

Born to Win

A Corrupt Media

by Ronald L. Dart

I lived in England for nearly seven years back in the '60s, and I tend to love things British. But when I was in England, the Labour Party was a lot further to the left than they are today. Britain in those days seem to me—my American eyes—to be all but a welfare state: marginal tax rates were *astronomical*, breathtaking; wages were *very low*. One fellow I knew—who was a *good* salesman—he told me it was hardly worth him working after *May*, because after that point he had to give *so much* of his earnings in taxes. Then came Margaret Thatcher and *everything* changed. I was gone by the time she came on the scene, but I knew how she had revolutionized the British economy just from following it in the news, and from running into British tourists who were finding it cheaper to come to this country for their vacations than to stay in their own. In recent years, I encountered a Labour leader, though, who gained my respect in ways I would not have thought possible. You know him; his name is Tony Blair. He's gained my respect enormously in the past several years, and as he left office he said something *profoundly* important. Joel Belz, writing in *World* magazine, called it to my attention. He said,

Late in June, [Blair] spoke candidly to a mixed audience at the London headquarters of Reuters news service—and he acknowledged candidly that what he said would be controversial. “I know it will be rubbished in certain quarters,” he ventured.

And it was. While the British press scornfully discounted and disdained his critique, way too many other media observers around the world were even more cruel. They just ignored the substance of what Blair said.

[...] After noting that the proliferation of media outlets in this internet age has forced all of them virtually to scream for attention, [...]

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets “rubbished” and ignored

And that probably registers with anyone who's watching American television these days; especially the 24-hour news outlets. They *do* scream for attention.

Blair spelled out how the media go about that process of seeking impact at almost any price.

They go for scandal and controversy, he said, ahead of ordinary reporting.

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets “rubbished” and ignored

And of that, there can't even be a question. He said,

“News is rarely news unless it generates heat as much as or more than light.”

The media attack motive instead of attacking judgment.

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets "rubbished" and ignored

Now, I didn't exactly get that at first, but I came to see it as a very profound statement. Joel Belz went on to explain. He said,

He didn't spell out precisely how this happened to his friend George W. Bush—but the implication was clear. It's not bad enough for the media to say that Bush has simply made mistakes on various issues. They have to claim darkly instead that he calculated to mislead the American public.

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They focus on *motive*, rather than *the facts*. And we see it every night, every day, anytime we pick up and watch the news. We see it when we read newspapers. It's just coming. Now, you may have come to expect this sort of thing from the political opposition. That's the sort of thing they do: “Bush lied, people died.” It isn't clear to me, though, why they need to. If the leadership makes enough mistakes, isn't that reason enough for turning them out of office without impugning their motives? Is it necessary to paint them in the blackest possible hues? Well, for politicians it seems to be; but it isn't clear to me why it needs to be that way with the *news media*.

A friend of mine used to work with a company that sold airplanes. One salesman, when he would talk to a customer, made it a point to run down the competition. As it happened, his airplane was well built, but he would pour out accident statistics on the competition: “Well, there was this terrible storm, and their airplane came out the bottom of it in pieces.” My friend observed that the net result of his approach was to turn people away from buying a small plane *altogether*. In other words, it made them think that flying in a small or light twin was dangerous. Now, my friend's approach was to sell the benefits of *his* plane as though there wasn't any alternative. Guess who made more sales. I don't think it ever dawns on politicians that when they paint their opponent black a lot of the paint gets on them at the same time.

Now, if we've learned to expect this from politicians, why do we have to put up with it from news media?

The media, Blair charged, hunt in a pack. They are “like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits.”

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets "rubbished" and ignored

Now, you know you don't have to watch a lot of news before you will see with your own eyes the truth of what he said. It's sometimes shocking. If you have somebody who will take the time to collect the statements that news media are making, it will become *clear* that they *do hunt in a pack*. They jump on the same aspect of the story, they jump onto the same *verbiage* in the story, and you hear it *over and over again*. You hear on Fox, you hear it on CNBC, you hear it on MSNBC, you hear it on CNN, Headline News. It's *all over* the place. Truer words were never spoken than what Blair said when he said the media are a *feral beast*, tearing people and reputations to bits. And they *do* hunt in packs.

Small wonder that the media were kind of unhappy with what Blair had to say. He...

[...] accused the media of elevating commentary on the news to a role higher than simply reporting the news—and regularly blurring the distinction between the two. “This is not exceptional,” he said. “It is routine.”

