

# Why Media Bias Matters

✘ As you may know, Bill O'Reilly doesn't have much faith in what passes for the mainstream media. The other night, in a conversation with me on The Factor, he said this:

"Folks know that the media is dishonest, that the media now is not in the business to report the news anymore. They're there to advance an ideological agenda. So, if the folks know it, all the polls say they know it, that means that the press is not going to have any real influence on the elections this time around." Then he asked what I thought.

I said even liberals know the press has an agenda, that it takes sides, and that while coverage favoring President Obama might influence less sophisticated voters, the influence would be minor and would not affect the outcome of the election.

That prompted a blog from somebody named Erik Wemple who writes under the banner of the Washington Post. "So if the impact of media bias is so trivial, why do these guys [O'Reilly and me] harp on it each week?" he asked.

You might think that someone who writes for an important news organization like the Washington Post would understand why media bias is important. Alas, he doesn't.

First, Bill and I don't "harp" on the subject of media bias. We discuss it. A small point, perhaps, but not to me. Second, I have never said that media bias is "trivial." That's how Wemple characterizes it hoping we'll drop the subject and move on to something less threatening. Don't hold your breath, Erik.

Here's why media bias is important, even though it may not affect the next – or the last, or possibly any – presidential election: In a free country we have to have a free press. Everybody knows that. But you can't have a free country

forever if you don't also have a *fair* press.

In a free country, people depend on the media for their information about government and other powerful institutions. If the press sounds the alarm about some danger, people have to pay attention. But if they have lost confidence in the press – because of its biases – then there's a good chance we'll ignore the warning. And that could be dangerous.

While I was writing *A Slobbering Love Affair*, my 2009 book about the media's crush on Barack Obama, I talked to political analyst Pat Caddell, and asked for his thoughts about the mainstream media.

They were more biased than ever, he said, before launching into a bit of history to put the current mess into perspective. "There is one institution in America which has no checks and balances," he told me. "And that is the press. And there was a reason for that. It wasn't that the Founding Fathers loved the press. It was because the press was supposed to protect the country. *That's* why Jefferson said, 'I would much rather have newspapers without a government than a government without newspapers.'

"But [when the media] leave the ramparts and become a partisan outrider for one party or the other or one candidate or the other; essentially [deciding] who should be president and who should not be president; what truth people should know and what truth they should not know; then what they become, what they constitute, is a threat to democracy."

Imagine, Caddell told me, that one day a demagogue comes along and decides to run for president. Imagine that he "gets up at the start of his campaign and says, 'I want you to see the press. They are the enemy of the American people. They will do everything they can to stop me because they want to stop *you*.' And the American people will believe it. What if this is the most dangerous man that ever came along? Nobody will

care what the press says.”

That, Erik Wemple of the Washington Post, is why bias in the media matters.