Seeing Through News Media Bias: Exposing Deception and Proclaiming Truth in an Age of Misinformation

Steve Cable examines the role of deception in how we receive much of today's information, providing perspective on how to see through it to the truth.

Biblical Perspective on Truth

We live in an age when many of us feel as if we are swimming in a sea of information. From broadcast media to cell phones to ubiquitous internet access, we are assailed with more information than we can possibly assimilate. Just on the internet alone we are asked to deal with social networking, blogs, news feeds, forwarded emails, spam, not to mention our compulsion to Google any topic that crosses our mind.



Most of the information we encounter is intended to impact our view of truth; what we think about politics, economics, relationships, needs, and wants. Its purpose is to reshape your current view of reality into a different view that someone else is promoting. This reshaping may be good or bad depending upon the validity and implications of the revised view.

One response to this deluge of information is to despair of ever discerning truth. After all, what standard can I use to compare competing truth claims? If one medical doctor promotes eating fish daily and another doctor says it is dangerous due to high mercury levels, how can I discern the truth? I may be tempted to retreat into a postmodern perspective, creating my own personal, relative truth that works for me while affirming

that others may need to create a different truth that works better for them.

However, as a Christian, I know that there is absolute truth. I may not have full awareness of truth, but it does exist regardless of my lack of knowledge or understanding. Absolute truth is reality as seen from God's perspective, lived out through the person of Jesus Christ and recorded for us in the Holy Bible. When I consult that Bible, I find that I am not to be tossed about by all of this competing information, but rather I am to be grounded in the truth and to speak the truth in love. If I am responsible for speaking truth then God must have equipped me to discern truth from falsehood.

In this article, we will begin by looking at a biblical perspective of truth and the battle between truth and deceit. Then we will look at some of the ways misinformation is being foisted upon us today and explore some biblical principals to expose it.

Truth Is Central to the Gospel

Some people suggest that truth is of secondary importance in the work of Christ. According to this view, we should focus on grace and relationship rather than doctrine and not be concerned if people profess faith in a perception of Jesus that is not consistent with the biblical record. On the contrary, the Bible is clear that grace and truth are both indispensable parts of the gospel. Let's consider three passages from Scripture:

- Paul tells us that "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of *the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4).

- Jesus explains to Pilate, "For this I have been born and for this I have come into the world, to testify to *the truth*" (John 18:37).

- In his gospel, John proclaims, "The law was given through

Moses, grace and *truth* were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

From these passages we see that:

- Knowing the truth is what God desires for people.
- Proclaiming the truth is central to the purpose of Jesus' incarnation.
- Jesus is the source of both grace and truth.

When we receive Jesus we are not only accepting God's grace for us, but also enthroning Jesus as our source for truth.

Challenge of Deception

We are called to walk in the truth and to speak the truth, but we find this to be a challenge. One consistent theme of the Bible is that the war between good and evil is a conflict between truth and deception. As we strive to walk in the truth, we will find ourselves assailed with deception, misinformation and partial truths. If we look at our world objectively, we will see that deception is at the heart of most problems. The Bible gives us insight into three reasons why exposing deception is at the heart of our Christian walk.

First, deception is at the heart of Satan's plan to destroy us. Jesus tells us that Satan "was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there *is no truth* in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a *liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44-45). Satan began by deceiving Eve in the garden and his campaign of deception remains the centerpiece of his strategy to attack God

Second, deception is at the heart of man's separation from God. As Paul explained in Romans, "For they exchanged *the truth of God for a lie*, and worshiped and served the creature

rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). When we accept Satan's lies, we begin a life of self deception buying the illusion that we can truly live apart from our Creator.

Third, deception is at the heart of man's efforts to exploit you. Peter warns us "because of false teachers the way of *the truth* will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with *false words*" (2 Peter 2:2-3). By convincing us to buy into a "false truth", exploiters can manipulate us into doing what they want us to do rather than what God has called us to do.

Through Jesus Christ, God has redeemed us from slavery to deception, and there will be no deception in heaven. While we live on this earth, God knows we are going to have to deal with deception everyday. He commands us to be on our guard so that we can walk in the truth. In Ephesians, we are told that

> We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the *trickery of men*, by craftiness in *deceitful scheming*; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ (Ephesians 4:14-15).

