

**“God’s Objective Truth, As Far As We Know It”: Journalism Ideology  
At An Evangelical News Magazine**

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Abstract

Ideology has been a major topic of journalism research for the past several decades. This ethnographic study looks at the underlying ideology of a major evangelical publication, the bi-monthly *WORLD* magazine. Thirteen staff members were interviewed, and a year’s worth of content was analyzed, to find the overarching beliefs that inform the magazine’s reporters and editors, and the work that they produce. The results indicate that the journalists’ ideology can be organized into seven major themes, and that the journalists see themselves as humbly doing God’s work while being persecuted in a largely secular, liberal society as part of the “culture wars” in American life. At the same time, the journalists were found to only loosely apply the “biblical objectivity” concept that the magazine’s editor, Dr. Marvin Olasky, considers so essential to evangelical journalism. This study provides unique and previously unavailable information on several topics within the study of journalism, newsroom ideology, and evangelical Americans, and represents the first study of evangelical Christian journalists to combine interviews with textual analysis to look at the ideology that shapes their perspectives, motivations, and routines, and the content they produce.

Keywords: ideology, evangelical journalists, culture wars

**Introduction**

Over the past several decades, a considerable amount of research has focused on how journalists understand and perform their work. There has been widespread agreement, among such scholars as Pamela J. Shoemaker, Stephen D. Reese, Todd

Gitlin and Herbert J. Gans, that the motivations, habits and performances of journalists are strongly shaped by an overarching ideology that informs reporters, editors and managers in making decisions about coverage and content.

Hall (1996) describes ideology as “the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the system of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works” (pp. 25-26). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) write that mainstream news producers’ ideology emphasizes American values, which include “the belief in the values of the capitalist economic system, private ownership, pursuit of profit by self-interested entrepreneurs, and free markets” (p. 224). Gitlin and Gans agree with this perspective. Gans (1979) writes that American journalists are driven by a “paraideology” that puts the profession in service to such enduring American values as social order and individualism (p. 68).

Significantly, these values do not include journalists emphasizing the importance of religious freedom or any particular religion. This study contributes to the understanding of news sociology and modern religious journalism by detailing the motivations, work routines, and content produced by a small group of self-consciously religion-based journalists who seek to balance their professional lives between two competing ideologies that influence journalism performance. In doing so, this study focuses what it means to be an evangelical Christian journalist producing journalism that meets the high standards emphasized in mainstream

journalism with a belief in the importance of biblical scripture, God as mankind's savior, and the importance of proselytizing for Christianity.

This topic is addressed via an ethnographic case study of one evangelical Christian publication, *WORLD* magazine. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, *WORLD* is a bi-weekly publication that includes news articles, features, and commentary on world events, as well as sports and arts and entertainment, news coverage and criticism. With a circulation of 85,000, *WORLD* is the sixth most popular evangelical publication in the United States, according to Christianity.about.com. *WORLD*'s editor-in-chief is Dr. Marvin Olasky, a prominent figure in evangelical and conservative thought in the United States. Olasky is "widely regarded as the godfather of 'compassionate conservatism,'" a term embraced by President George W. Bush in the late 1990s (Grann, 1999, ¶ 1,4).

In *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism*, Olasky offers a distinct ideology for evangelical journalists, "biblical objectivity," as a way to fight against "secular liberal culture, which is the dominant social, political and philosophical force in America today" (Olasky, 1996, p. 19). Such a God-centered, scripture-based ideology, he writes, is a "commitment to proclaiming God's objective truth as far as we know it" (p. 45). In setting out his case for biblical objectivity as the way for Christian journalists to approach their work and challenge the secular liberal perspective, Olasky clearly sets the magazine and its journalists apart. He describes *WORLD* as the shining example of a publication that functions both in adherence to the most important concepts and standards of mainstream

journalism, and in direct opposition to an ideology that serves mainstream American culture.

Both immediately after *Telling the Truth* was published in 1996, and in subsequent years, Olasky's biblical objectivity ideology has been controversial in both academic and mainstream journalism circles. While several authors, such as Hoover (1998) and Schultze, (2003) praise Olasky and the biblical objectivity concept, others, including Stafford (1996) and Mattingly (1997) have dismissed both. In a *Christianity Today* review of *Telling the Truth*, Stafford compared biblical objectivity to what he said is an old journalism saying: "I already have the story; I just need some quotes" (Stafford, 1996, ¶ 16).

