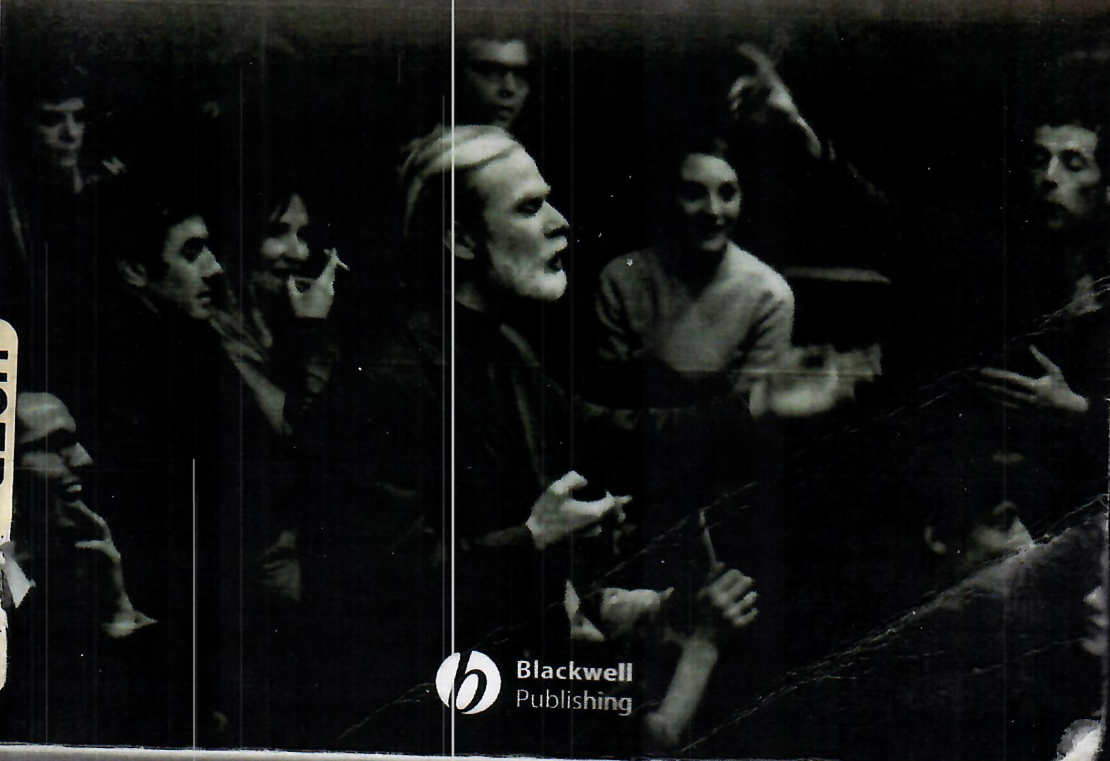



BLACKWELL MANIFESTOS

The Rhetoric of RHETORIC

The Quest for Effective Communication

Wayne C. Booth



 Blackwell
Publishing

The Need for Rhetorical Studies Today

increase their hatred or mistrust, we must learn how to offer evidence that we are sure deserves to be listened to.

Obviously the rhetoric of the political world, more complex than ever before, cannot be fully cleansed, no matter how many of us pursue those two "commandments." Conflicts will never be totally escaped. Even threats of violent alternatives to LR will perhaps never disappear, *Homo sapiens* being what you and I are. For all we know, the horrors of World War III *will* arrive.

What is clear is that our future depends on victories of LR over violence. We are threatened with expanded warfare (probably leading to the catastrophic use of WMD). Now that we live with "media globalization" and "globalization of weaponry" (not to mention current "warfare" about commercial globalization), our very survival, whether as democracies or tyrannies, depends on just how many citizens of the world – leaders or protesters – are trained to be skillful in their listening, and thus more skillful and ethical in their responses.

7

Media Rhetrickery

How is the world ruled and led to war? Diplomats lie to journalists and believe these lies when they see them in print.

Karl Kraus

If you tell a lie often enough, the public will come to believe it.

Paul Josef Goebbels

As the Steady-Camera followed Bush's triumphant walk . . . at the end of his speech, changing angles and aspects, making larger than life the handshakes and smiles and pats on the back, I couldn't help thinking of how much Riefenstahl [who chronicled the rise of the Third Reich] taught us about how powerful a political tool the moving image can be.

Journalist who has asked not to be identified

I'm tempted to begin again with a bit of rhetrickery of my own: "Our totally commercialized media, satanic slaves of commerce, are irredeemably seducing us downward 'even to the edge of doom.'" Doesn't that sound a lot like what we meet every day, especially in television talk shows? "Totally?" "Satanic?" Absurd. "Irredeemably?" Who knows? "Edge of doom?" Where's that? And why engage in literary quoting, when you're talking about politics?

