
PRESS & TELEVISION

Big Business, and prayer in public schools, and they favored divestment from South Africa, affirmative action, and abortion rights, consistently more often than the average American. Yet fewer than half of the news readers surveyed characterized their daily newspaper as either liberal or conservative; those with an opinion split evenly between the two assessments. Moreover, regarding the newspaper they read, those surveyed gave "positive" ratings for: overall performance (96 percent); staff quality (83 percent); accuracy (91 percent); and impartiality (84 percent).

The authors maintain that "there is no evidence that people perceive the newspapers they read as biased strongly to the Left. . . . Those with an opinion see their newspapers as sharing the public's (more conservative) views, not the prevailing liberalism of the reporters and editors."

Television news coverage also received a strong endorsement, note Schneider and Lewis. The viewers polled gave ratings of "fairly good" and "very good" to local TV news (95 percent) and network TV news (91 percent). The viewers objected only to a perceived "negativism." Roughly two-thirds of the respondents criticized the print and broadcast media for "overdramatizing," stressing "bad news," and "putting too much emphasis on what is wrong with America and not enough on what is right."

Despite such occasionally sharp criticisms, the authors conclude that, with respect to the Fourth Estate, "public opinion . . . is still heavily tilted in the positive direction."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Holy Days

"Lubavitcher Hasidim" by Lis Harris, in *The New Yorker* (Sept. 16-30, 1985), 25 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

Along the Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, N.Y., men garbed in black with long beards and broad-brimmed hats are often seen chanting at sundown on Friday nights, before going to synagogue. These Lubavitchers, members of a branch of Judaism called Hasidism, have been congregating in Brooklyn's Crown Heights section since the mid-1930s, when they first emigrated from Eastern Europe.

Devoutly orthodox in their religious rituals, notes Harris, a writer for the *New Yorker*, Hasidim (pious ones) place "prayer, mysticism, dancing, singing, storytelling, and the sanctification of daily life on an equal footing with Talmudic scholarship [the study of Jewish laws]." The Lubavitchers are the largest Hasidic contingent, but other smaller groups—the Belzers, Bobovers, Satmarers (whose names derive from their Ukrainian and Hungarian cities of origin)—add to the estimated 250,000 Hasidim worldwide. Nearly 200,000 of them live in the United States, roughly one-half of them in Brooklyn.

In 18th-century Lithuania, around the town of Vilna (then a major center of Old Testament study), Hasidism first took hold. There, Rabbi Israel ben

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Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson is the present Rebbe, or spiritual leader, of the Lubavitchers. Born in the Ukrainian city of Nikolayev in 1902, he immigrated to America in 1941 and became Rebbe nine years later. Except for a brief trip to Paris shortly after World War II, he has not left New York City since the day he arrived.

Eliezer (1698-1760), called Besht (master of the good name), popularized the little-known Kabbalist (mystical) tradition, especially the teachings of the prophet Isaac Luria (1534-72). Emphasizing the existence of a divine spark "everywhere," Besht taught that daily life is itself a holy experience and that God "hates sadness and rejoices when his children are joyful." When Besht died, Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745-1813) followed as Rebbe, the Lubavitchers' spiritual leader. In his book the "Tanya"—one of the Hasidim's holiest—he taught that through soul-searching and contemplation, men could understand "all the dimensions of their world."

Since Zalman, six Rebbes have led the Lubavitchers, each a son or son-in-law of his predecessor. The present seventh leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is the only Rebbe with a secular as well as religious education, having studied engineering at the University of Berlin and the Sorbonne. He has brought a vigor and breadth to his role not seen since the early days of Hasidism. "Chabad houses" (Hasidic study centers) and yeshivas (Jewish seminaries) now number more than 135 in the United States, with another 275 scattered throughout Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Canada, Africa, and most of Europe. He has created a "Jewish Peace Corps," Lubavitch youth groups, and women's organizations. These innovations have jarred the Hasidim's traditional insularity; they have also attracted thousands of new adherents.

"It is one of the curious twists of history," concludes Harris, "that the Hasidim, once considered the enemies of [Jewish] orthodoxy, today consider themselves its bulwark."