This study emphasizes how *WORLD* journalists not only describe and perform their work from the perspective of evangelical Christians, but also how they produce stories and *WORLD* as a whole within the ideological prism of Olasky's biblical objectivity concept, and how doing so is in conflict with what they see as a largely secular, immoral society.

In his seminal work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973) writes that the purpose of an "ethnographic account" is to "capture primitive facts in faraway places" and "clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise" (p. 16). Recent years have seen an increasing number of ethnographic studies of a variety of news organizations, from online content producers (Paterson, 2008) to a newspaper led by women (Everbach, 2006) to an alternative newspaper in a large American city (Hindman, 1998).

None of these studies have examined a news organization defined by the religious beliefs of its members. As a result, to date there have been no studies that focus on the topic proposed in the current study: to use ethnographic research to describe the beliefs, routines and content of a religion-based, evangelical Christian publication. As a result, this study provides unique and previously unavailable information on not only *WORLD* and Olasky's biblical objectivity concept, but also on the ideology of a vital, and controversial, alternative journalism publication.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review provides information on a number of topics vital to this study, including evangelical journalism, normative and biblical objectivity and the different "classes" of biblical objectivity. The review concludes with the research questions that will guide this study.

### **Evangelical Journalism**

Olasky situates his argument for biblical objectivity in today's evangelical Christian journalism as the current manifestation of the history of Christians, journalists and non-journalists alike, challenging powerful officials. In calling for improved, and aggressive, modern evangelical journalism, he describes himself and his mission as a throwback to everyone from Martin Luther to American Puritan Increase Mather. Just as he and his staff are doing now, these men fought for Christian beliefs. He also writes that, in a sense, Jesus Christ was the first Christian journalist, given that his "emphasis on trusting the Father in heaven contrasted so sharply with Rome's *official story* of governmental power and wisdom" (Olasky, 1996, pp. 49, 51, 53, 56, 103, italics in original).

Olasky also decries what he calls the modern era of American journalism, “when leading American journalists forgot what their predecessors had learned about man and God, and began to contend that man could be God,” an era that, he writes, was ushered in largely by men such as Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst and Walter Lippmann. These men advanced a “message of hope through science and material progress, evenly distributed by benign government agents” (Olasky, 1996, pp. 209-221).

Evangelicals being ridiculed by mainstream newspapers during the Scopes trial of 1925 caused them to “withdraw from the wider culture” (Hendershot, 2004, p. 25). The result was a rise in evangelical media products over the next several decades, ranging from radio stations to magazines. The 1956 founding of *Christianity Today* by the Rev. Billy Graham was a pivotal moment in evangelical journalism because it served as a popular forum for generating “serious discussions about the intersection of evangelical Christianity with American culture” (Schultze, 2003, p. 126).

Since the resurgence of evangelicals in the United States in the 1960s, a plethora of evangelical cultural products have emerged as a way of conservative Christians pushing back against the “culture wars” that continue to divide Americans along basic liberal-Democrat/conservative-Republican fault lines. These products include everything from Christian bookstores to films to music to novels.

Evangelical media outlets have experienced enormous growth, including the Christian Broadcasting Network, thousands of religious radio stations, and dozens of local/regional evangelical newspapers (Blake, 2005, pp. 32-35). The huge variety of

Christian media means that believers can “live culturally in a parallel universe alongside secular society . . . They can talk sports scores and Hollywood gossip with non-Christian coworkers and still rely on a safety net of information and inspiration coming from their own media institutions” (Diamond, 1998, p. 48).

### **Normative and Biblical Objectivity**

Objectivity, at least in theory, “guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report on the facts . . . According to the objectivity norm the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called ‘news ‘ without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way” (Schudson, 2001, p. 150). At the same time, news is assembled by the routine process of reporting, writing, and editing that favors the “needs of certain social groups and disfavors those of others” (Moloch & Lester, 1974, p. 106).

Those “others” often include those in power, including elites in business and politics. Numerous studies have found that American journalism favors such groups, from “officials and experts” during political coverage (Peer and Ettema, 1998, p. 257) to the country’s overall “sense of national identity and collective memory” (Harp and Bachmann, 2013, p. 8) to politicians and the American form of democracy (Entman, 2010, p. 390). The result is that newsmakers’ ideology is “inherited by reflex from the dominant political culture” and thus has a “distinctive ideological view” (Bennett, 1982, p. 303).

