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# What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News

Eric Alterman

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# What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Eric Alterman is a columnist for The Nation and MSNBC.com. This talk, on the subject of his book, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* (Basic Books), was presented at the Ninth Annual Media Studies Symposium at Sacred Heart University on April 13, 2003.

ERIC ALTERMAN

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*What Liberal Media?  
The Truth About Bias and the News*

Raise your hand if you think the media is liberal. Now raise your hand if you think the media is conservative. Actually, it's a trick question. The media *are*, not the media *is*. That's important, because everybody's right. If you just say the media "is" you could be talking about any aspect of this enormous organism, and whatever you say would be true, because you could be talking about the *National Enquirer* or *Oprah*, or you could be talking about the *New York Times* or CBS News, you could be talking about *The Nation* magazine or the *National Review*. And so anything is true. When you talk about the media, you have to first define your terms. You have to know which media you are talking about.

Now when most people talk about the media, what they mean is the elite media. They mean the media that's located in Washington, in New York, a little bit in L.A., maybe some in Boston, Seattle, and the media that basically defines the political agenda for the rest of the country. Most Americans disagree with people in this room. Just about 50% of Americans think that the media are conservative, and about 13%, according to the most recent polls, consider it to be liberal. Now in my book, I say that the notion that this media, this elite media, are liberal, which is a truism within the media as well as among 50% of Americans, is a lie. I call it a lie.

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It's a little imprecise to call it a lie. It's a myth. But it's a useful myth. I know this is a school with a lot of very strong athletic programs. One of the former heads of the Republican Nation Committee, a man by the name of Rich Bond, has admitted that he doesn't think the media are liberal, but he said it all the time when he was the chairman of the Republican Party, and he compares saying so to what he calls ``working the refs." If you're the coach of a basketball team and you want the ref to cut you a few extra breaks in the clutch, you are going to be screaming at him the whole time that he's not giving you a fair shake. You're giving the ref a few options when you do that to him: He can have you ejected from the hall, because you won't shut up. He can look carefully at the calls he's making, because maybe you have a point. Or he can just throw a few your way, so you'll just shut up and let him get back to doing his job.

The media don't have the option of throwing the Republicans out of the hall, so they are really only left with two choices. Actually three: They can listen carefully to what they're saying and reject it entirely, and continue to go back to what they are doing, but the people who are saying it are very influential and powerful people, and they're not likely to go away or take it sitting down. Or they can internalize some of the critique and decide that maybe they have a point, honestly, and so they're going to be more careful in the future and not let their liberal tendencies, as they now understand it, guide what they say and do. Or they can just get the people to shut up by giving them what they want whenever possible. And I would submit that this tactic has been enormously successful for reasons two and three: on the one hand, some people, even many liberals, believe that the media are liberal and biased on behalf of liberals, and another large significant group of people believe that they just would like to be able to do their jobs, and in order to do their jobs they have to throw the conservatives a bone every once in a while and shut them up.

I don't give a very formal lecture, but I have given many talks on my book since it came out about two months ago, and interestingly, for me, the talks have changed because of things I've learned from the reviews of the book. There's been a sort of dialectical process in my reading reviews of the book, and I've come to understand things that I didn't know when I wrote it, or maybe I knew them but I wasn't thinking about them. They weren't front and center in my mind, and I

would definitely do them differently were I writing it now.

While I was writing the book I was also finishing up my doctoral dissertation in history, and amazingly I left all the history out of the book while I was putting it into the dissertation, even though the dissertation had nothing to do with the topic. In part, I left the history out of the book because I wanted to make it a short, quick, somewhat polemical argument: footnoted polemical, but polemical. But the problem with leaving the history out of the book is that it makes it seem like this notion of a liberal media came from Mars, that it's just out of the blue, that it's just sort of a tactic that the Republicans thought of: Let's lie about the liberal media and work the refs in this fashion, and we'll convince everybody in the country that it's true, and therefore we'll have a much easier time of things and we'll get our guys elected president while at the same time complaining about the way they're covered. That doesn't really make any sense, on the one hand, and also it's not how it happened.

