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Conservatives
Should Be
Optimistic About
the Media**

By L. Brent Bozell III



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Why Conservatives Should Be Optimistic About the Media

By L. Brent Bozell III

Something fascinating is happening within the national media.

For thirty years, we conservatives have been frustrated by the Dominant Media Culture, to coin the term of Arnaud de Borchgrave. We watched, helplessly, as the left within the so-called objective so-called news media championed and advanced one liberal cause after another, knowing they had the power to not only frame the terms for national public policy debate, but also implement them.

By and large, the left enjoyed a monopoly in the national press. To be sure, most cities had more than one newspaper, yet few would be classified as conservative. *U.S. News and World Report* presented a far more balanced picture than its competition, *Time* and *Newsweek*, but trailed them badly in circulation numbers. Radio was a declining business proposition as the industry and the public turned increasingly to television. Three networks controlled virtually everything we saw. Everything we heard. Everything considered “newsworthy.”

And what was “newsworthy?” According to Leslie Midgley, Walter Cronkite’s long-time producer at CBS, “In the print media, news is what the editor says it is... In television, news is what the producer says it is.”

There was no conservative network to challenge the liberal press, no magazine powerful enough to compete with the increasingly liberal tilt of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Conservatives had their periodicals like *National Review* and *Human Events*, the combined circulation of which might compete with one edition of *The New York Times*, assuming a natural disaster launched most of that paper’s fleet of trucks into the East River.

Challenge to the Media. Liberalism’s unquestioned control of the news media was finally broken in the 1980s. Ted Turner brought an entrepreneurial genius which revolutionized the industry; Ronald Reagan a revolution with which the industry was forced to contend; and media critics an end to the left’s unquestioned promotion of a liberal agenda under the guise of objective news.

In 1980, Ted Turner launched Cable News Network and soon followed with a second network, Headline News. But Turner was ahead of his time, and foresaw the public’s hunger for increased news coverage. His vision—a 24-hour news source—slowly took hold, and triggered the explosive growth of cable television which today has relegated the three networks to dinosaur status. Turner saw something else: conservative spokesmen and conservative values were not represented on television, and therein lay the opportunity to compete with the Big Three.

Now, one could say, and I would agree, that Mr. Turner does not possess a conservative bone in his body. In recent years he has moved steadily and dizzily to the left, embracing one strange cause after another, using his networks to promote them. From his Orwellian glorification of communism in “Portrait of the Soviet Union” (“Siberia is the place where young people go to re-

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alize their dreams”)to his pro-abortion documentaries like “Abortion for Survival” to his political indoctrination cartoons—yes, *cartoons*—like “Captain Planet and the Planetears,” Turner is promoting a radical left world view.

Why in the world, then, should conservatives be grateful to Mr. Turner? One, the man is intellectually honest: as opposed to so many of his peers in the press, Mr. Turner usually is quite straightforward in his biases and, I think, a good role model for those in journalism who ought to be equally forthcoming. Two, by and large (yes, there have been some exceptions) he has refrained from promoting his personal agenda on his two news programs, CNN and Headline News; instead, he usually uses his other properties, WTBS and TNT. Three, he has allowed conservatives to participate in his endeavors; by championing open political discourse with credible spokesmen on both left and right, Mr. Turner has not only given a voice to conservatives, he has demonstrated a commitment to balanced political programming.

The Reagan Revolution. In 1980 also came the Reagan Revolution. Ronald Reagan *was* Rambo: the liberal media’s worst nightmare. The more momentum he gathered, the more problematic his vision became for the liberal media; the more the media challenged his views, the more openly hostile and biased they became; the more openly biased their programming, the more they energized conservative opposition to their agenda; the more mobilized the conservatives, the stronger President Reagan became.

By defining conservatism (and by extension, redefining liberalism), Ronald Reagan magnified the media’s agenda while marginalizing their impact. When he denounced the Soviet Union as an evil empire, many were quick to condemn him as a threat to world peace. In fact, every time Reagan confronted communism, from the placement of Pershing missiles in Europe to the refusal to drop his Strategic Defense Initiative program, Reagan was denounced within the national media. Yet the more the media attacked Reagan, the more the public gained an appreciation for the foreign policy of the President—and the media’s bias against it.