This is exactly the argument that Olasky has made for the need for a separate ideology for Christian journalists, instead of relying on the standards of a profession with a worldview that supports a government and a society that have become far

too secular and liberal. In his view, there is currently a battle for America's soul between Christians and those that are irreligious/secular/liberal and, as a result, there is no middle ground between how the mass media and the Christian media should report the news. "The key for all Christian journalists is to study the Bible and to emphasize its themes of sin and redemption rather than our own feeble attempts to arrive at what is called 'objectivity'" (Olasky, 1999, ¶ 9).

He operationalizes Christian journalists applying a "God's-eye view" to their reporting by organizing biblical objectivity into "classes" of stories:

1. *"Class one: explicit biblical embrace or condemnation."*
2. *"Class two: clearly implicit biblical position."*
3. *"Class three: partisans of both sides quote Scripture but careful study allows biblical conclusions."*
4. *"Class four: biblical understanding backed by historical experience."*
5. *"Class five: biblical sense of human nature."*
6. *"Class six: Navigable only by experts, who might themselves be overturned."*

(Olasky, 1996, p. 23-24, italics in original).

This method, he writes, means Christian journalists do not have to worry about falling "into relativism or situational ethics . . . because its sole ethic is to reflect biblical positions." This is possible because biblical objectivity assumes that there is, in the end, a singular "true truth" that hinges on God's word and biblical teachings. "We are either God centered or man centered," and that is where, for him, the truth of every event or issue lies (Olasky, 1996, p. 25).

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer two research questions.

Research Question 1: How do the journalists at *WORLD* magazine fuse normative journalism routines and standards with their beliefs as evangelical Christians?

Research Question 2: How do these journalists apply Marvin Olasky's concept of biblical objectivity to their work?

This study's introduction and literature review establish the basis for these research questions and their appropriateness for this study. This includes providing information on mainstream journalism objectivity; the importance of Olasky's biblical objectivity concept as a unique guideline for how evangelical journalists should perform their work; and the framework for applying this concept on a daily basis. This study's next section will discuss the method by which the author collected and analyzed the information that served as the basis of both the results and discussion sections.

### **Method**

This study takes a qualitative approach to communication research. Carey (1975) describes qualitative research as "studying the particular rituals, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life" (p. 190). In this case, the author is seeking to understand how the staff writers and editors at *WORLD* magazine interpret their work as Christian journalists and apply Marvin Olasky's biblical objectivity standard.

The specific approach, analyzing interviews with the journalists and one year of the magazine, goes to the heart of ethnographic content analysis, which Altheide (1996) describes as “how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis” (p. 2). A researcher’s interpretation of material is the cornerstone of qualitative research, which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe as when “knowledge of social reality emerges from the fundamental interdependence that exists between researchers and those they study. Researchers do not use methodological instruments. They *are* the instrument” (p. 9, italics in original).

The author collected, organized, categorized and interpreted both the opinions and observations of the *WORLD* staff members, and a selection of their work, to answer the study’s two research questions. This research satisfies the definition of a case study supplied by Yin (2009), who wrote that such studies “investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). Within the broad context of the research questions, the interviewees were also asked to comment on a variety of subtopics to provide a greater understanding of how the journalists see their work. These subtopics are in the Appendix.

At the same time, the previous year of *WORLD* magazine was analyzed by using the method that Altheide (1996) describes as “ethnographic content analysis,” which means that “documents are studied to understand culture – or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society” (pp. 2, 13, 16). This was done via Altheide’s 12-step process that includes categorizing the material, deciding on a “sampling rationale

and strategy,” and finding key words and concepts (pp. 32-44). The process is designed to discover the “meaning and emphasis” of the material being studied by discovering the “frame, theme, and discourse” of the documents. These “overlapping” concepts look at the underlying messages therein. He defines discourse as “the parameters of relevant meaning that one uses to talk about things” (pp. 28, 31).

The collected data was analyzed via grounded theory, which Glaser and Strauss (1967) write is “*how the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research – can be furthered.*” This is a matter of “providing us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications” (p. 1, italics in original). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) write that grounded theory involves personal interpretation of the material as it is collected, organized and, finally, discussed in the study, mainly via “*constant-comparative method,*” a way of “comparing units of data with each other” (pp. 250-251, italics in original). The researcher coded the narratives in the interviews to find “cultural and interpersonal patterns in talk, stories, media content, and other narrative texts” (p. 249). In addition, the researcher’s interpretation of the material was informed by an understanding of how the data is related to several concepts that have been discussed in the previous chapters, including journalism ideology and objectivity.

