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**CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE BIAS IN NEWSPAPER PRINT:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS**

by
Ted Christian

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Seminar in
Public Relations for a Master of Arts Degree in
the Graduate Division of Rowan College
1997

Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved Dec 10, 1996

ABSTRACT

Christian, Ted A Content Analysis evaluating the newspaper coverage that Christian Conservatives receive.
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin, Corporate Public Relations.

The major purpose of this study was to analyze the content from six major U.S. newspapers regarding their coverage of Christian Conservatives. The newspapers chosen for the study were the: *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times* and *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*.

Articles from these newspapers from June 1993 through July 1994 were analyzed for their bias against Christian Conservatives or lack thereof. Samples were selected from the newspapers during the time frame chosen when one or more of the following five descriptors appeared in the newspaper text: Christian Conservatives, Christian Coalition, Religious Right, Religious Conservatives and Radical Right. The articles were grouped as either straight news or opinion /editorial/ commentary.

Following the researcher's initial evaluation, five professors from Rowan College of New Jersey evaluated five different samples to confirm or refute the researchers' findings.

The following conclusions were drawn:

- (a) It does appear that a bias against Christian Conservatives exists.
- (b) Despite the existence of bias found in this study, the extent is not as widespread or as blatant as has been reported in the past.
- (c) A relatively healthy balance appears to exist on the pages of these newspapers regarding their coverage of Christian Conservatives. Many papers appeared to use their op/ed pages to achieve this balance.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Christian, Ted

**A Content Analysis evaluating the newspaper coverage that Christian Conservatives receive.
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin, Corporate
Public Relations.**

The major purpose of this study was to analyze the content from six major U.S. newspapers regarding their coverage of Christian Conservatives. Sample articles from these newspapers were analyzed over a 14-month period and were categorized as straight news or opinion/editorial/commentary. The results showed that some bias does exist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Elice, for her financial and emotional support. And to my advisor, Dr. Don Bagin, for his patience and prodding.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the decade of the 1980's, a new and controversial voice began to be heard in this country. The new voice was that of the Christian Conservative.

Circa 1979, the Christian Right became a recognizable political player, with the incorporation of several organizations, the most conspicuous of which was the Moral Majority. ¹

The mantra of the Christian Right in the 1990's is carried by Reverend Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. It has long been the belief by many Christian Conservatives and Republicans in general, that "Today's multicultural elite seem to want every voice to be heard - except that of the conservative Christians and other people of faith." ²

The gatekeepers in our society are oftentimes held responsible for the perception of "special interest groups" and how much and how often they are heard. These gatekeepers have been and still are the mainstream mass media (print media consisting of daily newspapers and network news companies). The premise of many on the right is that the mainstream mass media are liberally biased and can't be relied upon to provide a fair and accurate portrayal of events as they happen.

Part of the explanation for bias is a cultural divide that separates journalists from middle America in matters of religion. A study by sociologists Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter in 1981 found that 86 percent of journalists

¹ Moen C. Matthew, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), p.108.

² Reed Ralph, *Politically Incorrect* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1994), inside cover.

and editors attend church either infrequently or not at all. Half listed no religious affiliation whatsoever. On social issues, they are decidedly left-of-center: supporting abortion on demand (90 percent), homosexual rights (75 percent), and holding that adultery is not wrong (53 percent).³

This appears to create a possible conflict of interest for those who cover Christian Conservatives and religious issues in general when you consider:

Most of the public policy positions advocated by religious conservatives are supported by the vast majority of the American people: 70 percent favor a Balanced Budget Amendment, 85 percent favor voluntary school prayer, 75 percent favor term limits, and 70 percent oppose abortion on demand paid for with tax dollars.⁴

Matthew Moen has written three books on the Christian Right and seems to give us another possible insight regarding press coverage of Christian Conservatives. During the 1980s and early 1990s the Christian Right had difficulty getting any coverage.

Closely related to a decreasing predilection on the part of journalists to cover the Christian Right was an eroding ability to do so. Tormented national reporters, facing deadlines and a rapidly changing world, lacked the time and resources to sift through and document the complexities of organizational and leadership changes in the Christian Right. They also lacked a vantage point, once Christian-Right leaders began focusing their energies and resources on

³ Ibid., p. 55. S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "The Media Elite and American Values," (report printed by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Dallas, Texas), 1982; Laurence I. Barrett, "The 'Religious Right' and the Pagan Press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1993.

⁴ Ibid. , p. 11

grass-roots activism. Coverage of the Christian Right by the national media lost track of, and lost interest in, an evolving Christian Right. ⁵

Is it conceivable the media cover a subject they both ideologically disagree with and don't have time for?

"Larry Barrett of *Time* magazine recently urged that he and his colleagues 'get ourselves to church, if only as observers.' He points to a 'profound disconnect' between the press and religious folk that has led to a deepening alienation from the major media by those of devout faith." ⁶

I. NEED FOR THE STUDY

The need for the study emerges if one looks at the press coverage received almost daily by Christian Conservatives. Commentary and Opinion pieces often refer to them as the "Radical Right" or "Christian Zealot." They are accused of using "stealth tactics" to implement their agenda. Are the mainstream mass media doing their public a disservice by portraying Conservative Christians in this manner? Are straight news stories written with a sarcastic slant? Are there a disproportionate number of op/ed articles printed coming out against Christian Conservatives? Or are the media being fair in their assessment? Are they offering the reader the opportunity to hear both sides of the argument? Is it conceivable that certain media have a pro-Christian slant?

