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TRUTH, IDEOLOGY, AND JOURNALISM†

WILLIAM DONOHUE*

If you are a journalist and you are not interested with the pursuit of truth, you should leave. Is objectivity possible? Within reason. Let me give you an example from sports. And journalists do not have it as easy. In professional football at least, you can call the play back twice, you can have the instant replay, you can check it. In the Olympics, what I like in figure skating and in diving, you have about ten judges, and they give you the scores one through ten. They throw out the high and the low scores, and they average. That is a pretty good understanding. That is a symbol of objectivity. (Now you have corrupt judges we have seen, from different countries, but that is irrelevant.) The question is, if you are honest, and most of them are, that is a good way to try and get a handle on it.

I think in the situation with journalists, it is similar to the umpire behind the plate in baseball. Because you have an umpire that can overrule someone else, if you are sliding into second. Behind the plate he is going to make a call. Now, is he objective? I think that most people who follow baseball would say that, sure, the strike zone for this guy might be a little higher or a little lower, a little more inside than outside, than compared to another umpire, but what we look for is consistency. And if he is consistent, if he calls them all high or all low in the strike zone, we find that to be acceptable within the parameters, and to that extent objective. That is the goal of the journalist, like the umpire behind home plate. We are looking for consistency at the very least, and we demand consistency. Truth is something

† On March 31, 2005, the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* hosted a symposium entitled *After Objectivity: What Moral Norms Should Govern News Reporting?* Dr. Donohue was the first speaker at the Symposium. His remarks have been revised for publication. See also Kenneth Woodward, Neither 'Objective' Nor 'Post-Modern' (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 719 (2005); Marco Bardazzi, Four Elections and a Funeral (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 727 (2005); Matthew Storin, If Not Objectivity, How About Honesty? (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 733 (2005).

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which ought to be pursued as the goal. Whether it can be obtained, we will let the philosophers debate whether you can do that or not.

Now, where are we today compared to where we have been in the past? Everyone has his favorite examples. If you are dealing with anti-Catholicism, God knows that in the nineteenth century the newspapers in this country were riddled with anti-Catholicism. We would not call that objective; they were editorializing a lot of the time. One can think of classic examples in this century. In 1932, Walter Duranty for the *New York Times* got a Pulitzer Prize. He watched the Ukrainian people being starved to death, intentionally—the first man-made famine—under the Soviets, under Stalin, and he wrote back to New York, that everything was fine. And he got a Pulitzer Prize. Herbert Matthews in the sixties said that Castro was just an agrarian reformer, until Castro finally had to say, “Who is this guy? I am not an agrarian reformer, I’m a Communist.” We have these examples of men who were just ideologically corrupt, but then again, it is not the same situation that we have today. Today’s situation is somewhat more disturbing because today there is a climate, at least in some sectors of the media, where it is okay to be biased. You can do like Howard Zinn does, “Yeah, I am biased, and I’ll write my history of American history, and that is okay, everyone is biased.” Everything is political, the circus is political, even apples are political. We have this kind of corruption that exists, this kind of post-modernism that exists, which is what I want to get to in just a moment. So the climate today is that so many people do not even make a pretext towards objectivity. The result has been not very good. I am going to give you examples how here the media have moved to the left. There are some signs that the media in this country have dropped their guard, that they are not interested in the pursuit of objectivity.

Take a look at a recent study by the Media Research Center. They looked at twenty-five years worth of surveys on the media. I will just read you their conclusion:

Surveys over the past 25 years have consistently found journalists are much more liberal than [the] rest of America. Their voting habits are disproportionately Democratic, their views on issues such as abortion and gay rights are well to the left of most Americans and they are less likely to attend church or synagogue. When it comes to the free market, journalists have become increasingly pro-regulation over the past 20 years, with majorities endorsing

activist government efforts to guarantee a job and to reduce the income gap between rich and poor Americans.¹

That is just one.