Reagan’s Economic Recovery Program was pure heresy for the social scientists in the press and they launched a fierce counter-attack. Bill Moyers, then with CBS, (now enjoying a comfortable living at our expense at PBS) tried to debunk the fairy tale of supply-side economics with his 1982 ‘documentary’ “People Like Us.” So misleading was this piece of propaganda—allegedly an objective review of Reagan’s economic policies—that the chief sponsor of the program refused to pay the advertising bill. When interest rates, which under Jimmy Carter had topped 21 percent, began finally to go down, NBC filed a report warning of the impending savings losses facing senior citizens. If economic data revealed an explosion of economic growth throughout the West and South, the networks filed reports showing economic problems in the North. Seemingly whenever the government released positive economic data, the networks looked for something—anything—negative to report.

Dishonest Reporting. Shameful as the media’s performance toward Reagan was during his presidency, it pales in comparison to their dishonest—yes, dishonest—reporting since. Just how many stories have we seen on the networks or read in the printed press detailing the “massive” social cuts under Reagan when social spending actually rose during his tenure? How many reports have been filed describing how “the rich got richer while everyone else suffered” when economic data available to everyone in the press shows that average family income grew for every segment of wage-earners during the Reagan years?

How many stories must we see blaming Reagan for the three million and growing homeless in America before the national press devotes *just one* report explaining that the three million figure was *invented* by the late Mitch Snyder as a publicity stunt?

Let's try another media favorite: the environment. The media's panic reports during the 1980s on topics ranging from Alar to Times Beach to acid rain cost the American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars to disprove, and not before private business had lost hundreds of millions of dollars more. Now that these scares have been disproven, where are the media? Rather than concede their errors, the media simply ignore them and look for new reasons to denounce conservatives as environmentally insensitive. Welcome to the wetlands controversy.

That is where the third element of the equation, media watchdog organizations, comes into play. The godfather of the movement is, of course, Reed Irvine and his Accuracy in Media organization. Formed in 1969, AIM was for years virtually the only group which dedicated itself exclusively to the fight against the liberal press. In the '70s others began producing credible studies documenting the liberal tilt within the press. To counter the growing evidence, the press cynically fell back to another line of defense: Our *coverage* of Topic X may have been biased, but this does not scientifically prove *we* are *personally* biased.

Media Bias Exposed. This argument collapsed in 1982 when Drs. Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman published "Media and Business Elites," a survey to determine the personal persuasions of the press itself, and the evidence clearly demonstrated just how leftist the national media were: From 1964 to 1976, the media had voted for the Democratic candidate at least 81 percent of the time; 90 percent favored abortion; 76 percent found nothing wrong with homosexuality; only 47 percent believed adultery was wrong; 50 percent had no religious affiliation. Rather than admit their biases, reporters retreated to their final line of defense: OK, the media may be biased, but *I'm* not. With that in mind, the Media Research Center was launched to restore political balance in the media by exposing and neutralizing the liberal agenda within the so-called objective press.

The cornerstone of the MRC is its research capabilities. Today the MRC has the most sophisticated research operation ever assembled, more advanced than any university or media organization. Researchers tape, analyze and input into a computerized database summaries of every single network news show, including virtually all ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC and PBS news broadcasts, weekly news shows, political talk shows, and special reports.

The MRC research capabilities are virtually boundless. Does CBS's Ray Brady have a liberal, anti-Reagan economic agenda? Ask the computer and it will tell you everything he has said on this topic since 1987. (He does.) Does ABC use its "American Agenda" series regularly to promote left-wing causes? (It does.) Were the networks neutral observers during the 1988 Democratic Convention only to become outspoken critics of the Republicans at their convention the following month? (They were.) Do journalists have an unbiased attitude toward abortion? (No.) Are political figures like Senator Jesse Helms and political institutions like The Heritage Foundation regularly labeled "conservative"—or worse—while their liberal counterparts like Senator Kennedy and The Brookings Institution are usually not labeled altogether? (Yes.)

Oftentimes this research will provide extraordinary evidence for conservatives long convinced of a given situation but heretofore unable to prove it. Let's look at an example. Conservatives who watch ABC's weekly "Person of the Week" segment on the nightly news have long suspected a left-ward tilt to these reports; now we can document it. By reviewing every broadcast from January 1988 through December 1991, we documented how liberals outnumbered conservatives 27-to-5. Moreover, some conservatives, like then-Secretary of Education William Bennett, were criticized rather than applauded; liberals were always applauded. And who were some of the liberals? "Law professor" Catherine McKinnon. "Environmental leader" Denis Hayes. Tom Hayden. Betty Friedan. Wait a minute, you say, McKinnon is a radical feminist who once wrote that we should "compare victims' reports of rape with women's reports of sex. They look a lot alike. Feminism stresses the indistinguishability of prostitution, marriage, and sexual

harassment.” Hayes is an environmental extremist who has advocated the banning of all automobiles. Hayden and Friedan are... Hayden and Friedan. How in the world can ABC glorify these people in the face of their radical beliefs? Easy: ABC chose not to discuss them.