I do fear that the picture is getting worse by the day, but media-rhetoric (here MR) varies so much from country to country and medium to medium and day to day that no full claim about decline could ever be demonstrated.

What cannot be doubted is that we are now flooded daily with news distortions, often just careless but too often deliberate. As I was writing a draft, back in late May 2003, some of the media were finally acknowledging how the American military officers and their media servants had invented a massive hoax about the “rescue” of Pfc. Jessica Lynch, after she was captured in Iraq on March 23. The brouhaha had all been about a bold military rescue from Iraqi abusers of the first female prisoner of war in our history, one who had herself shot back nobly. Only after two months was there open admission that though she was in fact captured and released, she had not been engaged in battle, and the military rescue had not occurred: the doctors had cared for her and turned her over to our team. The fake account had quite probably been designed to increase support for the war – perhaps even to gain media credit with the administration (a feeble echo of the later manipulation of President Bush’s visit to the UK and his Thanksgiving turkey trip to Iraq). The admission of the deception has had little publicity, even now that Lynch has denied many “facts” in the reports. A majority of Americans will no doubt go on believing that she was rescued in a military coup, assisted by her own gun firing.

Similarly, it took months for the media to begin admitting how they aided the administration in spinning the justifications for the war. Though by mid-summer even the president was taking some blame for the errors in his State of the Union speech about weapons of mass destruction (WMD), most of the media continued to pretend that it had all been accidental: nobody except political enemies has wanted to blame the top brass.

As Paul Krugman put it, in a *New York Times* column, long before the scandal about Bush’s “sixteen words” describing Iraq’s purchase of Nigerian uranium:

One wonders whether most of the public will ever learn that the original case for war has turned out to be false. . . . Each potential find [of possible WMD] gets blaring coverage on TV; how many people catch the later announcement – if it is ever announced – that it was a

false alarm? Each administration charge against Iraq received prominent coverage; the subsequent debunking did not. . . . In September Mr. Bush cited an International Atomic Energy Agency report that he said showed that Saddam was only months from having nuclear weapons. “I don’t know what more evidence we need,” he said. In fact, the report said no such thing – and for a few hours the lead story on MSNBC’s Web site bore the headline “White House: Bush Misstated Report on Iraq.” Then the story vanished – not just from the top of the page, but from the site. . . . A democracy’s decisions, right or wrong, are supposed to take place with the informed consent of its citizens. That didn’t happen this time. And we are a democracy – aren’t we?

What is most frightening is that Krugman has been subjected to innumerable threats of physical attack, because of his “unpatriotic” columns.

The attempt to address media corruption presents at least three major problems, in addition to the problems met in chapter 6. First, the term “media” is radically ambiguous. For some these days the media are only television. Some would add advertising. For some the term “media” includes all printed journals except serious scholarly writing. But if we think of those who “mediate” between what actually happens and how we learn about it, MR should surely include all who transform reality by reporting and misreporting realities – even teachers in the classroom stimulating discussion of the day’s events. Surely MR should include bestselling books that openly engage in reporting public events or attempt “histories” about them? So for us here, the media will include all who mediate – including, I admit, much of my superficial reporting in this book.

A second problem, which I must mainly ignore, is my inescapable ignorance of MR outside my corner of the American scene. I read many indictments of media in other countries, including the claim that *Le Monde* is corrupted by corporate interests.¹ But for all I know the ethical quality of MR has improved 100 percent in countries X and Y while becoming scandalous in the United States. Obviously MR’s *technical* quality – mastery in the art of hooking with invented

nd transformed images and recordings – has improved everywhere, specially in advertising. So although I'm aware of many lamentations about decline in the UK, France, Germany, and the rest of the world, cannot judge whether the lamenters are justified. The center will have to be what floods my life here in the United States – only a fraction of it coming from Britain (oh, yes: I read *The Economist* sometimes, and – a bit more often – the *TLS*; when I'm in England, of course read everything). I do have a dim hope that some reader in the UK or Ireland or Zimbabwe might be tempted to have a close look at the MR miseducation committed there, and write a book about it.

The third problem is an amusing paradox exhibited by the flood of MR. Much of my argument about bad MR depends on what I've learned from responsible MR. How can I trustingly quote a journalist's exposé without demonstrating that the media are sometimes OK? (Rhyme intended.) Shouldn't I trust the *Chicago Tribune*, usually "conservative," if it includes a column entitled "The Media Inspire Distrust," with the following opening paragraph?