Conservative politicians call it "Christian bashing." Their adversaries claim the Religious Right can dish it out but can't take it.

In his book *Politically Incorrect*, Ralph Reed explains how and when Christians, and later Christian Conservatives, began to be demeaned in the press. Reed professes that it began in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee during the Scopes Trial. In the trial, a public school teacher was prosecuted

⁵ Moeu, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), p. 146.

⁶ Reed, *Politically Incorrect* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1994), p. 55. Barrett, "The Religious Right and the Pagan Press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1993.

for teaching evolution with William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow opposing one another in the courtroom. H.L. Mencken, the editor of the American Mercury, covered the event. Mencken's dispatches from Tennessee were less than favorable toward Christians.

Mencken denounced Christianity as a "childish theology founded upon hate" and railed against its followers, who he described as "morons," "yokels from the hills," and members of the "booboise." He lampooned the Bible Belt as a region that resounded with "the clashing of theologians" but had nothing to drink save "a beaker of coca-cola" and nothing to read but "a pile of Saturday Evening Posts two feet high." Most of his reports carried little news from the trial. Instead, Mencken used the forum to undertake a vicious critique of fundamentalism... 7

Quill, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, published an article in the 1993 July/August edition titled, "Religion in the News - Are we short-changing readers and ourselves with biases that filter news?" The story examined biases that distort coverage of religion. 8

In the *Quill* article, Washington Post ombudsman Joann Byrd claimed, "When journalists aren't like, or don't know, the people they are writing about, they can operate with no ill will whatsoever and still not recognize that a statement doesn't ring true. It may be even harder to see how deeply offensive a common perception can be." 9

The author of the *Quill* piece, Terry Mattingly sums it up by saying the bottom line is "Journalists know less than Americans about religion. The phenomenon affects how much space is given to religion and who covers this complicated subject." 10

7 Ibid , p.53

8 Steinfelds Peter, "Beliefs," *New York Times*, April 30, 1994.

9 Mattingly Terry, "Religion in the News," *Quill*, July/August, p. 13

10 Ibid.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study concerned a content analysis of six major newspapers around the country over a 14-month period from June of 1993 through July of 1994.

III. DELIMITATIONS

This study was limited to six selected newspapers in the United States in regard to content of Christian Conservatives in the U.S.

No television, radio or magazine coverage of the subject was included in this study.

The study was conducted over a 14-month period from June of 1993 through July of 1994.

No other studies completed by research groups, religious groups or media groups directly attribute to the study, because none has completed analysis on this particular content during this time frame

IV. PURPOSE

The primary purpose was to analyze the content of the articles published by six newspapers to better understand the fair treatment, or lack thereof, the subject received during the time period. This was accomplished by implementing the following sub-purposes:

1. Selecting a time period to cover the subject so that enough unlimited information would be available.
2. Selecting a time period recent enough with enough coverage to provide a fair representation for the reader.
3. Selecting which and how many newspapers would provide a fair representation for a cross-section of the nation.
4. Narrowing the number of key terms as qualifiers necessary to conduct an objective study.
5. Establish a separate category to determine if newspapers "balance" their coverage on opinion/editorial/commentary pages.
6. Identifying and constructing a rating scale to catalog findings.

7. Analysis of material based on predetermined qualifiers.
8. Amplifying the most important implications of this study to aid in the ongoing feud involving Christian Conservatives and the media.
9. Charting results and comparing trends within the study and with other studies.
10. Drawing conclusions based upon the findings of the study.

V. PROCEDURES

The majority of the research for this study was merely a retrieval of the news summaries as they pertained to the subject(s) relevant to the dates chosen. The time frame chosen (June '93 through July '94) was selected to ensure enough information would be cataloged and available to the researcher. Many newspapers do not immediately provide the public with past editions on disc. This time frame was also recent enough to create a climate of timeliness to help the study's relevance.

Rowan College of New Jersey provided the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* through an ondisc search. The remaining newspaper summaries were retrieved through an online search (at cost). The complete list of references is as follows: *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The original premise was for a content analysis on the coverage of the Christian Coalition specifically. Many people lump together or have the perception that, Christian Conservatives and Christian Coalition are one and the same. Despite the fact that they generally are, the researcher wished for a broader search than that of simply the Christian Coalition. Five separate terms were used as descriptors:

Christian Coalition
Christian Conservatives
Religious Right
Religious Conservatives
Radical Right

If one or all of these descriptors appeared anywhere in the text, in any one or all of the newspapers, for the dates provided, it produced a possible sample.

Provided with a possible sample, the researcher was allowed some latitude. The possible sample left the researcher with text from an article which contained a descriptor somewhere in that text. The researcher then had to determine whether the sample was worthy for the study based on the following questions:

1. Is this article mainly about the descriptor?
2. If the article is not mainly about a descriptor, but contains something biased, should the researcher take it into account?
3. Should the researcher include this article if the focal point is about a figure affiliated with the descriptor but not specifically about the descriptor (i.e. Ollie North)?
4. Should the researcher consider opinion/editorial/commentary pieces for the project?