In 1989 the MRC launched its Entertainment Division to confront the increasing leftist political activity of entertainment industry. New database systems were installed and researchers began recording, analyzing and inputting summaries of every single prime time network entertainment show, made-for-TV movie, and entertainment talk show. Researchers also review major motion picture releases, the recording industry and entertainment publications.

With the research systems in place the task became to present our findings to the public through both retail and wholesale marketing. On the retail level we began with our flagship newsletter, *MediaWatch*, an eight-page monthly report on the news media. Our second venture was *Notable Quotables*, a bi-weekly compilation of the most outrageous utterances in the so-called news media. Each year a panel of conservatives nationwide is assembled to select the most outlandish quotes of the year; when the votes are tabulated we release “The Linda Ellerbee Awards for Distinguished Reporting.” To document the left-wing antics within the entertainment industry, in 1989 the MRC launched a third newsletter, *TV*, etc.

The MRC regularly releases other major studies to further document the media’s biased proclivities. *And That’s The Way It Is(n’t): A Reference Guide to Media Bias* contains 47 studies by a host of experts proving beyond a shadow of a doubt the slanted nature of news reporting. *The Revolving Door: The Connections Between the Media and Politics* cites examples of hundreds of political activists, both left and right, who have gone in and out of the media. Works in progress include *How to Identify, Expose and Correct Media Bias*, a manual for grassroots conservatives on the local level; *The Politics of Hollywood*, a detailed probe into the politics of the entertainment media; and *Free Enterprise, Government and Television*, a year-long examination of both the news and entertainment media’s coverage of the free market system.

The real impact of the MRC, however, can be found through the wholesale marketing emphasis we place on our work. One key audience consists of opinion makers: hundreds of elected and appointed government officials and conservative leaders—usually the targets of biased reporting—receive complimentary issues of all publications. A second category is comprised of conservative editorial writers, columnists, and radio and television talk show hosts who can use the materials provided to reach millions more. A third category includes over five thousand members of the mainstream press, at every level of journalism.

As well, we place our research at the disposal of any organization, regardless of political affiliation. We have provided research for organizations as diverse as the Republican and Democratic National Committees; *The American Spectator* and *Mother Jones*; representatives from Israel and Syria. As a legal concern we are an archive and obligated to do so; as a practical matter the research speaks for itself, can be used to help our friends, and might educate the rest.

More often than not you won’t see the MRC name on much that appears on the subject of media bias. The recent *Washington Post Magazine* cover story devoted to the rising political power of Hollywood made no reference to us, but the author of the piece used our research for her article. The late Warren Brookes never cited us, yet we provided him with much of his research on the media (and it goes without saying that he provided us with research on virtually everything else). David Shaw of the *Los Angeles Times*, who wrote the masterful series on the media’s promotion of the pro-choice movement, spent considerable time at our offices conducting research for his piece. Indeed, I will go so far as to warrant that 90 percent of the stories in both the electronic and print media which deal with the political bias in the industry have their origins in the Media Research Center.

The Future is Bright. Why should conservatives be optimistic about the media? Because our future is bright, but only if we take advantage of it.

Today the public is no longer buying, figuratively and literally, the media's liberal agenda, and the evidence is overwhelming.

First and foremost, history is proving Reagan right. The Soviet Union is gone, communism is on its last legs, and socialism is on the run worldwide. While the media were beatifying Mikhail Gorbachev in the U.S., the people of Russia were throwing him out; while they glorified the socialist miracle of Sweden as a role model for America, the Swedes voted their socialist government out, too. The media continue to sing the praises of Fidel Castro; it is only a matter of time before they eat their words about him as well.

In late 1988 *Time* declared its intention to become more interpretive in its reporting and ushered in a blatantly leftist editorial spin to the "news" magazine. Six months later, *Time* had witnessed a loss of 300,000 subscribers. Undaunted, it capped the year by naming Mikhail Gorbachev its "Man of the Decade." Three months later it had lost another 300,000 readers. The non-political *Media Insider Newsletter* analyzed these numbers, and concluded *Time's* slide was a direct result of the public's rejection of its liberal agenda.

Gulf War Revealed Bias. The Gulf War presented liberals in the media the opportunity to pursue their agendas aggressively. Unfortunately for them, the Vietnam syndrome was indeed dead, and this time the public didn't buy the message. CNN's Peter Arnett filed one disgraceful report after another, while that network's anchor, Bernie Shaw, refused to be de-briefed by the U.S. military, pronouncing himself "neutral" in the conflict. Wherever, and whenever, a critic of the war could be found, that person was put on the air to denounce the U.S.

