

BOOK REVIEWS

Eleanor MacLean

**Between the Lines:
How to Detect Bias and Propaganda
in the News and Everyday Life**
Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981.

Reviewed by
Graham Knight
McMaster University

Between the Lines is organized along the lines of an instruction manual that attempts to provide a critical look at the content and structuring of the broad range of messages produced by the mass media. Although the accent is on Canada, the global character of communications means that sources and examples are drawn from other than Canadian media. The discussion is concerned primarily with news, but takes in other forms of communication such as advertising, corporate publicity, and commentary journalism. The general theme tying this together is a desire to instruct the reader in ways to detect bias and what is referred to as "unclear thinking" in the continuous stream of communication that we are typically subject to in modern society. The moral purpose informing this goal is classically liberal: the assumption that people need to be well-informed about what is going on around them, and equipped with the capacity for critical thinking and independent judgement.

The book outlines and discusses the usual ways in which "bias" is constructed, such as edit-

ing, the selective use of citations, reliance on particular types of source for data and opinion, and, most basically, the use and abuse of language. These are all given ample illustration, particularly with reference to news coverage (and lack of coverage) of the Third World. Particularly instructive is the discussion of a feature article carried in the now-defunct *Weekend* magazine dealing with the black liberation war in Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia) which shows the manifold ways in which power is inscribed into public discourse. This overall concern with message content is complemented with a look at the growing concentration of media power in Canada (the statistics are now a little dated, but the basic trends remain the intact), and discussion of some of the control implications of this for what we daily see and hear.

While the book provides a useful introduction to its subject, there is something rather obvious about the choice of materials for illustration. For example, in the case of the infant formula milk controversy, it is hardly surprising to find a pro-corporate stance being taken in a place like *Fortune* magazine. Similarly, the general attention paid to news bias in coverage of the Third World is not unexpected given that this is an area where the performance of the Canadian media is notoriously perilous at best. What this points to, however, is a deeper and more problematic weakness of the book: the absence of a coherent theoretical and methodological position. This is evident throughout in the rather incidental manner in which the topic is discussed. Of course, it is always possible to pick out examples of news manipulation by sources, editors, and journalists; the point, however, is to be able to show how discrete instances fit into a larger picture of production that renders public discourse at once quite realistic and profoundly ideological.

Yet this larger picture is missing. In encouraging the reader to interrogate the messages of the mass media the book fails to subject its own presuppositions to critical scrutiny. Objective reality is consigned to inverted commas, and discourse reduced to pure subjectivity. To head off the logical conclusion of this relativistic idealism that all forms of representation are biased in that they are necessarily partial, the text resorts to the simplistic, if not fatuous, distinction between "propaganda," "bias," and "point of view" based on the intentions of the speaker and his or her openness to other perspectives. Predictably, those with "points of view" emerge as the moral favorites. They do not mask their true intentions and interests, and remain amenable to persuasion from other views. In other words, the book is about taking professional journalism to task for not practicing fully enough the lofty moral ideals it preaches -- objectivity, balance, and thoroughness in covering all angles. What is missing from this, however, is precisely any recognition of the fundamentally ideological character of this methodological position. The book's idealism conforms to the dominant ideology of discourse as purely subjective, prized off from the objective world and floating above it in some more or less indeterminate relation of circulation and distribution (the media are "vehicles of mass culture", for example) that occults real production and reproduction.

Between the Lines works best at the elementary level, as an introduction to the structuring of communication, though here too it is marred by a cluttered layout that detracts from continuity and makes a coherent reading hard to sustain. Certainly those concerned to address the more complex theoretical and methodological issues involved in the analysis of news, or discourse in general, will still need to look elsewhere.