So I want to spend about ten or fifteen minutes on history, which I don't do in the book, or I don't do very well, because I actually do think the media were liberal a while back. I think that the conservatives had a legitimate complaint about the media, and they were so effective in fighting against what they saw as unfair treatment that they stuck to this tactic long after they no longer needed to, because it was so effective. They did it for the sake of working the refs, but it didn't begin that way. And one reason why so many people continue to believe it and one reason that conservatives feel so strongly about it is that for a long time they lived in a universe in which it was true.

This was probably before most of the people who are in this room were around, but if you go back to the middle of the last century, 1948, 1949, 1950, when the liberal intellectuals were sort of defining the discourse, there were no conservatives at all involved in the discussion, in terms of the people who we thought of as our leading intellectual thinkers and the people who set the agendas for what ideas we would discuss. I'd say, and I don't think many people would argue with this, that the two most important books in terms of defining American liberalism of that period, were Arthur Schlesinger's book *The Vital Center*, published in 1948, and Lionel Trilling's book *The Liberal Imagination*, published in 1950, but the essay that it's based on was published in 1949. Now in neither of these two books do conservatives

even exist. Trilling's book is a lament that because there is no legitimate conservative intellectual tradition in the United States, liberalism is likely to grow flaccid, grow weak, and become bureaucratized, and lack the intellectual energy for self-regeneration that's necessary for it to remain relevant. So he's actually worried about the fact that there's no conservatives in this world. Schlesinger's book was really directed towards liberals, mostly to readers of *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, who he thought were overly soft on Stalinism and not up to the challenge of facing the Soviet Union in the Cold War. But again, he didn't care about conservatives. They didn't really exist except in some very isolated pockets of colleges, not even really universities, but colleges that didn't really have any prestige at the time.

This is the way it was in the 1950s and the early 1960s, and then something happened in 1964 that's very interesting. There's a very famous right-wing billionaire, named Richard Mellon Scaife, who many of you might have heard of. He funded all of the investigations into Bill Clinton that eventually led to the discovery of Monica Lewinsky and the impeachment of the president. He's the only person I talk about as an individual in the book, just because he's had such an interesting life, and in fact the best stuff about his personal life got taken out the book by the lawyers. He's a scion of the Mellon family, and he grew up unbelievably wealthy, in an environment where everything around him was named after his family. He graduated from Carnegie Mellon University, where his father was chairman of the board of trustees. He had originally gone to Yale University, but he was expelled. By his late thirties he hadn't done much of anything at all, but his sister married a local Republican politician in Pennsylvania, where they're from, and he got involved in Republican politics. Before that, the family foundations had given money to people like Jonas Salk. His mother had funded the lab where Jonas Salk did all his work. But once he became of age, he started directing the money towards Republican candidates, because those people were really nice to him, once they found out how much money he had.

So in 1964 he was flying around the country with Barry Goldwater, who was the Republican candidate for president and was considered very conservative back in those days. Actually, today Barry Goldwater would be considered kind of liberal on a lot of issues. He offered Goldwater his plane to fly around. This is a very important

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form of corporate campaign contribution that never gets reported, giving these guys plane rides, because otherwise they have to rent the planes, and they cost a fortune. So Scaife was a pretty happy guy, because here he was flying around this guy who was his new best friend and who was going to be the next president of the United States. It's fun to have your best friend be the president. And then Scaife woke up one day in 1964 in November and found that not only was Barry Goldwater not going to be president of the United States, but he was in fact a national laughingstock, and that all the columnists, all the smart columnists like James Reston of the *New York Times* and Joseph Alsop of the *Washington Post* and Walter Lippmann of the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek* were saying that the Republican Party would be finished. It would be over. It would be a one-party country unless they moved way to the left, where the Democrats were. In fact, the Democratic Party at that point was a very racist party, and the Republicans really had an opportunity to move to the left of the Democrats on the issue of civil rights.

