Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals. *By David M. Haskell.* Toronto: Clements Academic, 2009. 289 pp. ISBN 9781894667920.

Studying news is a guarantee against running out of research ideas. Who could have predicted the uproar over the behaviour of a Canadian prime minister at a Catholic funeral for a former Governor General? Perhaps only David Haskell, author of a new book, *Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals,* that examines how Canadian journalists report on evangelical Christians.

Set against a backdrop that includes media criticism in 2000 of the creationist beliefs of former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day, David Haskell draws not only on a major study of ten years of transcripts of national Canadian television news reporting (from Global, CTV and CBC), but also on his own experience as a journalist.

John Schmalzbauer's excellent 2003 book, *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in American Journalism and Higher Education,* treads similar territory. But there is little research on the attitudes of Canadian journalists with regard to religion, which makes Haskell's work noteworthy.

Haskell takes the necessary first step of defining and describing evangelicals, his research into media coverage, and how the Canadian context differs from that of the United States. It is an important exercise given the prevalence of Canadian reporting on the American "Christian right" and the relationship of groups like Focus on the Family to the U.S. Republican Party. However, in Haskell's discussion of the Canadian media response to Stockwell Day, elements of the history of the now reconstituted Conservative Party go unnoticed. Readers who are unaware of the history of the Progressive Conservative party's merger with (takeover by?) the Canadian Alliance may miss the nuances involved. It could be argued that opinion polls suggesting unease with a Conservative Party headed by evangelicals were a natural development following the political demise of the likes of Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney. These former prime ministers were never confused by a communion wafer; as with the majority of Liberal leaders, they were Catholic. In this context, it is easier to understand how a long-standing tie between Catholic or mainstream Protestantism and Red Tory leadership might be seen as paralleled by evangelical Christianity and right-leaning social policy. Tommy Douglas becomes the exception proving the rule, followed by the public and, to some extent, by journalists.

The author uses framing theory to analyze television news coverage from January 1994 to January 2005. Despite its longitudinal strengths, one of the limits of the study is a reliance on transcripts. Haskell is right to decry the difficulties researchers face when trying to access audio-visual materials from Canadian news organizations. But it would be helpful to have an acknowledgement of the repercussions of using text alone when analyzing television reporting. What might it mean to hear the accent of a speaker, or to see the general age of a congregation when a researcher is trying to determine whether a news report suggests that evangelicals are un-Canadian or out of touch? In reporting on Stephen Harper's actions at the July 2009 funeral of Roméo

LeBlanc, clear video of the PM either consuming or pocketing the communion host would have been golden. But, by itself, a transcript of the original event alone would have missed the story completely. Working from transcripts can provide only partial sense of a television report.

Haskell's first important finding is just how few stories dealt with evangelicals during the ten years under review—only 119 stories among the three national newscasts. Averaging around a measly twelve stories per year, there can be little doubt that using Haskell's methods of identification, evangelical Canadians are seldom seen on national news. CTV audiences would have viewed twice as many stories on evangelicals as those watching CBC TV, and the public broadcaster's Neil Macdonald comes in for special criticism. About 54 per cent of the stories identified dealt with a conflict between evangelical and scientific or cultural thinking. Another 29 percent of stories involved political actions and issues. The lack of reporting on charitable work (research has suggested evangelicals are more generous than other Canadians) is particularly troubling to Haskell. But he notes that conflict, not good works, is the grist of the journalistic mill. While the research found some reports that portrayed these Christians as somewhat intolerant, politically threatening, un-Canadian and unintelligent, overall, the frame analysis suggests a neutral approach to reporting on evangelicals.

In the preface, Haskell makes a point of identifying himself as a Christian in accordance with the early church, a strategy of openness, which he recommends to journalists as a means of identifying potential biases. With the exception of some striking suggestions – that identifying evangelicals among Canadians is analogous to appreciating light in the darkness – it is to the author's credit that most of the book keeps to neutral ground.

But Haskell might have had an easier time getting a camel through the eye of a needle than he did in getting journalists to go on the record about their own religious perceptions and practices. In order to gauge the ways in which journalists know and think about Canadian evangelicals, the author conducted surveys with ten CBC, seven CTV, and four Global journalists. While just 21 of 97 candidates responded, the replies offer an interesting and descriptive look. It may well be that those who did respond self-selected for a particular bias for or against Christianity (14 of the 21 claimed not to practice religion, and only two identified as evangelical), but their comments with regard to evangelicals' take on homosexuality was telling. Haskell makes a convincing argument that the most significant rift occurs between the worldviews of journalists and evangelicals when human rights and equality claims intersect with religious dogma. The Canadian debate over same-sex marriage was most likely what occasioned an "intolerance" frame in the stories analyzed by his team.

In addition to the core task of analyzing television coverage, Haskell includes studies of potential audience reception of evangelicals and a look at Canadian newspaper coverage of the same-sex marriage debate. While interesting to read, it would have been useful to synthesize these studies with the larger project, including a consideration of the way in which news decisions are made by broadcast versus newspaper journalists. Particularly for those who have not worked in these settings, it would

be informative to discuss the ways in which stories are assigned, reported, edited, and produced. It is too easy for the reporter who appears in the byline or on screen to take all the blame for sins of omission and commission.

The reader is left in no doubt that Haskell's intent is not only to investigate and describe the current state of affairs, but also to improve the relationship between evangelicals and Canadian journalists. Such engaged scholarship befits someone who now schools budding journalists, and is completely in keeping with the project. Although the majority of the book interrogates journalism and journalists, it does not let evangelicals off the hook, suggesting that they adopt some basic public relations strategies and accountability when dealing with financial church matters.

Haskell's good news is that the view of Canadian evangelicals through the journalistic lens is not in fact as dark as one might think. But it does have a very narrow aperture. *Through a Lens Darkly* allows and invites room for more research from those interested in considering the intersection of media, religion, and politics from a Canadian perspective.

Reference

Schmalzbauer, John. (2003). *People of faith: religious conviction in American journalism and higher education.* New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

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