

Study: News overplays religious conservatives: Liberal bias debunked

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The mainstream news media, derided by some critics as liberally biased, actually overemphasizes the importance of religious conservatives, according to findings announced by two progressive-oriented groups based in Washington.

Media Matters for America and Faith in Public Life released the report, "Left Behind: The Skewed Representation of Religion in the Major News Media," at a May 29 news conference. It said that between the 2004 elections and the end of 2006, prominent conservative religious leaders were interviewed, quoted or mentioned 2.8 times more than were prominent moderate or liberal religious leaders.

When considering only television news, the disparity was higher: for every story that mentioned or quoted a religious progressive, 3.8 stories mentioned or quoted conservatives. The difference was less dramatic in newspaper stories, but conservatives still outnumbered progressives by more than two to one.

"Despite the fact most religious Americans are moderate or progressive, in the news media it is overwhelmingly conservative leaders who are presented as the voice of religion," the report's authors asserted. "This represents a particularly meaningful distortion, since progressive religious leaders tend to focus on different issues and offer an entirely different perspective than their conservative counterparts."

At least one conservative journalism watchdog group dismissed the study, saying its sponsorship and methodology compromised it.

Media Research Council spokesperson Robert Knight said the study left out some important liberal religious leaders who often are quoted or appear on newscasts. He cited the absence of Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and V. Gene Robinson, the gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire.

The study's list of moderate and liberal leaders whose appearances were tallied "is missing some key people, who, if included, would eclipse any perceived advantage in coverage garnered by conservatives," he said, according to CNSNews.com, the Media Research Council's news arm.

The study tallied media appearances by or mentions of 10 religious conservatives and 10 religious progressives.

The conservatives were Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, Franklin Graham of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Christian activist and former GOP presidential candidate Gary Bauer, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson, former National Association of Evangelicals president Ted Haggard, Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America, Tom Minnery of Focus on the Family, Ohio pastor Rod Parsley and Bill Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

The progressives were Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* magazine, San Francisco rabbi Michael Lerner, National Council of Churches head Bob Edgar, Baptist sociologist and author Tony Campolo, David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, nun and *National Catholic Reporter* columnist Joan Chittister, Louisiana Baptist pastor and Interfaith Alliance head Welton Gaddy, John Thomas of the United Church of Christ, "emerging church" leader Brian McLaren of Maryland and James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York.

The study set aside several religious "celebrities" who receive frequent media attention but who themselves are often newsmakers rather than commentators. They were Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, James Dobson and the late Jerry Falwell.

The study found that, in the period studied, Sharpton and Jackson received significantly more media attention than the three conservative celebrities combined. But the study's authors reckoned they were not in the same category as the others studied.

"Although they are sometimes called on to provide commentary about political and social issues, each one of the religious leaders in this category also regularly drives news stories," the report said. "They become active participants in events rather than simply commenting on them. When they do comment, their statements are newsworthy simply because they are making them, rather than representing a

‘religious’ perspective. In other words, these five are more political actors than political commentators.”

Katie Barge, spokesperson for Faith in Public Life, said the relative news attention given to the 20 leaders presents a true picture of how the media provide a religious perspective that overrepresents conservative views. On the question of leaving out the five celebrity newsmakers, she contended that “the media is not calling them to give a perspective on the religious matters of the day.”

Knight’s group and other conservative groups also said the study was unreliable because Media Matters and Faith in Public Life favor liberal causes.

Media Matters is a group established to challenge what it views as rampant “conservative misinformation” in the mainstream media. Bob Edgar, one of the 10 progressives on the list, who joined the National Press Club news conference to describe the findings, said that “this research from Media Matters proves” his longtime opinion that U.S. news media give disproportionate coverage to religious conservatives.

While Barge said Faith in Public Life does not align itself politically, the group was pleased to cosponsor the press conference. “We want a balance,” she said.

One religion and media analyst suggested that the study probably underestimated the imbalance. Carl Kell, a communications professor at Western Kentucky University, said conservatives are overexposed in religion stories because it’s “easy to find” representatives of “a religious community that has hard-edged, sharp perspectives on faith and life.” *-Associated Baptist Press*