The researcher determined that to include the article in the sample, the majority of the story needed to be based on the descriptor. Even if that article contained something blatantly biased, it was not included as a sample if it was not mainly regarding a descriptor. If the article was about an affiliate of the descriptor (i.e. Ollie North) but not mainly the subject matter, the article was disqualified. Lastly, the researcher included op/ed pieces but under a separate heading from straight news.

The samples were graded as positive, negative or neutral, based on the researcher's evaluation. A sample was given a positive grade if it appeared to give a pro-Christian slant. A sample was graded as negative if the researcher perceived a bias or vindictiveness in the story. An indicator for a positive sample was a one-sided number of quotes each side of an argument was given and the significance of the person being quoted. The researcher believed this could indicate a reporter parroting a news release.

In negative stories, key “catch words” were used to help determine a sample’s grade. Terms, “radical “ and “extreme” were used in negative stories. Also, the researcher often found the Republican Party “under siege” from the Religious Right in samples given a negative grade.

Samples given a neutral grade were deemed by the researcher as reporting the news with no obvious bias.

Following the grading procedure, the findings were categorized according to different variables. The samples were divided into the previously mentioned categories of straight news and opinion/editorial/commentary pieces. The findings were then grouped by newspaper to rate the coverage of the six newspapers and by year (1993 or 1994). The additional categories enabled the researcher to further analyze and chart other possible trends in coverage.

A panel of experts was assembled to verify that the researcher’s evaluations were valid. This panel was comprised of five professors at Rowan College of New Jersey, whose specialties included mass media, communication, public relations and/or survey research. Each panel member was sent a sample of one positive, one negative and one neutral sample as categorized by the researcher. The panel member was then instructed to grade the sample based on the same criteria previously mentioned.

VI. TERMINOLOGY

Christian Coalition: An organization consisting of Christian Conservatives. Originally founded by Pat Robertson, they are now a very active and an important political special interest group.

Christian Conservative: A person of the Christian faith who is generally politically conservative. Christian Conservatives generally are very active politically.

Christian Zealot: A person of the Christian faith who is extremely partisan.

Descriptor : A term used to help the researcher retrieve information during the literature search. The researcher used six descriptors: Christian Coalition, Christian Conservatives, Religious Right, Religious Conservatives and Radical Right.

Ethics and Public Policy Center: A nonpartisan organization that conducts a program of research, writing, publications and conferences to encourage debate.

Freedom Forum First Amendment Center: Based in Nashville at Vanderbilt University, they are an independent program whose mission is to foster a better understanding for the First Amendment.

Lichter and Rothman: S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman have done numerous studies regarding various Christian groups and how they are perceived in the media.

Positive, Negative and Neutral: These are grades given to various samples as a way to group them. A story that was a pro- Christian Conservative story was dubbed as positive, an anti-Christian Conservative Story was graded as negative and a story that was judged as fair was called neutral.

Ralph Reed: Current Executive Director of the Christian Coalition.

Pat Robertson: Founder of the Christian Coalition, Founder of the Family Channel and television's 700 Club. Ran for President on the Republican ticket in 1988.

Sample: An article that was used and graded as part of this study. Samples were retrieved based on descriptors.

CHAPTER TWO

RELATED LITERATURE

Although a great deal of material exists on the subject of how religion is perceived by the media and the rise of Christian Conservatism in general, not much material is available on Christian Conservatives in the media. Most of the material found on media coverage of Religious Conservatives is limited to a lone chapter from a book of broader subjects or a stray article or study published in a magazine.

Relevant literature on media coverage of Christian Conservatives was found through various sources. At Rowan College of New Jersey's Savitz Library, data base searches were undertaken to determine the existence of any related literature. Key words used in all searches were: "Christian Coalition," "Christian Conservative," "Religious Conservative," "Religious Right" and "Radical Right." The social services index was scanned for the same purpose. It showed 11 related listings, only one of which was used for further research. Also at Savitz Library, the on-line book catalog showed nine related listings, of which one was used. The on-line catalog of periodicals generated no related listings.

Most of the researcher's success finding related literature came from finding names of other authors and professors and titles of other books, magazines and studies from the literature the researcher already had. In grading the samples from the six newspapers chosen from the time period chosen (June 1993 through July 1994), the researcher learned of existing related literature from the text. While consulting that related literature, the researcher discovered more related literature. The researcher scanned the bibliographies and footnote sections of this literature to produce even more related literature.

One example of this occurred when researching a possible sample in the *New York Times*. The particular article titled, *Beliefs*, is subsequently not even used as a sample. The article does however yield a plethora of information. The article, by Peter Steinfelds, deals with the annual meeting of the Religious Newswriters Association that is being held in conjunction with the 60th anniversary of the Religious News Service. Steinfelds goes on to mention how the coverage of

religion is changing and is beginning to be taken more seriously. He lists recent accomplishments. Included in them is the Summer 1993 *Neiman Reports*, which devoted most of the issue to 'God in the Newsroom.'

Steinfels credits *Quill* with publishing an article that examines biases that distort coverage of religion. Later, Steinfels mentions how the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University issued a study regarding the problems between the media and religion. Lastly, he mentioned that Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, announced that they would create a new Center for Religion and News Media. ¹¹

After acquiring the *Quill* and *Neiman Reports* publications, the researcher contacted by telephone the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center in Nashville. The people at the First Amendment Center provided the researcher with several pamphlets and studies. Only one, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media*, by John Dart and Jimmy Allen, was used for further research.

