

cc: s. trahern ✓

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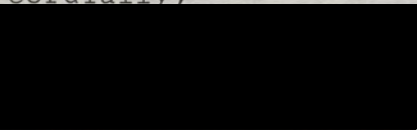
Brian Lamb
C-Span
Washington. DC

Dear Mr. Lamb;

You seem interested in fairness concerning media. I watched your show today (July 23rd) and while there were many mentions of Pro-Choice (for abortion) there were no Pro-Life (anti-abortion) mentions at all. You smiled and nodded throughout the whole program...wishing to be completely neutral...but you did not bring in the other side of this issue at all!

Pro-Choice is a nice sounding word but does not cover BOTH sides as you seem to think. Please read the enclosed article, I send along the cover so you may see the magazine from which it came. There IS another side.

Cordially,



Hendersonville, NC 28792

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JULY 16, 1990

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Is the press straight on abortion?

BY JOHN LEO

About a year ago, I noticed that one of our major metropolitan newspapers had taken to using "abortion provider" as a neutral term in reporting the abortion debate. It is not neutral. "Abortion practitioner" and "doctor who performs abortions" are neutral terms. "Provider," with its overtones of nurturance and protection, is a one-word argument in favor of abortion, just as "abortionist," with its overtones of back-alley sleaze, is a polemic against it. I fired off a helpful note to the city desk pointing out this unprofessional misuse of the clanging euphemism "abortion provider" and signed it "John Leo, Journalism Provider." No answer yet.

A good deal of comment has appeared recently about the semantic tilt on the abortion issue. ("Pro-choice" for abortion-on-demand and "pro-life" for anti-abortion are both examples of ghastly argumentative jargon. The press generally uses the first as a neutral term, but not the second.) Under pressure from the anti-abortion side, this sort of concern has broadened into a wider questioning of press coverage. On May 6, because of a column by Richard Harwood of the *Washington Post*, the issue broke into the open, and editors across the country sat up and began to take notice.

The column by Harwood, the newspaper's ombudsman, reflected and made public the views of Managing Editor Leonard Downie, who had already moved to correct the apparent bias at the paper. Harwood wrote that the *Post's* "shabby" coverage of the April 28 pro-life rally in Washington "has left a blot on this paper's professional reputation." Only two short articles appeared in the *Post*, one the day of the event, one the day after, neither on Page One. U.S. Park Police estimated the crowd at 200,000. By contrast, Harwood wrote, the *Post* "nannied" the pro-choice rally last year (police estimate 125,000), devoting a dozen stories to it, plus all sorts of maps and charts, and featuring it on Page One as the lead story of the day. (He might have added that the *Post* homed in on the wholesome mother-daughter angle favored by rally organizers, and played down the colorful "Dykes for Choice" and "The Pope is an angel of death" contingents.)

There were some mitigating circumstances. The *Post* had just finished its vast coverage of Earth Day on April 22 (56 stories, 77 columns over several weeks) and may have been suffering from postparty depression. And the 1989 pro-choice rally, the first major one by the movement in almost a decade, had built-in hype because of the suspense over the pending Supreme Court decision on *Webster*.

Newsroom insularity. Still, Harwood was unsparing. He described Downie's recollection that *Post* staffers had a pervasive awareness about the pro-choice rally and Earth Day, whereas nobody at all mentioned the pro-life rally at the meeting on plans for weekend coverage. Harwood wrote of Downie: "Journalists here, he thinks, not only are not part of the anti-abortion movement but don't

know anyone who is." This airy isolation is precisely what's wrong with so much

coverage of the abortion issue. It is why "abortion provider" slips past copy editors, why police brutality toward Operation Rescue and other anti-abortion demonstrators never seems to get mentioned in many papers, and why complex half-a-loaf compromises get reported as victories for those who favor abortion.

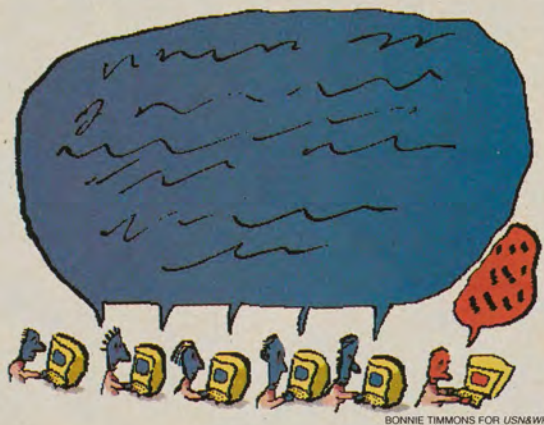
This issue will now have to be addressed head-on. A good starting point is the report from an eight-month study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which found that reporters for the three network news shows and the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* quoted nearly twice as many pro-choice sources as pro-life ones. In stories filed by female reporters for the two papers, the pro-choice advantage was 3 to 1. An unnamed network news official said: "The problem, pure and simple, is that the media's loaded with women who are strongly pro-choice."

The above quote appeared last week in a post-Harwood four-part series on the issue by David Shaw in the *Los Angeles Times*. The gist of the series is that Harwood is correct. Ethan Bronner of the *Boston Globe*, one of the best and fairest of those covering abortion, told the *Times*: "I think that when abortion opponents complain about a bias in newsrooms against their cause, they're absolutely right."

One problem is that the new crop of female reporters, most of them smart, tough feminists of childbearing age, is having trouble dealing fairly with abortion reporting. Because the feminists have turned abortion into a litmus

test for movement loyalty, these reporters are under enormous pressure to file politically correct copy. After Susan Okie of the *Washington Post* wrote a story on new procedures for saving premature babies, she was warned by a friend that this kind of story was not good for the abortion-rights movement. Okie told the *L.A. Times*: "I felt that they were . . . [saying] 'You're hurting the cause' . . . that I was . . . being herded back into line."

The other problem is that since so few editors and reporters seem to know anybody who is anti-abortion, abortion protesters have been relatively easy to demonize. As the *L.A. Times* points out, protesters are frequently described as militant, strident zealots, or asked by TV types to "look angry" for stereotyped sound bites. I think it is true that the anti-abortion movement contains all too many fanatics and woman-haters, but it also contains a great many ordinary concerned Americans from all walks of life and many veterans of the civil-rights and anti-war struggles. It is an extremely broad and varied movement depicted routinely, in Harwood's words, "as one of those . . . 'fringe' things somewhere out there in Middle America or Dixie." Harwood is inviting us to address the contempt, insularity and obliviousness that lie behind the press failures on abortion. Thanks to him and the *Post*, that effort is now under way. ■





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