Scaife was really shocked by this. He couldn't believe it. He thought everything Goldwater was saying made perfect sense, and here it turns out the guy was a joke. So Scaife had this blinding insight, which turns out to be true: that no candidate who shared his politics would ever be elected to national office so long as the means of communication through which he had to reach the rest of the country provided a distorted prism for his ideas to pass through. Scaife understood, and I think largely correctly, that because the media were biased against conservative ideas, there was no way for a conservative to communicate those ideas to the country in such a way that he could be elected, because by the time they reached the rest of the country, they would be made to sound ridiculous.

Instead of giving money to Republican candidates, beginning in 1964 Scaife decided to build himself a better media, to build a new media. He didn't do it alone. There were other Republican billionaires who shared his vision, who became convinced of it: Malcolm Coors is another one, and Sun Myung Moon has given many billions of dollars to this cause. And they started throwing around money to every single conservative institution that would ask for it, no matter what they did. That wasn't important, because they understood that they didn't know exactly how it was going to work. They were aware of what bad shape

they were in, that conservatism had basically lost the fight for the nation, and that the Republicans didn't want to nominate anybody like Goldwater next time: they wanted to nominate someone who was much more liberal, much more centrist. So they just started planting all these seeds in the form of money with all these various organizations, media organizations, think tanks, student organizations, legal organizations, even medical organizations, and they waited to see what would happen.

A few years later, there was a similar insight by a couple of guys in New York, who were very different people than Scaife. I'm thinking specifically of Robert Bartley, who retired last year, I believe, after twenty-nine years as editorial page editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Irving Kristol, who was a very important liberal intellectual in the 1950s and 1960s, but turned very far to the right and became one of the founders of neoconservatism in the '70s. The reason that Kristol, like many of his comrades, moved from the left to the right was that they were really disgusted with the antiwar movement and the student movement of the 1960s. They felt like it had turned into a sort of commie-symp organization which had turned against all the values of the United States. They felt that what they called the ``new class" had taken over the media and the entire teaching profession and all of the ``soft knowledge" work in the United States, and that they were turning out generations of young people who would be taught to hate their country and to refuse to fight for it and to want to destroy capitalism. They really believed this. It's not too much to say – you're not going to get this because you're too young – that the SDS, which was the radical organization that all students belonged to in the '60s, had changed its initials, and its new initials were now CBS, NBC, and ABC.

And so people like Bartley and Kristol went to Wall Street, and they said, Look guys, you make a very good living being capitalists in this country, and you want your children to live in a world just like you do, and you want everything to basically go along as it is. Well, that's not going to be possible, because look who is training your children. Look, they've taken over the universities that you are sending your children too, and if you want to fight back, we'll do it for you, but it's going to be expensive. And this argument was basically found to be compelling by these captains of industry. They were listening to their



students calling them war criminals and so forth.

At the same time that this was happening, liberalism itself was collapsing from its own problems and internal contradictions. The Vietnam War was begun by liberals. The Kennedy Administration and the Johnson Administration: those were liberals. It wasn't necessarily ended by liberals, but it was a liberal war, fought for liberal goals defined in liberal terms. The Civil Rights movement is something I think everything in this country owes a debt of gratitude toward, for the permanent changes it helped institute. But by the mid-1970s it had evolved into something quite different than it had been when it began in the early 1960s, identified with Martin Luther King and nonviolence and the March on Washington. It had evolved into something in the 1970s that was something that would be very hard for most middle-class Americans to embrace: the Black Power movement, which kicked most of the white people out of it and had a violent side to it, and was basically very hard. I don't want to pass judgment on it. I personally don't find it very admirable. I am sure some people might. But moving from Martin Luther King to, say, the Black Panthers as the vanguard of the civil rights struggle, for purely symbolic reasons, made it impossible for most Americans to feel a sense of mission with regard to it.

So you have the two main projects of liberalism of the '60s turning sour, Vietnam and civil rights. And on top of that, you had Jimmy Carter elected president in 1976, kind of as a fluke. The country had already started to grow more conservative then, but Carter was elected because Nixon had disgraced the presidency with Watergate, and actually if the election had been held a month later, Ford probably would have won it. He was gaining enormously on Carter. But Carter was perceived as the liberal candidate, and in many ways was a liberal candidate, and he had the very bad luck to be president when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and when the Iranians took the Americans hostage and held them for, I think, 444 days, if I am remembering correctly. And these events were both believed to be profound humiliations for every American. In addition to that, you had the terrible problems with the economy and the energy crisis, and interest rates were enormous and unemployment was rising; everything was really lousy in those days. I was a teenager in those days. Believe me, everything was really lousy.