A phone call to the Center for Religion and News Media in Evanston, provided the researcher with the name of Professor Stewart Hoover at the University of Colorado. It seems Professor Hoover published a study titled *Religion in Public Discourse: The Role of the Media*. Within the study itself, Professor Hoover documents several other studies done on this subject. Through the course of this research, the same names continued to surface.

One of the earliest studies done on the relationship between religion and the news media was by journalists S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman. Titled *The Media Elite and American Values* and published by the Ethics and Public Policy Center in 1982, this study found that half the journalists surveyed said they had no religious affiliation and 86% said they seldom or never attended religious services. Ninety percent of journalists favored the right of the women to decide on abortion. Fifteen percent 'strongly agreed' that extramarital affairs were immoral. ¹²

¹¹ Peter Steinfels, "Beliefs," *New York Times*, April 30, 1994

¹² Lichter and Rothman, *The Media Elite and American Values*, (report printed by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Dallas, Texas).

In 1991, Lichter conducted a study titled, "Media Coverage of the Catholic Church." It was later incorporated into a book, *Anti-Catholicism in the Media, an Examination of Whether Elite News Organizations Are Biased Against the Church*. The study looked at stories about the Catholic Church during three five-year periods. The researchers studied every *Time* magazine article, a certain number of CBS Evening News broadcasts and 10%-20% of articles on the Catholic Church in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. There were nearly 2,000 news items analyzed in all. Among the results showcased were that CBS-TV focused mostly on stories about the Pope and *Time* focused heavily on conflict within the church. 13

A search of the researcher's personal library produced *Politically Incorrect*, by Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition. In his book, he dedicates a chapter titled "The New Amos and Andy: How the Media Portrays People of Faith." Reed traces the misrepresentation of "fundamentalist Christians" back to 1925 when during the Scopes Trial, H.L. Mencken, editor of the *American Mercury*, portrayed these Christians in a less than favorable manner. Reed cites the Lichter study but primarily blames the problems of today on the ignorance and lack of understanding of the media. He goes on to mention how religion, like other special interests, seems to receive coverage only when some sort of scandal occurs. 14

Matthew Moen, in *The Transformation of the Christian Right*, examines the changes that occurred in the Christian Right during the 1980's. Moen states, "The central thesis underpinning this volume is that the Christian Right has become more politically sophisticated. An auxiliary theme is that the movement has grown more secular in character." 15 This resource provided the researcher with much needed historical background information about the Christian Right.

Echoes of Discontent, by Allen Hertzke chronicled Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson's runs for president. Hertzke referred to the popularity of these two charismatic figures as a resurgence of

13 Lichter and Rothman, "Media Coverage of the Catholic Church," 1991.

14 Reed, *Politically Incorrect* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1994).

15 Moen, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), p. 1

populism. This also provided the researcher with background information on the Christian Right during the 1980's. 16

The Ethics and Public Policy Center provided the researcher with two pieces of related literature. The first, *Disciples & Democracy - Religious Conservatives and the Future of American Politics*, is a series of essays by various authors. In a chapter titled, "Why the Nation Needs the Religious," Fred Barnes, senior editor of *The New Republic*, discusses the possibility that some of the negative press that the Christian Right has received may be ending. "My second observation about the Religious Right is the good news that the fog hovering over it is beginning to lift. The hostility toward it has begun to soften," states Barnes. Barnes goes on to say:

The backlash in the press, while not sympathy, was the beginning of a recognition that the Religious Right is a legitimate bloc in the Republican coalition. I don't want to overstate this. But after talking to ten political reporters who followed the Virginia (Gubernatorial 1994) race - Christopher Matthews of the *San Francisco Examiner*, Gloria Borger of *U.S. News*, Brit Hume of ABC, Eleanor Clift of *Newsweek*, (et al) - only two of whom are conservatives, I found that most agreed the Religious Right is not an evil juggernaut, as they'd previously thought, but rather a viable element of the Republican Party. They acknowledged that during the campaign the issue of the Religious Right changed - from fear of a religious takeover to the unfairness of attacks on people for holding strong religious views. The result is a more positive view of the Religious Right, and that's a gain. 17

The Ethics and Public Policy Center also provided the researcher with *No Longer Exiles - The Religious New Right in American Politics*, once again a series of essays by numerous authors and once again edited by Michael Cromartie. Robert Booth Fowler, a professor at the University

16 Allen Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent* (Washington, D.C. : CQ Press, 1993).

17 Fred Barnes, *Disciples & Democracy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and Washington D. C. : Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1994), p. 113.

of Wisconsin in Madison, comments:

The decade of the 1980s saw repeated assaults on the NCR (New Christian Right), by, among others, the elite media. In the media the NCR encountered a major impediment. Tina Rosenberg's study, which once seemed bold, is no longer disputed. The elite media in a real sense "made" the Moral Majority - in our broader terms, the NCR - through their extensive coverage and often flamboyant denunciations. I am not aware of any data yet establishing that the media also "unmade" the NCR, but I suspect that they did hurt the NCR in the popular mind. Aided by the NCR's own errors, the media hostility may explain why even those citizens who shared the Moral Majority's policy positions offered it only limited support. Overwhelming evidence of the furious assault on the NCR, which Rosenberg noted, is available to any reader or listener. Time magazine is a good example of modern Manhattan secularism at its most militant, and *Time* struck every blow it could at the New Christian Right. 18

