

**Belloc, Hilaire. *The Free Press: An essay on the manipulation of news and opinion, and how to counter it.* Norfolk, Virginia: IHS Press, 2002. 95pp. \$8.95 paperback.**

In *The Free Press*, Hilaire Belloc offers an incisive analysis of the problems associated with modern news media – what Belloc refers to as “the capitalist press” or “the official press.” He also offers a powerful defense of the importance of alternative news media – what Belloc refers to as “the free press.” His prescient critique of modern news media is just as relevant today as it was in his time. He is fundamentally correct in asserting the need for fundamental reforms in the way the news media go about their business if democracy is to survive. However, his argument that alternative news media will bring about the needed fundamental reform has not yet been born out by history.

Belloc’s argument is more in the nature of a polemic than a rigorous demonstration, yet within those bounds, his argument is substantial and worthy of careful thought. The reader should be prepared, however, for Belloc’s tendency to engage in sweeping generalizations and simplifications and not let the inevitable leaps and gaps obscure the many valuable insights into the nature of modern news media.

For example, Belloc begins with the assertion that word of mouth is the natural and normal mode of transmitting the news and opinion necessary to sustain a modern democratic state. He then argues that the introduction of modern mass media into the natural oral communications process inevitably leads to a twofold corruption in the process of a democratic society informing itself. First, the rapidity with which modern mass media transmit content acts to deprive audiences of time to reflect. Second, the mechanical similarity of the various accounts coming through the news media deprives recipients of the natural inconsistencies so characteristic of oral transmission of news,

which serve as a stimulus for reflection (since the human mind naturally seeks to harmonize inconsistencies). Thus the seeming consistency of news accounts coming from all directions and almost immediately present everywhere lend a false sense of authority to the modern press and soporifically discourage critical reflection and verification in the audience's personal experience.

There is, no doubt, truth in these claims. Media critics from George Orwell to Marshall McLuhan have trenchantly noted the anesthetizing character of modern mass media. But it might also be pointed out that oral transmission can also be remarkably consistent. (Think of the process through which stereotypes and racial prejudices arise and are perpetuated in even the most primitive cultures.) And fallen humanity long ago developed the habit of simply selectively ignoring inconsistencies rather than thinking them through. At the same time, it could be argued that there is a remarkable variety in media presentations today – even if one has to go a little out of one's way to find it. Simply pick up the *The Washington Times* and the *The Washington Post* and see how remarkably different their accounts of the same events can be.

Belloc then points out that the dynamics of modern capitalism intensify the modern press's tendency to suppress diverse accounts and viewpoints. The natural competitive advantages of size and economies of scale encourage the concentration of media in fewer and fewer hands. Size also attracts advertising revenue which enables the media plutocrats to produce news media for less than it would if consumers had to bear the entire cost through the subscription price. For Belloc, subsidy through advertisement is particularly poisoning of news media because it causes the controlling emphasis to shift from editors serving readers to publishers serving advertisers. No longer is the press's

success defined by how well it informs readers. Rather media success is defined by how many seducible eyes and ears publishers can deliver to advertisers. Subsidy through advertising further distorts the truthfulness of the press because of its natural tendency to shy away from anything that would alert and offend readers and therefore reduce the number of suggestible eyes being delivered to advertisers. Thus, in a modern capitalist system, control of the media falls into the hands of a few rich men, men usually of “base origin and capacities.” In their hands, the press is a mere commercial enterprise, controlled by advertisers because they are the primary financial support.

Belloc then embarks on a discussion of the intertwining relationship between the plutocrats, the press, and government officials. Because the latter two depend on the former, the press ends up being an organ for the creation of false information and views (an extreme example is the phenomenon of the supermarket tabloid and its television and magazine equivalents) and the suppression of real information and views incompatible with the economic objectives of the plutocrats who seek above all the efficient organization of politics and society so as to maximize profit. Belloc then gives a number of examples of important social issues suppressed or alternative views ignored by the capitalist press that were current in England during World War I, the time when Belloc’s essay appeared.

The only way out of the current media morass, for Belloc, lies in the alternative press. Always a precarious David to the capitalist press’s Goliath, the alternative media still possesses, in Belloc’s eyes, three crucial advantages in the war of words. The first is its disparate particularism. In other words, it is not a fundamental disadvantage that particular alternative news organs tend to be strongly – even fanatically – biased.

Because these biases tend to be all across the political and cultural spectrum, taken together they tend to cancel one another out, according to Belloc. The second is its indignation against falsehood, and the third is its indignation against arbitrary power. As the plutocrats of the capitalist press become ever more powerful, they become ever more brazen – boasting out in the open about what they formerly plotted only in secret. The arrogance of the plutocrats inevitably provokes men of intelligence and cultivation to oppose them through alternative news organs.

The very poverty of the alternative media caused by the lack of advertising subsidy makes the alternative press much better suited (collectively, not individually) to carry out the truth function that a modern democratic society should expect of its news media. Because it must be sought out by its audience, Belloc argues that alternative news media tend to exercise an influence out of proportion to their small readership and meager resources. Alternative news media are read rather than scanned and absorbed with passion rather than passively by their audiences. Thus their content has a greater chance of persisting and affecting their audience's actions.

In the ideal, Belloc's argument might carry the day. But Belloc does not sufficiently take into account the corrosive effect of the modern materialistic consumer society on the character of media consumers who ultimately still determine what kind of media flourishes. Educated to be a worker and a consumer, enslaved by modern consumer debt, and distracted by a constant barrage of media stimulation, the vast majority of people today do not have the formation, the time, or the inclination to seek and sift through the wide array of alternative media sources that would be necessary to arrive at a reasonably accurate and comprehensive understanding of reality. Ironically, it is the very nature of

the materialist democracy bequeathed to us by Hobbs and Locke that sets a practical limit on the influence of alternative news media on the polity at large. For when the ignorant, passion-driven citizen is king, the sugar of simplistic and seductive “happy news” will always fare better with the majority than the tougher gruel required to navigate through the complexities of modern political issues.

Even if Belloc was overly optimistic in his thesis, his analysis of the weaknesses of modern news media remains valuable. And the need for a vibrant alternative news media remains more valid and urgent than ever.

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