So nobody wanted to be a liberal in this period. When I was in college, you were either a conservative or a Marxist. There were no liberals really to speak of. This is why I am saying liberalism probably would have collapsed all by itself, but at the same time liberalism collapsed, conservatism was on the ascendancy, and nowhere was this effect more profound than in the media, because that was the first line of attack for the conservatives, and that was where the liberals had dominated but were no longer able to defend themselves. Now when Richard Mellon Scaife had his insight in 1964 – I haven't looked this up, I'm just kind of guessing here – I'm guessing there were maybe fewer than half a dozen significant conservative organizations in the country, membership organizations, organizations with over a million dollars. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, in Washington alone there were 113, of which about 70% had received money from Scaife. When George Bush managed to get close enough to Al Gore to have the Supreme Court hand him the election illegitimately in 2000, there were over 300 conservative organizations in Washington alone. And these are big organizations. The Heritage Foundation has a \$30 million a year budget. There's nothing like it on the liberal side, and there's 300 of them, so it's 300 times 30: it's like a 900 to 1 advantage, conservative to liberal.

Building this better media, from the conservative standpoint, has had two significant effects on our politics. On the one hand, they've created another pole. It used to be that the left was here, on one side, the center was here, and the right was here on the other side. Now they have a right that's all the way over here, and so the part that used to be on the left is completely remote and vacant. It's like you picked up the football field and you moved it a hundred yards down the line, so that the part of the football field where you used to play is no longer there, and the part that used to be conservative is now where the liberals are. So it's not an exaggeration to say that Richard Nixon was more liberal than Bill Clinton. In many ways, Barry Goldwater was more liberal than Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton was the liberal when he ran for president, *vis-à-vis* George Bush's father and Bob Dole, just as Al Gore was "the liberal" against George W. Bush. But they were all more conservative than conservatives were twenty, thirty years ago. So what creating that pole and funding it enormously has had the effect of doing is delegitimizing the liberal voice entirely. You pick someone

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who is a center-rightist and call them the liberal, and that becomes the liberal voice, and genuine liberal ideas are never heard in mainstream debate. They are relegated to the complete fringes, to the sort of crazy people, like myself, I guess.

The other effect that it's had is that because it's so well funded, young people going to Washington could create entire careers within this sort of hermetically sealed bubble of right-wing thought, never having their ideas tested, never having their ideas challenged, but moving up, way up the ladder. Take someone like David Brock, for example. Before he decided to turn liberal, he was given five or six jobs. He's exactly my age; we went to Washington in the same year. He was given five or six jobs where he was making hundreds of thousands of dollars on the basis of very little work, and then was given a million dollars as a contract from Free Press to write a book about Hillary Clinton without even a book proposal. The only question he was asked by the publisher of Simon and Schuster is, Is she a lesbian? And he said, Well, I don't know, I'll save it for the book. And in fact he was run out of the movement when he wrote a book saying that she wasn't a lesbian, in fact. All she was was a communist. That was his argument.

The consequence of these structures, of the Heritage Foundation, Fox News, cable TV, all cable TV, all talk radio, Rush Limbaugh, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times*, the *American Spectator*, the *Weekly Standard*, the *New York Post*, the *New York Sun*, is that there are now millions of people in America who hear nothing but what Scaife knew to be true in the first place. They never hear the other side, and so they can't believe that anyone could believe what people who disagree with them believe. It makes them furious. It makes them really angry citizens. And they are very good citizens. They are good citizens in the sense that they do the things citizens are supposed to do: they write letters to the newspaper, they send e-mails to their congressman, they go to rallies, they go to demonstrations, and they do this in a way that liberals don't do any more, because liberals don't really feel this sense of empowerment and self-confidence the way conservatives do.

