

Engage360 | Episode 47: Media Literacy and Bias

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, hello everyone. This again is Engage 360 from Denver Seminary on Don Payne and glad to be joined again by our president Dr. Mark Young. Welcome Mark.
- Dr. Mark Young: Hey, thanks Don, I always enjoy it.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well this week, we want to tackle a topic that is in one way or another at the forefront of everybody's minds. It's affecting us all over the place and that is the media and how we make sense of the media. We are really pleased to be joined for this conversation by Terry Mattingly. Terry, welcome to the podcast. Welcome to Engage 360.
- Terry Mattingly: Glad to be here.
- Dr. Don Payne: Terry is joining us from the Cumberland mountains of Tennessee, and we're glad that we've got at least for right now, a good cell signal to connect us. Terry was a journalist who has written a nationally syndicated column called On Religion for the Scripps Howard News Service. He's written that since 1988, and you can still find it online. Terry is the former or a former religion writer for the Rocky Mountain News. During his years here in Denver, in the late eighties and early nineties, he has written for the Charlotte News and the Charlotte Observer. He taught at Denver Seminary in the early 1990s and has also taught at Milligan College. He is the founder of the Washington Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. So he brings a lot to the table for this conversation about how do we make sense of the media, what we hear in the media, all the conflicting signals, and how do we navigate that faithfully as Christians, who are trying to make some sense out of our culture? Terry, let me start off this way. It seems more difficult now than ever to make sense of what we hear in the news. And you made an observation in an article over 20 years ago that most of our people do not have the media under control, if anything it's the other way around. Can you expand on that, what do you mean by that? And how does that apply to news media today?
- Terry Mattingly: Well, first of all, that was before the internet. And that was before, I mean, if you were in a house with three or four televisions, which most suburban Americans were living in a house of that kind, and I used to say at Denver Seminary, if that's the way you got your house set up, you're going to get the family life you deserve. But I mean, but picture taking those individual screens and then blowing them up into what we have today, you know, which is where you're walking around with things in your pocket that are 10 times more powerful than what put a man on the moon. And you've got constant screen

access everywhere. I remember, you know, in the days when we were talking at Denver seminary and I mean, my history there was short, but I mean, it doesn't get much more poignant than sharing an office with Vernon Grounds. And an office suite with Vernon grounds and your mentor has Haddon Robinson, you know, bringing you in. And cable television was the big issue then, but Haddon knew the internet was coming.

And he once said, people say Denver Seminary is cutting edge. He said, we're the cutting edge of a butter knife. I mean, he said, we haven't even dealt with TV yet. And wait till the internet arrives. And part of what he meant was the internet was going to take a world divided into like 400 channels of cable or a hundred K let's go back earlier, 110 channels of cable. It was going to take that world and blow it up into the legions of screens and niches and subgroups that we have today. So if you thought it was hard to debate cable television in 1991, 92, 93, and VHS tapes put that up into the level of social media and media platforms that we have today, and divide your church audience, let alone the unchurched audience up into thousands of individual niches and potential audiences. And try to make sense out of that. That was where we headed in the nineties. And we are way, way past that now of course.

Dr. Don Payne: How are we different as a culture, as a people, because of all this?

Terry Mattingly: Well, the one thing the internet does really well is divide us. I mean, in the days when we had three major television stations and you had a local newspaper that was going to at least attempt to talk to an entire broadcast audience. You could presume that you had some idea of what the forces were that were shaping the people to whom you were going to preach, or try to reach out. To some degree, you could put a frame around them and it looked kind of like your TV set. And that's what Haddon was saying that we didn't even have that under control. Well, today the one, like I said, the one thing the internet does is divide us up into all of these tiny little niche audiences. And on top of that, in terms of news media, we now basically live in two different Americas. We're one half of America, primarily in blue zip codes in urban areas, is receiving its news from legacy media with very strongly, I don't know if liberal is the right word today. I don't know if liberal applies to people who are weak on free speech, freedom of religion and freedom of association.

