

And That's the Way It Isn't . . .

By Dr. Gary Jason

A Review of *The Media Elite: America's New Power-brokers* by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda Lichter (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986), 342 pages, \$19.95

There is a difference between something being intuitively obvious and something being proven true. The book under review says little that isn't already intuitively obvious to anyone of moderate or conservative politics, but it does provide useful evidence to buttress those institutions. For what Rothman and the Lichters have done is to document in detail the liberal bias of the major news media in this country. The authors use a variety of social scientific techniques to do the job—which, considering the uses to which liberals have put social science, is an ironic turnabout.

The book is well structured. Chapter One contains a brief review of the rise of the power of the media, especially broadcast media, through this century. Chapter Two presents a "group portrait" of journalists (the media elite). The picture is not surprising in general, although some particular facts are eye-opening. The media elite are predominantly white, male, early middle-age, rich, well-educated, big-city, Northern or Upper-Midwestern (only 3% of the media elite are Californian!), non-religious, markedly liberal politically and socially, and highly influential. What is surprising is the enormity of the difference between the average American and the media stars. For example, over the sixteen-year period studied, less than twenty percent of the media elite even once voted Republican in a Presidential race. More outrageously, journalists of the future at the Columbia School of Journalism rated Fidel Castro more favorably than Ronald Reagan. The Lichter/Rothman findings are clearly robust and have been amply replicated by other independent sources.

Chapter Three examines the sources from, and the ways in which, the journalists create a picture of the world. Naturally, journalists get the preponderance of their

information on controversial issues from identifiably liberal sources, such as activist groups (like Nader's many organizations) and opinion journals (like *Mother Jones*). Only one in five journalists surveyed said they looked to business-related sources in gathering information for their stories. (The Lichter/Rothman researchers looked at the sources for stories on welfare reform, consumer protection, environmental issues, and nuclear energy.) Considering that most journalists don't have either the intelligence or the education required to interpret technical primary sources, this means that the conclusions those journalists reach are based upon the highly biased liberal secondary sources. Moreover, the Lichter/Rothman researchers were able to demonstrate bias in the recall of journalists (i.e., their selective memories) by the standard psychological experimental technique of having the subject first read a story, and then give the gist of it. Also, the journalists were given a Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which is rather like a Rorschach test: the subject is shown a picture and asked to invent a story that might go along with it. Psychologists who employ TAT's feel that the story a subject invents will reveal hidden or repressed desires and attitudes. Again, the tests argue for a fundamental liberal bias in the perceptions of the media elite.

Chapter Four shifts the focus from individual predispositions to group behavior. In particular, the focus shifts to the personality of and motivations of the journalist as a collective type. The upshot of the discussion is that in a comparison of journalists with businessmen, "the journalists scored higher in the need for power, fear of power, and narcissism, while the businessmen scored higher on the need for achievement and the capacity for intimacy." (p97) In other words, the journalists want power and influence, and are fearful of others gaining power over them. The businessmen, on the other hand, tend to desire to meet inner standards and to develop closer personal associations. This group personality analysis is very unflattering to the media stars, and certainly has a certain ring of truth. But it all depends on TAT reading, which may be more pop psychology that

genuine scientific investigation. Also, one would like to see other "control" groups besides just businessmen (e.g., teachers, nurses, farmers, or others) used in the comparison.

In any event, the journalist personality type would, if true, explain much of journalistic behavior, with its emphasis on confrontation, horse-race coverage, adversarial investigations, and "who won?" analyses of political debates. Needless to say, this "boom-crash" journalism is hardly conducive to reasoned analysis and insightful exploration of current events. The power hungry/fearful personality type also shows up in the needlessly macho style of questioning Presidents (a la Sam Donaldson). This mindset leads journalists to think that "what is good for the media is good for America." It also leads them to be susceptible to being "bought off" by a powerful leader, such as John Kennedy, who will stroke their egos.

Chapter Five then shifts the book's focus entirely away from the media elite themselves to the product they produce. The authors begin by discussing the methods used for analyzing the content of news stories. The reader is given nice examples of differing accounts of the same event—which leads to the suspicion that somebody must be lying (although the authors resist such a conclusion, stating instead that there are different paradigms at work). And the authors give some very trenchant criticisms of current journalist practices—such as "reconstructing" dialogues that never actually occurred, citing anecdotes in lieu of solid empirical evidence, constructing "composite" characters that don't actually exist, and "objectively" refuting a politician's remarks in the report of those remarks in a partisan manner.

I will not discuss Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight in detail. Each chapter contains a content analysis of the coverage of a major recent issue. Chapter Six discusses the biased coverage of nuclear power, and reviews the evidence that shows that science journalists are vastly more negative about nuclear energy than are engineers and energy scientists. The results are robust, and they are surprising in that they show little division of opinion in the energy

community about the merits of nuclear power. Chapter Seven discusses the controversy surrounding busing as a tool for school integration. The authors review the debate, then document the pro-busing bias in the media coverage of it. Chapter Eight discusses the oil crisis of the early 1970's, and again uses content analysis to document the anti-business bias in the media coverage of it.

There is much of value in this book. There is good discussion throughout of social science methodology and empirical techniques (such as questionnaire formulation, TAT evaluation, polling, significance levels, and content analysis). And certainly, with the wealth of evidence presented, nobody can ever again deny the obvious—viz., that the major news media are biased in the liberal direction.

The major problem with the book is that the authors buy into a number of social science myths that rob the book of its punch and its normative potential. These myths include the idea that it is impossible for science and journalism to be value-free, and that one's paradigm shapes the world one sees (which leads many to conclude that there is no objective reality). The net effect is to absolve journalists from the duty of attempting to remove bias in their reportage, and from exposing themselves to other views. Aristotle pointed out that the way one can achieve balance (the "golden mean") is to become conscious of his tendencies and to act in the opposite direction. There is no reason journalists can't identify their bias—indeed, this book does that for them—and seek to present opposing views. Objectivity is obtainable to a great degree, it just requires work. And it is a shortcoming of the book under review that it doesn't make that case clearly and forcefully.



Dr. Gary Jason is a contributor to CR.