In the 2000 election, for instance, when they were trying to figure out what would be the best way to count what was essentially a tied election, you had this enormous conservative network of Limbaugh, of Fox News, of freerepublic.com – which by the way at the time was

publishing the home addresses and phone numbers of the Florida Supreme Court justices, so they could be harassed – you had them bringing hundreds, thousands of people down to Florida to demonstrate, and there were no liberals really at all coming. There was no trumpet on the liberal side. So you can actually trace George Bush's presidency and the war in Iraq and all the terrible things, in my opinion, that have happened since Bush became president to the moment where the vote was shut down in Miami-Dade in 2000 because thousands of people were screaming at the vote counters and telling them not to count the votes, and the vote counters inside were getting scared. They were told that armies of Cubans were marching down the street to commit acts of violence against them, and they stopped counting the vote. That vote was never completed, and given how tiny the margin was, it's quite possible that shutting down that vote is the reason Bush was able to claim victory. Now actually I think Bush would have found a way to claim victory anyway, but I'm just showing that these dedicated cadres of conservative activists are something that grow out of the dominance of this part of the media and there's nothing at all on the liberal side to match it. There's a tiny fraction on the liberal side.

But the other thing that having this new pole does is that it exerts a gravitational pull on the rest of the media. Like I said, it moves the whole football field down the road. So because they've funded these think tanks, the conservatives have been so successful at creating these institutions – and by the way, when I describe these things, in the main I'm not doing it critically. I'm not saying that they did anything wrong. I'm saying that this was a brilliant strategy, and I admire their patience and their willingness to rethink their ideas and try new things. I'm not a conservative, obviously, but I don't think that they've taken things over illegitimately, with the possible exception of the current president of the United States.

But to give you an example of what this pole does: I can't tell you how many times I've been on the radio promoting my book and the guy will say to me, Well, what are you whining about? We've got Fox News, and you've got CNN. But of course if you listen to CNN, you know that CNN is nothing like Fox News. CNN is, I would say, more conservative than liberal, but certainly not anywhere near as liberal as Fox is conservative. The better comparison they could make would be

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NPR, say, with Rush Limbaugh. But even so: I don't know how to tell this joke for this age cohort. The way I tell it is that NPR is a James Taylor concert and Fox News and Rush Limbaugh is a Led Zeppelin concert. You got that? You've heard of Led Zeppelin?

You can prove this rather easily statistically if you look at where the media go for expertise, and again I'm talking about the elite, mainstream media. According to a Nexis study that was done of think tank experts that were quoted in 2001, you have to go to number eleven and then again to number seventeen before you get an actual liberal think tank on the list. Fifteen of the top seventeen sources quoted are either center or far right. No liberals allowed. What this tells me is that if you control the terms of the debate, it doesn't matter all that much whether or not the people who are doing the reporting on that debate are biased a little bit in one direction or another, because the very questions you are asking are conservative questions. You're not asking liberal questions.

People say to me, Eric, how would you define liberal? I would define liberal on the basis of the philosophy of the late John Rawls, who died last year, and I think most academics would give you a similar answer. John Rawls defined a liberal society or a just society, although he was speaking as a liberal, in this way: A just society is a society where you would choose to live if you didn't know where you fit in, but you felt like you would get a fair shake, whether you were a millionaire spending a million dollars to get his daughter into pre-school on the Upper East Side or a guy cleaning the toilets in that pre-school on the Upper East side. So in a just society, regardless of money, everybody would have the same access to things like education and health care and public parks, basic foodstuffs and whatever else. If you think about what kind of action we would have to take to reach that kind of society, the degree of taxation, and so on, you'd think that the things that I am proposing would be completely and totally nuts. We can't even expunge the power of money from our elections, much less expunge it from the way people are educated, the way people are fed, the way people are clothed. I'm talking about the basics, but still. We can't even say that being rich doesn't entitle you to more political power than anybody else, that it doesn't entitle you to more votes than anybody else. So to actually propose the levels of confiscatory taxation that would be necessary to have a liberal society is to show how

conservative our fundamental assumptions are.