The ultimate goal is to find themes in the material – in this case, the interviews with the *WORLD* journalists and the documents – that can be understood, and then written, “in particularly arresting or insightful ways.” Among the devices Lindlof and Taylor (2011) list for interpretation are metaphors, ironic expressions,

and, perhaps most important, exemplars (or examples), the last of which are a “segment of data used to shape and advance an argument” (pp. 266-269).

This means that a single incident, example, or event, or a collection of related incidents, examples, or events, are used to illustrate larger points or concepts. For this study, the researcher used quotes and examples – including published stories that the interviewees selected – of how they see and execute their jobs at *WORLD*, and to make larger points about their work as evangelical journalists working with Olasky and his biblical objectivity concept and six different classes of stories.

### **Results**

The research used to gather the information to answer this study's research questions is two-fold. First, the author conducted interviews with 13 members of the *WORLD* staff in April and May 2013, both in Asheville and Charlotte, North Carolina, and by phone. Second, the author analyzed one year of the print edition of *WORLD* magazine, beginning in July 2012 and ending in June 2013.

The staff members interviewed included: Editor-in-chief Dr. Marvin Olasky, founder Joel Belz, Vice President Warren Cole Smith, Chief Executive Officer Kevin Martin, managing editor Tim Lamer, editor/reporter Mindy Belz, news editor/reporter Jamie Dean, senior writer Susan Olasky, senior writer Lynn Vincent, reporter Emily Belz, and correspondents Sophia Lee, Angela Lu, and Tiffany Owens.

The author analyzed 24 issues of *WORLD*'s print edition, which is published twice per month. Seven different parts of each issue of *WORLD* were selected for analysis. These include Joel Belz's column; Mindy Belz's column; Marvin Olasky's column; Olasky's Q&A interview; each issue's cover story (which highlights the most

important news events and trends the magazine is covering, including gay marriage, abortion, and the persecution of Christians around the world); the Dispatches news story; and the main news story. The main news story is typically longer and more in-depth than the Dispatches items, but briefer than the cover story.

### **Research Question 1**

The interviewees' answers were often remarkably similar, reflecting a true, if informal, consensus of attitude and perspective. Similarly, the analysis of *WORLD* revealed that the issues, perspectives, and interview subjects remained remarkably consistent from issue to issue and story to story. As a result, it is possible to organize the answer to Research Question 1 around a series of themes that emerge from the interviews, and to display how these are reflected in the magazine's content. These are listed and detailed below.

#### *Journalism as a holy calling and a uniquely Christian profession*

Several staffers, including Joel Belz, Smith and Vincent, underscore the idea of modern enemies – including the mainstream media, the current administration of President Barack Obama, the popularity of secular/liberal thought, and the rising force of Muslims – threatening Christians around the world by discussing journalism as what Smith calls “Christian stewardship.” Smith says he is “bearing witness for God” to what he sees around him. “The Bible is a book of journalism more than a book of history. In Revelation Jesus comes to John and says, ‘Write down what you see.’ That’s what journalism does” (personal communication, April 16, 2013).

*WORLD is neither conservative nor liberal*

This sense of reporting from a Christian perspective is underscored by the widely held belief among *WORLD* staffers that they view the world from a position that de-emphasizes the American political system – which, they say, hinges on the beliefs of and contrasts between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans. As Christians, they are holding themselves above this fray and trying to work in accordance with more eternal teachings, standards and beliefs.

“Both secular liberal and conservatives’ understanding of people are in materialistic terms,” says Susan Olaksy (personal communication, April 3, 2013). “We see that people are created in the image of God. We remind people that this matters.”

Through these interviews, it is evident that the difference between evangelical Christian and secular journalists is seen at *WORLD* as not ability or daily routines or quality of work – several of the interviewees, in fact, praised the quality of the reporting and writing of many mainstream journalism outlets – but rather of purpose and meaning. They see themselves as carrying on the traditions of a variety of biblical figures who informed the faithful about threats from outside the “walls” of Christian beliefs and the need to protect a like-minded community of believers.

