

Can Conservatives Change the Media?

By M. Stanton Evans

The question of the media has troubled conservatives and others for a long time. I think the reason is that the media are crucial to the proper functioning of our system. We depend upon the media for information on which we make decisions about politicians and about a lot of other things in our society, and if the information provided by the media is inaccurate then the system tends to malfunction. Information is the oxygen of the body politic; if you don't get good information — steady and accurate information — then the system isn't going to work. The malfunctioning of the information system is apparent to many of us, even those who do not have particular ideological interests. It is simply a fact that there are distortions in the system which prevent information from being conveyed in an accurate fashion.

There is an old joke that probably some of you have heard, about the different ways in which different media treat stories. A report received by the CIA indicated that a meteor was going to strike the earth and destroy it in the next twenty-four hours. Being a secret piece of CIA information, this was of course immediately leaked to the media, and was played in different ways. The *Wall Street Journal* had a headline that said "World to End Tomorrow: Market Expected to drop 1,000 points." *The New York Times* had a head that said "World to End Tomorrow: Details on Page A18." *USA Today* said "World To End Tomorrow: How We Really Feel About It." And the *Washington Post* had a head which said "World To End Tomorrow: Women and Minorities to Suffer Most." These are rather accurate approximations of the way that different media view the same stories.

Look at the stories on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and they are very much in this vein: *The Wall Street Journal* has emphasized the impact on the economy while *The Washington Post* is playing up the politics of it. That kind of treatment is inherent in the fact that human beings tend to see events through the lenses of their own ideologies and interests, and this leads to distortions of communication. Conservatives tend to think that the problem is bias. There is a lot of bias in the media, which has been documented rather well by a number of people. But there are other problems also. There is a problem of superficiality — of hopping around on the surface of events without really looking beneath the surface to find out what is causing the headlines to change as they do.

Ignorance and Incompetence. And there is also a problem of incompetence: never underestimate that. There are many people in the media who are dealing with subjects of world-shaking significance who don't know very much about the topics they are reporting. One of our main concerns at our little enterprise at the National Journalism Center is, for instance, economics. If you look at the domestic policy news and indeed the foreign policy news in recent years, a lot of it is economic in character. The budget and taxes and inflation and unemployment and the stock market and housing and homelessness; transportation, energy and farm policy — it's all Econ. If you don't understand economics, therefore, you are not going to be very well equipped to cover those issues.

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This is also true in foreign policy. If you look at the Iraq-Kuwait story or the story of African famine, the debt problems of the less developed countries or the upheaval in Eastern Europe, these are all economic stories. If the reporters assigned to cover them do not understand very much about economics, then they are not going to understand what they are covering, and they're not going to write very accurate stories.

Rock Remedies. One of the things that always strikes me about coverage of these events is how it combines both superficiality and incompetence in one package. Think about the African famine stories that we have seen. We say, "They're starving to death over in Africa, they don't have enough food to eat in Ethiopia and other places, so what would be a good thing to do about that? I know, let's have a rock concert!" So we have a rock concert to raise people's consciousness, and that is what is reported in the media. We then come to our own domestic economic situation where we have a problem with farm surpluses. We have overproduction of farm produce in this country, and as a result there are problems with our agricultural economy of a very different character. People look at that and ask themselves what to do about it. And someone says, "I know, we should have a rock concert! Let's have a rock concert about that." So we have Willie Nelson and John Cougar Mellencamp and Neil Young performing at Farm Aid, and that is what is reported in the media. This is what people are told is the "news" about starvation in Africa or overproduction of farm products in the United States: that a bunch of celebrities are having rock concerts to raise people's consciousness.

This is pitiful. This is pseudo-information. This has nothing to do with the reality of the problems that exist in these two situations — problems that exist for very specific causes. They exist because in the governments of Africa — among other things they have done — have held the price of farm products below the market level, thereby encouraging consumption and discouraging production, and over here we have done the reverse. We've held prices above market levels, which discourages consumption and encourages production. In the first case you get a shortage and in the second you have a surplus. But if you don't know Econ 101 you don't understand it. So, you report a rock concert, while nothing is reported that would help people understand the problem and address it in substantive fashion, which would be necessary if we want to correct either of these situations.

Problem of Bias. We're now getting a sense of *deja vu* about the gas lines of the late 70s. People are concerned that gas lines will occur again in this country — which I predict flatly will not happen because domestic circumstances are different. In 1979, however, we had gas lines at many of the gas stations here on Capitol Hill. I well remember the one at 4th and Pennsylvania, S.E. where there were gas lines up the block and around the corner. I remember looking out of my office and seeing this gas line, and that night seeing a report about it in which a TV reporter went to the scene and interviewed a person sitting in the gas line. It went something like this.

