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Bylines & Biases

A LOOK AT FAITH
AND THE MEDIA



Look up the term “media bias” on the Internet and you’ll find dozens of watchdog groups claiming that the media is biased. There’s MediaResearch.org, which says that the news media is too liberal, while FAIR.org (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) says the media is too conservative. HonestReporting.com claims the media is biased against Israel, while MediaMonitors.net says it’s biased against Palestinians.

Those websites mirror a 1998 study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, in which 78 percent of

University), says that despite those human failings, the journalists he knows work hard to be fair in their coverage.

“They have a fundamental commitment to fairness and accuracy,” he says, “and do their level best to convey truth and accuracy in everything that they’re assigned to. They’re far more sophisticated than people give them credit for.”

Claims of bias are often heard when the news media covers religion. Churches and religious leaders complain that a reporter has oversimplified



Owen Youngman

subjects often criticize reporters for missing the key details. “It doesn’t lessen our responsibility to continually work at doing a better job,” says Youngman, “but it’s a factor.”

Another complaint that the media is biased against religion is based on the amount of coverage that religion receives. That criticism is hard to explain away, says Youngman. “We don’t cover religion nearly in proportion to its importance in the lives of the people who read our newspaper,” he says. “The percentage of people who

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Americans polled believed that the media was biased. They just couldn’t agree on what the bias was. Forty-seven percent said their local newspaper was more liberal than they were. Thirty-eight percent said it was more conservative.

All of this makes Owen Youngman shake his head when he hears Christians talking about a liberal or “anti-religion” bias in the media. Youngman, vice-president for development at the *Chicago Tribune* and member of Libertyville (Illinois) Covenant Church, says that the media is made up of ordinary people who have a variety of biases.

“The media is not a thing,” says Youngman. “The media are the people next to you on the train, and at the supermarket, and in the church just as much as they are the people on the TV or in the newspaper office. That means they have the same liabilities and foibles and failings that all of us do.”

Youngman, who started working at the *Tribune* in 1971, during his freshman year at North Park College (now

a story, or gotten the details wrong. Some of the complaints may be true, says Youngman, but they may not be due to bias. Instead, he says, it’s difficult for a reporter working on a tight deadline to capture all the nuances of a religion story. A church leader or member of a religious group will always have a better grasp of the intricacies of a news story.

“I like to say that 95 percent of what you read in the *Tribune* is absolutely correct,” says Youngman. “The exception is the 5 percent of which you have personal knowledge. We have a limited amount of space and a limited amount of expertise. Our reporters are parachuting in to write about topics that they don’t live every day. What the reporter and the editor see as a detail that’s necessary to get a story into the paper is seen by the people who know the story intimately as an omission of a critical fact.”

That complaint, says Youngman, isn’t limited to religion coverage. People interested in education or other

go to church or to worship services every week, or say they do, according to Gallup, is far larger than the percentage of people who go to the polls. [But] we give far more space to political news than we do to religious news.”

Part of the disparity in coverage happens because politics is much easier to cover. “It’s really easy to cover stories where, even if you don’t know what is right and wrong, you know clearly what positions are being staked out,” says Youngman. “The conflict between the positions or between the personalities gives you something to write about. Many of the things that we write about have beginnings and middles and ends, and so there are additional points you can focus on, like a hundred days into the Bush presidency or the end of the eight-year Clinton era.

“Religion isn’t something that starts, ends, or is clear. It’s full of nuance. It’s around us everywhere. It’s in places

Bob Smietana is associate editor of the *Companion*. Jane Swanson-Nystrom and Craig Pinley contributed to this story.

you don't expect to find it and in places you do. You have to work at doing a good job to cover it."

The desire of many reporters to be seen as objective—to give all religious groups equal treatment—can be a concern for many Christians, says Sharol Josephson. Josephson, a former news anchor and member of Hope Covenant Church in Strathmore, Alberta, has been a journalist for twenty years. She currently hosts *Canadian Living*, a television show about Canadian families and their lifestyles.

"What sometimes offends the Christian church is that the media covers all religions—Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism—with the same even hand that it covers cults and sects and every

are more stories about religion now than I've seen in my twenty-year career," she says. "And they're not just in the religion section of newspapers and magazines or relegated to the last few minutes of a weekend newscast. In the past year alone, *Time* magazine has given cover story status to articles about Jesus, faith, evil, and angels. *Maclean's*, our Canadian news magazine, just did a cover piece on 'Soul Searchers,' Canadians seeking faith. I think editors have finally discovered that religion sells. When the *New York Times* recently decided to include religious books on its bestseller lists, readers were stunned by how well religion sells."

A 1999 study by the Garrett-Medill

est and that quest starts surfacing. That doesn't mean that church attendance has climbed. As a matter of fact, it has gone down in most cases, except in the mega-churches, which are entrepreneurial, growth-oriented churches."