*The meta-narrative: creation, fall and redemption*

At the heart of the viewpoint of *WORLD* staffers about the mission of Christian journalists is the biblical narrative of mankind’s creation, fall and, it is hoped, eventual redemption and salvation by God. This narrative of mankind’s past, present and future is an essential aspect of Christian belief. This theme informs the work done at *WORLD* in several ways, most notably that what is happening in the

world today is directed by God and that people do things they should not because they are, first and foremost, fallen, sinners who naturally commit crimes and act inappropriately. At the same time, it is assumed that people do good works as a sign that God is working in their lives and that, for doing them, there will be salvation.

Tiffany Owens, for example, says she constantly reminds herself that “God is in control” when looking at the lack of morality in the modern, secular world (personal communication, April 10, 2013). In the same way, Smith says that homosexual behavior “does not connect to the meta-narrative . . . he’s corrupt. We’re all corrupt. Christianity says we are born in corruption – Jesus brings the happy ending. So (*WORLD* journalists’) narratives relate to the meta-narrative.”

The connection between what *WORLD* covers and the meta-narrative can be seen in numerous stories in the magazine, such as Marvin Olasky’s column in the December 29, 2012 issue, in which he says that numerous events that occurred that year, such as Hurricane Sandy, are the “repercussions of mankind’s fall” and evidence of mankind’s inadequacy and God’s providence (Olasky, 2012, p. 29). Similarly, Emily Belz’s January 12, 2013 cover story about the Sandy Hook shootings extensively quotes two local pastors whose narratives adhere to the meta-narrative, particularly the inherently sinful nature of man (Belz, 2013, p. 37).

### *Humility*

The *WORLD* staffers say that because they, too, are fallen sinners, their understanding of how to do their jobs will always be flawed. As a result, they frequently noted that their ability to understand and interpret the Bible and its directions for how to do their work will always be done with a profound sense of

humility. Their hope, they say, is that they can come as close as possible and not let their human nature get in the way any more than necessary. Even when they are absolutely sure of God's *view* of certain issues – such as, most prominently, abortion and homosexuality – they know the *execution* of their work will never fully, and perfectly, reflect God's word.

At the same time, several writers noted that relying on the Bible offers a profound sense of relief and solace that grounds them by offering eternal truths that do not shift or change in the face of evolving (and, they believe, declining) morals and standards of conduct.

"God's word does not fail," Susan Olasky says. "It is a rock and a measuring stick that does not fail. It should be the standard because the Bible says that God's word is an anvil that has worn away many hammers."

#### *Steadfastness*

Many stories in *WORLD* emphasize the idea that Christians work in the face of overwhelming odds and difficulties, including, in many cases, the fear of death. The theme of the vast majority of the stories published in *WORLD* that report on Christians in foreign countries – and foreign news in general – is that there are considerable dangers faced by Christian missionaries trying to bring the word of God to the Middle East or Africa. Mindy Belz's "Surviving by serving" (published September 8, 2012) provides a ready example by focusing on the city of Aleppo and the small number of Christians there who are helping the less fortunate while being persecuted. The story ends with a quote from Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audio, who

says that Christians in Aleppo are “showing the presence of the Lord, and serving Him with joy” (Belz, 2012, p. 40).

The steadfastness theme is also found in numerous stories about Christian politicians and business owners being guided by their principles while those around them focus on adhering to the ideas and standards espoused by political parties.

Jamie Dean’s “Here they stand” (February 9, 2013) features interviews with evangelical and Catholic business owners who are fighting against Obamacare because, they say, it means they must provide contraception as part of their health care packages or face hefty fines. These Christians who are fighting against what they see as anti-Christian law and an anti-Christian government are framed as far less concerned with the fines they might face than being able to maintain their Christian beliefs in their working lives (Dean, 2013, pp. 34-41).

#### *The forgotten man*

A major theme in the interviews, and in WORLD content, is highlighting the viewpoints and struggles of those who have been “forgotten” because their narratives and perspectives do not fit those espoused by the mainstream media, which include approval for Obamacare and equal rights for gay people.

“We talk about this in staff meetings,” says Smith. “We often ask who this is. In the case of abortion, it’s the baby. With Obamacare, it’s the taxpayer paying for the expansion of the federal government.”