"Well, how long have you been in this gas line?"

"I've been here for an hour."

"How do you feel about this?"

"I'm mad as hell!"

"What do you think is going on here?"

“Well, I think its some kind of conspiracy by the oil companies. Their tankers are sitting offshore and I’ve heard somebody – my brother-in-law talked to somebody who said he heard it was an oil company plot.”

“Well, that’s it. Back to you, Dan.”

And that’s it. That’s the report.

The American people were not told that they couldn’t get any gasoline in their service stations in major metro areas because of a) the price controls that were imposed on domestic production of petroleum; and b) the rationing that was then imposed, which prevented people from bringing gas in from other areas to sell it at higher prices, which they would have done in the absence of government controls. Nothing was conveyed to the American people of substance and importance about those issues. So, putting together the bias problem, the superficiality problem, and the incompetence problem, you have a real distortion of the flow of information that is needed for the proper functioning of our system.

Tough Critics. How can this situation be corrected? There are really two basic approaches to this. One, which has been done very well by a number of institutions, is simply to conduct a punishing critique of media performance. The book on this has been written by Reed Irvine of Accuracy in Media, who has done a superlative job showing what is wrong with media performance on many of these issues. I’d say that what Reed and others have done in this respect has had impact. I have seen what I believe to be important changes, for example, in the reportage of the *New York Times* in response to the critique that has been conducted by Accuracy in Media. I applaud that and I applaud the work of Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Brent Bozell, and others who are doing this kind of criticism. And I think it should be continued; I think it is important.

However, I think that over the long haul that kind of external criticism is not going to change the essential character of the problem, because the problem exists in the heads of the people who are running the media. The people who are doing the reporting and sitting in the editorial chairs and behind the microphones in the media are products of a certain cultural mind-set or world view which affects the way they perceive events, and therefore affects the kind of reportage we get. I don’t think you are going to change that kind of reportage until you change the mix of people in the press corps. Therefore, the approach that I have favored is to try to train up a new generation of youthful journalists who will go into the press corps and provide some sort of balance in reporting.

Practical Training. That is what the National Journalism Center is about. A group of us started it in 1977. Over the years we have had about 800 or 900 students, and I see some of our alumni sitting in this room today. We have emphasized the importance of practical experience – getting hands-on training here in Washington but also getting beyond Washington – and getting in on the reporting side of the news, not just the editorial or political commentary side. We estimate that some 400 to 500 of our alumni are out there working in the media. They range from people who are producers at CNN and C-Span to editorial writers for the *Wall Street Journal* to reporters for the *Washington Post* and many papers across the nation. There are quite a few of them out there in positions of some influence, which we are pleased to see.

There is a misconception about our program which is held by some of our liberal critics and some members of the liberal media, and also shared by some of the young people who come to us to participate in our program. The misconception is that we are in the business of training conservative journalists to infiltrate the media. That is not true; it is not something I would want to do, even if I could do it. What we are trying to do is something very different and it is a little hard to communicate. We are not particularly interested in training up conservative polemicists or editorial writers or syndicated columnists, though we have produced a few of these. We've got a lot of young people who come to us with such thoughts in mind; everybody wants to be the next Bill Buckley or the next George Will. We call this SCS: syndicated columnist syndrome. We try to discourage this for lots of reasons.

The first reason is that if you are starting out in journalism, it should occur to you to ask: why should anybody pay me for my opinions? What is there about my opinions, my conservative opinions, that will make somebody pay me to write them? The likelihood of that occurring is very remote.

Accuracy Essential. The second reason, and a more serious objection, is that I don't think that the way to correct a spin from the left is to try to impart a spin from the right. If you go back to the premise of the discussion, the problem is the distortion of information. Then, abstractly considered, an information flow distorted from the right would be just as much a disservice as distortion from the left. What we really should be after from our communications media is *accurate* information. And I don't see what any conservative or anybody else for that matter has to fear from accurate information. This is something we try to communicate to our young people. We believe that if you go into the media business as a reporter, then you are hanging out your shingle to the public saying "I'm in the information business; come to me for accurate information and I'll provide it."

