

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Without Fear or Favor?

A Survey of Recent Articles

The mainstream news media may or may not have the liberal bias that conservatives have long decried, but when it comes to shouting about the news on TV and radio, liberals have found it hard to get a word in edgewise.

The latest liberal talker to succumb to ratings anemia is Phil Donahue, whose MSNBC cable-TV show attracted, during one recent month, an average of only 439,000 viewers, compared with conservative rival Bill O'Reilly's 2.7 million, over at Fox.

That liberals such as Donahue face an uphill battle with the cable audience is evident from a June 9, 2002, report on a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (www.people-press.org). Only 16 percent of the regular viewers of MSNBC identify themselves as liberals, while 40 percent self-identify as conservatives. Thirty-eight percent call themselves moderates. The ideological breakdown for regular CNN viewers is the same as for those watching MSNBC, but at CNBC the conservative percentage rises to 44, and at Fox News Channel to 46. The call-in radio audience is also about 46 percent conservative.

Some wealthy Democrats are seeking to bankroll a radio network of liberal talkers to combat conservative talk king Rush Limbaugh and his kind, *The New York Times* (Feb. 17, 2003) reports. But those millionaires are wasting their

money, suggests *Washington Post* columnist Marc Fisher, writing in *Slate* (Feb. 21, 2003). "For 20 years now, good libs have been conducting their very own *American Idol* talent search. They tried Mario Cuomo, and that fiery Jim Hightower, and that nice man Bill Press, and all those other *Crossfire* refugees. Not a one of them clicked."

Leftist Michael Moore has "clicked," however, both on the big screen (*Bowling for Columbine*) and on the bestseller lists (*Stupid White Men*). He and Limbaugh, and their respective loudmouth brethren in the media, have something in common, according to William Powers, media critic at *National Journal* (Feb. 28, 2003): They pretend to seek political power, but what they are really after is money—and for that, the opposing ideologues desperately need each other. "Without his liberal foils, Rush Limbaugh would be an obscure Midwestern disc jockey. Without his conservative foils, Michael Moore would be an obscure Midwestern filmmaker."

The rise of the conservative commentariat now seems to lend support to the long-standing *left-wing* charge of *right-wing* corporate media bias. "Take a look at the Sunday talk shows, the cable chat fests, the op-ed pages and opinion magazines, and the radio talk shows," urges Eric Alterman, author of *What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News* (2003). Writing in *The Nation* (Feb. 24,

2003), he points to the vast flock of conservatives darkening the commentarial skies, from veterans such as George Will and Robert Novak to newcomers Ann Coulter and Tucker Carlson. “Liberals are not as rare in the print punditocracy as in television, but their modest numbers nevertheless give the lie to any accusation of liberal domination.”

Conservatives no longer much inveigh against news commentators, as Vice President Spiro Agnew used to do; they now concentrate their fire on the mainstream purveyors of straight news—the TV networks’ nightly news programs and the national newspapers and newsmagazines. The conservative commentators “openly, cheerfully acknowledge their biases”—and they’re not members of “the ‘news’ media,” which do indeed have a liberal bias, argues L. Brent Bozell III, president of the Media Research Center, writing in *National Review Online* (www.nationalreview.com, Feb. 5, 2003).

Bruce Bartlett, a senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis, agrees. “A survey of the pressroom in any major newspaper, newsweekly, or television network will show overwhelming support for abortion on demand, restrictive gun control, and severe limits on campaign contributions. Any candidate espousing such views will generally get positive press coverage.” Yet that, he argues in *The Weekly Standard* (Nov. 25, 2002), may work to conservative Republicans’ advantage. “To the extent that [Democrats] pay attention to their media coverage, they are cut off from the mainstream of society without even realizing it, implicitly believing that Peoria thinks like *The New York Times*.”

Some conservatives, however, have hinted that the “liberal bias” charge is exaggerated. In 1996, Patrick Buchanan, the conservative commentator-turned-presidential-candidate, said that he had received “balanced coverage, and broad coverage—all we could have asked. For heaven sakes, we kid about the ‘liberal media,’ but every Republican on earth does that.”

If the mainstream media outlets are guilty of liberal bias, it can’t be because they are pandering to the audience. Among regular viewers of the networks’ nightly news programs, the Pew researchers found, 41 percent are moderates, 37 percent are conservatives,

and a mere 17 percent are liberals. The ideological breakdown is much the same for regular readers of newspapers and newsmagazines.

But the mainstream news media *are* pandering to their viewers and readers, or at least paying very close attention to their likes and dislikes, many observers point out. “The dirty little secret of network newscasts, and of most major newspapers, is not that they are manned by liberal proselytizers,” says Neal Gabler, a senior fellow at the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication, “it is that they are trying to attract the widest possible viewership, or readership, and that doing so necessitates that they be as inoffensive as possible.” Though the fare they offer may seem “like liberalism to conservatives and conservatism to liberals,” he writes in *The Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 22, 2002), it really reflects “a strategy to keep people watching.”

The news media are a lot less “uniformly liberal” than they were in the Nixon-Agnew days, contends Timothy Noah, a contributing editor of *The Washington Monthly* (Mar. 2003). It’s true, he observes, that “outside the pundit class reporters and editors remain predominantly liberal.” According to a 1996 survey, nearly 90 percent of Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents voted for Bill Clinton in 1992. But because of the criticism they’ve received, journalists “tend to overcompensate.” That helps to explain “why, during the 2000 election and the ‘long count’ that followed, Bush got more favorable coverage from political reporters than Gore did.”

Among news organizations today, Noah writes, there remain only a few “liberal bastions,” such as *The New York Times*. But Gabler maintains that the *Times* lately has become more openly partisan, “with its crusade against the exclusion of women members at Augusta National Golf Club” and its apparent use of news columns to discourage a U.S. war against Iraq. In his view, the important news-media struggle today is not between liberals and conservatives, but between “two entirely different journalistic mindsets: those who believe in advocacy, and those who believe in objectivity—or, at the very least, in the appearance of objectivity.” At stake, he believes, is “the idea that the chief obligation of the press is to tell it the way it is without fear or favor.”