A pervasive cynicism seems to be growing about the ability – or even the desire – of major news organizations to provide accurate, objective, unbiased reporting on stories that have significant impact on people's lives. I've pondered this trend since the last class of the journalism course that I taught this spring at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Everything is subjective," one of my students said. . . . None of the other students in the lively discussion disagreed. Indeed, then and in previous classes the students unfailingly expressed doubt that journalism had much to do with objective truth in any but the most superficial ways.²

What's more, can MR be indicted if it includes statements like this one from Jack Fuller, president of the Tribune Publishing Company?

People are looking for more coherence, not less. They want guidance about the meaning of things. . . . Part of the challenge of those who pioneer the new medium will be to devise ways in which it can meet

the audience's yearning for a sense of meaning. This will require journalists to embrace and master the lessons of rhetoric, because their task is nothing less than to create a whole new mode of expression and persuasion.³

Even the *New York Times*, on which I depend day by day (always of course with absolutely profound, wise, unbiased skepticism), was betrayed recently by the dishonest and undisciplined behavior of two of their reporters. But can a journal that then included serious thoughtful attacks on itself, with strong apologies, be really in bad shape? When we add journals like the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *Progressive*, and even *Newsweek* (I resist naming British journals), with their regular exposures of media flaws and political misbehavior, the whole charge seems even weaker.

So I must ask that as you read my blasts on the media here, ask at every moment, "Where did you get your evidence?" And please, whenever you are tempted to offer evidence against any of my claims, ask yourself, "Wasn't the source of my evidence also a branch of the 'media'?"

What is beyond doubt is that in the United States, and surely throughout much of the world, we are harmed daily by the floods of careless or even deliberately harmful MR. To repeat my claim in chapters 5 and 6, we are all – not just our children – miseducated daily.

Here is how William Safire, usually a downright defender of the rightwing corporate world, puts his sense of alarm:

You won't [these days] find television magazine programs fearlessly exposing the broadcast lobby's pressure on Congress and the courts to allow station owners to gobble up more stations and cross-own local newspapers, thereby to determine what information residents of a local market receive.

Nor will you find many newspaper chains assigning reporters to reveal the effect of media giantism on local coverage or cover the way publishers induce coverage-hungry politicians to loosen antitrust restraint.

... [As for political selling], the big bucks go into broadcast TV, with its unmatched cost per thousand viewers. . . . The leading 20 Internet sites and biggest cable channels are already owned by the expansive likes of G.E.-NBC, Disney, Fox, Gannett, AOL Time Warner, Hearst, Microsoft, Dow Jones, The Washington Post and The New York Times. (Is there anyone I haven't offended?) . . . [T]he truth is that media mergers have narrowed the range of information and entertainment available to people of all ideologies.⁴

And here is how Michael Ignatieff summarizes the British media scene:

In place of thought, we have opinion; in place of argument we have [shoddy] journalism, in place of polemic we have personality profiles . . . in place of . . . public dialogue, we have celebrity chat shows.⁵

Such claims are found "everywhere," again underlining my paradox: MR is awful, yet the media are full of warnings against the awfulness of MR. A recent study (reliable?) has shown that only 36 percent of Americans believe that news organizations get the facts straight – in contrast to 55 percent in 1985.

Here I must concentrate on less questionable claims. Because there is so much untrustworthy MR flooding our world, everyone everywhere now is threatened by two forms of rhetorical miseducation: *unconscious* misleading through sheer carelessness, and *conscious, deliberate* misleading induced by one or another of the four motives (not limited to the media) that we come to below.

Unconscious, Undeliberate Miseducation

Nobody is surprised when sheer careless errors are discovered. The better magazines and newspapers often offer a tiny section of "Corrections" in each issue. Books that are full of misquotations and plagiarisms get exposed by reviewers. As we'll see below, readers on the left publish books exposing shameful carelessness revealed on the

right, and vice versa. But meanwhile the misinformation overrides the criticism: millions of citizens – especially, I'm sure, the younger ones – fail to get the message that too much of what the media feed us, even the statistical "proof," is fouled food, some of it poison serving Mammon. A recent article reveals how faking of photo images has increased, and how the fakes are naively accepted by millions as the media tout them. The author speculates that even when the fakery is exposed, most viewers do not find out about it. Examples are offered on both sides of the political debate: viewers took as legitimate the faked portrait of President Bush holding a child's book upside down, as he pretended to be reading it, and viewers took seriously a faked portrait of Senator John Kerry talking with Jane Fonda.⁶

In January 2003, there was an announcement of the annual prize, awarded by the Statistical Assessment Services, for the "2002 Dubious Data Awards" – the "ten most misleading, inaccurate, or downright lazy" bits of news coverage during the year. The errors revealed are shocking, but obviously similar "winners" could be found for every year since MR was invented. (When was that? Was it the day way back when "we" invented language – the first "medium" – and discovered how much fun it is to relate unverified gossip? It was certainly long before printers were invented.)

