraid to use their considerable power to present things that way.

Let me answer a related question that you’re not asking. I don’t think the media have a great deal of respect for any of you. That’s why you can turn on your television at 7:00 at night, during what used to be called the family hour, and hear people saying “Let’s kick his ass” and stuff like that. I use too much bad language myself, so I’m not

offended by that, but kids are watching. Doesn't that bother anybody?

And it's not just the news culture or the Hollywood culture. A few years ago, a company ran a series of outrageous underwear ads that were soft-core child pornography. If you're in this ideological echo chamber, if you're so cool and so hip, you don't see anything wrong with this when you put it out. That's the real problem. They're fond of saying that *you* don't get it, but the fact is, *they* don't get it.

At the beginning of Bias, you write that the major media got it right on 9/11. How would you describe the news media's performance since then, especially on the anniversary of 9/11?

I finished the book before September 11, and then afterward I felt that I had to write another chapter to make the book relevant to what was going on in the world.

On September 11, 2001, television was more than just the place to get facts. This also happened when President Kennedy was assassinated and when *Challenger* blew up: television became a kind of national cathedral where all of us went, where we were all doing the same thing at the same time. We got a sense that we were all in it together. Television filled the role that the campfire used to fill as we moved West back in the 1800s.

In those rare instances, television does a magnificent job. But I also said at the beginning of the book that the media were going to revert to form, and they have not disappointed. A recent

poll said that something like over 70 percent of the sources on page 1 of the *New York Times* in the past few weeks on the Iraq debate—and on one of the networks, over 80 percent of the sources—were against President Bush. That's on the front page, not the editorial page, and it strikes them as just fine. They're reverting to form and seeing everything through their particular prism. They talk to their friends. They fancy themselves sophisticated, but Manhattan is one of the most provincial places on the planet.

Why is talk radio rife with conservatism and network news plagued by liberal bias?

I told Bill O'Reilly of Fox News Channel he should send a case of champagne to Rather, Brokaw, and Jennings to thank them for sending over all those viewers. As good as Bill O'Reilly is, and as good as Rush Limbaugh is, they owe a lot of their success to the failure of the mainstream media. People have lost faith in the mainstream media. When I was on those 400 radio stations, too many people told me they get their news from talk radio. That is a very bad and dangerous thing because those are opinion shows. They're entertainment. Talk radio is fine as entertainment and to hear what other people think. But it's not a good idea to get your news there, because it's filtered through a conservative prism.

I do find it interesting that talk radio in America is overwhelmingly conservative. Based on the 2000 election, half the country is liberal and half

is conservative, but liberals cannot make it on national talk radio. So why are the television network news divisions liberal? Because they don't listen to anybody. They just do what they do and if you don't like it, too bad. They continue to hemorrhage viewers, and they chalk it up to everything under the sun except their liberal bias.

Is it good news or bad news that Jesse Ventura says your book is his favorite?

When the book came out, a publicist sent me everything that was written about it. I don't know if it's me or just human nature, but I could read twenty positive things and then one negative thing and it would ruin my day. So one day, I discovered that Jesse Ventura had walked into a news conference with the book and said to the reporters, "I was right all along. You guys have to read this." Did it make me happy? Absolutely. If you come in for enough bad stuff, you enjoy the good stuff.

Is there a difference between what your friends are saying to you privately and what they're willing to say publicly?

I have received more than a few phone calls, some from people whose names you would know, saying, "This is great, glad you did it." Somebody from CBS called me and said, "The book made some good points"—as if the book wrote itself.

There has been a dichotomy between private reaction and public

reaction. I have heard from former colleagues who have said some very nice things, but not one of them has said anything good publicly. I understand that, and I'm not criticizing them for it. My former bosses handed me my head when I spoke out, so I'm not asking anybody else to do it.

The overwhelming reaction from the top people has been no comment at all. These people are so delusional that they think if they ignore the book, it will go away. They think if they ignore the arguments, the arguments will go away. Here's a prediction: they're going to go away before the argument goes away.

Any final thoughts?

When the Berlin Wall came down, people voted with their feet. You can vote with your remote control. The networks worship at the altar of Nielsen. That is their only god. They're not even real liberals; I would admire them if they were. Real liberals risked their lives for civil rights; these people would throw a black person overboard for a single rating point.

Viewers have the only power. If enough people say, "Screw this, I'm going someplace else," they will have a choice. The networks will either have to finally address this issue, or they will become less and less relevant until one day, they'll wake up and find that nobody's paying any attention to them. ■