Well, why is that? It's in part because Americans like it that way, or feel they do, but that's in part because the very way the questions are framed is conservative. Even if you listen to NPR or PBS, supposedly ``communist" broadcast stations according to some people, you're going to hear a program called *Market Watch*. When are you going to hear *Labor Watch*? Never. When you hear about inputs into stock prices being high or low, what are those inputs? They're labor, they're environmental conditions, they're human rights conditions in factories in the Third World. But these are treated as externalities or inputs: if they cost the community something, they're externalities; if they make the production cheaper, they're inputs. But the story is never the actual people and the quality of life of the people who are making these products that are being sold. Even if they're products like customer support for your Windows program, those are never discussed. If the media were genuinely as liberal as people say it were, we would be defining business reporting as labor reporting, as worker reporting, rather than as business reporting. Again, it's such an amazing notion, it sounds entirely utopian.

I don't argue, and I would not argue, that most reporters in these elite communities that I'm talking about are not socially liberal, and I'm sure at a place like this they're more liberal on social issues than many of you. I live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I used to live in Dupont Circle in Washington. Basically everybody I know has the same politics on social issues. Everybody is pro-abortion, everybody is pro-gun control, everybody is pro-gay marriage, everybody supports campaign finance reform, everybody's pro-environment. But if you hold these views and you are a professional journalist, your tendency is going to be to bend over backwards to prevent your prejudices from seeping through, because you believe in trying to be as objective as you can on the one hand, and on the other hand, you have these watchdogs: remember I said that there's these 300 organizations in Washington alone, and there's thousands more of them throughout the United States, that are going to be on your case if you let anything slip.

There's a website I mentioned earlier, [freerepublic.com](http://freerepublic.com), which is the most conservative place imaginable. To call it conservative is to insult conservatives. On [freerepublic.com](http://freerepublic.com), which recently printed my

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home phone number, when Paul Wellstone's plane went down, there were people posting saying, Gee, isn't it too bad Hillary Clinton and Ted Kennedy couldn't have been on that plane too. That's the kind of people they are. In the *New York Times* every Monday, in the business section they print a bunch of statistics in the back, like movie grosses and media stocks that are up and down. One of the statistics they print every once in a while is website "stickiness." Do you know what website stickiness is? It's how long a person stays at a given website. The stickiness factor for freerepublic.com is five hours and twenty minutes. It's unbelievable. These people have no life. But there's a degree of dedication to a cause: they've got dedication, they've got money, and they're using this to do their best to keep the so-called liberals in the media in line. And it works.

On social issues, I grant that most journalists are liberal. On economic issues, most journalists are conservative, relative to the rest of the country. They don't send their kids to public schools, so they're not worried about the quality of public education the way you would be if you were a parent. They don't worry about Medicare, Medicaid. They don't like unions. They're not worried about having their jobs traded overseas: you can't trade a journalist's job overseas. And on top of that, they work for these enormous conglomerates that are naturally conservative.

There's a professor, a former journalist, who's dean of the school of journalism at Berkeley, named Ben Bagdikian, who has written the same book for the past thirty years, called *The Media Monopoly*. There's a new edition: I think we're up to edition number seven. The first time he published it, in around 1970 or 1976 maybe, there were fifty media companies that controlled what you see and hear, by and large. Fifty is not very many, when you think about the marketplace of ideas, but it's still fifty. Today the number is six. There are six media conglomerates that control the vast majority of what is reported anywhere: you know, companies like AOL-Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Disney, and GE, who I work for. The people who own these companies — Michael Eisner, Robert Wright, Jack Welch, Rupert Murdoch — are not out there preaching revolution. Their hearts are not bleeding for the poor. They may be sort of fashionably liberal in their social views, but they are not going to hire people to speak for them who in any way threaten the economic structure that

has been so good to them, and is so important to their shareholders. It just doesn't make any sense.

