



A BIASED PRESS

By Monroe S. Miller

When you're a newspaper junkie like I am, one of the great things about a trip is the chance to read papers from towns and cities all along your travel route. I must have read four dozen different newspapers this fall while travelling in the east.

It is easy to pick up differences in the way papers report local and regional news. Editorial pages reflect much about the personality of the newspaper and even more about its politics. Newspapers are as different and individualistic as their names—*The Courant*, *The Blade*, *The Banner*, *The Plain Dealer*, *The Globe*.

Unfortunately, most have one glaring characteristic in common. They all tend to focus on negative reports. This is hardly a new or startling observation, I suppose.

We see it all the time in reporting on pesticide news and issues. Zealots make unfounded charges; papers and electronic media rush to report the accusations. We're left with the nearly impossible task of trying to prove a negative.

I've seen reporters do it many times. An outdoor person claims bird damage but cannot produce documentation. Someone else claims headaches due to our activities but hasn't even seen a doctor. Yet in both cases the news

reports carry the undocumented charges and the implication of guilt.

Rod Johnson recently witnessed the same types of people "use" news reporters during legislative hearings at the Capitol. The most flagrant instance was the toxic terrorist who wore a respirator only when someone from the media was present. Press people, of course, took the bait.

Recently, I read a report in the *Boston Globe* that spoke to biased reporting. Two Toronto investigators analyzed how North American newspapers handled two studies on nuclear radiation hazards that the investigators considered equally valid.

The studies were published last March in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. One study had a "positive" outcome. It showed there was a 63% increased leukemia rate among workers at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

The other study had a "negative" result—no increased risk of cancer among people living near nuclear power plants.

Seventeen major newspapers published reports on the two studies. Nine ignored the good news story with negative results and most of the rest made only a short note of it. Only three gave equal weight to both stories.

This study merely verifies what we know to be true all too often—good news is no news. This kind of bias against negative studies gives readers an unbalanced picture of controversial issues.

So why am I making this point in *THE GRASS ROOTS*? Simple. The study described is exactly what happens all the time in our business. Issues dealing with groundwater, plant protectants and controls, runoff and a host of others receive no attention in the press unless there is some hint of "bad news".

This study points out why it is difficult to talk about the positives and enormous contributions of golf and golf courses. The press simply won't report such.

The implications are obvious. We must redouble our efforts at public education in Wisconsin. We must use all means available to us to pressure reporters to give more attention to our side of environmental issues. We must work harder at pointing out the gross absurdities and complete falsehoods promoted by the other side on behalf of their agenda.

Failure to confront and deal with a biased press on issues critical to the game, to us professionally and personally, and to society in general will have dire consequences.

The saddest part is that those consequences would be so unnecessary.

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