It mattered not a bit to the press that professional anti-military leftist activists, like Center for Defense Information leader Eugene La Rocque, were presented as impartial military experts; that anti-war radical demonstrators who appeared regularly on press reports represented but a blip on the screen of public opinion; that "anguished victims" of the war were paraded regularly on our television screens when it turned out some were official Iraqi government agents. Do you remember the distraught woman whose tearful cries of "...it's the West! Mea culpa, the blood, she is on your head!" were shown for days on CNN after the Allied bombing of the alleged baby milk factory? It turns out this lady was a professional multi-lingual bereavement machine: CNN was forced to report, several days later, that she was actually the assistant to Iraq's Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs; *Newsweek* reported she was seen also on French television wailing in French; and later she was found on Italian television crying in Italian as well.

Conservatives were outraged at this coverage, and made an issue of it. Who carried the day in public opinion? ABC conducted a survey to answer the question "Are the media fair and balanced in their coverage of the war?" 96,000 people responded and an overwhelming 83 percent said "No."

What about the media's contention that the U.S. military was dishonestly manipulating public opinion through censorship? ABC's Judd Rose said it best when he proclaimed on "Prime Time Live" that the war-within-the-war was being waged between the U.S. military committed to censoring information from the public and the media, which were committed to the opposite. In fact, said Mr. Rose of his profession, "We are really the conveyors of truth in a very critical time and people need to know that truth."

So cynical were the media that some ignored Allied security concerns altogether. At 10:30 PM on February 16, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney announced the beginning of the ground war, and practically begged the media not to disclose Allied troop movements: "Allied military

units are on the move. Their positions, movements, and plans must be carefully safeguarded. We must assume the enemy is confused about what is happening on the battlefield and it is absolutely essential that we not do anything ourselves to clarify the picture for him.” At 10:39 he repeated the same message. It took CBS and Dan Rather just six minutes to report: “As part of our CBS News live coverage of the beginning of the ground war offensive, we’re talking to Bob McKeown, who’s one mile from the Kuwati border. Bob, any indication of how far up you think the Allies are now?”

Again, the public rejected the media’s complaints of military censorship. Asked their opinion on the subject in a Times-Mirror Corporation survey, 57 percent of Americans wanted even *more* censorship by the military on the press.

More data? In 1990 alone, CBS News reportedly lost 10 percent of its audience and suffered a reported \$26 million loss in revenues. Meanwhile, NBC and ABC have posted major financial losses as well. Now, the networks will quickly respond by pointing to the growth of the cable industry as the driving force behind their woes, and there is considerable truth to that. But they cannot ignore another truth: their credibility today is in ruins. Recent surveys report the public today holds the media in lower esteem than even the U.S. Congress!

Leftism on the Defensive. The Dominant Media Culture today is clearly on the defensive. The conservative movement ushered in by Ronald Reagan is the driving cultural force on the American scene. Conservative organizations like the MRC have demonstrated the ability to neutralize the national media by exposing their agenda to an increasingly skeptical public. The explosive growth in cable television and conservative radio talk shows demonstrates that the public is willing to go elsewhere to receive a more balanced presentation of the news.

The media have no choice but to contend with this new reality. Some in the mainstream press recognize the problem and, I think, are now committed to the proposition of a balanced playing field. Others are reacting like cornered rats, lunging for the jugular of conservatism in a shameful attempt to derail the movement that has marginalized their impact on the body politic. It is up to us to distinguish between the two: to work with the former, confront the latter. To that end, I offer several recommendations:

1) Demand balance, not objectivity. Human nature being what it is, there is no such thing as pure objectivity. To be sure, objectivity is what the media ought to strive for, but the best way to achieve it is through balanced journalism.

It follows, then, that we ought not to be in the business of passing judgement on who should or should not be allowed to participate in the business of news reporting. From a strategic standpoint, we open ourselves to the same level of censorship; on a practical level, the media are simply not going to listen.

But we do have every right to demand balance. Whether it is in terms of time allocation, “experts” cited (just who are these “experts,” and if they are “experts” why aren’t they cited?), labeling, or even topic matter, the conservative voice demands a hearing. As well, be it reporters, editors, directors, producers—in short, at every level of the media—conservatives ought to be employed to balance the existing liberal forces.

2) Acknowledge Your Biases. Conservatives who denounce the liberal press in the name of objectivity are as misleading as the pundits they condemn. I am convinced that one reason the MRC enjoys a good relationship with many in the press is that we openly acknowledge my own biases.

