

October 8, 1994

Monrovia, CA 91016

JEL
Opinion

Mr. Brian Lamb
C-SPAN
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Dear Mr. Lamb:

I was unable to get through on the call-in lines during the Journalists' Roundtable on October 7 and also a week or two ago when Gerald Seib was a guest. I had written a letter about a Seib column in the Wall Street Journal and I was calling to get a response from Seib about my letter.

During the October 7 there was discussion about the reliability and integrity of talk-radio shows, which I felt tied into media credibility and the subject of my letter to the Journal. Except for Ms. Thomas, the journalists took their requisite shots at talk radio and pronounced themselves to be pure, objective, and, of course, the final arbiters of what is true and what is not.

Mr. Nelson said he "has a problem with Rush Limbaugh." Mr. Warren chastised a caller for expressing "broad-brushed" negative views about the credibility of newspapers without having read any of the three newspapers represented at the roundtable.

Well, I read the Los Angeles Times. And I have a problem with the Los Angeles Times, Jack Nelson, and anyone else who thinks that these agenda-laden journalists are the final word on any point of fact.

I have enclosed a copy of my letter to the Journal and a copy of Gerald Seib's column. As with the story about NBC I relate in my letter, I have first-hand knowledge of the Los Angeles Times' reporting practices.

In recent months, there have been some serious problems with Los Angeles's new subway system. We are hearing almost daily reports of construction troubles. Certain concrete tunnel walls are thinner than called for by engineers. Water has been leaking into tunnels. Accidents have killed workmen. Portions of streets and buildings have been damaged in Hollywood because tunneling operations have undermined the ground under them.

In each of these incidents, as reported by the Times, there has been an investigation by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the agency responsible for the subway. Subsequent Times' articles state that the problem, whatever it was, was the result of unsafe or unauthorized contractor actions.

The contractor poured thinner walls to "save money." The contractor broke water

mains and failed to repair them. The contractor was working too fast to be safe. The contractor did not properly shore tunnels.

In each case, the Times' quoted what sounded like an insipid contractor spokesman regurgitating the company line about safety and quality. The latest articles portray inspection and construction contractors arguing with each other about who is to blame. The Times has put forth a picture of fast-buck contractors building low-quality structures using unsafe construction methods. The MTA has never been implicated as a culpable party. Blame has been shunted to the contractors.

The truth is something else.

As with the incident I describe in the Wall Street Journal letter about my father, NBC, and the EPA, I know people directly involved with the subway construction. I am a civil engineer, like my father, and I have friends and acquaintances who work for both the MTA and the contractors.

These are the facts. MTA engineers approved walls thinner than designed because they had a geologic report, which the MTA commissioned, and which said that thinner walls were acceptable. The contractor did not construct thin walls on his own volition. After the initial uproar about the walls, the contractor said he would "repair" the walls. He said he wanted paid for the repair, which was only reasonable considering that MTA approved the thinner walls and initially demanded money back from the contractor for cost savings. But the Times never reported the simple fact that the MTA had approved the change, even though the contractor told the Times this, and produced documentation to prove it. They did, however, report that the contractor wanted more money to "fix his own mistake."

In each case, from charges of working unsafely to deficient shoring of new tunnels, the contractor has been blamed. But in each case, this is only half the story. And the contractor's side has not been reported to the public. My friends believe that the contractor was told to go along, or else. Which should be another story, but which will probably not be reported by the Los Angeles Times.

So, here we have Jack Nelson saying he has "a problem with Rush Limbaugh," James Warren complimenting the Los Angeles Times for its "good work," and these same guys telling us how much more important their jobs are because there is so much misinformation from talk radio and viewer callers.

Meanwhile, NBC portrays a federal agency, the EPA, as white knights as they destroy a private business without cause, General Motors catches NBC staging explosions, and the Los Angeles Times ignores half of the story about major problems with a multi-billion dollar public works project.

Jack Nelson has a problem with talk radio because they are his competition in the news business. He, and his colleagues, are getting beaten by the competition and they are being shown to be political partisans with agendas, and, in some cases, blatant liars.

In closing, I have a question for you, Mr. Lamb. A while ago I read an article about you and C-SPAN in the Los Angeles Times (yes, unlike Nelson, Seib, and Warren who

criticize talk radio, but do not listen, I read the Times). As I remember it, the article said that among the reasons you started C-SPAN was that you noticed how much was going on at news events outside of the range of cameras and that you wanted to provide an unfiltered window on these events. If my memory is mistaken, my apologies, but I believe this is what most people consider C-SPAN to be: an unfiltered window on Washington and Congress.

I thought about this when a few weeks ago I was watching the Journalists' Roundtable. One reporter was commenting on the failure of Clinton's health care reforms. He talked about how important it was and how unfortunate its failure was. He talked about misinformation and about how the Clintons were simply trying to help the public. A few minutes later you took a call from a man who repeated what the reporter had said and asked if he had accurately recited the reporter's thoughts. The reporter said he did. The caller then asked, "Well, who cares what you think?" The reporter seemed dumbfounded.

The caller made a good point. These reporters are supposedly, as they claim, nothing more than conduits of information. Here's a fact, report it. What the "conduit" believes is, or should be, unimportant. But son-of-a-gun, here are three reporters on television every week, telling us their opinions. And there's The McLaughlin Group, Washington Week in Review, This Week on ABC, and more, presenting these "conduits" with opinions.

Which brings me to my question for Mr. Lamb. Why do you present this roundtable of journalists? If C-SPAN is supposed to be an unfiltered window on Washington, why do you present the filtered "facts" of these journalists? I believe it is useful for the public to see that these people who deliver news because it exposes their biases, but what about the unfiltered window on Washington.

Finally, a suggestion. How about a "Citizens' Roundtable." Have the C-SPAN School Bus scout for three reasonably articulate, non-combative people from outside Washington who are willing to discuss politics. Select a conservative or Republican, a liberal or Democrat, and an independent. And let's see what ordinary people think. It would be interesting, indeed enlightening, to have these ordinary people discuss the "gap" between what they see when they witness news events and what the elitist reporters "report." I suggest you have this roundtable on Fridays immediately after the Journalists' Roundtable. And you could even have journalists call in with questions, and the ordinary people could be rude, snide, and condescending to them.

Very truly yours,