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets "rubbished" and ignored

I know he is right about that. This distinction is not just blurred: half the time I *can't even find where it's at*. If you start reading your news reports and ask yourself, “Okay, am I just really reading only the story, or am I getting the *opinion* of the reporter alongside with and embedded in the story?” And you'll find more often than not that the latter is the case.

All this, Blair suggests, has come about because of the ferocity of the competition that now exists among the various media outlets. “Rolling 24-hour news programs cover events as they unfold.”

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And one thing he illustrated (and he illustrated it quite clearly with statistics) is that people have scattered *all over the place*. There is no one (or even 2 or 3 or 10) news outlets that are dominating; there are hundreds, probably thousands.

The sheer numbers on the one hand, coupled on the other with the incredible speed with which they are forced to produce, has trivialized rather than enhanced the competition.

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So, in fact, what's going on is trivializing the news—until, of course, the news *makes* the news by having two of their helicopters collide over the scene of a car chase, and collapse in dirt and dust and debris and smoke on the ground.

So Blair argues that instead of blaming the media, we might well see them as victims.

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I thought, “Why not, everybody else is.”

They are “increasingly and to a dangerous degree driven by ‘impact.’ Impact is what matters. It is all that can distinguish, can rise above the clamor, can get noticed. Impact gives competitive edge. Of course, the accuracy of a story counts. But it is often secondary to impact.”

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What on earth are we supposed to do about this? Well, Tony Blair had two suggestions:

[...] first, that all the media reassert their own commitment to distinguish between news and comment; [...]

Joel Belz - 'Like a feral beast' Tony Blair's media critique gets "rubbished" and ignored

That would be very desirable, but don't hold your breath.

[...] and second, that some form of government regulation might prove necessary.

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Well, Joel Belz was not impressed with that. He thought both approaches were...

[...] dangerously counterproductive. *[I think the first one is just not going to happen. - Ron]* With hundreds of media outlets going after each other tooth and toenail, let listeners and readers decide for themselves just how much raw news and how much analysis is good for them. And whatever you do, leave government bureaucrats out of the equation.

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Now, in general, I agree with Mr. Belz on this; and yet it seems I recall, *many years ago*, Congress did something about...something like this that *actually worked*.

Some of you are old enough to remember a time when television ads were terribly outlandish in the claims they made. In fact, a person giving an ad on television could claim almost anything he wanted to about his product—whether it did it or whether it didn't—and sell them to people and went on. Somewhere along the line (I don't remember *exactly* when this happened) something came along called Truth in advertising. It was the Federal Trade Commission Act. And they concluded that there are three things that advertising must be:

- advertising must be truthful and non-deceptive;
- advertisers must have evidence to back up their claims *[What a novel idea that is.]*; and
- advertisements cannot be unfair.

FTC's "Frequently Asked Advertising Questions: A Guide for Small Business"

Now, here was my question: Why can't these standards be applied to political ads? And how big a step is it to apply them to news stories—that they are truthful and non-deceptive, they have evidence to back up what they say, and they cannot be unfair? Well, okay, what makes an advertisement deceptive?

According to the FTC's *Deception Policy Statement*, an ad is deceptive if it contains a statement - or omits information - that:

- is likely to mislead consumers acting reasonably under the circumstances; and
- is “material” — that is, important to a consumer’s decision to buy or use the product.

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Well now, look...you know, we all the time (and you’re probably headed right into a season where you’re going to see plenty of these again) we see political ads we *know* were *designed* to mislead voters. I mean, you can see it; it’s hanging right out there. Oh, I suppose there are people who don’t tumble to that, but I would think most thinking people would. And this is especially true of stories that pop up *just before* the election, when the candidate has no time to respond or to evaluate it. One instance of this that comes to mind is all the way back in the first time that President [George W.] Bush ran for office. It was just in the last days of the campaign that somebody decided then and...having had this story before, but that’s when they decided to publish the story that he had been a heavy drinker and perhaps been stopped once for driving while he was drinking.

Why then, when they had it earlier? Because he wouldn’t have time to respond. Now, the FTC, if they were dealing with this like they do with other types of advertisement, would say, “That’s an unfair use of your material. You’ve got to demonstrate that you only just now came into possession of this information, and you’ve got to show that it was fair.”

How does the FTC determine if an ad is deceptive? Well, they follow certain steps.

- The FTC looks at the ad from the point of view of the “reasonable consumer” [*Or in our illustration, the “reasonable voter”.*] — the typical person looking at the ad. Rather than focusing on certain words, the FTC looks at the ad in context — words, phrases, and pictures — to determine what it conveys to consumers.