Two stories focusing on gay marriage that appeared in the April 20, 2013 issue provide ready example of this theme. In the first, “Gettin’ on board the gay marriage train,” Emily Belz focuses on Defense of Marriage Act lawyer Paul Clement,

who, like many of those arguing for traditional marriage, is ignored by mainstream reporters (Belz, 2013, pp. 35-39). The second, Edward Lee Pitts' "Countercultural warriors," focuses on young conservatives whose anti-abortion beliefs run counter to many of their generation. These young conservatives are pressing on, guided by their belief in God and the sanctity of traditional marriage, even as they are ignored or derided for having "bizarre, odd, offensive and uneducated" views (Pitts, 2013, pp. 40-43). In both cases, the main thrust of the stories is the lack of acknowledgement and, occasionally, the venom these people face from the mainstream/secular media.

#### *Persecution and resistance*

Speaking to *WORLD* staffers, it becomes abundantly clear that a sense of being persecuted, of constantly fighting back with their work against a destructive and ungodly culture, is at the core of their beliefs. Virtually every staffer was well aware of the "culture wars" concept and said their work was part of those wars. This theme was evident not only in news stories but also, quite often, in columns by Marvin Olasky and Mindy and Joel Belz: not only are they battling just about everyone who is not an evangelical, but they are also losing.

Olasky's Q&A feature, particularly, often serves as a forum for conservatives who advance similar ideas, including conservative journalist Tucker Carlson (April 20, 2013). Mindy Belz also attacks a wide variety of liberal forces in her columns, including feminists who she says are championing abortion (September 8, 2012) and the liberals in academia who, she writes on November 17, 2012, have made college campuses "a toxic environment for Christian families" (Belz, 2012, p. 34).

**Research Question 2**

As with Research Question 1, the answers the *WORLD* staffers gave in relation to this question were remarkably similar. As a result, it is again possible to organize the answers into a group of themes. These are listed and detailed below.

*Stories about homosexuality and abortion are always Class one or Class two*

Every staff member agreed that all stories on these topics – no matter the nuances between different issues, incidents and other factors – should be written in a way that reflects the biblical position that abortion and homosexuality are wrong. The result, says Smith, is that normative journalistic ideas about balancing viewpoints can be done away with entirely. “When covering abortion,” he says, “we don’t find it necessary to balance the voices that say abortion is wrong by quoting people that say it’s good. Some issues are so clearly wrong.”

For example, in his May 18, 2013 cover story about allowing openly gay boys and men in the Boy Scouts of America, he relies almost completely on quotes by anti-gay sources, such as Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council. While there is background information about the history of Scouts and the controversy from other publications, virtually all of his new and original reporting comes via quotes from these sources.

*The “organic” nature of applying biblical objectivity and the six classes*

Given the enormous amount of work done by the *WORLD* staffers, one would think that they would require, or at least want, a reliable, tested method or set of guidelines for fusing biblical objectivity, the six classes, and their day-to-day work. Such is not the case. There is no set of guidelines or recommended pathway to help

the staffers do this; nor is there a competency test given to measure what biblical knowledge a given reporter or job candidate has.

Rather, it is assumed that each staffer has a basic grounding in the Bible, biblical objectivity and the six classes, as informed by their individual development as Christians, including such factors as background and education. This “organic” nature of understanding Olasky’s ideas was noted by virtually all staffers; they expect each other to know these things and, essentially, apply them as they see fit. It is assumed they share a sense of the importance of their work, the “culture wars” in American life, and the persecution they face as Christians, while understanding such concepts as the forgotten man. They assume that the path to proper application of biblical objectivity and the six classes will simply reveal itself as necessary.

“I would not ask a reporter for a theological justification of a story,” says Mindy Belz. “We’re not theologians and we don’t have the time. We apply what we know about Scripture to do the work that’s put in front of us. That’s our task.”

*The lack of agreement on what stories can be assigned to which class*

The above two sections of the answer to Research Question 2 have established that *WORLD* staffers agree that all stories involving homosexuality and abortion are Class one or Class two, meaning that only people that are against abortion and homosexuality should be quoted extensively. Second, the *WORLD* staffers agree that using biblical objectivity is more important than always using the six classes of stories. It follows, then, that the interviewees did not often worry about which class most of the stories they were reporting fell into.

Literally dozens of stories in *WORLD* are written according to a formula. First, only conservative Christians are quoted; second, each story is based on at least one, if not more, of the themes described in Research Question 1. A story by Dean published on May 4, 2013, provides a ready example. She profiles a German family seeking asylum in America but facing deportation back to their home country. Dean frames the German family, the Romeikes, as facing persecution by stronger secular/liberal forces – in this case, deportation via the Obama administration.