Here is another: in 1981, in a study by Robert Lichter and Stanley Rockman, they found out that nineteen percent of the broadcast journalists said they were leaning to the right. In 1988, in their study of 1,037 newspaper reporters in the American Society of Newspaper Editors, they found that the figure was fifteen percent conservative/Republican.² “Four years later, sixteen percent of 1,410 journalists polled by the Freedom Forum were Republican. And by 2001, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey of 300 reporters found that only 6 percent were conservative.”³ Then we have the Pew Study, which says that the numbers who are liberal went from twenty-two to thirty-four, whereas the numbers of conservatives has declined to four percent.⁴ I think it is pretty evident, that the bias is there, and it shows up particularly with regard to religion.

For example, when Lichter and Rothman did their study of the media elite, they did the top newspapers in the country, they did ABC, NBC, CBS at the time before the advent of cable, and they found out that while only six percent of the population did not believe in God, fifty-five percent of the media elite did not believe in God. A study more recently by Amy Black and Stanley Rothman has indicated that not a whole lot has changed. So we have this incredible divide. Now, let me give you something more anecdotal here, that lays the groundwork. This is just from last week; choosing two people on the more liberal side of the spectrum. *New Republic* senior editor, Michelle Cottle said last week, journalists “behave as though the people who believe” in widely held Christian values “are on the fringe.”⁵ Steve Roberts, who worked for the *New York Times* for twenty-five years, said, “I could probably count on one hand, in the Washington Bureau of the *New York Times*, the people who would describe themselves as people of faith.”

1. RICH NOYES, MEDIA RESEARCH CENTER, *THE LIBERAL MEDIA: EVERY POLL SHOWS JOURNALISTS ARE MORE LIBERAL THAN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC—AND THE PUBLIC KNOWS IT* 1–2 (2004).

2. Jennifer Harper, *Poll Shows Liberal Tilt Escalates in Newsroom: Conservative Journalists in Small Minority*, WASH. TIMES, May 25, 2004, at A04.

3. *Id.*

4. NOYES, *supra* note 1, at 7.

5. Media Research Center, *Cyberalert* (Mar. 28, 2005), at <http://www.media-research.org/cyberalerts/2005/cyb20050328.asp> (on file with the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy).

What I find interesting as a sociologist, is how do the people in the media perceive themselves? Do they realize that the public looks at them askance, and the empirical evidence suggests that they are very far to the left of center? Well, a 1998 survey of 3,000 Americans sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors said that seventy-eight percent of the public said that the media was biased, biased to the left.⁶ When they asked 1,700 newspaper editors and staff members, they said there was not a bias problem.⁷ Again we have this enormous gap between the perceptions of the people and the perceptions of the media. I remember when I was at New York University as an undergraduate, and I was taking a class in Latin American Economics, and I remember talking to this professor, and I said, "How come every book you've given us is published by the Monthly Review Press?" That is the communist press in this country. There are a lot of pros to reading what the communists have to say, but every book is published by the communist press? And he said, "Well what are you looking for, a conservative economist?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Why don't you choose Galbraith." Galbraith was a socialist. This is the way they think. Their bubble is so small, they don't understand that the rest of the country is that much different. Consider the remark of Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker*, back in 1972, "I can't understand how Nixon won, everybody I know voted for McGovern." Well, of course. Robert Kuttner, of the *Boston Globe*, just the other day, said that, "We have come to the conclusion that we liberals must live in a bubble." He is right, they do live in a bubble.

Now, the tragedy is, and listen, I have a lot of respect for the discipline of journalism, and I do not want to see it degraded like any other discipline, but unfortunately, we have a situation now where there is an "anything goes" attitude. When a Zogby poll in 2002 asked students about disciplines having an anything goes attitude, the students talked about business first and journalism second; the military and religion were last.⁸ Ninety-seven percent of students said that they are taught about ethics in the schools.⁹

Seventy-three percent said that what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diver-

6. NOYES, *supra* note 1, at 14–15. .

7. *Id.*

8. Press Release, National Association of Scholars, NAS/Zogby Poll Reveals American Colleges Are Teaching Dubious Ethical Lessons (July 2, 2002), at http://www.nas.org/print/pressreleases/hqnas/releas_02jul02.htm (on file with the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy).

