

Polarizing the Press

“Bad News” by Richard A. Posner, in *The New York Times Book Review* (July 31, 2005), 229 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The once-dominant “mainstream” news media now get whacked from both political sides. Conservatives repeatedly rail against their liberal bias (“Dan Rather!”), while liberals deplore their descent into sensationalism and willingness to serve as an echo chamber for the irresponsible Right (“Swift Boat Veterans!”). Both critiques are “basically correct,” argues Posner, a U.S. Court of Appeals judge. The source of the problem (if it is a problem) is increased competition—and a public that doesn’t want what journalists and other high-minded sorts like to think it wants.

“The mainstream media *are* predominantly liberal—in fact, more liberal than they used to be,” says Posner. They are also “more sensational, more prone to scandal, and possibly less accurate.”

Behind these trends, says Posner, is “the vertiginous decline in the cost of electronic communication and the relaxation of regulatory barriers to entry, leading to the proliferation of consumer choices.” Americans today have 10 times as many TV channels available to them as they did 30 years ago, along with the myriad offerings of the Internet. The result, he says, is a declining audience for the mainstream media and increasing political polarization and sensationalism in news reporting.

Imagine a city with only two newspapers. Because the less committed citizens vastly outnumber the partisans, each competitor has a business incentive not to lean too far right or left. But if changed economic conditions reduce the size of the audience needed to make a prof-

it, competitors will multiply. And as the new rivals try to “out-conservative” or “out-liberal” the original papers in order to gain market share, the latter now have incentives to be more politically partisan. In much the same way, argues Posner, the lowered costs of entry and increased competition in today’s media world have led to “the current tendency to political polarization in news reporting.” For example, when CNN realized that the rising Fox News Channel was drawing away many of its conservative viewers, he says, it shifted left in its coverage to try to strengthen its hold on its remaining viewers.

The notion that competition increases polarization conflicts with the notion cherished by Left and Right that “people consume news and opinion in order to become well informed about public issues.” If this were so, says Posner, then “liberals would read conservative newspapers, and conservatives liberal newspapers, just as scientists test their hypotheses by confronting them with data that may refute them.” In the real world, however, ordinary people don’t act that way. They look instead for news and opinions that support their existing beliefs, and they look for entertainment. “So they accept, and many relish, a partisan press.”

Increased competition in the news market has produced, “in sum, a better matching of supply to demand.” But giving the public more of what it wants hasn’t produced a “better” public, one “more oriented toward public issues, more motivated and competent to engage in genuine self-government.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Before King

“African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930–55” by Dennis C. Dickerson, in *Church History* (June 2005), Dept. of Religion, Florida State Univ., Dodd Hall M-05, Tallahassee, Fla. 32306–1520.

When Martin Luther King Jr. articulated the dream he had for “all God’s children” and led the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, he was standing on the shoulders of gi-

ants. Though they were invisible to most observers at the time, an earlier generation of black religious thinkers had shown King and his cohorts the way.