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Then (and I think this is very important)...

- The FTC looks at both “express” and “implied” claims. [...]

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And it’s the implied claims that are so strong in political ads.

- [...] An express claim is literally made in the ad. For example, “ABC Mouthwash prevents colds” is an express claim that the product will prevent colds. An *implied* claim is one made indirectly or by inference. “ABC Mouthwash kills the germs that cause colds” contains an *implied* claim that the product will prevent colds. [...] Under the law, advertisers must have proof to back up express and implied claims that consumers take from an ad.

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And the fact the matter is: If you look at the political ads, you will see they are *just loaded* with implied claims; and it's pretty obvious, in many cases, that they couldn't prove it if their feet were held to the fire on it.

The FTC also looks at what the ad does *not* say that it *should* say—if they're disclosing stuff that the consumer ought to know. They look at...

- [...] whether the claim would be “material” — that is, important to a consumer’s decision to buy or use the product. [...]

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And of course, in political ads “material” means would you be led to vote or not vote for a candidate because of what this ad says.

- The FTC looks at whether the advertiser has sufficient evidence to support the claims in the ad. The law requires that advertisers have proof *before* the ad runs.

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Now I ask you: Why can't we have a “Truth in Political Advertising” law. You can use the same principles for evaluation and enforcement. Can we get it through Congress? Oh, I doubt it. Congress will want to maintain their right to lie. It seems to be a fundamental right of elected officials, although it is certainly not in the Bill of Rights, but they act as though they had codified in the Constitution the right to lie to the voters. I assume that because they do it all the time.

Now, what kind of evidence must a company have to support the claims in its ads? Well, the FTC goes on to show lots of stuff. They say that...

Before a company runs an ad, it has to have a “reasonable basis” for the claims. A “reasonable basis” means objective evidence that supports the claim. The kind of evidence depends on the claim. At a minimum, an advertiser must have the level of evidence that it says it has.

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What a shocking, onerous statement: you have to have what you say you have. How would that work? Well, I've seen these: “Two out of three doctors recommend ABC Pain Reliever”. If you're going to do that, you've actually got to have a reliable, independent survey to demonstrate it. But, of course, this is too reasonable, too sensible to ever get past Congress. I hope you'll forgive me my cynicism. And so on it goes.

What does the FTC do when it finds a violation? Well, one thing they can do is make the advertiser come right back with another ad and clarify the issue and straighten out or correct any misinformation to consumers. That would work really well in politics: make them come back and tell the truth when you've caught them out there in a lie. I think that might be interesting. A federal watchdog could require *immediate* ads retracting the misleading ad, or the offender should have to pay for a competitors ad to set the record straight. This could be done in politics; it'd be like falling off a log. Oh, I forgot, you've got to get it through Congress somehow.

You know, the funny thing: The media should help with this, but they are like a watchdog that has an affection for the burglar. They have long since taken sides in our political discourse. Now, what's *funny* about that is that both political extremes think the media are in the pocket of the other side. And the media have only themselves to blame. As for us, our republic is in serious danger because our watchdogs are asleep at the switch, or they have taken sides. Politicians fear the loss of power more than anything and the people to blame are those who grant power to politicians who won't talk straight. And the media should, but probably never will, hold the political class to account for telling the truth. Now, is this situation really new, or is there a parallel in history?

The news media we're *different* in ancient times—long before the invention of printing and so forth—but the need of the people for information was just as important as it is today. Now, I'm no historian, and I can't tell you much about the intervening years, but it is interesting... and one area that I do have some expertise is the Bible. And it occurred to me to ask: Where on earth did the people in the Bible get their news? How did they know what was going on? The answer: at the city gates. The gates of any city were the place where business was conducted. Property sales were transacted, news was distributed, the elders of the city heard criminal and civil cases at the gate, judgments were handed down, even speeches were delivered there. In other words, you've got a pundit who wants to give you his opinion on what's going on? You'll find him down at the city gate standing up on a box or upon a step somewhere where his head's above the crowd where he can speak to all the people. It's a lot like the courthouse steps in your own county.