9. *Id.*

sity. Only twenty-five percent said there are clear and uniform standards of right and wrong. I remember at Carnegie Mellon, in Pittsburgh, when I was teaching at a small college there, addressing some of the Ph.D. students in engineering, and after I gave a talk somebody said to me, "You sound like a conservative," and I said, "Yeah, I am." And he said, "Well, I guess you think it is a pretty good country." And I said, "I like America, I think it is pretty damn good." And I said, "Wait a minute now, you are telling me that there is no way to judge one culture versus another, is that right?" And they said, "That is exactly right." "So they are all equal?" They said, "That is all correct." These happened to be Jewish students, and that is important to what I am going to say. So I said, "I think I got it. In other words, in this country we put pizza into ovens, and in Nazi Germany, they put people like you into ovens. So that is like different strokes for different folks?" And they said, "Well that is not exactly what we meant." And I said, "Well, what did you mean? That was the principle that was operative; didn't I give you an example that was consistent with the principle you just told me, that you can't judge one culture?" That is exactly where we are going, that it is all a matter of taste—chocolate, vanilla, strawberry. It has been like this for a long time.

Now, there is good news in this too. While there may be less objectivity, and there may be a climate where you are not even supposed to strive towards objectivity, the good news is that because of multiple sources of information, you are less likely to get away with it. Look at what happened to Dan Rather, bloggers, Internet, talk TV, and talk radio—the fact is that with all these multiple sources of information, there is greater accountability. So that if you are a fraud, or if you do try to tinker an election and throw it to somebody, the chances are today more likely that you are going to get caught than in the past. It can be said that this is somewhat refreshing. Obviously there has got to be some norms, you cannot just have a free-wheeling circus, there has to be some moral norms. To me, it all stems from the academy. The corruption of journalism in this country comes straight out of the academy. This entire facile, maddening idea, of post-modernism, and I'm talking about all of its varieties, nihilism, moral relativism, deconstructionism, subjectivism, historicism, this idea that there is no such thing as truth, that it is all a matter of opinion. This is an idea I would expect in the asylum. Indeed, I have often said there is a thin line between the academy and the asylum. If you want to find out about it, just go and listen to these people talk, ranting and raving as they have. Nietzsche was of course the ultimate expression of this idea of

nihilism. He was the father of Foucault, who thought that everything was a social construct. I meet these people all the time. It comes from my discipline to some extent, from sociology. Everything is a social contract, there is no such thing as reality. Well, he was a practicing homosexual, who thought there was no such thing as abnormal behavior, so he went to the bathhouses. Did he go to his grave not knowing that AIDS was not a social construct? I am not sure. He may have gone to his grave thinking that it was.

There are some things that people get very antsy about, like when you start talking about things like an objective moral order. I like the Catholic perspective. There is an objective moral order. Take Pope John Paul II, who I understand is not doing very well right now. I will put his work in *Veritatis Splendor*, up against the 1859 work of John Stuart Mill *On Liberty*, because I look at it more in the sense of a contribution towards liberty; it is also a contribution on morality. It is absolutely brilliant. If you haven't gotten a chance to read *Veritatis Splendor*, please, if you read no other encyclical, read that one. This man has a towering intellect.

Post-modernism is dangerous. I will tell you who was a post-modernist, Hitler. And today we have Eric Alterman writing for the *Nation* magazine. He thinks that all this stuff about a liberal bias is nonsense. Eric Alterman is on the left, and that is fine. Eric Alterman says for example, I will give you a direct quote from him, "There is no such thing as truth." I will finish the sentence, "There is no such thing as truth, and there is no such thing as objective reality." This is Adolf Hitler, "There is no such thing as truth." The exact same words. Hitler, the great post-modernist, is this what you have been studying? Do they study him at Notre Dame? I don't think so. Notre Dame has a better reputation. I will finish his sentence, "There is no such thing as truth," explains Hitler, "either in the moral or scientific sense."