Professor Stewart M. Hoover at the University of Colorado at Boulder published *Religion in the Public Discourse: The Role of the Media*. Hoover explains that that research on this study merely expands on his study done in 1989 in conjunction with the Religious News Service. The 1989 *RNS (Religious News Service)-Lilly Study of Religion Reporting and Readership in the Daily Press* dealt with 25 newspapers where religion coverage was generally regarded as good. The 1989 study mainly dealt with the insights of those covering religion. They were asked such questions as, what is religious news? Informants responded by mentioning the "newsworthiness" or "substantiveness." Also, "localism" and "controversy" were important.

Hoover's research this time was different than in 1989. Rather than continuing with the analysis on print media, Hoover's study focused on broadcast news and

18 Robert Booth Fowler, *No Longer Exiles*, (Washington D. C. : Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), pp. 72-73. (Also, see Tina Rosenberg, "How the Media Made the Moral Majority," *Washington Monthly*, May 1982.)

“undertook a thorough historical and cultural analysis of the roots of the treatment of religion in the media.”

The study was conducted by the Gallup Organization, using a random sample of the adult U.S. population. Among Hoover's findings are that:

When looking at the most prominent of the non-print media, television, audiences are not terribly opinionated about its treatment of religion. This may be related to their relative lack of experience with range of types of treatment. In general, viewers want more religion coverage when religion appears, and public television was considered to be the most negative in its treatment. ¹⁹

In Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media, published by The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, John Dart and Jimmy Allen examine the “chasm of misunderstanding and ignorance” that separate those in the media from religious folk.

The study was commissioned by the Freedom Forum and conducted by Dr. Robert Wyatt. Among the findings in *Bridging the Gap*:

An unhealthy distrust exists between religionists and journalists

Many clergy are convinced the news coverage of religion is biased

It appears there is more ignorance about religion than bias in the average newsroom.

The nation's newspapers and broadcasters largely refuse to take religion seriously.

There are too few full-time religion reporters to provide proper coverage.

¹⁹ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in Public Discourse*, (Boulder, Colorado: Center for Mass Media Research - The School of Journalism and Mass Communication), p. 125.

Perhaps the most interesting claim in the Freedom Forum study is that contrary to a 1980 study by Lichter and Rothman, *The Media Elite*, the nation's journalists are not "irreligious." In fact, religion-beat journalists are more religious (72% say religion is personally important to them) than the general public.

The Lichter-Rothman study survey was based on interviews with 240 journalists in Washington and New York. The Freedom Forum survey was conducted over a nine-month period. The study drew on results of a survey answered by nearly 1,000 clergy and journalists and over 50 interviews and analysis of previous research. 20

Bridging the Gap also provided a very pertinent chapter in its report. The chapter on related literature provided this researcher with more relevant information.

Two Indiana University professors, David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, disputed the findings of *The Media Elite* in their book, *The American Journalist*. The book was based on their 1982-1983 national telephone survey of over 1,400 journalists at newspapers, broadcast outlets, newsmagazines and wire services. They wrote, "We also find a slight left-leaning tendency among our national sample of U.S. journalists, but it is much less pronounced than that found in Lichter and Rothman's sample of Northeastern elite journalists." 21

University of Georgia graduate student Douglas Vinson studied stories about evangelicals in *Time* and *Newsweek* published from 1976 to 1982. He analyzed 53 stories in *Time* and 47 in *Newsweek*. Vinson concluded that more than half the stories in *Time* (58%) and *Newsweek* (62%) were coded as neutral. He wrote, "Only a handful of stories could be classified as catering to sensational or trivial interests." Vinson did note a "less than favorable attitude" in photos and captions however. 22

20 John Dart and Jimmy Allen, *Bridging the Gap* (Nashville, Tennessee: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, 1995)

21 Ibid. , p. 43. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist," 1982-1983 telephone survey by two Indiana University professors.

22 Ibid. , p. 47. Douglas C. Vinson, graduate thesis, University of Georgia.

In 1988, graduate student Karyn S. Campbell at the University of South Carolina sent 100 questionnaires to evangelical pastors. Of the 46 that were returned, it showed that “generally they felt the press was doing a mediocre job of covering evangelicals,” concluded Campbell. 23

In a 1993 article in *Quill*, Terry Mattingly examines four biases in “Religion in the News - Are we short-changing readers and ourselves with biases that filter the news?” The article outlines four biases as: space, time and resources - knowledge - world view - prejudice. In the article, *Washington Post* ombudsman Joann Byrd claimed, “When journalists aren’t like, or don’t know, the people they are writing about, they can operate with no ill will whatsoever and still not recognize that a statement doesn’t ring true. It may be even harder to see how deeply offensive a common perception can be.” 24

The 1993 summer issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* published two articles that are relevant to this study. The first, “The Religious Right and the Pagan Press,” by Lawrence I. Barrett discusses the notion that religion is not covered fairly or adequately by the media. “Several studies have shown that we journalists are not a very pious lot. Just as important, those of us who *do* attend religious services go to mainstream institutions,” points out Barrett. 25

The second story, “A Political Story - Chapter and Verse,” deals with how the national media went from very little or no coverage of the Religious Right to the coverage they currently receive now that they are national players. “One explanation is that the religious right is a difficult beat to report. Unlike presidential candidates, political parties, and interest groups, the religious right doesn’t depend upon ‘free media’ or ‘earned media,’ in the current jargon, to transmit its message to the audience it is seeking,” explains author Joe Conason.