A strong reinforcement of MR carelessness is the naive, biased carelessness of us receivers. All of us – to repeat – are thirsty for evidence supporting what we already strongly believe, and when it is offered we too often take it straight. Polls in mid-summer 2003 showed that more than half of Americans believed that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were in close collaboration on the September 11 attack. How many changed their minds when President Bush finally rejected that myth in September 2003? Similarly, many Americans who hate our government, whether on the extreme left or anti-government right, have swallowed the absurd claim that Bush planned the attacks. Apparently this myth is even more widely embraced in Europe and the rest of the world, often with the addition that Jews commanded Bush to engage in the attack.⁷

Anti-Semites around the globe are still sucked into the crazy Protocols of Zion myth. Even so-called “objective” academics are caught time after time succumbing to fake “evidence” claiming to support this or that ideologically motivated hypothesis. As I have confessed here before, I myself am guilty of that, often tempted to embrace uncritically any printed or spoken hint of “evidence” that President Bush has lied or fumbled the ball. I try to discipline that bias and ask, “What’s the evidence?” – but I often fail. Thus we can hardly blame the media for all of the miseducation. Who can blame them for appealing to those of us who will blindly accept their distortions?

In any case, there is no need here to collect evidence of fake claims of evidence: everybody recognizes them – at least when they are committed by opponents. A statistician friend of mine often laments that the “statistical studies” headlined week by week are mostly unreliable because the researchers have been careless – either deliberately dishonest, sometimes bribed, or badly educated. And an hour later another colleague, attempting to disprove some claim of mine, snarls: “Haven’t you seen the report in the *Wall Street Journal* of the study proving statistically that . . . ?!”

Conscious, Deliberate Miseducation

Aside from carelessness and inadequate training, what produces the largest number of errors? Obviously it is deliberate lying, subtle or blatant, or deliberately falsified labeling. How should we react to a world in which a famous radio commentator, Rush Limbaugh, labels as “Communists” all who oppose our preemptive war strike – a world in which some on the left label all supporters of President Bush as “Fascists” and “Hitlerian”? This flood of error in what Dennis Hans and others have called “the disinformation age” is not just ignored in our schools. It is downplayed almost everywhere.

I see mainly four sources of the deliberate distortions, the second and third overlapping with number one, and all of them overlapping with political motives I’ve already deplored.

(An inherent problem in journalism is too complicated for full treatment here: the contrast between “objective reporting,” “editorializing,” and “opinion page” commentary. Reporters writing for the “front page” are expected to rise above their biases and report the facts; editorial writers can ignore the facts and express anonymous opinions; op ed page commentators can straddle those two borders, confessing their biases but simultaneously at least pretending to be “objective.” All three of these areas are too often corrupted by the four motives we come to now, though the worst harm occurs in the first area, where the claim to objectivity disguises the misleading. The public damage occurs whether the distortions are committed consciously or unconsciously.)

1 Money

“I’m willing to accept bribes for giving rhetorical support to any position, or to be ordered by my bosses to back corporate interests, downplaying news about misbehavior by politicians or executives. By embracing the dictated position, regardless of fact or reason, I can maybe become rich, or at least get a raise.”

In *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* (2002), David Brock reports scores of occasions when he was seduced or bludgeoned into spreading deliberate lies supporting the “conservative conspiracy” against President Bill Clinton, often being paid hard cash. Rightwing critics have claimed that the book is full of lies (which it may well be – in order to help the book sell). But Brock tries hard to project a new persona, one that resists Mammon’s orders, and his evidence of deliberate cheating, often for financial reward, by him and others, is overwhelming.

Mammon’s skill in destroying objectivity is especially clear in the case of CNN. When Time Warner bought out Ted Turner in the mid-1990s, CNN began showing signs of paying more attention to its commercial interests. The present competition for ratings between FoxNews and CNN has driven each to “take sides” while radically changing their formats. They now exhibit a much flashier, hipper,

more Internet-like style, in order to capture a larger audience. Their objectivity in reporting has certainly declined; the CNN that covered the first Gulf War was radically different from what we have observed since the March 2003 strike on Iraq. And media critics from both the right and left are claiming that the CNN-commercial-sellout is occurring in all the major networks – sometimes in even worse form.

2 Political Support and Personal Safety

“For the sake of safety in my job, or government support for my company, I must not express my honest opinions about this or that political move. Hiding behind the defensible standard of ‘objectivity,’ practicing ‘self-censorship,’ I must either portray myself as neutral, reporting both sides fairly, but actually maintaining a biased non-balance, or project an aggressive air of support – regardless of what I believe.”

