The Media, the Press, and the Church

Part 2 of 4: Media Bias or Media Ignorance?
with Darrell L. Bock and J. Kerby Anderson
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Well, we’re going to shift gears here. We’ve talked a little bit about cultural engagement and the personal aspects of it and the way that can work and the way we think about culture.

Let’s talk a little about the media. You know, the media gets painted in a lot of different ways, and particularly there’s a lot of discussion about things like media bias and that kind of thing. But I’m going to share a feeling that I have in my interactions with the media, and that is what I sense going on—I’ll say it this way: I’d say about 95 percent of the interviews that I’ve done feel have been done very professionally. The journalists carrying out their responsibilities is doing what they see their job as being, which is attempting to make sure that the various sides in a conversation are represented and presented before the public. And so they engage me understanding that I represent one voice of several voices that they’re responsible to put on the table.

So what we sometimes perceive as media bias may actually be, if I can say it this way, a clash between what our expectations of the media might be and the way the media sees themselves in terms of what they do and are. Can you kind of sort that tension out for us?

Yeah and I might even agree with you in the sense that a lot of what is oftentimes called media bias is media ignorance. Let’s recognize that most of the interviews you and I have gone to even in the Christian world, but certainly in the secular world, are conducted by individuals who—let’s be charitable—could not sign the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary and that kind of a baseline shows that maybe they don’t know as much about the issue. When I was at Georgetown University, a friend of mine Robert Lichter at George Washington University along with Stanley Rothman did a very extensive survey of people in the media elite, the people that determine what you read, see and hear: ABC, NBC, CBS, <i>Time, Newsweek, US News & World Report</i>, you know, all sorts of different groups and <i>Washington Post, New York Times</i>, on and on and on. And he found that, first of all, they were very liberal—no surprise there—it but the point I want to make is 86 percent of them seldom or never attend religious services. In other words, they’re very secular. They don’t go to church, they don’t know people that go to church. So as a result, as you would well be aware of, oftentimes if you go to a media interview, you really have to kind of explain things.
That’s right.

**Darrell Bock:**

I mean, you use a word like “incarnation” or “atonement,” I mean, you might as well be talking a foreign language.

**Kerby Anderson:**

That’s right.

**Darrell Bock:**

So you really have to understand that they’re trying to be professional but this – except for maybe a religion editor – is really outside their comfort zone, outside of their database. So that’s the first issue. And so they will make statements, they will ask questions, they will spin it in a way that makes it feel a little more comfortable for them, but it isn’t necessarily that they’re trying to do you harm. They’re simply trying to feed the monster. They’re basically every day trying to produce programs, and you will occasionally have some people that are very articulate and do understand basic theology. But I think it’s important to recognize sometimes it’s not so much bias as it is ignorance, and as a result, maybe you just need to help explain a little bit.

Cal Thomas one time told me about a woman that came in, did an interview and then she said, “Are you an Evangelical?” and he said, “Well, what do you mean by that?” and she says, “Well, you know.” He says, “Well, I know but I don’t think you know.” It’s a nice way of saying she’d heard the phrase, didn’t have a clue as to what it meant, but wanted to use it in the interview, and so you have to sort of help them along. And I’m sure, Darrell, there have been times when you sort of had to help people along to understand why you had concerns about *The Da Vinci Code*, why you had concerns about a particular theological perspective. And so that’s just part of the responsibility we have if we’re going to be interviewed.

I think some people just don’t understand what a person who’s in the media is actually doing most of the time. I mean they are running from story to story. They’ve got deadlines. I mean, they’ve got drop-dead deadlines that are on top of them. They’ve got only so much time they can work on a story. One day they’re at a fire. The next day they’re at a robbery. The next day they may be covering a national story, and then – boom – they’re at a seminary.
What’s this all about?

*Kerby Anderson:*

Exactly right, and then they’ll talk to you for awhile and only a small snippet – we’ll talk about this is a second – only a small snippet actually gets in because of the way they have to package it. But my daughter studied journalism at Northwestern, so I have some familiarity, again, on the media side and sensitivity. And what I think they see their responsibility as – tell me if you think this is fair – their responsibility at least if they are performing their job professionally, is to take an issue where, at least the type of area where Christianity tends to walk in, take an issue and then they’re supposed to help people kind of like a mirror show the variety of positions that relate to whatever the topic is that’s being addressed.