The importance of being on our guard is also emphasized in Colossians where Paul writes,

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and *empty deception*, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

God gives us this warning because many Christians live with their minds captive to a world system based on empty deception. Although these believers have an eternal inheritance, they are largely ineffective in bearing fruit for Christ. We are commanded to take positive action to see that this does not happen to us and to tear down the walls of deception that hold others captive.

News Media As a Source of Misinformation

Clearly, the Bible teaches us that Satan and the world system are out to take us captive and make us ineffective in our Christian lives by deceiving us into conforming to a perverted view of truth. Every successful con begins with an attempt to validate the trustworthiness of the conman. A recent example is the complex investment Ponzi scheme run by Bernard Madoff which has purportedly cost investors $50 billion. His impeccable credentials and complex models convinced not only friends, but also large hedge funds to trust him with their money. This aura of trustworthiness allowed his scheme to continue for years even though a Boston analyst had been reporting him to the SEC consistently for the last nine years.

The most dangerous sources of information are those that occupy positions of trust. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the mechanisms we turn to for factual information or truth are oftentimes the biggest sources of misinformation. In our society, we look to the news media, academia, government and the arts to provide information and perspective to understand reality or truth. As Christians, we need to approach these sources of information with a degree of caution to avoid being taken captive by a distorted worldview.

In what follows we will focus on how to approach information we receive from the news media (newspapers, magazines, television, internet news, and blogs). As recognized by the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, we need the press to be free to provide news and commentary as they see them without fear of retribution. However, the press can also wield a dangerous amount of power when left unbalanced. As Mark Twain quipped, “There are laws to protect the freedom of the press’s speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press.”

First let’s consider the question, Is the information we receive really biased toward deception? In America, multiple

polls have found that the vast majority of the members of the press are secular and liberal. But some argue that their personal views should not keep them from presenting information in an unbiased manner. However, multiple academic studies of this question have shown that news reports are biased. For example, an analysis of news reports done by researchers from UCLA and the University of Missouri concluded:

> Our results show a strong liberal bias: all of the news outlets we examine, except *Fox News' Special Report* and the *Washington Times* received scores to the left of the average member of Congress. . . . *CBS Evening News* and the *New York Times* received scores far to the left of center.{1}

Many reporters are trying to provide objective reports, but it is very hard for any of us to completely set aside our biases and agendas. What we consider balanced is in fact skewed by our own views and thus off center from true objectivity.

The deceptive nature of news reporting is not new. Writing about the period around the First World War, C. S. Lewis stated,

> Even in peacetime, I think those are very wrong who say that school-boys should be encouraged to read newspapers. Nearly all that a boy reads there in his teens will be known before he is twenty to have been false in emphasis and interpretation, if not in fact as well, and most of it will have lost all importance. Most of what he remembers he will therefore have to unlearn.{2}

Part of the reason for biased reporting is the view held by most people in the news media that their calling is to shape society into a better place, not just provide people with the facts. Therefore, news reports are not simply unbiased facts but rather a product created by newspeople to impact society. As Terry Eastland observed in his study on the collapse of

mainstream media,

> The most influential journalists understood that news is rarely news in the sense of being undisputed facts about people or policy, but news in the sense that it's a product made by reporters, editors, and producers. . . those who define and present the news have a certain power, since news can set a public agenda. And they weren't shy about exercising this power.{3}

Bias in news reporting shows up in subtle (and not so subtle) ways. Four of those ways are:

1. Setting the agenda
2. Slanting the information
3. Skewing the facts
4. Skewering the truth

By "setting the agenda" we mean that people within the news establishment determine what information makes it into print and onto television newscasts. An event that highlights a favorite cause of the journalist or news organization may receive extensive media coverage while another receives little or no coverage. One area we see this occurring in is so-called hate crimes where coverage may vary greatly depending upon the "disadvantaged group" represented by the victim. This method is the hardest to detect since it is based on the absence of information. However, the recent growth of alternative news sources makes detecting this method of bias easier.

"Slanting the information" uses subtle techniques to influence that way people interpret the information included in a news story. Examples of this are the selection of headlines, the type of words used to describe the topic, the selection of experts, and how the experts are described. Warning signs of this technique include words that seem to overstate the case or emphasize a point which is secondary to the facts. One example of this was an August 2006 *Washington Post* article on

economic reports showing record growth and outstanding performance of the economy. One might expect a headline stating something like “Economic News Encouraging in All Areas.” Instead, the actual headline stated, “Economic News Isn’t Helping Bush.”{4}

Other common techniques for slanting information include the use of labels or definitions that communicate an implied value judgment. Examples of this are using the label “anti-choice” instead of “pro-life” and defining Intelligent Design as a form of Creationism formulated to allow it to sneak into public schools.

