



**Understanding**

by Sam Laing

**O**ur times have rightly been called "The Age of Information." The globe is literally linked and intertwined with a system of communication that makes neighbors of us all. Events geographically distant are seen, heard and written about at a speed that is mind-boggling.

As a part of a worldwide movement of heightening profile, disciples will increasingly confront and be confronted by this immense system of people and technology. How are we to understand it? How are we to prepare for it?

### Understanding the Power

The power of the news media is awesome. Everywhere we go, whatever we do, we are influenced by it. By and large, freedom of the press is a good thing. The benefits of unhindered examination and reporting of the deeds of the public and private sectors serves to protect people from fraud, hypocrisy and abuse of power. No one in his or her right mind or with a good heart would desire to shut down the freedom of expression and information.

But as the power of the media is a force for good, it has become a source of evil as well. The fact is that in those nations granting freedom of press, there is precious little provision for freedom from the press. If you doubt these words, witness the merciless effusion of verbal sewage from the screaming tabloid headlines at your local grocery store check-out line. What, or who, can protect public figures from such slander? The court system moves at a pace that can only be described as glacial, and when a case comes to trial, unless malicious

# the Media

**As a primary agent of modern culture, the media will certainly cover opposition to the Kingdom of God and often encourage it.**

intent can be proved, there is no conviction. And the abuses, alas, are not limited to the trashy tabloids; they pervade the established press as well.

Journalists must largely police themselves. Either from within a news organization itself the heart of integrity must call, or from competing networks or publications. Public outcry is a recourse, but *where does the public have to go to cry out, and where do they find out the truth to cry about?*

## Understanding the Mindset

Journalism never rises higher than when there is an objective, courageous reporting of truth. The problem is, the journalist's opinions and feelings often get in the way *but are presented as fact*. The preconditioning biases of the reporter or editor color their approach to, and handling of, a story. Even in quoting the words or showing a film of those they criticize, a skillful writer or editor can make the other person look just about any way they choose. In all of this writer's almost 19 years of ministry, in my many encounters with the press, I can count on one hand, the occasions where their minds were not already made up before we ever talked.

The mindset of the media is generally slanted against Bible-believing groups. Such people are usually presented as Archie Bunker types; money hungry, hypocritical and intellectually



limited. With the exposures of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, these attitudes have only been intensified.

If persecution is promised us by Jesus, then we must clearly understand that it will occur in the media as anywhere else. The early church experienced the power of rumor, fear and suspicion. "*But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers*" (Acts 14:2). Back then, by word of mouth; in our day, by the press!

## Understanding the Motives

Certainly many journalists take seriously their calling to report events truthfully and be guardians of the public interest. But they are human, and as such are beset with sinful, deceitful hearts, just like the rest of humanity (Jeremiah 17:9). The news

business *is a business*, after all, and the temptations of money often compel the media to be sensational and hasty so that they can sell more papers or draw more viewers. Careful television reporting seems relegated to the public broadcasting stations whose revenues are not tied so directly to the weekly viewer ratings. Deeper studies of events

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do not appeal to the fleshly appetites of the readers who are easily hooked by the publications with eye-catching, gossipy headlines.

Pride and hunger for prestige drives many a reporter looking to rise in their profession. If they can be the first one to get there, the first one to dig out the dirt, then they have won the respect of their peers and made a name for themselves. The example that most shamefully illustrates this is the case of a hoax perpetrated in 1980 by Janet Cooke, a reporter for the revered *Washington Post*. In a story entitled "Jimmy's World," on September 28, 1980, Cooke wrote of an 8-year-old heroine addict in Washington, D.C. She refused to reveal his true identity to police under First Amendment privileges to "protect" him and his family. Her editors, among them Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, reviewed her story and published it. It was later discovered that the piece was a fabrication and that her superiors had never checked out Cooke's sources. *Post* editors had begun to have serious doubts about the article, but still nominated Cooke for the Pulitzer Prize! She won, and two days later had to return it—the first time in the 64-year history of journalism's most prestigious honor that an award-winning story was discredited as a lie. In telling why the editors of *The Post* had recommended Cooke's article for the Pulitzer in the face of their doubts, city editor Milton Coleman, explained, "... it was a question of pride. We'd already presented the story on the front page of *The Post*." "A question of pride!" It took a national embarrassment to wring out the truth. Reporters and editors have egos and pride that deeply affect their choices, decision and words!

## Understanding the Methods

The methods are, of course, influenced by the motives. The motive "scooping" the rest of the media produces methods of sloppiness and shallowness that plague so much of modern journalism. The desire to sensationalize generates the use of buzz words that attract immediate attention. reference to "brainwashing" or "mind control" grabs the eye more than "persuade" or "convince." Using the term "cult" with well-placed reference to the Jonestown tragedy of 1978 raises more fear than talking about a church that calls people to be sincere disciples and go by the Bible alone.

The search for bad news and the "real" story "behind the scenes" creates a negative approach to life and to reporting. The idea is to search for the flaw, to find the grumbler, to find the malcontent, and to look for and create controversy. As disciples, we must never fear controversy or be surprised when it swirls about us. But this means that the news media will be able to whip up lots of it whenever they please and that they will look for and emphasize the stories not of the masses we have helped, but of the minority who have left with bitter feelings. That is their way.

We will have some good stories and features done about us, but be under no illusion—we must be prepared for the times when "... people will insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11). It has come, and will come through the multi-billion dollar, high tech pervasive media.

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The methods are, of course.

The power of the media, as we have already stated, is awesome. But there are greater powers in the world than any government, any amount of money, or any number of people. Those powers are the powers of love, of righteous lives, of truth and, ultimately, of God himself. No power of man or of Satan can stop the advance of God's Kingdom if we remain loyal to Jesus Christ in doctrine, in life, in faith and in speech. Because, after all, only the truth ultimately survives, and only the truth can set us free. **D**

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Grossberger with Lucy Howard, "The Pulitzer Prize Hoax," *Newsweek* (April 27, 1981), pp. 62-63.