So they have a limited amount of time. They have a limited amount of expertise. They have several voices that they have to squeeze into that slot to try and make sure that the various spots or positions are represented or at least that they’re represented fairly and accurately. And then they’ve got to spin it around the commercials oftentimes that they have if they’re on television or radio so that your hour … I tell people – they don’t realize this – that an hour show actually ends up being about 40 to 42 minutes of substance.

Very true.

*Kerby Anderson:*

Just because the advertising. So now you’ve got your introduction. You’ve got your conclusion – that takes even more time – and watch that time window shrink. And so that’s what someone in the media is up against. They’re working oftentimes late into the night producing a show that has to be on at X time. And so I really think most people don’t know what someone in the media is up against.
Kerby Anderson: Yeah and that’s the other part of it, too, is that they have to have something that’s visually interesting if it’s on television or somewhat slightly controversial if it’s on radio or in print. So there are some other things that are being placed upon them as well, and it is difficult for them to pull it all together. Now, I would say for some of our viewers that if they’re going to go into an interview, what you have to ask yourself first of all, “Am I going into one where controversy is for controversy’s sake?”

Right.

Darrell Bock: I remember years ago when I was on the Ed Busch talk show, it was very obvious he had me on there as the Christian representative because he wanted to create a lot of controversy. And if you go on with Bill Maher these days and things like that, those programs are intended to be controversial. And I remember Ed Busch was frustrated we weren’t getting enough phone calls, so he goes right to the exclusivity of Christ, how you people believe that only Christians are saved. He was creating that. But for every one of those, there are hundreds of others that are just simply trying to do their job.

Exactly right.

Darrell Bock: They’re trying to, in as fair a way as they can understand it, present kind of a point-counterpoint or a couple of different viewpoints. So it’s important to recognize whether you’re being set up or whether or not a person’s just really trying to do that. And if they’re just simply trying to explain that, anything you can do to help them would be certainly a good thing.

The other point is recognize that some come with a lot of preparation and some with very little. You’ve probably been on a few shows where, “Tell me, Darrell, is it Bock? Okay, who is Jesus? Okay, tell me, Darrell, who is Jesus?” You know, you get those kind of interviews. And you’ve got others where they basically have surveyed every article you’ve ever written. They’ve got a research associate …
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Darrell Bock:

You’re like, “whoa,” and so you need to understand that’s something as well. The major media, the national media probably will have a research assistant, which will suggest possible questions, possible topics, maybe even background and do a lot more digging. The local talk show host? Probably not. So it varies from place to place. But once you understand that, you’re going to recognize that some things which are labeled as bias are simply ignorance or lack of preparation, and so you can’t really flaw them for that, and you just need to do the best job you can to help them understand what’s taking place.

Kerby Anderson:

Yeah, oftentimes the reporter is scrambling. They’re scrambling to get located into the question – and it’s one of 15 stories they may do that week so it’s… I have a sympathy for having been around it, have a sympathy for what it is media attempts to do. Obviously, some people do it better than others, but it still is very demanding kind of discipline that they’re undertaking.

Darrell Bock:

Sure.

Kerby Anderson:

I like to tell this story: I once did in the midst of, I think it was the controversy around the movie "The Passion" Mel Gibson produced. I was flown up to ABC and I had reacted earlier by letter to a special they had done, Peter Jennings had done, on Jesus. And I went up there and was part of an interview of a panel and, of course, I was the evangelical conservative representative. And there was a Jewish person and a liberal person and a secular person on the panel, and we went through and did the thing on the movie. And I think I had all of maybe 45 seconds of air time, of face time in terms of what I actually got to say when they finally edited it even though we filmed for almost 45 minutes.
And but that wasn’t the most important thing that happened on that trip. The more important thing that happened on that trip is that I met for an hour and a half with four top people at ABC to discuss the ABC special that they did on Jesus and to do, in effect, background for them on evangelicalism in America. And I had criticized them for not interviewing the right kinds of people and not approaching – not getting our slice of being at the table right and that I thought I could help them do that. And so we went through this long discussion about evangelicalism in America and how it worked, and I said you’ve got to get out of the Northeastern bubble because the South is very different than the Northeast, and the Midwest is even different than both of those and the West Coast is kind of its own deal, et cetera, and to their credit, they responded.

And actually that hour-and-a-half conversation has resulted in an ongoing 10-year relationship that I’ve had with them in which when they move now to do specials in certain areas where evangelicalism is involved, I’ll get an email or I’ll get a call. And they’ll say, “Darrell, this is the topic. This is what we’re thinking about doing with it. Who do you think has the expertise that we should talk to?” And that’s exactly the way it ought to work.