We will never know how many journalists in Nazi Germany detested what Hitler was doing but didn't dare talk about it. We will never know how many journalists who sounded neutral about or even favorable to the Iraq war were in fact opposed to it – though we can hope for some open confessions. Even in countries that profess freedom, journalists obviously suppress or moderate their true views, though they are usually a bit freer to be honest than journalists were under Fascism or Communism. (For more about this see the section on LR-d in chapter 3, p. 48.) In proudly “free” America, journalists in almost every major controversy have confessed – after the event – that they had lied to protect themselves.

The subtle punishments for disagreeing are real. As Todd Gitlin summarizes the widespread silence of journalists, and their bosses, about their opposition to preemptive strike, “It would have had to be put on the agenda by themselves – as something they cared about – which is something they are loathe to do.” There has been a flood of reports of journalists being punished for openly protesting the Iraq attack. No doubt some reports have been exaggerated, perhaps even invented. But there is no question that journalists became far more

anxious about open declaration of views after the war began than they were before the attack loomed. Only as evidence has mounted that the “war” is continuing, and that its justifications were shaky from the beginning, have more and more journalists risked speaking out. (Most confessions still come in the form: “I really believed in the attack then, and now I see that I was wrong.”) And like Krugman, they continue to be physically threatened.

Sometimes the suppression is from the top, as when political powers prevent journalists from obtaining the information they seek – a power abuse that deepens whenever war or threat of war occurs. Recently some reporters have revealed how much suppression of evidence there was in the Gulf War, and research has uncovered how the media suppressed evidence that President Johnson was lying about events in the Vietnam War. Many knew he was lying, but they also knew that to speak out would be dangerous.

Sometimes the fear is only local: my employer may fire me. After escaping from a “business media” job, James Ledbetter describes how his employers required him to conceal the truth, summarizing the situation like this:

Indeed, too often the news magazines and Websites acted as incurious cheerleaders, championing executive and innovative companies without questioning their books. . . . The mainstream media, too, did its share of hyping the “technology boom,” required to conceal the evidence that the bubble was bursting.⁸

The distortions by political extremists are perhaps the worst. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman report an unquestionable case of media reversal of fact:

Mr. Gore's statement that he had played an important role in the legislation that brought about the Internet (an ordinary, more or less factual piece of political bragging) was quickly transformed into the absurd claim that he had “invented” the Internet, which was then repeated endlessly by journalists who never bothered to check the original quote.⁹

None of this should be interpreted as confined to blaming the journalists. With the worldwide threats of violent punishment for speaking out, how can any journalist be blamed for being cautious. As *The Times* reported, "The statistics are dreadful: more than 400 writers were murdered between 1999 and 2002. . . . [It is] what the UN Commission on Human Rights calls 'censorship by killing.' Last year alone, 30 journalists were killed and another 1,140 writers were attacked worldwide."¹⁰ Whatever the threats, from death to imprisonment to mere job loss, it is appallingly clear that although fewer journalists are threatened or attacked in "democratic" countries than in autocracies, the fear of punishment threatens honest reporting everywhere.

3 *Celebrity*

"I want to 'make it,' to get to the top of this so-called profession."

The pursuit of fame overlaps obviously with the first two motives. Fame yields money; serving the political or industrial bosses yields money. And money yields fame.

For those working in most corners of our media the pursuit of personal fame leads to overemphasis on reporting "the famous." Fake or trivial stories about celebrities can make more of a splash than most true stories about important matters. Managers of corporations like Fox, running FoxNews, know that to spend media time on major issues affecting the real welfare of the nation will yield smaller profits than front-paging minor "celebrity" issues: the trial of Princess Diana's butler, accused of stealing her leftover artifacts, or the revelations of one of her lovers; the endless concentration on ex-President Clinton's sex life. And so on. "Let's just drop scientifically demonstrated threats about global warming and other environment disasters, or the brutal facts about worldwide starvation, or the rising inequality of educational opportunity, or the corporate scandals, or the shocking violence in the inner cities, and play up what will attract the most attention. At the same time we must give the impression of dealing

with larger issues, especially in our talk shows, where we'll display speakers for the 'other side.' But we'll make sure that as they try to express their opinions, they'll be surrounded by those hired to be on our side, shouting the 'bad guys' down."

The branch of our media most likely to attack these three corrupting influences is fiction. Novelists can still manage to get publishers to accept powerful indictments. (Is that because publishers know that such indictments will sell?) A wonderfully effective satire against media sellout is Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*. One of the two doomed characters is editor of a newspaper in financial trouble. He learns of some scandalous behavior by a prominent political leader, decides after considerable conflict to feature it on the front page, and suffers disastrous consequences — largely because another medium publicizes the scandal first. Though attacking media corruption is not the center of the book, it does both underline the paradox (we depend on media for attacks on media) and the claim that media success is sought for celebrity.

4 *Dogmatic Commitment*

"I will passionately, or at least implicitly, defend my one true position; I will honestly, sincerely support my side while ignoring what my opponents say."