Last week this deranged kid from Minnesota killed nine people and himself. He belonged to some Nazi group. I don't think this is accidental. Look at the tell-tale signs, the kid goes to school with spiked hair, with ropes and chains hanging from him, and combat boots and black trench-coats. He was just a little different; he writes all these poems and such. And they knew he was a member of some Nazi group. So I went on the Internet to learn something about this Nazi group, and it had a funny name like the Libertarian National Socialists Green party. They all came together. Nazis are on the left anyhow, that is why they are called National Socialists, do you get it? Now if you are a conservative, you believe in minimal government. The people

on the other side like big government. Now, all I am going to say is this, I looked on that site, and there was a frequently asked questions page, and I tapped into it and what did I find on the second page, the Nazi group came out and said that there was no such thing as an objective moral truth. There it is, right from Hitler, right out of the post-modernists, right out of the spoons of the philosophy, and to the extent this belief is held in the press, the reporters, we have a real problem in this country. I don't think we are going to get beyond this problem unless we can have that kind of war which is necessary; I mean an intellectual war. An assault, an all-out assault, on this pernicious idea, this diabolical idea of post-modernism, that there is no such thing as truth, there is no such thing as an objective reality. Count me out on that.

Now how are you going to go about fixing this thing? Look, we need diversity. You can get into a conversation with an intellectual this day, and I would just say to them: you are not able to use the words diversity or inclusion. They won't be able to talk; they keep dropping these words, it is like a mantra. But I am going to use them, I am going to get them to contradict themselves. I hate inclusion, by the way, I am totally opposed to it. Inclusion is always used as a way to make sure that I can't celebrate my religion. I do like diversity, in what it is supposed to be—pluralism. If you don't like Macy's you go to Lord & Taylor's. If you don't like Notre Dame you go to Georgetown. I like shopping.

The one kind of diversity we have on college campuses, is diversity in terms of anatomy and ancestry. Look, you want to hire more women, you want to hire more Latinos and blacks, and they are qualified, I'm all in favor of that. Do not get me wrong, I think it is good. But I do not think it is good because you are going to get a different perspective. You are not going to get a different perspective. I think it is good because of justice, that people who have been denied opportunities in the past should have their opportunities today. But do not give me this nonsense that you are going to get a different perspective. In fact, I will say to you right now that it is racist, absolutely racist and sexist to assume that there is a black way of interpreting the world, or a male or female way interpreting the world. I will prove it to you right now: Clarence Thomas, Condi Rice, Colin Powell. If you were to ask the black establishment, the NAACP, they are not even considered black. Linda Chavez, who is on my board of advisors, has actually been declared a non-Hispanic by a Latino group.

I remember when I was a professor, people would say to me that I was a conservative, that I would never vote for a woman. I would say, "Oh really, I'll vote for Jean Kirkpatrick, how about you?" "Well, not her, not Jean Kirkpatrick." So here we go again, we have to play this game. You don't bring a black perspective to the table, you don't bring a female perspective table. What you bring, maybe, is a perspective from the left or the right, I can understand that. If there is going to be diversity, then hire so that you break up this monopoly where you have a concentration of people on the left. And that is what is happening. People who are of a more conservative understanding cannot even get hired. If they get hired, they are not likely to get tenure. This is an old-fashioned game; I can tell you some personal war stories if you want, all night, over a beer. I am Irish; I do believe in fulfilling certain stereotypes once in awhile. Take the women's centers; try going to a women's center, and you are woman, and be pro-life. Let me see how long you last, out the door honey, that is the exit sign, right there.

This idea has become pernicious in so many ways. I happen to deplore the whole concept of a docudrama, make it a documentary or make it a drama. Alex Haley was a fraud, so is Oliver Stone, and so is Dan Brown. They are all frauds. Haley was probably the most honest of the three, when he made up this nonsense about Kunte Kinte. Let me tell you something, he made up a word called "faction." At least he was more honest than the others. He said faction is a blend of fact and fiction, so you can never tell. Malachi Martin played the same game. People would read his book, and he would say not all of it is true, some of it is fiction. But how am I supposed to figure it out, how am I to tease this out of here? Then you saw JFK with Oliver Stone. Oliver Stone says, well, I made it up, but then he has the gall to send out study guides and exam bank questions to high school and college teachers. You can't have it both ways. Dan Brown tells you it is a work of fiction, and then tells you it is all based on history. These people are intellectually dishonest. With regard to Brown, I had to read the bloody book—*The Da Vinci Code*. It was a great page turner, but I do not want to get started with all the historical errors. And I just went to Ron Howard, and I said, as far as the movie is concerned, just put up a disclaimer, say it is a work of fiction, and then you won't have to worry about the Catholic League.