While the study found no overt bias in the news coverage, it did find that less than 40 percent of the stories provide any context. Without that context, says Larson, readers are left without the details they need to understand the stories.

"Because so many Americans, while interested in religious questions, are also religiously illiterate or semi-literate," says Larson, "the stones cry out for explanatory journalism—journalism that helps readers make sense of

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wacky, new-agey, flavor-of-the-month spiritualistic trend going," says Josephson. "The media isn't very discerning that way. Evangelical Christians aren't always happy with the way their story is told and the fact that God gets the same coverage as a self-appointed guru somewhere in Oregon or Sri Lanka."

Josephson says she has seen a growth in religion coverage in recent years. At one point while working as a news anchor, she decided to look at the newsroom archives to see what stories that station had done on religion. Besides stories about major events, such as news about the pope's travels or the annual pilgrimages to Mecca by Muslims, she found the station did very little coverage of local religion stories. "When it came to religion closer to home, local churches for example," she says, "I found we really only covered three things—fires, funerals, and scandal. I was appalled."

Much of that has changed, as Josephson says that editors have discovered that readers have an interest in religion and spirituality. "I think there

Center for Religion in the News Media showed that stories about religion, spirituality, and values make up between 11 percent and 20 percent of stories in newspapers, newsmagazines, and television news broadcasts. (Though in most of the cases, religion is a secondary topic in the story.)

Roy Larson, director of the Garrett-Medill Center and a former religion writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, says that during the mid- to late-nineties, there was a growing interest in religion and spirituality. "I think there was a great surge for a while, when God was hot," he says. "I think this has cooled somewhat, but some of it will continue." Larson says that news media have started to shift away from covering the institutional church, and have started at looking at human interest stories, and stories about the search for meaning.

"I think there is a tremendous amount of religious curiosity these days," he says. "This is what Wade Clark Roof calls a 'quest culture' or searching culture. I think there is a lot of inter-

what they are reading. Journalism that can help readers who are overwhelmed by information understand the context and pull the fragments together."

That lack of context in stories can lead to reporters making embarrassing mistakes in stories. In their book, *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenthal relate a story told by Laurie Goodstein, who covers religion for the *New York Times*. A reporter was covering a group of Pentecostals who were meeting on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. The reporter described the meeting, and then wrote, "At times, the mood turned hostile towards the lawmakers in the stately white building behind the stage." The reporter was referring to a speaker who said, "Let's pray that God will slay everyone in the Capitol."

Unfortunately for the reporter, said Goodstein, when a Pentecostal asks God to slay someone, they mean being slain in the Spirit or "praying that they are overcome with the love for God, for Jesus."

"It made for an embarrassing cor-

rection,” said Goodstein.

The kind of nuance needed to cover religion stories can make reporters gunshy about writing religion stories, says Terry Anderson. Anderson, a former syndicated columnist and Associated Press Middle East correspondent, taught journalism at Ohio University before retiring this fall. “This is a very complex area,” Anderson says, “and because it is very sensitive, most journalists are going to say, ‘I am not getting into that. When they send me a press release about which pastor is being elected I am going to print it. But I am not going to start covering religious issues.’”

Part of that reluctance, says Anderson, can be blamed on the reactions

that religion stories can bring out in readers.

“If there is by chance an implied criticism in a newspaper article,” says Anderson, “you are going to jump up and down on the editor’s desk, and scream and holler and scare the crap out of him so next time he isn’t going to cover it. Churches are extraordinarily sensitive about the media coverage they get.”

That kind of reaction, says Anderson, makes him skeptical that churches or other religious groups are interested in improving religion coverage. What they want instead is more positive coverage.

“I doubt seriously that you want more intelligent new coverage,” he says, “because if you ask for that you might get it. Then they are going to come and look at your church and its problems and they are going to put them in the newspaper and you are not going to like that. If you want more positive coverage, learn more about the media, learn how to get [stories about your church] in the newspaper. It is a skill

On Being a Christian and a Journalist

IN 1985, TERRY ANDERSON, then chief Middle East correspondent for the Associated Press, was captured by members of the Islamic Jihad. He was held captive for almost seven years. Among his fellow captives was Ben Weir, a Presbyterian minister. One of the first things that Weir asked Anderson was, “How can you be a Christian and a journalist?”



Terry Anderson

“It threw me back,” says Anderson, “because I had not ever addressed the question that bluntly, and it is a serious question.”

A serious question, and one with no simple answer. Being a journalist means being a skeptic, says Anderson. “When somebody comes along and talks about his faith, they are going to face skepticism, because faith and proof don’t go along, do they? They are not compatible.”

Journalists also have a tradition of not getting involved. For instance, when Anderson visited areas of conflicts or refugee camps, he was torn between doing his job as a journalist—which meant getting the story and sending it out—and wanting to help people. “My job as a journalist required me not to get involved with these people even though their need is clear,” he says, “because that would compromise my ability to work. I wouldn’t be trusted if I was somebody committed to one side or the other, even the victims. And that is very difficult for a Christian to do. You see people suffering and you want to help them.”