This kind of commitment, almost always leading to distortion, is to me by far the closest to being defensible. The dogmatist, practicing win-rhetoric rather than LR, feels full of integrity and can either ignore or openly "refute" the evidence that contradicts the dogma. When it is practiced openly as "advocacy journalism" — that is, when the reporter confesses all basic commitments — such passionate certainty can produce some of our best journalism. The journalists, like Murray Kempton and I. F. Stone in the old days and Jack Newfield and Paul Krugman now, do a kind of research that looks only for support of their cause, report the results carefully and honestly, but never mask the bias. The reader is thus given the required clues for the need to read the claims critically.

Blind dogmatism in contrast simply ignores the other side, yet speaks as if totally objective. When in England in April 2003, working on a draft of this chapter, as I suffered the daily floods of cheap MR, right and left, I felt increasingly dismayed by how the actual war was producing a war of words, with neither side acknowledging counter-arguments. In the London *Observer* I read a journalist's justified complaint about a "torrent of hate mail" he had received because he questioned the war; he did not hint that anything he had ever said might be at least questionable. Another journalist, on the right, was reported as "savaging" a "Saddamite buffoon still panting his orgasmic paeans to the impenetrability of Baghdad's defenses." Working in this spirit, you feel that you win not only "out there" but also in your own soul. You are not cheating and you are not to be subjected to critical inquiry. You are serving your God, or at least "the Truth."

To me the most outlandish defense of dogmatic proclaiming comes when immoral argument is defended because the cause is just. Here is how leftish Eric Alterman puts his justified charge against the "Internet gossipmonger Matt Drudge."

[T]he downside of the punditocracy-gossip merger was the seal of approval it offered to information that was frequently false, malicious, and proffered by sleazeballs. . . . Tim Russert allowed the generally excellent Meet the Press to fall victim to these dangers when he invited . . . Drudge to join an august panel [of pundits]. . . . Drudge . . . defends himself . . . by arguing that he has no professional standards whatever. He proudly admits to publishing the purloined work of other journalists who are still in the process of verifying their stories. Respectfully questioned by Russert, he used his NBC-supplied microphone to berate real reporters for failing to use his own sleazy insinuating tactics.¹¹

Unfortunately Alterman reveals here another version of the media paradox; he weakens his attack by revealing his own carelessness in argument, pursuing his own dogmatic commitment. Drudge can answer, "You are just engaging in shoddy slander, with words like

'sleazeball' and 'sleaze' and 'insinuating'; your attack contains no solid, documented, carefully structured argument against me. I actually threw your book away after the first few pages, because your evidence mainly consists of epithets." Drudge would be wrong in ignoring the book; *Sound and Fury* is full of genuine evidence of outlandish rightwing bias. But, like most of us, Alterman too often falls into the very fault he is attacking.

Whether or not you agree with me that an increasingly large slice of the media reveals deception, I hope you will agree that we would be better off if more journalists were trained more effectively in, and thus devoted to, thinking about and fighting against these four corruptions.

As many of my quotations here have already shown, it is hard to draw the line between media corruption and the political corruption we saw in chapter 6, since politicians inescapably depend on being able to buy, or at least deceive, the media. And the line drawing is complicated even further by the fact that everyone, including you and me, has to deal with the Machiavellian choices among "goods" and "evils" that I described on p. 120. But everywhere we look we see evidence that the success of corrupt political rhetoric depends on the media, which in turn are corrupted by political bias. As Alterman puts it:

Our politicians' rhetoric is so riddled with misinformation, mindless cliché, and meaningless spectacle that it has ceased to have any relevance to the problems it alleges to address. . . . The forms of American political communication – nine-second television sound bites, negative advertisements, and ceaseless fundraising – have buried even the possibility of fruitful debate. . . . Because American politicians' words are so thoroughly uncoupled from the things about which they speak, the role of setting the parameters of our national debate, of determining what problems require urgent attention and what issues may prove to be important to the national interest, must fall elsewhere. In our case, that means the media.¹²

Alterman's case can be dramatized with two final examples of attempted attacks on bias.

Actually we are flooded with charges of shameful bias, from both the right and left.¹³ A bestseller by Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (2002), is centered on attacking the three major US TV networks. CBS is especially demonized for its “liberal” bias and for its mistreatment of Goldberg as a conservative employee. Goldberg does acknowledge – but only once – that bias is inescapable, found on all sides:

Does anyone think a “diverse” group of conservative journalists would give us the news straight? I sure as hell don’t. They’d be just like the Left. Except, they’d let their conservative biases slip into the news, and they’d swear on a stack of Bibles that they were mainstream . . . just as liberals do now. It’s the human condition. (p. 126)

As his own biases “slip into” almost every paragraph, his book – and its wild success among those longing for evidence that journalists are mostly lefties – is one of the most discouraging demonstrations of our plight. He does include some genuinely disturbing examples of how his employers at CBS misbehaved. But as he rightly attacks their mistreatment, he loads the book with evidence that *he* cannot be trusted: he listens to hardly anyone. First of all, he makes no attempt to distinguish among versions of liberalism: everyone who disagrees with any of his views is suspect. Even worse, he offers not a single citation identifying sources for his wild allegations. And he gives only a hint or two of the rightwing bias exhibited outside the three “liberal” networks he targets: *all* the liberal left is equally biased.