Journalists who work for these structures know this. So the companies don't really have to censor them. Every once in a while they'll say something stupid that we'll hear and we can use it against them: like when on the day Disney took over ABC, Eisner and somebody else — I think the guy's name is Murphy — went on *Good Morning America* and Charlie Gibson said, Well, with everybody getting taken over, is there going to be room for the little guy? And Eisner and Murphy looked at him and said, Charlie, don't you like working for Disney? Aren't you happy with your job? He said it right on the air, just like that. And Eisner said specifically that he doesn't think ABC News should cover Disney. He thinks Disney should get a free pass from ABC News. They should be allowed to do whatever they want without being reported on by one of the six remaining media companies.

And you know when it's something they all agree on, it doesn't get reported at all. The reason that you think you're paying too much money in cable bill and the reason that the radio is totally terrible — everything you hear is the exact same thing — is a law that was passed called the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which ended all the bars on competition. In other words, it used to be that the size of media companies was limited by a series of laws because it was felt in the 1930s that too much power concentrated in anyone's hands in the media was dangerous for democracy. Those laws were enormously relaxed in 1996 under this incredibly heavily lobbied Telecommunications Act, and it was a very big deal because it involved the broadcast industry versus the cable industry.

In fact, Bob Dole was a real good-guy in this battle, because one of the effects of the Act was to give away the broadcast spectrum to the people that already owned the companies. The broadcast spectrum was estimated to be worth \$30 to \$70 billion, and it was owned by us, by the taxpayers, and Dole said, Why are we giving it to these companies? They're private corporations. Why are they entitled to a \$70 billion gift from the American taxpayer? And someone said to him, Bob, don't you want to run for president? He said, Well, yeh. They said, Well, who do you think is going to broadcast your campaign? He said, Oh yeh, and he dropped his objections, and the



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law was passed.

Now the phrase "Telecommunications Act of 1996" was never uttered on ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, or Fox News, ever. It was said once on broadcast TV ever, and that was on *Nightline*, when everybody was asleep. That's because nobody had an interest in upsetting their parent company, something that was tremendously important. Your whole universe of what you see and hear was determined by this Act. It's now about to be loosened even further. Again, nothing's being reported. It's going to be done by the FCC this time. You're not going to need a law for it, so it's being done even further under the table.

So my argument is that yes, most journalists are liberal socially, exactly the way their socio-economic bracket would predict. In other words, well-educated, urban elites have the same views on affirmative action, gay rights, and gun control everywhere, and they have them in the media. But those views are offset by journalist's professionalism on the one hand and by the power of the conservative lobby on the other. On economics, where they also have the same views you would expect well-educated, well-remunerated urban elites to have, those views are if anything reinforced and further pushed to the right by the economic structures of the corporations for whom they work and by what I've described as the self-interest of the journalist, who knows not to upset them.

A net result of this is that conservative Republicans are treated much more gently in the media than liberal Democrats. If you think back to the election of 2000, the election was basically determined on the basis of a single argument, if you break it down. When I talk about media bias, it's not like that's the only problem with the media. There are other significant problems with the media: there's the whole rush to tabloidization, there's the whole simplification, there's the fact that when we should have been discussing Iraq in September, we kept hearing about little blonde girls being kidnapped everywhere, as if it were a national emergency, when in fact the number of child kidnappings was going down and you are more likely to be hit by lightning than to have an incident of child kidnapping. Media bias is not the only problem, but it's a significant problem, and it's a problem that everyone has sort of the wrong idea about, so I find it interesting, and I wrote a book about it.

Anyway, if you go back to the election of 2000, the media told a single story, basically. Everything had to fit into this one narrative line, and that line was: Bush is a dope, Gore is a liar. And the question that they would ask after every incident is, Is Gore too much of a liar to be president? and Is Bush too much of a dope to be president? I think Bush is a lot of things that I wouldn't want to be myself, but he's not a dope. He's actually a brilliant politician, and one of his great gifts, as with Ronald Reagan, is getting his opponents to think that he's stupid, because it allows him to get away with an awful lot. They're wrong about that.