23 Ibid. , p. 48. Karyn S. Campbell, graduate thesis, University of South Carolina.

24 Mattingly, “Religion in the News,” *Quill*, July/August 1993, pp. 13-14.

25 Barrett, “The ‘Religious Right’ and the Pagan Press,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1993, pp. 33-34.

Conason goes on to suggest that now since the national media have jumped on the bandwagon, so to speak, there are a couple of things they could do to help improve their coverage. Among them are: treat political stories as political, not religious ; perform the necessary background research on religious right figures and organizations; report the religious right story from the field as opposed to the desk; don't treat leaders, activists, or members in religious right groups with condescension and don't stereotype them; demand full disclosure and accountability from the religious groups and their adversaries. 26

26 Joe Conason, "A Political Story - Chapter and Verse," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1993, pp. 34-35.

CHAPTER THREE

PROCEDURES

A search from the newspapers and time period chosen (June 1993 through July 1994) was conducted to retrieve any relevant information. Data base searches were undertaken to determine the existence of current related literature. The searches included data bases for books, periodicals and government publications. The social sciences index was scanned for any related literature in book or periodical form.

Possible samples were retrieved from a CD-Rom "Ondisc" search at Rowan College of New Jersey for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. The remaining possible samples were retrieved through an online search for *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Five terms were used as descriptors to gain a possible sample. The descriptors were: Christian Coalition, Christian Conservatives, Religious Right, Religious Conservatives and Radical Right. If any or all of the descriptors were used in the text from these newspapers, that possible sample was retrieved for evaluation. The researcher's evaluation was based on whether the article dealt mainly with the descriptor. Samples were divided into two categories. One category contained primarily straight news samples and one contained samples from opinion, editorial and commentary pieces.

After samples were collected, they were divided into the two categories and rated on a grading scale. The sample received a grade of either positive, negative or neutral. A sample received a grade of positive if it appeared to give a pro-Christian slant. A sample was graded as negative if the researcher perceived a negative bias or vindictiveness to the story. Samples given a neutral grade were deemed by the researcher as reporting the news with no obvious bias.

Following the grading procedure, the findings were categorized according to different variables. The samples were divided into the previously mentioned categories of straight news and opinion/editorial/commentary pieces. The findings were then grouped by newspaper to rate the

overall coverage of that particular newspaper and by year (1993 or 1994). The additional categories enabled the researcher to further analyze and chart other possible trends in coverage.

A panel of experts was assembled to verify that the researcher's evaluations were valid. This panel consisted of five professors from Rowan College of New Jersey whose specialties included mass media, communication, public relations and/or survey research. Each panel member received a sample of two positive, two negative and one neutral sample as categorized by the researcher. The panel member was then instructed to grade the sample based on the same criteria previously mentioned.

The researcher also telephoned organizations such as: Christian Coalition, Empower America, Republican National Committee, Media Research Center, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, Center for Religion and News Media at Northwestern University, Religious Newswriter's Association, Religious News Service, Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation and the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Through conversations with the Center for Religion and News Media, Professor Stuart Hoover at the University of Colorado was identified as a knowledgeable source on the researcher's topic. Professor Hoover's secretary provided the researcher with some of the professor's studies on the subject.

Several conservative magazines were also contacted by phone for any information they may provide. *The American Spectator*, *Policy Review* and *National Review* were among the publications contacted.

Lastly, the researcher placed a request on the Internet asking for any information regarding the topic. This last research method enabled the researcher to uncover any avenues of research previously unknown.

Nearly all of this information was used as background information to show a pretence of bias against Christian Conservatives existed. The researcher tried to demonstrate that a knowledgeable universe had already questioned this premise. So much so, that previous research had been conducted on the subject matter (see Chapter Two) and was written about quite extensively. This research simply justified the need for the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The *New York Times* appeared to the researcher to present the most negative coverage of Christian Conservatives. In the straight news category the *New York Times* had no positive or pro-Christian Conservative stories but had eight negative stories (42%).

One particular article had a very negative tone and serves as an example of the researcher's definition of a negative story. In the article titled, "Christian Right Splits G.O.P. in the South," author B. Drummond Ayres noted how Christian Conservatives "dominated" a state convention, "captured control" of an executive committee in the Republican Party, and explained how some local county elections in South Carolina were won by "...political novices who have been energized by an evangelical fervor to restrict abortion, limit homosexual rights, defeat gun-control measures and control what children learn in school."

Ayres continued his diatribe with more of the same negative tone. Either he or the *New York Times* chose such sub-heads for the article as: "Ideological Wedge," "Divisive Search for Unity," "In the Hands of Kooks," "Right and Further Right," and "No Compromise on God's Word."¹

Still, the majority of the *New York Times's* articles during this 14-month period were neutral. Eleven of the 19 stories (57%) were graded as neutral by the researcher.