As in so many *WORLD* stories, the German family is fighting the good fight and counting on God to lead them through their time of trial. We don't know why the Romeikes are being singled out, if they are, because Dean never quotes an immigration official about the case. She relies completely on quotes from the family and other Christians in the town where they live in hopes of escaping the German state-run school system that they see as a decidedly liberal and pro-homosexual.

### **Discussion**

This study's final section provides discussion about the results of the two research questions found in the Literature Review. In doing so, this section fuses the results with the significance of the study within current journalism research, the importance of ideology in shaping news coverage, the magazine within America's culture wars, and possibilities for future research.

### **Significance**

This study provides unique and previously unavailable information on several topics within the study of journalism, newsroom ideology, and evangelical Americans. It represents the first ethnographic study of a major evangelical

Christian news organization, as well as the first study of evangelical Christian journalists to combine interviews with textual analysis to look at the ideology that shapes their perspectives, motivations, and routines, and the content they produce. Moreover, because of *WORLD*'s popularity, this study provides valuable insight into the information that the evangelical community receives. This study also provides information on exactly how *WORLD* journalists use Dr. Marvin Olasky's six classes of biblical objectivity, which he claims provides a handy guide for evangelical journalists to perform their work and oppose traditional objectivity.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) advanced the theory that ideology is the most important factor when looking at the content of a mainstream news organization, and that "media transmission of ideology works as it does by drawing on familiar cultural themes that resonate within audiences. These themes, however, are selectively chosen and constructed into a coherent structure" (p. 222). This study strongly suggests that the same holds true for evangelical journalists who self-consciously provide a perspective that both challenges mainstream journalism ideology and advances a number of cultural themes that go to the heart of both why they do what they do, and the beliefs of evangelical America.

### **Findings**

The seven themes are detailed in the answer to Research Question 1, and are found in all parts of the magazine. *WORLD* journalists see themselves as providing an alternative to the viewpoints of both secular journalists and most of America, which they believe is crumbling due to declining moral and ethical standards. They believe they are fighting for biblical truth and transcendent morals against a wide

array of stronger opponents, among them liberal journalists, politicians and academics, as well as Muslim extremists as part of the ongoing culture wars in American life.

*WORLD* contributes significantly to the landscape of American journalism by reporting on the issues and concerns of evangelical Christians, who make up a significant portion of American society and have a considerable influence on America's cultural life and politics. *WORLD* provides information about a vast array of people, from American ministers to evangelicals in foreign countries to movers and shakers in the halls of Washington, D.C. As a result, *WORLD* can be seen as a corrective to one of the major failings of the mainstream media, which has often under-reported on Americans' religious lives (Silk, 2009, p. 84).

In doing so, the *WORLD* staff provides a unique and religion-based example of what Durham (1998) calls "standpoint epistemology," or taking the idea of objectivity away from the "intellectual property of dominant groups," elite social actors that work with journalists to reinforce the power structures in American life. Durham and other feminist scholars see these elites as mainly privileged white men. To the *WORLD* staff, however, the dominant social actors are mainstream reporters, liberals, feminists, members of academia, Democrats, and even other conservatives who base their actions on such earthly standards as one's favored political party. As a result, this study adds to the understanding of the role of alternative journalists who base their sense of mission on opposition to America's elite based on such characteristics as ethnic background, sex, sexual orientation, or location.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that *WORLD*'s staff and coverage fall into the trap described in this study's introduction by Stafford (1996), who castigates the magazine for deciding on the angle and sources for a story before actually setting out to report it (§ 16). Almost inevitably, *WORLD* writers interview only people who agree with their anti-gay/anti-abortion/anti-government/anti-Muslim/anti-liberal beliefs. In effect, *WORLD* creates an "echo chamber" of perspectives between writers, interviewees, story narratives, and audience. Putnam and Campbell (2010) describe echo chambers as "social interaction among like-minded co-religionists" that "reinforces and even hardens one's beliefs" (p. 439).