Until retiring this fall, Anderson taught journalism at Ohio University, and has served as vice-president of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The group supports journalists around the world who have been imprisoned or persecuted for their work. Anderson says being involved with CPJ reminds him of the important role of freedom of the press. “You cannot work with these journalists in Colombia, China, Uganda, Nigeria and not be inspired, not absorb some of their faith that what they do really does make a difference. They do believe that, because they risk their lives and quite often they lose it and they do it because they believe it’s very important. [Their governments] know that if they do not cow the press, they can’t oppress the people.”

Anderson says his work with CPJ often allows him the privilege of getting journalists out of jail.

Anderson also is involved with a group of Christian journalists on how their faith impacts their work. They wrestle with the same question that Ben Weir asked. “My short answer to that question is I don’t think there is any conflict between being a journalist and being a Christian. Both are involved with truth. And sometimes they cut against each other, but mostly they work together. There is nothing unchristian about finding and telling the truth, is there? However, it is impossible to be a Christian and a bad journalist. If you mislead, distort, treat the subjects of your story with contempt or disregard, exploit people in pain, which is what a bad journalist does, you are not a very good Christian are you?” □

Coverage During the Current Crisis

Religion played a major role in the media coverage in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11 (which occurred just as the *Companion* was going to press). The coverage took on the big picture questions, as Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clerics were asked to address the question, "How can God allow this evil to take place?" and "What does God say about retribution?" It also addressed concerns closer to home—ABC medical editor Tim Johnson was asked to speak in his role as a minister about how parents can explain the attacks to their children.

The media gave extensive coverage to the response from churches and other religious groups from across the United States and around the world, which gathered donations for the relief effort, and paused to pray for the victims and their families. The major networks also provided live coverage of the memorial service at the Washington National Cathedral on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on September 14, and featured the remarks from Billy Graham who said, "Yes, our nation has been attacked, buildings destroyed, lives lost. But now we have a choice: whether to implode and disintegrate emotionally and spiritually as a people and a nation or whether we choose to become stronger through all of this struggle to rebuild on a solid foundation. . . ."

As reports from the FBI began to characterize the hijackers as extremist Muslims, networks and other media sources talked with American Muslims and Muslim leaders to give some context. Most, if not all those interviewed, condemned the attacks, saying that killing innocent people is condemned by the Qur'an (Koran) as well. □

like any other that takes organization and knowledge of how the media works, which many church people may be as ignorant as the [media] are of you."

Getting more positive news coverage also means getting a sense of what kinds of stories reporters and editors are interested in. "What pastors think are good stories are usually not," says Rowena Coetsee, who writes about religion for the *Antioch Ledger-Dispatch*, part of the *Contra Costa Times* newspaper group in California. Coetsee, who attends Hillside



Rowena Coetsee

raderie."

People may also be surprised at the level of sophistication that editors and reporters bring to their jobs, says Youngman. That was best seen, he says, a number of years ago, when the *Tribune* covered the last months in the life of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. In August 1996, Bernardin announced that his pancreatic cancer had returned after fifteen months of remission. He died in November 1996.

"I remember sitting in the managing editor's office probably two weeks

"WHAT PASTORS THINK are good stories are usually not."

Covenant Church in Walnut Creek, says she has gotten at least one of her best stories from talking to lay people. Some of the stories she has covered in recent months include a profile of a couple who were driving with one of their neighbors, and were involved in a car crash. The couple survived, but their neighbor was killed. Coetsee wrote about how the couple's faith has helped cope with the loss. In another story, she wrote about an eighty-year-old Catholic priest who holds masses for migrant workers during the asparagus harvest. She also covered a conference of pastors trying to prevent domestic abuse in their congregations. ("The general perception is that it shouldn't be a problem in the church but it is," she says.)

Coetsee says that many of the religious leaders she talks to are surprised to learn that she is a Christian. "When I talk to pastors, they expect that they are talking to a non-Christian," she says, "and they are surprised when they find that you know the Scripture passage they are referring to. There's a different level of trust, a level of cam-

after Bernardin announced that he was dying," says Youngman. "We had scads of people all who were going to be focusing their attention on all the elements of that story. Here were the people who would focus on who might be the candidates to succeed him. Here were the people who were going to focus on the medical part of it. Here were the people who were going to focus on the impact on the church organization of Chicago. Here were the photographers and the graphic artists. Here were the editors.

"Then the managing editor took it all in and said, 'Before we start I just want to remind you about something. For Joe Bernardin, this is not a sad story. As sad as the impact of this might be on some of the people we're going to write about, for Joe Bernardin this is about what's next.' It's a powerful moment today," says Youngman. "I don't think that your stereotypical picture of the media takes into account the sophistication of people who understand that, and are willing to make it clear to the reporters who are going to go out and cover that kind of story." □