3) Distinguish Between Biased and Sloppy Reporting. When we disagree with the direction of a news story it is a temptation to accuse the reporter of a political bias, yet sometimes it is simply the result of poor research or careless writing. We must be accurate in the charges we file. Moreover, a journalist who might otherwise have been befriended will turn against you if you accuse him unfairly of a political bias.

4) Distinguish between the ideological liberal in journalism and the journalist who is a liberal ideologically. The former is your enemy, the latter is not, and I will cite examples of both. A few years ago I met with one of the top reporters at the now-defunct *L.A. Herald Examiner*. Pony-tail and all, he berated conservatives while openly proclaiming, “we liberals are the social conscience of this country and we have an obligation to use the press.” He is the enemy—happily for us, an unemployed enemy.

ABC’s John Martin, on the other hand, is a journalist who happens to be a liberal (he might disagree: this is my opinion). He has earned our coveted “Janet Cooke Award” for the worst story of the month, and has been cited more than once in our pages for biased journalism. Yet Mr. Martin has also been the keynote speaker at our annual Board Meeting, and I was honored to have him. Why? Because while his tendencies may be to the left, Mr. Martin is an excellent journalist, and has always been open to discuss the conservative perspective in stories with which he is involved.

5) Help journalists do their job. Conservatives who believe they simply cannot work with the press ought not to be surprised when the press ignores them. The John Martins of journalism are knowledgeable about liberal issues, know the players (both on a professional and often social basis) and naturally gravitate in that direction. Add to the equation the deadline factor—sometimes journalists simply do not have the time to research the conservative perspective—and our side is left out.

We have learned that many in the media are quite open to the conservative perspective if it is presented properly. We provide journalists with the conservative argument on a given issue, lead them to the organizations expert in it, and recommend qualified spokesmen. Do liberal organizations have to do this much work, and isn’t this a double-standard? Tough. It is amazing how very receptive some journalists are to this assistance, and we should provide it.

6) Wholesale your product. When possible, try to get the most appropriate mouthpiece of public information to cover your story, as cited above.

On the other hand, if the media attack your issue (or you) in an unfair manner, and it is a function of biased journalism, give that story to conservatives in the media. One column by Paul Harvey will reach millions around the country in several hundred papers; one story by Rush Limbaugh on the radio will reach millions more. These conservatives relish this kind of information.

7) Remember your sense of humor. Like that poor unemployed social conscience from the *L.A. Herald Examiner*, some in the liberal media have absolutely no sense of humor (and, my guess is, no personality either). Barbara Reynolds at *USA Today* is another. Dan Rather, a third. Let’s face it: some in the press do come up with some of the most outrageous utterances this side of Morton Downey, Jr.

If you want to neutralize them, do not confront them by responding to their stupid statements. When Jerry Adler of *Newsweek* tries to solve environmental problems by writing, “It’s a morbid observation, but if everyone on earth just stopped breathing for an hour, the greenhouse effect would no longer be a problem,” do you take him seriously? No, you laugh. Never underestimate

the common sense of the public; they will laugh along with you. And you will drive those oh-so-serious liberals nuts.

8) **Help train the next generation.** It is rather meaningless to demand that the media balance their programming by including conservative voices if we don't have a stable of journalists prepared to enter the work force. They certainly will not come out of the major journalism school which, studies show, are even more liberal than what we have at present.

Last year the MRC published the first annual *National Press Directory for Conservatives* to enable aspiring conservative journalists to network with their peers as they search for employment. Stan Evans of the National Journalism Center has performed yeoman's work to train young conservatives. I understand Morton Blackwell and his Leadership Institute are going to begin training seminars for broadcast journalists. They ought to be supported strongly.

Do not believe for a moment that conservatives have won the day in the battle to restore political balance within the national press. Far from it. The left still controls the press and continues to wield their power relentlessly in order to shape the political conversation. But the tide may have begun to shift against them. If that is so, it is critically important that conservatives understand the reasons behind it and rededicate themselves to the effort like never before.

Imagine, if you will, a future wherein the media willfully support the foreign policy objectives of the United States. A time when the left can no longer rely on the media to promote its socialist agenda to the public. A time when someone, somewhere in the media can be counted on to extol the virtues of morality without qualifications. When Betty Friedan no longer qualifies for "Person of the Week" honors. When Ronald Reagan is cited not as the "Man of the Year," but the "Man of the Century."

The news and entertainment media will continue to effect the cultural health of America. If we succeed in our mission to restore political balance to this institution, future generations will benefit and thank us. It's worth fighting for, now.