“Skewing the facts” is a technique of selectively emphasizing the facts that support the journalist’s point of view while either discounting or leaving out facts that run counter to that point of view. It can also include drawing illogical or unsubstantiated conclusions. Whenever you encounter a journalist using statistics to paint a conclusion as fact, you should view it with skepticism. Mark Twain reported that Disraeli was the first person to warn us that “There are lies, damn lies and statistics!”

One example of skewing the facts prominent in the recent presidential campaign dealt with the potential impact of developing more of the oil reserves of the United States. One of the candidates (and their running mate) made the following statement during multiple televised debates: “But understand, we only have three to four percent of the world’s oil reserves and we use 25 percent of the world’s oil, which means that we can’t drill our way out of the problem.”{5} What they are implying is that because twenty-five is a bigger number than four, it is obvious that our oil reserves cannot help us. Of course, most of us learned in the third grade that percentages are not absolute numbers. For example, would you rather have four percent of Bill Gates’s net worth or twenty-five percent of what he spent for lunch today? In fact, comparing the size

of our reserves and our yearly oil consumption, it appears that North America's known recoverable reserves would last over one hundred years if we used them to meet half of our needs. This would certainly buy us a long period of energy independence while we develop alternative sources.

More complex examples are often found in reporting on public health issues and climate change. Skewed facts are used to promote public policy around conclusions which are not really supported by the raw data. I encourage you to check out articles on our web site on condoms preventing HPV and global warming for detailed examples on how statistics can be skewed.{6}

"Skewering the truth" is the most blatant technique for biased reporting where the journalist misrepresents the information and/or presents faulty conclusions as established fact. Oftentimes the first three forms of bias may be unintentional, but usually skewering the truth requires an overt attempt on the part of the journalist to deceive the recipient. One technique used to mask these misstatements of fact is to put them into the mouths of unidentified experts or couch them as general common knowledge among the well-informed. For example, a recent *Newsweek* article is subtitled "Opponents of gay marriage often cite Scripture. But what the Bible teaches about love argues for the other side."{7} In this article selective, liberal interpretations of scriptural passages are used to support the following conclusion: "Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, then, but in custom and tradition."{8} For those of us who are students of the Bible, this statement is clearly false, but it is stated as a clear fact.

In another blatant example, Michael Ennis, in his article entitled "Dissing Darwin," claims that there is a correlation between what a state's education standards say about the teaching of evolution and the performance of its students on standardized science tests.{9} However, when we examined the

data he cited, we found that the actual correlation was exactly the opposite of what Ennis claimed. So, either he did not take the time to actually look at the information to see if it agreed with his claims or he hoped we would not take the time.

Uncovering Misinformation

If we are not to be taken captive by the philosophies of a godless world, it is important for us to be on the lookout for biased, agenda-driven reporting. Too many times Christians have been either unaware of the biased message or unconcerned about its impact. Looking back at the social and spiritual changes in our country over the last fifty years, we can see how this lack of awareness and concern have contributed to the emergence of dominant views on morality and religion that are counter to a biblical worldview.

The Bible instructs us to be on our guard. Let’s look as some things we should be doing to proclaim truth in a world filled with misinformation.

The first step we should take is to know what the Bible teaches and allow the Holy Spirit to use the scripture to bring discernment. As the letter to the Hebrews tell us,

> For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Second, we need to be on the alert for the warning signs of misinformation. When we recognize the need for discernment, begin by asking God for wisdom in looking for and applying the truth:

> But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who

> gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5-6).

Then we need to ask ourselves some tough questions about the article or news report:

1. Does it begin with truth?
2. Is it logical?
3. Does it consider all of the evidence?
4. Does the conclusion make sense apart from the argument?
5. Does it stand up to close examination?

Based on the answers to those questions, we have a pretty good idea whether we need to be concerned about being deceived. If so, the next step is to do some digging into the background to see if any of the four techniques for biased reporting have been employed. In today's world, we can often use the internet to get access to source material that has been referenced by the journalist. However, in many cases the best way to check up on questionable reporting is to consult a trusted resource. Organizations like Probe have often already done the research. If we don't have something on the specific article, we will probably have information on the primary topic of interest.

