



Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals

By David Haskell, Clements Academic, 292 pages, \$24.95

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For the first time a researcher has completed a detailed study of just how the Canadian media portray Evangelicals. Through survey research and extensive content analysis, Wilfrid Laurier journalism professor Dr. David Haskell explains how and why the media's coverage of Evangelicals can fall short of objectivity.

Haskell starts with treatment of U.S. vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). He makes a strong argument that CBC reporting distorted and omitted facts so as to portray her faith as something to be worried about. For example, the CBC's Neil Macdonald played a clip of Palin discussing the deployment of soldiers to Iraq and saying, "Our leaders, our national leaders are sending them out on a task that is from God" (p. 24). However, Haskell explains that the full context of the clip shows more clearly what she meant:

Pray for our military, he [her oldest son] is going to be deployed in September to Iraq. Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right. Also for this country [pray] that our leaders, our national leaders are sending them out on a task that is from God. (p. 24)

Haskell points out that the distinction between the two statements is that one comes across as a jingoistic war cry while the other is a humble prayer requesting guidance to choose the right path. His point was driven home to me as I watched CBC's *The Hour with George Stroumboulopoulos* within hours of reading Haskell's book for the first time and saw the same truncated clip used again in a piece about Palin.

Haskell makes equally compelling observations about the coverage of Diane Haskett, then mayor of London, Ontario, who came under fire in the media for refusing to proclaim Gay Pride Day in her community. Haskell points to columnists who mocked her religious convictions and in one case even implied mental instability.

Haskell also goes over the Canadian media's treatment of Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day and argues the media made the 2000 election more about faith than anything else.

Haskell also discusses the criticism of Evangelicals within the Conservative Party. He points to a *Globe and Mail* article from 2005 which ran under the headline "Christian activists capturing Tory races: Some in party worry new riding nominees will reinforce notion of 'hidden agenda.'" Haskell draws attention to the use of the word "capture" rather than "win" and the outcry from Evangelicals who wondered if other religious groups in a political party would receive similar treatment.

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The book goes much further than mere story-telling. This is the first Canadian empirical study of its kind. To examine how Evangelicals are depicted, the author pored over a decade of national television news stories featuring them. To evaluate these depictions, Haskell uses frame theory, which asserts that news reports tell us not only what issues to think about but how to think about them. So, for example, a reporter may routinely frame stories involving Evangelicals in such a way that they emphasize a negative image. Haskell uses a sophisticated coding strategy to determine if Evangelicals are depicted in stories as intolerant or neutral or tolerant, intelligent or unintelligent, deserving or undeserving of society bias, and so on.

Overall, Haskell found television news was neutral in its depiction of Evangelicals. He points to other studies, however, that show that the instances where journalists use negative frames carry more weight with audiences. Haskell notes the “frequent use of the intolerant, criminally minded, and un-Canadian frames” (p. 165) in the news reports he examined. He argues this focused negative messaging contributes significantly to audience perception of Evangelicals.

Haskell also found that fully one-third of Canadian television news reports about Evangelicals featured American Evangelicals rather than Canadians. Haskell argues that the language used by American Evangelicals in news reports about issues such as same-sex marriage tends to be more offensive. In the minds of audiences, however, Canadian and American Evangelicals are indistinguishable from one another, a perception that is reinforced by the un-Canadian frame that is sometimes used in television news reports.

He complements his content analysis of television news stories with a survey of national television newsroom personnel. The survey results suggest that many of the values held by journalists are distinct from those of the general population and far different from those of Evangelicals. Haskell points out that just 19% of Canadians say they practice no religion compared with 66% of the respondents to his survey. When he asked journalists in his survey what the dominant characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes of Evangelicals were, the top answer was “arrogant self-righteousness.” He concludes that “overall, national television journalists have little personal interest in religion and, for the most part, view those who do – certainly the most devout – negatively” (p. 168).

Haskell identifies some typical shortcomings of journalists when they cover a subject where their values clash with those commonly held by Evangelicals. He finds journalists will often not relay information the way evangelical subjects interviewed intended them to be received. Or journalists may not place events in proper perspective by providing relevant background information. An example of this is the launch of the Miracle Channel in Canada in 1996. Haskell points out that two-thirds of the station’s programming was Canadian, but the CBC emphasized that the station would “air many U.S. programs, providing the stars of the right-wing religious world with a Canadian platform” (p. 137).

Haskell also notes that media reports sometimes fail to allow those criticized to respond to their critics; and occasionally they do not indicate when opinion rather than fact is being relayed. Haskell discusses a CBC television report about Evangelicals wanting to see a Jewish temple rebuilt on Mount Moriah, where a mosque now stands. The reporter says Evangelicals are prepared to do “stupid violent things” and are making “Israeli police and intelligence services terribly nervous” (p. 136). Haskell criticizes the reporter for not supporting his claims with examples of Evangelicals plotting or committing illegal acts.

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He finds distinctions between the networks. His analysis suggests the CBC is the hardest on Evangelicals while the Global Television Network is the most Evangelical-friendly.

Haskell writes from an unusual perspective and in the spirit of his book discloses his worldview in the preface. He is a committed Christian who writes that “I readily embrace most of the traditional beliefs and creeds of the early Church; however, many of my evangelical friends say I’m too liberal for their comfort... . While I do not always agree with Evangelicals, I think most are very good people who do much to make this world better” (p. 15). He is also an accomplished television reporter who believes journalists sometimes “become opinionated and paternalistic. Unfortunately, the thoughts ‘I will be fair and balanced’ and ‘I know what is right and I’m damn well going to do something about it’ cannot mutually exist in the mind of a journalist on assignment” (p. 16). While the book is solidly rooted in academic research, Haskell is able to explain his methodology and the academic theory behind it to the layman.

The author explains larger issues such as journalistic objectivity, the construction of the news, and the impact on audiences. For this reason, the book serves as a valuable resource for those interested in the media, religious studies, and popular culture in general. Students of media will find it to be particularly helpful as it explores questions such as whether there is such a thing as objectivity to be held up as a journalistic ideal and, if not, what is the proper role and function of the news media. Those interested in religious studies will find Haskell’s review of the literature gives them solid background on what exactly makes a Christian an Evangelical and how the American variety may differ from the Canadian one. Haskell even makes a point of exploring how Evangelicals may have brought some of this negative coverage on themselves by “being party to their share of weak arguments and bigoted positions. Let us remember, not every news piece featuring Evangelicals behaving badly is slanted reporting!” He also offers advice for how evangelical leaders might build better media relationships.

Haskell’s conclusion is damning. He argues that when the beliefs and actions of Canadian Evangelicals clash with those held by journalists, the journalists are often willing to abandon professional objectivity and slant their stories. Haskell points to an Ipsos Reid poll showing Canadian Evangelicals feel their faith group is “rarely” or “never” fairly portrayed in the media. The evidence he has compiled provides them with some justification.

The strength of Haskell’s research is that he is able to quantify abstract concepts such as bias and objectivity. His qualitative survey of newsroom workers provides further illumination. A future qualitative study involving more in-depth interviews with news directors, for instance, may offer more insight into newsroom decision making and further validate some of Haskell’s conclusions. 🌱