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BOOK SLAMS PRESS, ESPECIALLY AP

A new book by a Dartmouth teacher slams the press, and particularly the Associated Press, for presenting a warped view of controversies.

The great bulk of the press behaves like cattle in a stampede, according to *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues* (Praeger), by Jim Kuypers, senior lecturer and director of the Office of Speech at Dartmouth.



Jim Kuypers

Kuypers studied hundreds of press clips in the wake of controversial stories about black activist Louis Farrakhan, homosexuals, and the Confederate flag.

Since so many papers rely on the AP for coverage of such events, a handful of writers can have immense influence on how Americans think, he contends.

He defines framing as, "The process whereby communicators act to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed (or ignored) in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others."

Based on the universe of facts that exist on the topics above, Kuypers found that the press focused on a small portion of them that appeared to satisfy a certain agenda.

The public, he concludes, is deprived of facts needed to understand the controversies.

Farrakhan's Speech Not Covered

For instance, he found that the press mostly ignored the speech given by Farrakhan at the "Million Man March" in Washington, D.C., Oct. 16, 1995.

Instead, it fixated on his previous speeches and remarks, calling him "racist," "bigot," "sexist," "anti-Semite," "homophobe," and many other names.

Farrakhan's speech was mostly "uplifting" and conciliatory, including reaching out to Jews, says Kuypers. Farrakhan said it was time to stop arguing and sit down with Jewish leaders so relations can be improved. He also urged blacks, in a two-and-a-half hour speech, to accept responsibility for problems they may have and to lead exemplary lives.

Confederate Flag = States' Rights

After Alabama State Senator Charles Davidson gave a speech May 9, 1996 saying the Confederate flag was a symbol of states' rights and not slavery, he was savaged in the press. A typical critic said he had adopted an "outrageous, evil, racist, backwards, lying position" towards blacks.

Media focused on a small part of Davidson's speech, says Kuypers, neglecting the part that showed the economic basis for the Civil War. The industrialized North, via high tariffs, was preventing the agrarian South from trading with Europe, which was giving it a better deal. Almost everyone in the South fought, including many slaves, believing the issue to be "local control," says Kuypers.

Football Hero Is Sacked

When Green Bay Packer Reggie White told the Wisconsin legislature March 25, 1998 that the problems of homosexuals should not be compared to blacks since "homosexuality is a decision, not a race," he was hit with everything but the kitchen sink. He was called "incredibly ignorant," "a moron," "homophobic," "mean-spirited," etc.

Almost every news report and editorial agreed that homosexuality is genetic although Kuypers says there is no scientific evidence of this. The press quoted the American Psychological Assn.'s 1973 decision to stop calling homosexuality a mental disorder. But Kuypers says the press didn't bother to find out that only a third of the members voted and that "eyewitnesses" say the decision "was driven by politics, not science." Also, he adds, 69% of psychiatrists polled four years later disagreed with the resolution.

EDITORIAL

by Jack O'Dwyer

Press Bias and Politics is an important work for PR people and the press.

It is an in-depth study of how the press handles such controversial topics as race and sexual orientation. About the only thing missing is a study of how news from the Mid-East is handled. Perhaps that is next.

Dartmouth's Jim Kuypers can be more objective about these issues than the press itself because he is removed from the battlefield and is also studying flaps that are several years old.

He writes of a familiar phenomenon— the press going berserk on a single issue and taking an almost uniform view of it. Facts that do not fit the press's agenda are simply ignored. Editorial writers run amok without checking facts in the stories.

By printing large portions of the original texts of certain speeches and then the stories that were written about them, Kuypers shows that few reporters read some of the speeches involved.

Another phenomenon is that some groups react so ferociously when attacked or even mentioned, that the press avoids these hornets' nests.

What are readers to do? We advise reading letters-to-the-editor, op-ed pages, listening to talk radio and reading the foreign press via the web.

Google.com has a program that will translate almost any language into English or another language.

PR pros as well as the press are inveterate "framers." One definition of framing, provided by educator William Gamson in Kuypers' book, is that it is "a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue."

Facts remain neutral until framed, says Kuypers.

Press releases, reporters know, are often more notable for the facts left out than for those that are included. Ditto for many news reports.

"Priming" is another technique that is described and illustrated in the book.

Readers are "set up" to expect something from a speech or an event. The likelihood is that they will then see the event in that "frame."

"Agenda-setting" is a close cousin of priming. "Agenda-extension" occurs when media not only tell the public what to think about, but how to think about it.

"Sandwiching" is the placement of the side of an issue the press supports between two opposing viewpoints. The press quotes both viewpoints in an effort to be even-handed. But by inserting its own view, it tips the balance to one of the sides.

The press supposedly decries stereotypes but uses them

"extensively," says Kuypers. His view is: "The public has the right to know all pertinent information about a given subject."

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Responses:

Reality check in Connecticut (10/29):

I agree with the author here. Why are "we" so afraid to call the press on this?

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