This is done, in fact, by design. *WORLD* writers self-consciously and forcefully reinforce beliefs that are taken for granted in the evangelical community, among them the destructive power of liberalism, the need for recognition of mankind's fall and original sin as the basis for misdeeds, the oppression of evangelical Christians around the world, and the need for vigorously fighting back against that oppression and raging against the darkness that is creeping, inexorably, across the land. There are their perspectives, and there are the perspectives of people who are at once wrong, destructive, anti-God, and anti-Christian. This is exactly the sort of uncompromising viewpoint and unwillingness to see different perspectives that Mouw and Sobel (2001) describe when they write that the culture wars in American life continue to be "rooted in nonnegotiable concepts of cultural and moral order" (p. 915).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are two significant limitations to this study. First, the author was only given limited access to the staffers at the magazine's office in Asheville. The author could not, for example, sit in on editorial meetings or editing sessions. Second, several of *WORLD's* most frequent contributors, such as Washington reporter Edward Lee Pitts, declined to be interviewed, citing deadline pressures.

As a result, one of the avenues for future research could be a study that includes being able to observe such meetings and conduct interviews with every single staff writer and editor to look at the beliefs, habits and contents of another religion-based news organization. Also, what this study found about journalism ideology could be the basis for interviewing reporters who do not follow Olasky's biblical objectivity model, such as reporters at Catholic- or Jewish-based publications. There is also an important study to be done of a "liberal" evangelical publication such as *Sojourners*, which was founded by theologian/author Jim Wallis. Interviews with staff members could reveal how they conceive of their work and what basic themes guide their reporting and writing.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the ideology that informs the evangelical journalists who write for *WORLD* magazine, an influential and at times controversial Christian news publication. The author has fused textual analysis of a year of issues with interviews with that examine the beliefs of more than a dozen members of the *WORLD* staff, and how these views influence the magazine's content.

In doing so, the author has provided answer to two research questions. This study has found that the *WORLD* staff sees its work and its fealty to the "biblical

objectivity” standard of reporting and writing as an essential part of the culture wars in American life. This work is based on a mistrust of secular institutions and other religions (particularly Islam), a belief in both the importance of mankind’s fall in explaining people’s actions and God’s hand in everything that occurs, and a need to combat the ongoing damage liberals are doing to America. They believe they are fighting against ungodly forces that are pressing in from all sides.

As with the us-versus-them core beliefs at the heart of *WORLD*, its employees and its content, you either believe in the way the *WORLD* sees and describes the world, or you don’t. If the author learned anything from this research, it is this: *WORLD* deals in absolutes and unshakable tents when looking at how the world operates, who is right and who is wrong, and what the final outcome of mankind may be. As with the culture wars that continue to inform American life, there is no middle ground.

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## Appendix

This study's literature review provides the two research questions that were used to execute the study. Answering these questions was done by conducting interviews with staff writers and editors at *WORLD* magazine. Each interviewee was asked a number of questions that sought more in-depth, individual opinions and examples of how they conceive of the fusion of normative journalism routines and standards with their religious beliefs and, in particular, how they apply Dr. Marvin Olasky's concept of biblical objectivity to their work. The researcher used the interviewee's answers to these sub-topics that relate to the general questions. These sub-topics include:

\* What does it mean to be an evangelical Christian journalist, as opposed to being a professional, veteran journalist in general?

\* Can you describe the day-to-day realities of doing your work as an evangelical Christian journalist who is trying to do both excellent journalism in general and journalism based in evangelical beliefs in particular?

\* What does *WORLD* magazine contribute to American journalism, and to its audience's understanding of the events and issues *WORLD* journalists cover?

\* Why is it important to have *WORLD* magazine, and other evangelical Christian news organizations, as well as mainstream news organizations?

\* *WORLD's* editor-in-chief, Dr. Marvin Olasky, has written extensively about *WORLD's* importance in the "culture wars" in American life, and how the publication challenges the "secular liberal" perspective that he believes dominates both American journalism and American culture. How do you, in the course of your work, feel that you do this?

\* Can you give particular examples and discuss them?

\* Dr. Olasky has also conceived of and promotes the concept of "biblical objectivity" as the standard with which evangelical journalists should do their work, and in particular the standard for reporting and writing at *WORLD*. What does this concept mean to you and your work?

\* What does reporting from the standpoint of biblical objectivity, and as an evangelical Christian journalist, tell you about America's present and future?

\* Can you give specific examples of how and when this concept was used to shape and define your work in a way that it would not have been without it?

\* Dr. Olasky's concept of biblical objectivity includes reporters using six "classes" of stories to help determine how closely each story is related to biblical teachings. Can you describe how you use this system of classifying stories in your work with a few examples?

\* Why should biblical objectivity be the standard by which evangelical journalists do their work?

\* What does this concept of journalism ideology help Christian journalists accomplish that they could not without its application?

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