Using as his main example CBS’s legal objection to his violation of a contract, he ignores the fact that as he writes, scores of radio talk shows are exhibiting rightwing bias much more appalling than any he describes. The book simply pours out slick, unsubstantiated claims that he is above it all and the “liberal” media are down below. That it continues to be a bestseller is to me disturbing evidence for my thesis here.

On the other political side, Eric Alterman also exhibits a great deal of bias in a more recent book, partly devoted to discrediting Goldberg: *What Liberal Media? The Truth About BIAS and the News* (2003). As we have seen, Alterman is openly “left” on most issues. But he is clearly justified in his charge against Goldberg:

To those who do not already share Goldberg’s biases, his many undocumented, exaggerated assertions have the flavor of self-parody rather than reasoned argument. Among these are such statements as: “Everybody to the right of Lenin is a ‘right-winger’ as far as [liberal] elites are concerned.” Opposition to [President Bush’s] flat tax, he claims, comes from the same “dark region that produces envy and the seemingly unquenchable liberal need to wage class warfare.” (p. 5)

The contrast between Goldberg and Alterman is dramatized perhaps most strongly in the matter of supporting evidence. Goldberg provides no footnotes or index: it is all mere assertion. Alterman provides 646 footnotes – most of them convincing – and a full index. And he invites us to check almost every assertion. That of course does not prove that he is fully objective, but at least it shows that, unlike Goldberg, he expects the kind of reader who will want to do some checking.¹⁴

By performing or reporting genuine research of the kind Goldberg totally neglects, Alterman catches him again and again engaging in rhetorickery – as Goldberg could only occasionally catch Alterman. But Alterman’s critique of Goldberg is no more than a prefatory addition to his book (it was mainly written long before *Bias* appeared). His main point comes closer to mine: to fight off the casual reduction of the world into “right” and “left,” “conservative” and “liberal,” with neither side listening. He discerns bias afflicting the media everywhere:

Any number of biases – liberal, conservative, religious, ethnocentric, humanist, heterosexual, age-ist, class-ist, racist, able-ist, weight-ist . . . can creep into a story despite the best efforts . . . to keep them at bay. The key question to ask is not whether examples of bias can be found,

but exactly where is bias pervasive and what is its effect on the news and American public life?

[O]n most social issues, conservatives have a case. Elite media journalists, like most people in their education brackets, . . . rarely come into contact with religious fundamentalists. . . . If religion were the only measure of bias then conservatives would have a strong case. (p. 104)

Even worse than the worst of such printed attacks from left and right are the television talk shows that I call Crossfirism. It is impossible to quote from much of those shows, because both sides are mostly shouting unintelligible charges. But I can offer the results of my own rigorous scientific study. In the past month I have spent eight and a half painfully wasted hours watching some of these shows, and I can honestly, scrupulously, objectively report that not once has *any* participant said anything like, "Oh, I see now that you're right; I've been wrong. I hadn't known about . . . or thought about . . . or seen X, Y, or Z. Listening to you has changed my mind." And every program has ended with their shouting at each other all at once, with no viewer able to make out more than an angry word or two. My detestation is of course increased by my biased objection to the fact that the losers in the shouting are usually critics of the rightwing; but that confession does not weaken the charge that the programs are miseducating all of us, in every moment of viewing.

Bias aside, I hope that my main point is clear: everyone on all "sides" who thinks about the media for more than five minutes, as insider or outsider, emerges with a sad warning: "I must be more careful! I must think harder about what I read and see. Most who pretend to address me have their attention mainly not on my welfare but on how to capture me, regardless of the truth or importance of their claims. Even when I feel that I have been responsibly informed, I often have not been, and my thinking has been corrupted."

The case can perhaps be qualified slightly by the fact that more of us these days are in one sense "aware of current events" than ever before. Because we all watch at least a bit of TV and glance at the

headlines and photos on the front page, we all "know" about what is prominent in "everybody's" mind at this very minute. Our great great grandparents mostly knew nothing about non-local news and it was too late to do anything about it. In contrast, we are "informed" quickly, sometimes instantaneously. Does that fact suggest that we suffer less miseducation than did our forebears? Whatever the answer, we are – to repeat one last time – really misinformed, and MR, even in the form of thoughtful books, too seldom gives us real help in thinking clearly about the various events. Everyone on all sides of almost every controversy simply blasts out conclusions, with no attention to the steps that support those conclusions.