Once you have done your research, go back to the Bible. God has the only perspective that cannot be deceived by the schemes of the world. Compare your conclusions with Scripture and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you in truth. When the facts are not clear, you will not go wrong by being biased in favor of a biblical worldview. Remember how David delighted in God's word, saying, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

Finally, share what you have uncovered with others. Don't let others you know be deceived. Follow the command to speak the truth in love. If you have done some research that other need to know, you may want to look for a venue to share it with a broader audience. One approach would be to contact us at Probe

to see if it is a topic we should address on our Web site.

Remember, deception may create detours in our lives, but truth will always be truth and will win out in the end.

Notes

1. Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, "A Measure of Media Bias," www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/groseclose/Media.Bias.8.htm.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Fontana, 1959), 128-29.
3. Terry Eastland, "The Collapse of Big Media," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2005.
4. Jonathan Weisman and Nell Henderson, "Economic News Isn't Helping Bush," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 2005, D1, accessed online at tinyurl.com/9krga.
5. NDTV.com, October 16, 2008, tinyurl.com/cfqbe8.
6. Steve Cable, Despite Media Claims, Condoms Don't Prevent STDs," Probe Ministries, 2006, and Ray Bohlin, "The Complex Realities Behind Global Warming," Probe Ministries, 2008.
7. Lisa Miller, "Our Mutual Joy," *Newsweek*, Dec 6, 2008, accessed online at www.newsweek.com/id/172653.
8. Ibid.
9. Michael Ennis, "Dissing Darwin," *Texas Monthly*, April 2005, accessed online at www.texasmonthly.com/preview/2005-04-01/ennis.

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Two Sides to Every Story.

Especially Now.

Sue exhorts us to make Proverbs 18:17 our filter to find the balance in news stories, analyses, and opinion pieces by asking wise questions and finding trustworthy sources.

Please, please, please, make this powerful Proverb the filter through which you process information, especially during this Corona-Crazy time:

> ***The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.***
> *Proverbs 18:17*

We HAVE to remember that there are two sides to every story, particularly now when we have to navigate a slippery slope of opinion, and fake news, and deliberately skewed news, and trustworthy reporting of facts.

Many people are grabbing one compelling-sounding video or article or even just a meme on social media, and they stop thinking there. We need to be asking ourselves the power questions that help us think:

What do they mean by _____? We need to make sure that we understand what others mean by the words and terms they use. Politically- and idealogically-charged rhetoric often uses language that means something very different from what it appears on the surface. For example, the innocuous-sounding "Equality Act" is intended to severely restrict and punish those who hold to a biblical perspective on gender and sexuality—who, it is clear, are not considered equal to those who hold pro-LGBT values.

Where do they get their information? There are extreme-right and extreme-left sources that pump out nothing but slanted and unbalanced ideas. We need to be aware of the difference

between reports from the very conservative Infowars and The Blaze, and the leftist MSNBC and CNN.

How can we know it's true? Much of what appears to be journalism today is analysis and opinion pieces. How are your discernment skills? Can you tell the difference between factual reporting and spin? Probably not if you live in a bubble of only opinions and voices you agree with. "Confirmation bias" is a powerful dynamic that keeps us from considering anything from a different perspective. This is why it's essential to keep in mind, as Proverbs 18:17 reminds us, that there are two sides to every story, and we need to delay clamping down our minds on a position until we have more information and perspective. Do you know about allsides.com? That's a good place to find news from the left, from the center, and the right.

(Please see my article "Four Killer Questions: Power Tools for Great Question-Asking")

My extremely wise colleague at Probe Ministries, Steve Cable, offered this counsel in his article "Seeing Through News Media Bias: Exposing Deception and Proclaiming Truth in an Age of Misinformation":

> "[W]e need to be on the alert for the warning signs of misinformation. When we recognize the need for discernment, begin by asking God for wisdom in looking for and applying the truth:
>
> > But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5-6).
>
> "Then we need to ask ourselves some tough questions about the article or news report:
>
> 1. Does it begin with truth?
> 2. Is it logical?

3. Does it consider all of the evidence?
4. Does the conclusion make sense apart from the argument?
5. Does it stand up to close examination?”