Yeah, I did the very same thing a number of years ago. Now, this goes back quite a bit, but many of our viewers might remember Nightline with Ted Koppel. And I’ve always thought Ted Koppel’s one of the most fair people I’ve ever been around.

It’s true.

But one time he put together kind of a point-counterpoint on origins, and he had Carl Sagan, PhD astrophysics in Cornell, and James Robison, a local pastor.

Right.

So I thought, This is not right. So I put together a letter that explained who some of the really articulate people on the idea of intelligent design were and had all sorts of different people sign it. And everybody that signed it had either a master’s degree or a PhD in the area of science and sent it to Ted Koppel.
It was well received and the next time they did kind of a point-counterpoint in origins, they had Harold Morowitz, who was one of my professors at Yale, a PhD biochemistry, and Duane Gish with the Institute for Creation Research, PhD University of California at Berkley in molecular biology, and that seemed very fair.

And so, again, it maybe illustrates, Darrell, the point. They are living in a bubble, as you just pointed out. They know certain people, but when it’s like “Oh, evangelicals. Well, I’ve heard of James Robison. I’ve heard of Jerry Falwell.” Now, of course, they know people like Darrell Bock and others, and you get a much more significant selection of people that show up on those programs. But it isn’t necessarily that they were trying to necessarily make Christians look like dummies although maybe one of the editors did, but they just simply didn’t know where to go and who to find. In the old days we used to say, “What’s on your Rolodex?”

Exactly right.

**Darrell Bock:** What’s on your computer or your contact sheet? And when we can help them find those individuals, I think it’s a better program for them and it’s much more honest interchange.

**Kerby Anderson:** Yeah, I think if you put the two things together that we just talked about, when you look at the sequencing of how many shows a person is doing, that Rolodex really does – I mean, they’re pressed for time. They’re going to go to someone that they know. Once that name’s in the Rolodex, they also have to assess, “Does this person interview well?”

That’s a good point.

**Kerby Anderson:** And so when they put that all together, they go back to the same names. And so it’s interesting that you use that expression because my experience has been after I’ve done an interview someone has said to me, “Well, you’ve gone onto my Rolodex.” And so that’s what happens and so they come back to you.
It’s funny, one of the things I complained about at ABC on the Jesus special that they did with Peter Jennings is here you put all these articulate scholars who teach in the universities and have studied Jesus all their life. And who were the two evangelical counters that you had in that show? You had a Louisiana pastor …

I know. It’s embarrassing.

Kerby Anderson:

… who took his group to Israel on the one hand. And then you had at the very end briefly, although you did give him almost a final word, Tom Wright. And that was it. And I said I think you could do better. So that’s exactly the kind of thing that happens.

Darrell Bock:

Here’s another example of the type of thing that sometimes happens, and this is interesting. This is another kind of personal example. I once did a show in relationship to Gnostic Christianity and Gnosticism. And they sent me this script they were working on to show me kind of where I was going to be slotted, which actually was pretty nice. Sometimes they just interview you. You don’t even know where the show’s going or anything. And she walked through it and when I saw it, I wrote her back and I said, “Well, you really only have one half of the story, and so when you come to interview me, I’m going to try and tell you the other half.”

And again, it was one of those things where we talked for a long time off camera before she ever filmed me, and then we got on camera and we did the filming. And the way she handled it was really clever because for about three-quarters of the story, what she did is she told the story she had in her original script, which was about the diversity of early Christianity and that Gnostic Christianity was one of the things that’s happening. And that’s said in universities all over the place all the time on this topic.
And then about three quarters of the way she turns it and she turned it into “But there’s another half to this story.” And then I have a line that I’ve used in this particular debate a lot in which I say the line that you often get is well, history’s written by the winners. And so the argument is well, we only know about Christianity what orthodox Christianity wants to tell us. That’s kind of the gist of that line. But there actually was a much bigger, much more complex story out there, a much more diverse story full of alternative Christianity, that kind of thing. And then my comeback line is yes, history’s written by the winners, but sometimes the winners deserve to win. And what I did on the film was to explain why it is that you can trace the roots of Christianity, orthodox Christianity, back to Jesus and the apostles and these other groups you can’t do that with them. You can’t get back that far.

So when she did this turn at the end, the last line on the program was this line of history’s written by the winners, but sometimes the winners deserve to win. And I got a note from Marvin Meyer. Now, you know who Marvin Meyer is.