The *New York Times* was also negative in its coverage of Christian Conservatives for Editorial/Opinion/Commentary portion of the analysis. The *New York Times* printed a total of 18 pieces during the time frame chosen. Four articles (22%) were graded to be positive by the researcher. Eleven articles (61%) were graded as negative and three (16%) were deemed neutral.

¹ B. Drummond Ayres, "Christian Right Splits G.O.P. in South," *New York Times*, June 7, 1993.

New York Times

Straight News

Total Stories: 19

Positive: 0

Negative: 8

Neutral: 11

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 18

Positive: 4

Negative: 11

Neutral: 3

The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) printed the fewest articles on Christian Conservatives by far. Only three straight news stories were used as samples. One article was graded negative and two were graded neutral.

Eighteen articles were printed by WSJ in the op/ed category. A whopping 11 articles printed were graded as positive (61%). Four were deemed as negative (22%) and three received a neutral grade (16%).

Wall Street Journal

Straight News

Total Stories: 3

Positive: 0

Negative: 1

Neutral: 2

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 18

Positive: 11

Negative: 4

Neutral: 3

The *Los Angeles Times (LA Times)* received mixed reviews from the researcher. Over the 14-month period, the *LA Times* printed 17 straight news stories on Christian Conservatives. One article received a positive grade. Only five (27%), however, received a negative grade (27%). The overwhelming number of articles (11 total or 61%) graded neutral.

The *LA Times* also printed a total number of 17 op/ed pieces for evaluation. A total of four articles graded out as positive (23%). Seven negative articles were printed (38%), and six neutral pieces were printed (33 %).

Los Angeles Times

Straight News

Total Stories:17

Positive: 1

Negative: 5

Neutral: 11

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 17

Positive: 4

Negative: 7

Neutral: 6

The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* also received mixed reviews from the researcher. Of the 23 straight news stories printed, two (9%) earned a positive grade. Seven stories (30%) received a grade of negative and 14 (61%) were judged to be fair in their assessment of Christian Conservatives.

Of the 24 op/ed pieces printed, ten were positive, ten were negative and four were neutral.

Atlanta Journal and Constitution

Straight News

Total Stories: 23

Positive: 2

Negative: 7

Neutral: 14

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 24

Positive: 10

Negative: 10

Neutral: 4

The *Washington Post* printed a total of 16 stories for evaluation in the straight news category. Two articles (12%) were graded as positive. No articles received a negative grade and 14 of the 16 straight news articles printed received a neutral grade (87%). The op/ed analysis of the *Washington Post* was equally balanced. Of the 14 total pieces printed, six graded positive (43%), five were negative (36%), and three pieces (21%) received a neutral grade.

Washington Post

Straight News

Total Stories: 16

Positive: 2

Negative: 0

Neutral: 14

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 14

Positive: 6

Negative: 5

Neutral: 3

The *Washington Times* appeared to be the most biased in favor of Christian Conservatives in their coverage. Of the 26 total straight news stories printed for evaluation, the researcher determined that 15 (58%) were favorable toward Christian Conservatives. No stories received a negative rating and 11 (42%) were perceived as neutral.

Political correspondent Ralph Z. Hallow continuously wrote articles loaded with one-sided quotes from Religious Conservatives, members of the Christian Conservatives and/or proponents of the Christian Right.

The *Washington Times'* pro-Christian Conservative bias was not as pronounced in the op/ed category. Of the 16 total pieces printed, nine (56%) received a positive grade. Three pieces (19%) were perceived as negative and four (25%) graded out neutral.

Washington Times

Straight News

Total Stories: 26

Positive: 15

Negative: 0

Neutral: 11

Editorial/Opinion/Commentary

Total Printed: 16

Positive: 9

Negative: 3

Neutral: 4

The professors at Rowan College of New Jersey basically confirmed the researcher's opinions and validated his objectivity with the results of their research.

Each professor was to evaluate five sample articles from the researcher's pool. The researcher had already completed his own evaluation. The researcher sent two positive, two negative and one neutral samples for each professor to grade in the same manner. Each professor received the same five samples. Each was unaware of the researcher's previous critique. The results from the first sample showed that four of five professors agreed on a grade of neutral. One dissenter rated the sample negative.

Sample number two resulted in a fractured result. Only one of five professors agreed with the researcher that sample number two was a pro-Christian Conservative article. But there was no real consensus. Three professors rated the sample neutral and one negative.

Sample number three produced near unanimity. Four of five professors agreed with the researcher that sample-three was negative. One dissenter saw it as positive.

Samples four and five, rated by the researcher as negative and positive respectively, were rated as such by all five professors. On both articles, the professors agreed unanimously with the researcher.