These are great questions.

And we need to hang on tight to common sense, not being afraid to ask questions of what we’re reading and hearing. Biological viruses will not be transmitted through cell towers. Washing our hands thoroughly will ALWAYS be a good idea. We were told not to wear masks, now we’re told to wear masks; maybe there’s not a one-size-fit-all rule?

Conspiracy theories abound; is anybody addressing the assertions in them? At this point in time, Google is still our friend in finding the answer to that question.

The bottom line is that we need to always remember that “the first to make his case *seems* right, until the other comes and examines him.” If we’ve only heard the first side, we need to hold our thoughts and judgments loosely until we hear if there is another side.

And be kind the whole time.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/two-sides-to-every-story-especially-now/ on May 23, 2020.

When Things Get Crazy on

Social Media: Responding Biblically to Firestorms

Recently, a firestorm erupted over some viral videos of some high school students allegedly harassing a Native American veteran who was chanting and banging a drum. In a frenzy of name calling, people quickly ascribed disrespect, racism, and hatred to the students. The veteran made statements about the event that were also shared virally. Some media figures and a lot of Twitter users blew up the internet, condemning the students for their interpretation of what they saw.

But then, more and longer videos showing the true picture of what happened became available online, and the student at the center of the original viral video released an articulate statement explaining what really happened. It has become apparent that the media had mischaracterized the event, and some media figures have actually apologized for jumping to premature conclusions.

We are in a new place in history, where the internet makes news available immediately, faster than the speed of thought and analysis. At least in the United States, we now live in a culture of criticism and rush to judgment before all the facts are in. This is fed by our postmodern loss of belief in truth. Without recognizing it, many many people no longer believe in Truth with a capital T, just individual truth with a lowercase t. We are encouraged to find and hang onto “our own personal truths” rather than pursue knowledge of what is actually True. (Ever heard the phrase “true for you, but not for me”?)

This loss of confidence in ultimate truth, combined with the technology to record and edit videos that provide what someone wants others to see disconnected from context, has brought us to this place where “fake news” is only distinguishable from real news by investigating the details, assertions and context

of what is published and promoted.

That takes time. And deliberation. Neither one is a friend of those who want to manipulate how others think and react.

But we can protect ourselves from this manipulation if we will install a filter of the Bible's sage wisdom that is even more true today than it was 2700 years ago when Solomon wrote Proverbs 18:17:

> The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.

As Dr. Phil loves to say, no matter how flat the pancake, it always has two sides. And particularly with stories and videos going viral, there's always more information, there's always context, and there's always the worldview and agenda of those pushing the virality. The deeply beautiful truth of this proverb makes for an exquisite filter for every aspect of life. (See my blog post Headed to the Courtroom)

What creates an online firestorm is people quickly jumping onto social media to comment, judge, and share. The immediacy of the social media universe feeds the bad habit of reacting instead of responding, of blurting out one's first thoughts before giving time to consider alternative explanations or perspectives. This is why the wisdom of the Lord's brother James shines through for us in 2019:

> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

We should also take note of the keen observation that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so maybe we should listen twice as much (and as long) as we speak. Or tap. All three parts of this verse would have a profound effect on the frenzy of social media if more of us followed it!

One final suggestion for a filter as we experience this new post-truth, super-immediate, easily-manipulated world:

> So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

How do we read a Twitter or Facebook or Instagram feed to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the experience, lifting people and situations before His throne and asking for His blessing, asking Him to show ourselves and others what's true, and remembering that He sees all, knows all, and loves all.

How do we respond to social and news media accounts, rumors and stories to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the way we process these, remembering His word that there's always more to whatever story we are hearing in the moment, and waiting to draw conclusions and take a position.

How do we post and comment on social media to the glory of God? By following His command in Ephesians 4:29—

> You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear.

God's word has always been a source of great blessing, teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). But perhaps never more than right now!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/when_things_get_crazy_on_social_media_responding_biblically_to_firestorms on January 22, 2019.

Media and Discernment

We live in the midst of a media storm, and Christians need to develop discernment in their consumption of various media (TV, movies, music, videos, computer, etc).

Media Exposure

We live in the midst of a media storm. Every day we are confronted by more media messages than a previous generation could even imagine.

