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New York, New York 10021

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Mr. Brian Lamb, President
C-SPAN
400 North Capitol Street, Northwest
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Washington, District of Columbia 20001

viewer

Dear Mr. Lamb:

You were incredulous--almost dumbfounded--on Friday's "Washington Journal" that a FAX-er claimed he heard you state during the program that you are a liberal. Indeed, you sincerely believed he could not have actually watched the program.

I think I know where his notion came from. During the segment with Bill Welch and Kathy Kieley, a woman caller made assertions to the following effect: "I've figured out that you are a liberal, and that's why you have all these liberal reporters on here. It's because you're trying to push the liberal point of view." You chose to give tongue-in-cheek responses, such as: "That's right"; "You're right"; "You've got it." The FAX-er, however, took your responses literally, and now has your first-hand "confession" that you are a liberal!

The truth, of course--as most of your viewers are well aware--is that you are scrupulously unbiased and eminently fair.

You also wondered Friday why your callers chose to make the mainstream news media's liberal bias the prime topic of discussion, when it is conservatives whose political influence presently appears to be increasing in Washington. (In fact, as you know, this interest in liberal media bias has been quite persistent--so much so that repeatedly, during the last several telecasts of "Journalists' Roundtable," you invited callers to raise any issue other than media bias.) The shortest explanation is that all these callers realize, explicitly or implicitly, that media bias is VERY important. But what does that mean?

It is important because it is a pervasive problem. The news media--by definition--are the substrate of information transfer on a mass scale. In order to address any other problem, we first acquire information about it from the news media. If that information is distorted by bias, then it becomes misinformation which will impede every effort to solve every problem.

Media bias is important because it is insidious. Although some journalists are conservative, liberal journalists--the majority--usually deny that the mainstream news media are biased. In some cases--as your callers have frequently pointed out--these journalists actually do not even know that they are liberal. (A refreshing and rare exception to this lack of candor from liberal journalists was provided a week or two after the November 8 elections on "Journalists' Roundtable" by the Baltimore Sun's

Karen Hostler. When a caller asked why there had been hardly any in-depth reporting before the elections on the Contract With America, she said something like: "To be honest with you, we just didn't take it seriously. We thought it was a political gimmick.") In an age of increasing public sophistication, liberal journalists are not often so crude as to favor a viewpoint by only reporting arguments on one side of an issue. They do, indisputably, report both Democratic and Republican arguments--but Democratic arguments are parroted uncritically, while Republican arguments are subject to searching critical analysis.

Another way to understand the insidiousness of media bias is to consider the following hypothetical scenario: Most Americans will take it as an insult if someone stands up, looks them in the face, and lies to them. If someone does this to them over and over again, they will move beyond insult to anger (witness the considerable number of Americans--including me--who don't simply disagree with President Clinton, but passionately dislike him). And if there is a third person who, like an accomplice, routinely helps the liar get away with it, is it any surprise that Americans will resent that accomplice and treat him with suspicion and contempt? That is the manner in which the mainstream news media take sides--not by creating the lies, but by letting the liars get away with it.

Finally, media bias is important because it is politically decisive. It can change the course of history. Three examples:

1) Democrats claim Republicans want to cut school lunch subsidies, taking food from the mouths of starving children. As numerous C-SPAN callers have pointed out, this is utterly false. But the mainstream news media let the liars get away with it, by uncritically adopting Democratic rhetoric of "cuts," and even running feature stories on children who depend on the subsidies. Although "the jury is still out" on this issue, Dan Mitchell's opinion on "Sunday Journal" was that the Democrats are winning the political debate.

2) A handful of crucial Democratic senators reversed previous support for the Balanced Budget Amendment because it "doesn't protect" Social Security revenues from being used to balance the budget--exactly as they were being used before the vote on the amendment, and exactly as they continue to be used after the vote. In other words, the critical "reason" for these senators' opposition is an utter sham, but this went virtually unreported in the mainstream media. They let the liars get away with it.

3) "The economy's in the worst shape it's been in for fifty years!" Bill Clinton must have made that preposterous claim a thousand times during the 1992 campaign. Never challenged once by the mainstream media. They let him get away with it. No matter, as a fact of economic science, that the recession had ended in 1991. How did the mainstream media greet George Bush's few feeble attempts to proclaim that scientific fact? With utter ridicule. Bush was shamed into silence on this issue.

The effects of the liberal bias of the mainstream news media are pervasive, insidious, and politically decisive. There is no prospect that this situation will change in the foreseeable future. Consequently, the topic of media bias will continue to dominate your viewers' comments whenever your guests are liberal journalists.

Of course, C-SPAN is the best antidote to the biased mainstream media, and I am an inveterate C-SPAN "junkie." Unfortunately, the majority of Americans do not yet, as I do, use C-SPAN as a prime source for news.

Although I have watched C-SPAN for many years, I have never called in or written. I know that your genuine modesty prevents you from fully acknowledging the profound gratitude to you for creating C-SPAN that your audience feels. But C-SPAN is--without question--the best thing on television today. You have given your nation--our nation--a gift which has already changed it for the better, and promises to make America even greater in the future. So as I write for the first time to a man who has truly enriched my life, I will warmly add my voice to the thousands that have said: "Brian--thank you for C-SPAN!"

You might wonder where I would place myself along the spectrum of debate. I am neither a liberal nor a conservative. I am an Objectivist. Although I realize that "Booknotes" usually connects in some way to things political, I was disappointed that you did not choose to do a program on Leonard Peikoff's Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand after its publication at the end of 1991. This is by far the most important book published anywhere in the nearly four decades since the 1957 publication of Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged. It is true that the theme of Peikoff's book is philosophical, not political. But it does include political philosophy, and is highly relevant to the controversies of our day. As the book's very first sentence proclaims: "Philosophy is not a bauble of the intellect, but a power from which no man can abstain."

You have made C-SPAN great. Thank you for your integrity. Keep up the superb work.

Sincerely,