I do.

*Kerby Anderson:*

He does a lot of writing on Gnosticism and has translated a lot of those texts. Dear guy, just passed away. And we’ve had exchanges. We’ve often been on opposite sides of the show. And he sent me an email and he said, “Darrell, you fox. You got that line in there.” And it capped off the show.

Sure.

*Kerby Anderson:*

But what that shows, the reason I’m using this illustration, is it shows the way in which some of the engagement that you have isn’t what people see on the television. It’s the conversations that you have –

*Very well said.*
Darrell Bock:

- back behind the scenes and the relationships that you build and
  the trust that you build that then allows them to take what you say
  and say, “All right, I don’t just have you on camera for the 30
  seconds or 45 seconds that I’m going to use you, but I’m actually
  interacting with what it is and you’re helping me get located in this
  area.”

Kerby Anderson:

And this is something also I might pass onto some of our viewers.
First of all, I like to do live because I know they’re not going to edit
me, but many times I’m taped for various films. I’ve done some of
these DVD films and things like that. Sometimes in the middle of
the interview I’ll say, you know, a better question might be da, da,
da, da, da and then have them do that because since it is taped, we
can pull that out. And if you have an individual that is really
uptight or insecure, that doesn’t work very well. But most of them
are looking for help because they know that you’re suggesting the
best question or the best comment. And then, to put it bluntly,
that’s where you can ask them to ask you a question that goes on
the screen and then you have your zinger, whatever it might be,
your good line, and that’s one they’re looking for because that’s
golden.

If you’ve got an ability to turn a phrase – and there’s some people
that are really good at that – Gary Bauer, for example, used to be
with Family Research Council, one of the best in the business. But
there are many other people that are really good at turning a phrase.
Sometimes they just cannot help themselves. Even if they don’t
like what you said, they just like the fact that it sounds so good.
And that line that you just used a minute ago, “sometimes the
winners deserve to win,” you know that’s going to be in the final
edit. So sometimes when you’re in front of a taping situation, you
can stop and suggest a question or say, “That’s a good question but
here’s another one you might want to ask.” And they’re quite
willing usually to take some of that direction and you in a sense
have a little control over the interview.

And in fact almost at the end of every interview I ever do, the
question that comes last is, “Is there anything that I haven’t asked
you that I should ask you?”

Darrell Bock:

Yes, should’ve asked you, yes.

Kerby Anderson:
Darrell Bock:

And so there’s always this opportunity to step in. And I think you’ve made another point that’s important and that is there’s a lot of difference between doing a live response and doing one that’s taped. Those are two different scenarios that you have to work through when you’re actually doing the interviews.

Another thing that I think is important is it’s important, particularly for what I would call short-term media, and that can be television or radio, where you’re in a limited crunch time. You don’t have a lot of time. They’re going to only talk about your topic for six minutes or whatever it is. It’s important to be crisp.

Kerby Anderson:

Yeah and I was just going to say that, too, because what you have to ask yourself is what is going to be the final product? If you’re doing, say, a morning show on a Christian radio station or even a secular station – because I’ve done NPR, I know you have as well – you know it’s going to be real quick. Now every once in awhile, [although] I will oftentimes bring a guest in for an hour, the other day I had Ron Rhodes on for two hours on a book and, boy, authors love that when you give them two full hours.

Did he read the whole book to you?

Darrell Bock:

Yeah but we go off the book as well because when I’ve got people as talented as you or others, I’ll give them an hour or two hours. I’ll have some people, if you will, dump a whole load of hay in the first segment and I’m going, “We’ve got seven more segments coming up here.”

Kerby Anderson:

Right.

Darrell Bock:

So recognize that in a morning show or a short interview you really do have to get to the point. Even if the question is off-target, you have to get to the point that you want to make and ask yourself if I only could make two or three points, it’s basically Homiletics 101.

Kerby Anderson:

Right, exactly.

Darrell Bock:
What do I want to say? But if you have a little more time, you can kind of build your case. And so I think recognize the difference between a short format and a long format.

I’ve also said that everybody has a story, but not everybody’s story lasts two hours. Some people’s stories told in 15 minutes, and so understand as well that you really maybe have a short testimony. You’re just going to give an answer to something that happened on the school board or talk about some aspect of cultural engagement. Maybe you can do that in five minutes and don’t be offended that after five minutes, they say thank you and move on.