Sample Number	Researcher's Grade	Prof's Grade			Prof's in Agreement
		+	-	0	
Article #1	0		1	4	4 of 5
Article #2	+	1	1	3	1 of 5
Article #3	-	1	4		4 of 5
Article #4	-		5		5 of 5
Article #5	+	5			5 of 5

The professors at Rowan gave the exact same evaluation 19 of 25 times (76%). That's over three-quarters of the time the two groups agreed on the exact rating for a sample.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

The researcher evaluated a combined total of 104 straight news stories from the six newspapers and 107 opinion/editorial/commentary pieces. The numbers are strikingly balanced. It appears there may be some negative bias toward Christian Conservatives. But not to the extent we are sometimes led to believe by the proponents of the Christian Right. Of the 104 combined straight news stories, 20 (19%) received a grade of positive. A negative grade was stamped on 21 articles (20%). A neutral grade was received by 63 (61%) of the 104 straight news stories. It may be important to note that if you disqualify the conservative *Washington Times* from this study, the positive numbers drop drastically. Of the total number of positive stories combined, the *Washington Times* represented three-quarters of them (15 of the 20).

On the flip-side, an argument could be made that the *Washington Times* is the only true conservative newspaper represented in this study. With that in mind, the *Washington Times'* existence in this study is necessary to provide a fair representation of all the daily newspapers in the United States, not simply the ones from major cities with reputations for being liberal.

The op/ed category of the study produced a relatively fair result overall as well. Of the 107 combined printed pieces, 44 (41%) received a positive grade. A negative rating was established to 40 pieces (34%) and 23 pieces (19%) received a neutral grade.

What does this study tell us about the fairness in coverage of Christian Conservatives? First, a bias does exist. Sometimes it is a pro-bias and sometimes it is an anti-bias. That is not good. But it is also very understandable to some extent. More importantly, we can observe from this study that a balance does appear to exist. Some media outlets are more biased than others, but as a whole, they generally represent both sides fairly. While any bias is generally regarded as a bad thing, at least readers who seek a specific type of information or seek their information presented in a certain way, may now know where to acquire their information. With the bombardment of new information sources that are now available to most Americans, this may be all most people can ask for. One can already see a bevy of fractured mediums beginning to surface to fit specific niches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher has several suggestions for other studies related to this subject based on the conclusions of this study.

1. A scientific feedback process with the general public should be done to determine its perception of Christian Conservative bias. This researcher, along with a panel of experts, found that a bias does exist in reporting on this topic. Does the general public feel the same way? Can a cross-section of the general public comprehend the intricacies of biased reporting? Nearly all studies on fairness in the media topics are researched by either professors, graduate students or other journalistic academics of some type. Has this subject been over analyzed? And are these “academic types” basing their conclusions on their pre-conceived biases. This researcher would enjoy research comparing the findings of Academia versus that of Americana. This researcher would also propose that the study be divided geographically to gain a fair representation for each region of the country.

2. Research should be conducted pertaining to other mediums such as: network news, Sunday morning roundtable discussions, various publications (including the most partisan like *American Spectator* and *Mother Jones*), non-daily newspapers and documentaries. Different studies have yielded different answers. This study was conducted with six major newspapers in the United States. This researcher proposes a more far-reaching study that covers several mediums using the same samples or survey. This would be a massive, time consuming project that would require exceptional resources.

3. A study should be undertaken to determine the effect biased reporting on Christian Conservatives has on public opinion. Exactly what is gained by biased reporting for or against Christian Conservatives? The researcher finds this proposed research especially interesting, in that it may serve to find out how perceptive the public is to biased reporting.

4. Research should be done including more newspapers. Such a study could permit the researcher to include a geographical breakdown of perceived bias. As mentioned previously, a more prodigious undertaking on this subject would allow researchers more concrete proof that a bias exists and where it exists. This research merely scratched the surface on the topic.

5. Research should be done to check the factual correctness of stories regarding Christian Conservatives. In reading many of the opinion and editorial pieces during the research, it was astounding to witness so many citizens writing these papers merely to argue factual points of a previous story. Many of these people never argued the editorial content of the article they had read. They only wanted to point out the factual inconsistencies that they felt existed. At election time, we often see journalists appear on television with a "truth meter" to gauge a candidate's political commercials; why not use the same approach as a study?

6. A study should be done to evaluate the influence that Christian Conservative groups like the Christian Coalition have on various media and public opinion. What kind of a public relations department do they have? What type of public relations theories do they practice? Do they make use of polls, survey research and focus groups? What kind of relationship do they have with beat writers? It would be interesting to see exactly what type of control these groups have on their coverage. It would be naive to think that they are always at the mercy of some liberally biased journalist constantly spinning the story. This research primarily dealt with the bottom line - what appeared in print and was it biased? Research such as this could help shed some light on how and why stories appear why and when they do.

7. A study should be undertaken to determine the relationship between Religious Conservatism and non-partisan religionists. Does the media group them together in their coverage? Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the research completed, dealt with the amalgamation of all the various religious groups as Christian Conservatives. This researcher proposes a study to analyze the difference (if there is any) between these groups.

8. A content analysis should be conducted to determine the bias against religious groups opposed to groups like the Christian Coalition. This research would be similar proposed to the one in recommendation number seven. It would merely help to sort things out and draw a more distinctive line between the various groups.

9. A content analysis should be conducted to rate the bias of religious groups in other countries (i.e. fundamentalists). The researcher is primarily suggesting the study for other democratic nations. This would merely serve for the United States to have something to measure its results against.

10. A content analysis should to done with foreign newspapers rating their coverage of Christian Conservatives in this country (including such things as U.S. wire service stories). How much of what information is making it to other nations? And what are their perceptions?

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