Now, who were the players, though, at this scene at the city's gate? They were, in rough terms, five: princes, priests, elders, judges, and prophets. Now, if you want to understand these roles by some kind of a comparison to the modern world, the princes would correspond to, say, our senators and representatives—to congressmen. They are *important* people, and when they come by the city gates people would want to listen to what they had to say. Priests were mediators between God and Man. They performed the rights of state. They were educators, the administrators of the civic religion. They handed down the word of God and perhaps served as something close to our Supreme Court. Elders were local administrators and judges. They heard cases and disposed of them. Prophets were in two classes: One of them was the seer, the visionary, the person who actually had a vision from God and came up and said, "Well, here's what God showed me today." I imagine there were any number of them (and almost as many, maybe, then as there are today) who didn't see anything from God at all; they're just nut-cases. The other class is speakers, preachers. They would correspond in many ways to the pundits of today, who would stand up and tell us where we're going astray, what we're doing wrong, and what God's going to do to us because of it. In a very real way, the prophets were the news media, and they served as the interpreters of the news of the day.

Now, all this that's going on here is very natural, because it serves the needs of a civil society. Almost anywhere you go where there is civilization, you will find some version of this; because the people have to know what's happening, and they have to know what it means. Now, what happens to people when the system becomes *corrupt*. And this is an important question, because we're living right now in a situation to where our whole system of media and news transmission *has been corrupted*. It's kind of hard to miss it. Well, there's one example of it in Zephaniah, chapter three. He says,

Zephaniah 3

NIV '84

¹ Woe to the city of oppressors,
rebellious and defiled! ² She obeys no one,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD,
she does not draw near to her God.

Now, what does it take to say this of an *entire city*. Well, surely there were good people there. And even where we are, what does it take to say it of a *whole nation* that has gone that direction, when there are still a lot of good people? Notice, though, the condition of the leadership, the news media, and the officials. Verse three (and I'm reading from the NIV):

Zephaniah 3

NIV '84

- ³ Her officials [*King James Version: "princes".*] are roaring lions,
her rulers [*Their judges.*] are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.
- ⁴ Her prophets [*Newsman, perhaps preachers.*] are arrogant;
they are treacherous men.
Her priests [*That would be the Supreme Court.*] profane the sanctuary
and do violence to the law.

The picture is of a system gone *terribly wrong*—the whole governmental-media information system is corrupt. It isn't one or two wrongdoers; it's pervaded the *entire leadership* of the country. And I couldn't help but think when he said, "Her officials are like roaring lions and evening wolves who don't leave anything left over from the morning", I went right back to Tony Blair's statement that the news media are like a *feral beast, ripping* people and their reputations to shreds. Said Zephaniah,

Zephaniah 3

NIV '84

- ⁵ The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no wrong.
Morning by morning he dispenses his justice,
and every new day he does not fail,
yet the unrighteous know no shame.

Reading in Zephaniah's prophecy, you can see that as a nation goes too far down this road, there comes to be a place where they *simply cannot be redeemed*. Isaiah makes an interesting point on this in the 59th chapter. He says,

Isaiah 59

NIV '84

- ¹ Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear. ² But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.
- ³ For your hands are stained with blood,
your fingers with guilt.
Your lips have spoken lies,
and your tongue mutters wicked things.

My hands are stained with blood? Well, what he's talking to here is *the system*—the leadership that has done this. He says,

Isaiah 59

NIV '84

⁴ No one calls for justice;
no one pleads his case with integrity.
They rely on empty arguments and speak lies;
they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.

Oh, isn't it so! You can't depend on people to plead their case with integrity. And what do you hear when you get these people on television—one on the right and one on the left? *Empty arguments and lies*. He says,

Isaiah 59

NIV '84

⁵ [...] Whoever eats their eggs will die, [...]

Later he says,

Isaiah 59

NIV '84

⁹ So justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.
We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.

We might want to argue about whether we're *quite* there yet, but it's so easy to see that that's the direction we're going. Whenever we will get all kinds of information, seemingly, and yet we still won't understand. Isaiah said,

Isaiah 59

NIV '84

¹⁰ Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like men without eyes. [...]

Jeremiah also talks about this. Chapter 23, verse 9:

Jeremiah 23

NIV '84

⁹ [...] My heart is broken within me;
all my bones tremble.
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the LORD
and his holy words.

¹⁰ The land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land lies parched
and the pastures in the desert are withered.
The prophets follow an evil course
and use their power unjustly.

And *power*, you see, is what it's all about. You can follow the money, but that's going to take you where the power is; and *that's* what the real object is. And then Jeremiah said,

Jeremiah 23

NIV '84

¹¹ Both prophet and priest are godless; [...]

And right there you find the word that describes the condition of our system today—media and government—“*godless*”.

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