The cure? It will hardly surprise you to hear me echo chapter 5: flood our schools, from grade one onward, with Rhet-Ed that stresses LR: training in how to deal critically with MR! If that could happen, everyone would grow up somewhat more skillful in protecting against deception. And our informants, whether ranking as pundits or not, would be less inclined to deceive.

Postscript

The media revolution I have stressed here is dramatically underlined by the transmission in May 2004 of politically crucial "international" broadcasts: first of the many images portraying, to a universal audience, American troops torturing Iraqis; then of an Iraqi beheading an American. President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld have found themselves addressing *international* audiences, in an effort to diminish hatred of Americans, while many Americans have found, in the image of the beheading, further justification for our presence in Iraq. The revolution I described is even more dramatic than I realized.

- broader probing of casuistry, see Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*, 1988.
- 14 Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 1990, p. 17.
 - 15 Kerry Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 2003.
 - 16 Eco, "Political Language," p. 85.
 - 17 See Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People*, 2003.
 - 18 *Progressive*, November 2003, p. 46.
 - 19 In a longer draft, I dwelt on his mistake in beginning with what sounds like a defense of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, and his frequent self-centered complaints about journals turning down his articles.
 - 20 "A Farewell to Politics," *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2002, p. 4.

7 Media Rhetrickery

- 1 For a careful survey of media-rhetoric in Europe, see Deirdre Kevin's *Europe in the Media: A Comparison of Reporting, Representation, and RHETORIC in National Media Systems in Europe*, 2002. (As I don't have to tell you, the caps on RHETORIC are mine, not hers.)
- 2 J. Linn Allen, "The Media Inspire Distrust," *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 2003, Section 2, p. 4.
- 3 Jack Fuller, *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age*, 1996, p. 221.
- 4 *New York Times*, January 20, 2003, p. A23.
- 5 Ignatieff quoted in Jeremy Jennings, "Deaths of the Intellectual: A Comparative Autopsy," in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. Helen Small, 2002, p. 111.
- 6 *New York Times*, March 11, 2004, pp. E1, 7.
- 7 See Andrew Gimson, cover story of the *Spectator*, September 13, 2003.
- 8 James Ledbetter, "The Boys in the Bubble," *New York Times*, January 2, 2003, p. A29.
- 9 Quoted from a review by Alexander Still of *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists and the Stories that Shape the Political World*, 2003, in the *New York Times*, January 8, 2003, p. B11.
- 10 *The Times*, November 27, 2003, T2, p. 3.
- 11 Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy*, 1992; paperback 1999, pp. 274–5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

- 13 For example, *Big Lies: The RightWing Propaganda Machine and How it Distorts the Truth*, by Joe Conason, 2003. One major problem with such attacks is that they tend to reduce all distortions to "lying," thus ignoring the fact that the "lies" are often, like President Bush much of the time, absolutely convinced that their erroneous claims are true (or so I speculate). Dogmatists tend to believe the "lies" they tell. The only recent publication I could find in the UK is *Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq*, ed. David Miller, 2003.
- 14 Since my writing of the above, Goldberg has published another book, containing a grossly biased attack on Alterman: *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite*, 2003. If one adopts my broadened definition of "media," including books about the media, Goldberg's works point up our need for rescuers.

Part III Reducing Rhetorical Warfare

- 1 Eight months later, in another argument about why the attacks against our troops are increasing, he flatly denied ever having said what I have reported. But I have a record of it in my journal.
- ### 8 Can Rhetorology Yield More Than a Mere Truce, in Any of Our "Wars"?
- 1 This chapter borrows some from my essay in a volume honoring David Tracy: *Radical Pluralism and Truth*, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike, 1991, pp. 62–80. I also quote from various published versions of an essay on the rhetorics of science and religion.
 - 2 Thomas M. Lessl, "Gnostic Scientism and the Prohibition of Questions," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, 1 (Spring 2002), pp. 133–58. See critical response: "Lessl on Gnostic Scientism: Four Responses," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, 4 (Winter 2002), pp. 709–40.
 - 3 I don't like that word religionist, but it's hard to find a better one. Call them the believers? Well, scientists are believers too. The faithful? Well, scientists are pursuing their faith. The devout? Sounds pejorative. The theologians? Sounds too exclusive. So it will have to be religionists – even though one of my dictionaries says that that word sometimes means simply "bigots."
 - 4 One of the best treatments of rhetoric in scientific study is Alan G. Gross's *The Rhetoric of Science*, 1990; 2nd ed., 1996. By "going a bit too far" in intruding