

## The Real Media Bias: Profits

*Should consumers or journalists decide what people ought to listen to and read?*

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In *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*, a book that has been on the New York Times bestseller list for the past 10 weeks, former CBS reporter and producer Bernard Goldberg argues that the quality of the news we receive has declined. Why? Because of a liberal bias in the media.

Now this week in a new book, two journalists coming from what most fans of Goldberg's book would consider the very bastion of liberal bias offer their own indictment of journalism. But don't expect a rebuttal of Goldberg's thesis. In *News About the News: Journalism in Peril*, Leonard Downie Jr, the executive editor of the Washington Post, and Robert Kaiser, a Post associate editor, are not interested in whether the press is liberal - or conservative, for that matter.

Their operative word is profits.

The real bias in media these days is not ideological but financial, as Downie and Kaiser amply demonstrate through a careful examination of newspapers, local stations and national networks. Too often, news decisions are subjected solely to an accounting test: "Does it make money?"

That's an ominous trend for our society. In a democracy, giving the media the role of watchdog is one of the best ways to hold government and powerful institutions accountable for their actions. News matters. But fewer and fewer media institutions are engaging in it, say Downie and Kaiser.

Newspapers have shrunk their reporting staff and the space they devote to news. Very few have bureaus in their state capitols. The staffs of local television stations have been cut to the bone. National television networks have closed their foreign bureaus. Cable stations offer endless chatter and little substance.

All these decisions have sprung out of a media world which increasingly is in the hands of mega-corporate interests. In other words, most news organizations, which once served to keep tabs on those in power, are now powerhouses themselves. They are concerned not with public service, which they see as too costly, but with filling up air time (and newsprint) as cheaply as possible.

That means instead of hiring investigative reporters to keep politicians honest, newspapers settle for expanded lifestyle sections that please advertisers. Instead of reporting on what government is doing, local stations offer "action news," segments that appear to be investigative reports ("Pollution in the Rivers, Tune in at 5") but which are really pre-packaged formulas bought from consultants. Instead of in-depth reports from abroad, national networks and cable stations offer up endless entertainment features and talk shows that shed more heat than light.

Crammed with celebrity interviews, disaster and crime reports, punditry and manufactured news, the media is not so much an arsenal against ignorance. It's becoming a weapon of mass distraction.

It wasn't always this way, as Downie and Kaiser point out. For most of the first two centuries of American history, the country's newspapers were deeply rooted local institutions. So were television stations. "Some were public-spirited, others merely provincial, but everyone in town knew who the owner was and where to find him," they write. Now, "most newspapers, television networks and local television and radio stations belong to giant, publicly owned corporations far removed from the communities they serve."

And don't think this will change any time soon. With the ruling last week that paves the way for cable operators to own television networks, the concentration of media ownership into the hands of a few entertainment monopolies will only become more intense. And with it will come even more quarterly profit pressures from Wall Street.

"Media owners are accustomed to profit margins that would be impossible in most traditional industries," write Downie and Kaiser. "For General Motors, a profit margin of 5 percent of total revenue would mark a very good year, but the Tribune Company of Chicago, which owns newspapers and television stations located all across the country, wants a 30 percent margin. Many local television stations expect to keep 50 percent of their revenue as profit. Protecting such high profits can easily undermine the notion that journalism is a public service."

Downie and Kaiser are not opposed to news organizations making money, mind you. They receive their paychecks, after all, from the Washington Post, whose profit margins regularly exceed 15 percent and often go above 20 percent of total revenues (their own figures). But at the Post, they argue, those increased profits have not been made at the expense of serious news gathering. It is when newspapers are willing to sacrifice quality to meet the increasing demands of stockholders for more profits that the larger society stands to lose.

"Newspapers must get better, not worse, to retain the loyalty of readers, and thus the dollars of advertisers," they write. "If they fail to get better, newspapers will continue to shrink - in size, in quality, in importance. This would be tragic, because no other news medium can fill the role that good newspapers play in informing the country."

If that sounds like a bias toward print journalism, it is. Freely admitting they are not the best people to criticize the Post, the two Post veterans do take note of their own newspaper's deserved reputation for journalistic excellence. They also praise the newspaper that writes my paycheck - the St. Petersburg Times - pointing out that its unique financial structure (it is independently owned by a local nonprofit media institute) allows it to be "run for the public's benefit." On the other hand, they bemoan what they call the "profit-driven big chains" such as Gannett and Knight-Ridder, and the tendency of even well-respected newspapers to blur the lines between advertising and news. They take the Los Angeles Times, for example, to task for its notorious deal with the Staples Center, in which the newspaper shared advertising revenues from a Sunday magazine that purported to be news. The Times case was so egregious that its own editors later published a report critical of the newspaper's Staples decisions.

Downie and Kaiser's most vitriolic attacks, however, are reserved for the electronic media, particularly local television. "The owners and managers of local television stations feel little obligation to provide coverage of government, politics or civic affairs in return for the free airwaves they use, or the First Amendment protections they enjoy," they write. Whatever happened to the notion of public service?

There was, of course, a time last fall when it looked like that notion might be revived. During the days and weeks that followed Sept. 11, news organizations seemed to forget about profits and concentrated on serving the public. Television networks suspended commercials. Newspapers put out extra editions and expanded their news holes to accommodate badly sought after information about terrorism here and abroad.

Will such newfound interest in serious news last? Will the owners of news organizations now be convinced that it is in their best interest to encourage better journalism and spend more money on covering the news? Downie and Kaiser, who were finishing up their book just after the terrorist attacks, were cautiously hopeful. But the bulk of their research, obviously completed well before Sept. 11, indicates that it will be an uphill battle.

CBS' Goldberg is certainly skeptical. "On September 11, 2001, America's royalty, the TV news anchors, got it right," he wrote in a brief note added to his bestseller *Bias* after the terrorist attacks. "But it shouldn't take a national catastrophe of unparalleled magnitude to get the news without the usual biases."

Goldberg and other media critics continue to lay the blame for media mediocrity on the press' liberal or conservative bias. But in criticizing the media elites, Goldberg could have just stopped after the phrase "to get the news." The more pressing problem is not whether the news we get is slanted, right or left. It's whether we get any news at all.