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**PRESS & TELEVISION**

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*Jerry Falwell,  
Media Monster*

“How the Media Made the Moral Majority” by Tina Rosenberg, in *The Washington Monthly* (May 1982), 2712 Ontario Rd. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

As depicted by much of the press, Jerry Falwell commands the loyalties of two million members of the Moral Majority and reaches 25 million more people through his TV program, *Old Time Gospel Hour*. His followers are on the move in a “political holy war without precedent.”

Such media alarms have been sounded often since Falwell’s meteoric rise to fame in the election-year summer of 1980. They are wildly exaggerated, says Rosenberg, publications director at the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies. The Moral Majority’s real membership is 400,000, and Falwell’s weekly TV audience is about 1.4 million. In audience, Falwell ranks sixth among religious broadcasters—just behind Jimmy Swaggert. If the Moral Majority has power be-



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*Jim Morin’s 1981 cartoon reflects newsmen’s low opinion of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. But the press has exaggerated the group’s influence.*

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yond its numbers, that power has been bestowed on it by the press and political liberals.

Exaggerating Falwell's power serves liberals by supplying a scapegoat for their 1980 election losses and by lending a sense of urgency to their appeals for funds. The American Civil Liberties Union recently raised \$100,000 in one month after it ran a newspaper advertisement playing on fears that the Moral Majority would succeed in re-establishing school prayer. But why have newsmen played along?

For one thing, Falwell & Co. know how to grab headlines and 20-second TV news clips with outrageous quips ("We're becoming a society with a chicken in every pot and a baby in every trash can"). More fundamentally, most New York and Washington reporters are liberals—"the very people Falwell blames for driving America into a moral tailspin." A 1981 survey of 200 influential journalists found that 86 percent seldom or never go to church. Hence, newsmen fear Falwell's intolerance and anti-intellectual attitudes, even as they fail to understand his appeal and its limits. Yet, Rosenberg notes, the media furor has probably helped Falwell: "What's described as powerful often ends up being powerful."

Largely ignored by the press amid all the noise, says Rosenberg, has been "the human side"—the legitimate concerns of Americans worried about the moral decay in national life.

*No News Like  
Washington News*

"The Washington Press" by Dom Bonafede in *National Journal* (Apr. 17, Apr. 24, and May 1, 1982), 1730 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The way the big-league U.S. press and television reporters tell it, 40 percent of what matters in America takes place in Washington, D.C. The nation's capital dominates the news now as never before. Of *all* the news items broadcast by CBS-TV, for instance, almost two-fifths originate in Washington; of all the domestic wordage sent out to American newspapers by the major wire services, AP and UPI, nearly 40 percent is Washington news. So reports Bonafede, chief political correspondent for the *National Journal*.

The federal government's growth spurt since 1965 partly explains the Washington news explosion. But since "news" to some extent is whatever editors and reporters say it is, the growth of the Washington press/TV corps itself is a factor. Forty years ago, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was President, he met the press by chatting with a handful of reporters gathered around his desk. Now, presidential press conferences draw 200 reporters, TV cameramen, and others. According to Bonafede, there are some 10,000 journalists of all varieties, and 2,989 news organizations, ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to the Bergen County, N.J., *Record*; in town. ABC's TV news operation is headquartered in Washington, not New York, and has a staff of 450. The *New York Times*'s Washington bureau had 32 reporters in 1979; now it has