The media never actually quite said ``Bush is a dope." But they did frequently say ``Gore is a liar." You probably all know the main lies that he told, right? ``I invented the Internet. I discovered Love Canal." And here's the one that's really important. I think every country should have their elections on an issue something like this: ``I was the model for Oliver in *Love Story*." Now in each one of those incidents, Al Gore told the exact truth. My beat for the 2000 election was the media. I wasn't covering the election, I was covering the media covering the election. So I knew that Al Gore was being treated unfairly at the time, but I had no idea how awful it was until I went back and looked at it systematically for my book.

I don't love Al Gore. I don't even really like him. I supported Bill Bradley. I've come to like Gore a little bit in the past few months, but I didn't like him at all back then. But if you look at Al Gore's statements that the media took and picked up and ran with about his role in the creation of the Internet, well, he did play an important role in Congress in the funding of the Arpanet at the Department of Defense, which became the Internet, and that's what he claimed. He didn't say he discovered Love Canal, he said he had found this place that he wanted to have hearings in, called Toone, Tennessee, and he wanted another place to have hearings about so that he could show it was a national problem for Superfund and environmental cleanup, and he discovered Love Canal. That's how he meant it: that he discovered it in terms of another place to have a congressional hearing. The one that's my favorite is this really important issue about *Love Story*. What Al Gore was guilty of was correctly remembering a seventeen year-old story that had run in the *Nashville Tennessean* in which Erich Segal, the author of *Love Story*, had been incorrectly quoted by the reporter

in question.

There were thousands of stories written across the country about these things. There were far more stories written about *Love Story* than there were about, say, Bush and Harken Oil and whether or not he was guilty of insider trading. It was considered the most important thing in the world, and it was a lie, and the media were lying about Al Gore. Were they lying because ideologically they're conservative? No, actually, not entirely. No, they were lying because they hated Al Gore. It's complicated why they hated Al Gore, but there's no question that they did hate Al Gore. There was a debate between Bradley and Gore in New Hampshire where when Gore's picture came on the screen in the media room, people literally started screaming and throwing things at the guy, just like you would do in a basketball game if you were really badly behaved.

My point here is that if you take a look at the structure of the media, it's not impossible — because the media “are” rather than the media “is” — that you could find liberal bias in the media the way conservatives do, and talk about it and whine about it all the time, but you'd be missing the forest for the trees. Talk radio is a million percent conservative. Talk radio, by the way, is where, according to statistics, more Americans get their news from than any other news source: 40 million Americans say they get their news from talk radio, between 15 and 20 million people from Rush Limbaugh alone. Now that's a scary thought.

Cable TV is 98.8% conservative. On CNN, you have Begalla and Carville fighting on *Crossfire*. The liberals on cable TV are there to play liberals. The conservatives are there to have their own shows. So every once in a while you get a liberal like this guy Colmes, to get beat up by Hannity every night. But basically it's a conservative domination. On broadcast TV, there are fewer opinions, but if you think about it, of the important print liberals in the country, none of them are on television regularly: Frank Rich, Paul Krugman, no one from *The Nation*, nobody who's a liberal columnist has a regular gig on TV, whereas there's plenty of conservatives who do: George Will, Robert Novak, Pat Buchanan, dozens of them. If you are a conservative columnist and you don't have a TV gig, there's something the matter with you.

I'm not talking about a vast right-wing conspiracy. I think Hillary

Clinton did an enormous disservice when she said that, because it's so easy to parody. They've done it out in the open. When I go on Fox News, they ask, Are you saying what Hillary Clinton said? I say, No, I'm sitting here on Fox News. How can I be talking of a conspiracy? It's right here. It's right in front of you. You have millions of people watching it. And they've done it largely out in the open. They've done it honestly. They've done it patiently. I admire them for it. My primary point is that I wish they'd stop whining. I wish they'd stop whining about the liberal media, because it's not there.

My more important point is that I wish liberals and I wish journalists, which are not necessarily the same thing, would wake up to the world that they're living in, because it corrupts their understanding of where they have to go if they think that the media are going to give them a fair shake. They're not. Media have to stop allowing themselves to be worked, as the refs, and liberals have to realize that they're in a much weaker and much more vulnerable position than they had any idea of, and they need to figure out ways to fight back, just like the conservatives did forty years ago.

Thank you for listening so patiently.