For example, more homes have TV sets (98 percent) than have indoor plumbing. In the average home the television set is on for more than six hours a day. Children spend more time watching television than in any other activity except sleep.{1} Nearly half of elementary school children and 60 percent of adolescents have television sets in their bedrooms.{2}

But that is just the beginning of the media exposure we encounter. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimates that the average teenager listens to 10,500 hours of music during their teen years.{3} Families are watching more movies than every before since they can now watch them on cable and satellite and rent or buy movies in video and DVD format.

The amount of media exposure continues to increase every year. Recent studies of media usage reveal that people spend more than double the time with media than they think they do. This amounts to nearly twelve hours a day total. And because of media multitasking, summing all media use by medium results in a staggering fifteen hours per day.{4}

Student use of the Internet has been increasing to all-time levels. A study done at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found the following:{5}

- Nearly 90 percent of the students access the Internet every day.
- Students spent over ten hours per week using IM (instant messaging).
- Those same students spent over twenty-eight hours per week on the Internet.
- Nearly three-fourths spent more time online than they intended.

In addition to concerns about the quantity of media input are even greater concerns about the quality of media input. For example, the average child will witness over 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders before he or she is 18 years old. And consider that the average child views 30,000 commercials each year.

A study of adolescents (ages 12-17) showed that watching sex on TV influences teens to have sex. Youths were more likely to initiate intercourse as well as other sexual activities.{6}

Over 1000 studies (including reports from the Surgeon General's office and the National Institute of Mental Health) "point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children."{7}

To put it simply, we are awash in media exposure, and there is a critical need for Christians to exercise discernment. Never has a generation been so tempted to conform to this world (Rom. 12:1-2) because of the growing influence of the proliferating forms of media.

Biblical Discernment

Although the Bible does not provide specific instructions about media (you can't find a verse dealing with television, computers, or DVDs), it nevertheless provides broad principles concerning discernment.

For example, the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2:22 instructs us to “Flee from youthful lusts.” We should stay away from anything (including media) that inflames our lust. Paul also goes on to say that in addition to fleeing from these things, we should also “pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.” We should replace negative influences in our life with those things which are positive.

Paul says in Colossians 3:8, “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” Now, does that mean you could never read something that has anger or rage or slander in it? No. After all, the Bible has stories of people who manifest those traits in their lives.

What Paul is saying is that we need to rid ourselves of such things. If the input into our lives (such as through media) manifests these traits, then a wise and discerning Christian would re-evaluate what is an influence in his or her life.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” We should focus on what is positive and helpful to our Christian walk.

We are also admonished in Romans 13:13 to “behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”

As Christians, we should develop discernment in our lives. We can do this in three ways: stop, listen, and look. Stop what you are doing long enough to evaluate the media exposure in your life. Most of us just allow media to wash over us everyday without considering the impact it is having on us.

Second, we should listen. That is, we should give attention to what is being said. Is it true or false? And what is the message various media are bringing into our lives?

Finally, we should look. We need to look at the consequences of media in our lives. We should rid ourselves of influences which are negative and think on those things which are positive.

Worldview of the News Media

Of all the forms of media, the news media have become a primary shaper of our perspective on the world. Also, the rules of journalism have changed in the last few decades. It used to be assumed that reporters or broadcasters would attempt to look at events through the eyes of the average reader or viewer. It was also assumed that they would not use their positions in the media to influence the thinking of the nation but merely to report objectively the facts of an event. Things have changed dramatically in the news business.

The fact that people in the media are out of step with the American people should be a self-evident statement. But for anyone who does not believe it, there is abundant empirical evidence to support it.

Probably the best-known research on media bias was first published in the early 1980s by professors Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman. Their research, published in the journal *Public Opinion*{8} and later collected in the book *The Media Elite,*{9} demonstrated that reporters and broadcasters in the prestige media differ in significant ways from their audiences.

They surveyed 240 editors and reporters of the media elite—*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Their research confirmed what many suspected for a long time: the media elite are liberal, secular, and humanistic.

People have always complained about the liberal bias in the media. But what was so surprising is how liberal members of the media actually were. When asked to describe their own

political persuasion, 54 percent of the media elite described themselves as left of center. Only 19 percent described themselves as conservative. When asked who they voted for in presidential elections, more than 80 percent of them always voted for the Democratic candidate.