That is what the communications media say they are doing. That allegedly is the main business of all the newspapers and television stations and radio stations and magazines that profess to be news media in this country. If I hang out my shingle and tell people to come to me for accurate information, and then I don't provide it — for whatever reason, because I'm an incompetent, or because I am lazy or superficial, or because I'm putting a spin on it — what am I? I'm a bum. I'm just as much a bum as a guy who says he will fix your car but then doesn't and gives you a big bill for it. Or somebody who professes to sell you a product and then doesn't deliver the product that he advertises. He's a bum. And I'd think the same thing of people in the communications media, whether they're liberals or conservatives, who profess to be providing accurate, balanced information and don't do it.

Fundamental Obligation. There are lots of discussions at Sigma Delta Chi and the American Society of Newspaper Editors about media ethics — should you accept a turkey that somebody gives you at Thanksgiving, and so on. To me, the fundamental ethical obligation for someone in the media or any other business is very clear, very plain: Deliver what you advertise. If you are in the news business, that means not putting a spin on what you are reporting.

Other considerations also militate against the syndicated columnist syndrome: one is that if you really want to have influence on the course of events, you don't want your copy on the editorial page; you want it in the front page. Most people get their view of what is happening not from reading a signed opinion column but from reading what's on page one — what's

in the headlines of the day and what's on the news portion of the television broadcast or radio broadcast. So, if you really want to have some influence over this information flow, within the ethical guidelines I have suggested, then you want to be in the news part of the operation and not the editorial part.

And finally, even if you want to be a polemicist and opinion journalist — it is a profession that many people have done very well and it's been my profession for a long time — even then you need the skills of a reporter. If you're going to persuade people to your point of view, what is it that's going to persuade them? Your eloquence, your wit, your charm? Or is it your evidence? Unless you're very unusual, its going to be the last. What is going to be persuasive to other people about your opinion is what kind of *evidence* you have to back it up. And that means you've got to be a reporter. So for all those reasons we hammer away at the need for reporting skills.

Getting Out of Washington. With those thoughts in mind, let me suggest a few guidelines about how we think this should be done. The first thing we stress is very tough, because we are here and by our presence we're drawing people here, but what we hammer over and over again to many of these young people is *get out of Washington*. Again, unless you're very unusual, you're not going to build a career in journalism by staying in Washington. It's very difficult to break into the media and it's very difficult to get hands-on media training in a major market like this. It's very similar to trying to break into show business by painting scenery for a major Broadway show. What you really need to do to break in as an actor is to go out into the sticks, get off-Broadway experience in a small company. Then as you develop your skills you move up into the major markets. The same thing applies in journalism. You need to get out of Washington and into a smaller market where you can get a real journalism job and learn the skills of the trade.

A second rule we stress is that the most important thing about any story that you cover, any assignment you have, is you. When you go out there to cover that story, you're the only one there. Your editor is not there. Everyone is depending on you to get the information accurately, bring it back to the office, and write the story. And that means you have got to be prepared — not only in the specific sense, to master the skills of journalism as such — but you have to have something between your ears; you've got to have some kind of conceptual apparatus up there that allows you to understand what you are looking at, to assess it, and to ask questions and get information about it based on your informed intuition. That means you need to spend a lot of time informing yourself. You need to spend a lot of time reading. We have a lot of speakers in our program who stress this and I would reiterate it to anyone interested in this business: If you're not interested in reading, then probably this is not the business for you. If you're going to be in the information business cranking out information, you've got to take information in. And, by and large, information is absorbed by reading. Reading books, magazines, and newspapers is key for most people in this business, unless you're just going to be a talking head on the TV screen.

I would stress again the importance of practical experience of some kind. I think it is most likely to come outside of Washington. But even if you are here in Washington, try to get a job where you actually *do* something in a journalistic way as opposed to one where you're hanging around going out for coffee and watching somebody else do something. One of the things we stress in our internships — and there are about three dozen cooperating media outlets where we send people for practical training — is a requirement that interns actually be

allowed to do substantive work. If they don't, if we find out that they spent their entire internship typing the rolodex or picking up somebody's laundry, then we don't send anybody back there. That's not the way you learn journalism. You've got to get that hands-on experience and that's what the internships are about.

Mastering the Craft of Writing. The final thing that we stress is that one of the most important things for anyone to do who wants to go into journalism — even if it's the electronic media — is to write. It is important to get in the habit of writing under deadline. Even if it isn't under deadline you should write a lot, because it is in the craft of writing that you sift through your ideas; you clarify them, you learn what works and what doesn't work, and you get in the habit of expressing the ideas you have and presenting the information you have with clarity and directness through the written word. Even in the electronic media, that is of the utmost significance. And writing for the electronic media is in many ways an even tougher craft than writing for the print media, so you need that writing experience either way. That is what we try to teach our young people.

