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Arrogance in the Newsroom: Goldberg on Liberal Bias

Sometime ago, comedian Jay Leno made the following announcement to his audience: “A group of venture capitalists are in the process of developing their own liberal radio network to counter conservative shows like Rush Limbaugh. They feel the liberal viewpoint is not being heard—except on TV, in the movies, in music, by comedians, in magazines and newspapers. Other than that, it’s not getting out!” With his typical good timing, Leno delivered the joke masterfully and the audience responded with laughter. Of course, the laugh was at the expense of those who claim that the media shows no liberal bias.

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Just over two years ago, Bernard Goldberg rocked the media world with the release of his book, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. Now, just two years later, Goldberg has released *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite*. Together, these two books pack a powerful punch and make an eloquent argument. Goldberg puts to rest any claim that the elite media are politically unbiased.

After almost three decades of service as a CBS News correspondent, Goldberg is in a unique position to evaluate and explain the origin and impact of liberal bias in the newsroom. During his 28 years at CBS, Goldberg won 6 Emmy Awards and was one of the network’s most popular correspondents.

Nevertheless, once *Bias* was released, Goldberg found himself frozen out of newsrooms and shunned even by those who had been his friends. Goldberg broke one of the cardinal rules of the liberal media—never admit the existence of a liberal bias among those who write, produce, and report the news. Once that secret oath was broken, Goldberg became a pariah and the defense mechanisms of the elite media went into overdrive.

In his first book, Goldberg traced the development of liberal bias in the reporting and packaging of news. He traced the origin of liberal bias to the social context, educational experiences, and class consciousness of liberal journalists. As he made clear, many of these media personalities have convinced themselves that there is no liberal bias in themselves or their peers. They just consider their own worldview to be normative and anyone who disagrees with them to be lacking in either intelligence or sophistication. Lacking any better way of understanding this phenomenon, the trend-setters in the media just consider conservatives backward and obstructionist.

In *Arrogance*, Goldberg takes the next step, arguing for a 12-step recovery program that would force the liberal media to deal with their political bias. First, Goldberg puts the issue in perspective. The institutions of elite media deny liberal bias because they cannot afford such an admission. Their worldview leads them to see their own presuppositions as normal, and those who oppose them as backward. Therefore, they consider themselves to be doing a public service when they position conservatives as a radical fringe and establish liberal dogma as the norm.

Liberal reporters claim “objectivity” as their motto and standard. Goldberg pulls back the veil of misinformation concerning that claim. “By in large, these are people who see themselves as incredibly decent, even noble. They’re the good guys trying to make the world a better place. That’s why many of them went into journalism in the first place.”

Therefore, Goldberg explains that bias “is something the bad guys are guilty of.” This leads journalists to take a defensive posture, denying the very possibility that they could be biased in their own perspective: “So rather than look honestly at themselves and their profession, they hang on for dear life to the ludicrous position, to the completely absurd notion, that they, among all human beings, are unique—that only they have the ability to set aside their personal feelings and their beliefs and report the news free of any biases, ‘because we’re professionals,’ they say.”

How can this be true? These are smart people who consider themselves quite qualified to spot bias in others. How do they miss such bias in themselves? Goldberg answers: “Well for starters, as I say, a lot of them truly don’t understand what the fuss is all about, since they honestly believe that their views on all sorts of divisive issues are not really controversial—or even liberal. After all, their liberal friends in Manhattan and Georgetown share those same views, which practically by definition make them moderate and mainstream.”

Thus, those who stand outside what passes as “mainstream” in the salons of Manhattan and the political parlors of Georgetown show up on the radar screen of the liberal media as cranks, kooks, and extremists.

The insularity of the liberal newsroom was perhaps most graphically displayed when film critic Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* expressed shock at the landslide election of Richard Nixon over George McGovern in the 1972 Presidential race. “How can that be?,” she asked. “No one I know voted for Nixon.” That statement revealed that Pauline Kael was in no position to know anything about what mainstream America is like in the first place. Her friends and associates were the luminaries of the artsy New York scene, not the kind of people who sell insurance, manage grocery stores, change diapers and ferry the kids to Little League. George McGovern carried only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia—not even New York. Nevertheless, Pauline Kael lived in a world where George McGovern, not Richard Nixon, would have won in a landslide.

Because the media elite see themselves as fair and objective, they refuse to consider charges of liberal bias. “Better to cast conservatives as a bunch of loonies,” explains Goldberg, “who see conspiracies under every bed, around every corner, behind every tree, and, most important of all, in every newsroom.”

The rise of alternative media has transformed the equation to some extent. Fox News is now an alternative to the more liberal bent of CNN, even as conservative talk radio increasingly dominates the free-wheeling airwaves. This has put the elite media into a panic mode. Recent reports indicate that several liberal foundations and philanthropists are looking to set up an alternative system of liberal talk radio to compete with dominating conservatives like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Of course, liberals also have to explain why it is that their shows are failing while conservative programs continue to grow.

Goldberg has an explanation for this, too. “The Left, self-servingly, says it’s because conservatives (unlike civilized liberals, of course) are loud and angry and make complex political and social issues moronically simple for their moronically simple listeners, many of whom, of course, live in simple-minded Red State country.” Goldberg’s not buying it—“Here’s another theory: Maybe liberal talk shows keep failing because the American people don’t think they need yet one more media megaphone coming from left field.”

Goldberg offers a sophisticated analysis of this perplexing phenomenon. The very smart and very sophisticated leaders of the liberal media simply do not understand how distant they are from the lives of ordinary Americans. They consider themselves smarter, more informed, more analytical, and more broad-minded than the population at large.

Conservatives sometimes reduce this to a problem of partisan loyalties. While it is true that Democrats vastly outnumber Republicans in the media elite, the pattern of bias does not fall simply along party lines. To the contrary, the division is far more cultural and ideological than merely political.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, David W. Brady and Jonathan Ma recently reported on their study of media bias that focused on the description of liberal and conservative members of the U.S. Senate. As Brady and Ma detail, the media are far more likely to describe a conservative in negative terms than a liberal under similar circumstances. Furthermore, the very word “liberal” is used far more sparingly than the label “conservative,” and the latter word is often joined by other negative terms. Reviewing coverage of the 102nd Congress, Brady and Ma describe a pattern in which Massachusetts Democrat Edward M. Kennedy is described as “a liberal spokesman” and “the party’s old-school liberal” in *The New York Times*. The same paper described North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms as “the most unyielding

conservative,” “the unyielding conservative Republican,” “the contentious conservative,” and “the Republican arch-conservative.” Senator Tom Harkin was described as “a liberal intellectual,” while Senator Don Nickles was called “a fierce conservative.” And these people consider themselves free from bias!

Goldberg understands that this form of bias is deeply rooted in experience and perspective. “What media bias is mainly about are the fundamental assumptions and beliefs and values that are the stuff of everyday life. The reason why so many American’s who are pro-life or anti-affirmative action or who support gun rights detest the mainstream media is that day after day they fail to see in the media any respect for their views. What they see is a mainstream media seeming to legitimize one side (the one media elites agree with) as valid and moral, while seeking to cast the other side as narrow, small-minded, and bigoted.”

The twelve-step recovery program Goldberg suggests is not likely to gain traction in the liberal newsrooms anytime soon. Their denial of the problem is itself the problem. Until the media elite comes to terms with its own blinders and bias, it is sure to avoid dealing with this problem. Bernard Goldberg has performed an important public service in his new book. The mainstream media would perform an even more significant public service by taking it seriously.

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