Media personnel are also very secular in their outlook. The survey found that 86 percent of the media elite seldom or never attend religious services. In fact, 50 percent of them have no religious affiliation at all.

This bias is especially evident when the secular press tries to cover religious events or religious issues. Most of them do not attend church, nor do they even know people who do. Instead, they live in a secularized world and therefore tend to underestimate the significance of religious values in American lives and to paint anyone with Christian convictions as a "fundamentalist."

Finally, they also found that the news media was humanistic in their outlook on social issues. Over 90 percent of the media elite support a woman's so-called "right to abortion" while only 24 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "homosexuality is wrong."

For a time, members of the media elite argued against these studies. They suggested that the statistical sample was too small. But when Robert Lichter began to enumerate the 240 members of the news media interviewed, that tactic was quickly set aside. Others tried to argue that, though the media might be liberal, secular, and humanistic, it did not affect the way the press covered the news. Later studies by a variety of media watchdogs began to erode the acceptance of that view.

A second significant study on media bias was a 1996 survey conducted by the Freedom Forum and the Roper Center.{10} Their survey of 139 Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents showed a decided preference for liberal

candidates and causes.

The journalists were asked for whom they voted in the 1992 election. The results were these: 89 percent said Bill Clinton, 7 percent George Bush, 2 percent Ross Perot. But in the election, 43 percent of Americans voted for Clinton and 37 percent voted for Bush.

Another question they were asked was, "What is your current political affiliation?" Fifty percent said they were Democrats, 4 percent Republicans. In answer to the question, "How do you characterize your political orientation?" 61 percent said they were liberal or moderately liberal, and 9 percent were conservative or moderately conservative.

The reporters were also asked about their attitudes toward their jobs. They said they see their coverage of news events as a mission. No less than 92 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is to educate the public." And 62 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is sometimes to suggest potential solutions to social problems."

A more recent survey by the Pew Research Center further confirms the liberal bias in the media. They interviewed 547 media professionals (print, TV, and radio) and asked them to identify their political perspective. They found that 34 percent were liberal and only 7 percent were conservative. This compares to 20 percent of Americans who identify themselves as liberal and 33 percent who define themselves as conservative.{11}

It is also worth questioning whether a majority of media professionals who labeled themselves as moderate in the survey really deserve that label. John Leo, writing for *U.S. News and World Report*, says that it has been his experience "that liberal journalists tend to think of themselves as representing the mainstream, so in these self-identification polls, moderate usually translates to liberal. On the few

social questions asked in the survey, most of the moderates sounded fairly liberal."{12}

Once again we see the need for Christians to exercise discernment in their consumption of media.

Dealing with the Media

Christians must address the influence of the media in society. It can be a dangerous influence that can conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Therefore we should do all we can to protect against its influence and to use the media for good.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media: Philippians 4:8, which we quoted above, and Colossians 3:2–5:

> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Here are some suggestions for action.

First, control the quantity and quality of media input. Parents should set down guidelines and help select television programs at the start of the week and watch only those. Parents should also set down guidelines for movies, music, and other forms of media. Families should also evaluate the location of their television set so that it is not so easy to just sit and watch TV for long hours.

Second, watch TV with children. One way to encourage discussion with children is to watch television with them. The plots and actions of the programs provides a natural context for discussion. The discussion could focus on how cartoon

characters or TV characters could solve their problems without resorting to violence. What are the consequences of violence? TV often ignores the consequences. What are the consequences of promiscuous sex in real life?

Third, set a good example. Parents should not be guilty to saying one thing and doing another. Neither adults nor children should spend long periods of time in front of a video display (television, video game, computer). Parents can teach their children by example that there are better ways to spend time.

Fourth, work to establish broadcaster guidelines. No TV or movie producer wants to unilaterally disarm all the actors on their screens for fear that viewers will watch other programs and movies. Yet many of these TV and movie producers would like to tone down the violence, even though they do not want to be the first to do so. National standards would be able to achieve what individuals would not do by themselves in a competitive market.

Fifth, make your opinions known. Writing letters to programs, networks, and advertisers can make a difference over time. A single letter may not make a difference, but large numbers of letters can even change editorial policy. Consider joining with other like-minded people in seeking to make a difference in the media.

While the media has a tremendous potential for good, it can also have some very negative effects. Christians need wisdom and discernment to utilize the positive aspects of media and to guard against its negative effects.

Notes

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