The word progressive gets used a lot, but the main thing to me is, you know what I'm saying, urban blues, zip codes versus flyover country and middle America, the world of smaller cities and out in middle America, if anything, it might even be more divided up. I mean, in the sense that you don't have a dominant New York times or a dominant NPR, but you still have tons of subscribers to the New York Times and tons of listeners to NPR. And then you have people who are all the way out into the world of right wing, right bulletin boards. And then among young people, you have unbelievably complex networks of social media and bullying and pornography and all of that. And then on the positive side of all that, I mean the, the higher you, the lower you make the floor of American media, the higher the ceiling goes, you have technology

that allows a Seminary to literally work with people on the other side of the planet. You know, indirect lecture. So the ceiling goes up, the floor goes down. But the one thing that you have is more and more and more options from where you get your worldview, where you get your news, where you get your entertainment. Where you get your stories.

Dr. Mark Young:

Yes, exactly. Let me share a story with you that really prompted us to want to do this podcast. A local Pastor reached out to me and asked if I would interact with him on a kind of a webinar type basis about the whole question of news. And what's fake? What's real? His congregation is being torn apart by two very different narratives of what's happening, particularly in the United States. And clearly there has been a vested interest in describing the legacy media that you, the phrase you used earlier, as fake news, by those who want to create a pull toward an alternative story. His church is being ripped in half by that. So he said to me, what do you say to a congregation who wants to be informed, but they're only getting their information from one source or the other. How do you help them discern where to go to begin to understand the world as it is, as opposed to just these one-sided views? How would you answer his question?

Terry Mattingly:

Well, for starters, nobody has the same definition of fake news. I've written about this quite a bit at our website, getreligion.org. There's at least four or five different definitions of fake news. And you have people yelling at each other about this term, and they don't even agree on what it means. I mean, there are people that basically say fake news is whatever Donald Trump doesn't like, you have other people that say fake news is foreign governments. You know, interfering with Facebook and planting false information. Then you have people that say fake news is biased news, slanted news. And then you have people that would say fake news is incorrect news, mistaken news, news that gets basic worldview issues and facts wrong. And that's what I've kind of dedicated my journalism life to in the field of religion. Coverage is the press doesn't even know in many cases what words mean when they come out of the mouths of religious believers? I tell people that at the time I left the Rocky Mountain News to go to Denver Seminary, I had like 175 different folders on religious denominations, just in the Colorado front range.

Well, the typical journalist can't understand what any of that means. And doesn't know, I mean, to them, you know, if politics is your actual religion, the functional way that you view the world, you, you don't understand the tensions within evangelicalism. You don't understand what Christianity today and then Stetser at the Billy Graham center have documented so well, that evangelicalism right now is highly divided in the Trump era. They just see 81% voted for Trump, and they don't understand that half of those people didn't want to vote for Trump. They were pulling for other Republicans, but then when the general election came, they felt they had no option. How many Pastors do you know that basically are terrified to even discuss any moral or social issues right now, because they know the minute they speak the words, it will be defined in Trump era media terms.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, that, and that kind of brings back. I think, a word you used or Mark either you or Mark used the bias of media. And, and it seems like lots of well, meaning well-intentioned people, including Christian believers want to believe that they're getting unbiased sources. And some presumption of lack of bias would be the baseline for adjudicating something as fake, but is that really even possible to have an unbiased media?

Terry Mattingly: Well it's, to some degree it's even worse than that. We used to have a, what historians would call the American model of the press. And the American model of the press is wedded at the hip to modernity. And the belief, you know, that science and sociology and social sciences are going to make us better and better and better, but at its best, the American model said that you should try to get things as accurate, as balanced, as fair minded as possible. And you were supposed to treat people on both sides of controversial issues with respect, the phrase I've been using in journalism classrooms now for quite some time, is the goal was to report unto others, as you would want them to report unto you. I mean, you wouldn't want someone messing up your religious worldview, why would you mess up somebody else's? Well, if you're following events right now at the New York times in particular, you know, that that older school of journalism is basically just being destroyed by the internet in the sense that with advertising now being dominated by the big digital three of Google, Facebook, etcetera. Newspapers are having to preach to their choirs to get loyal subscribers, because that's the only way they have to pay the bills. So right now, media are profitable almost to the degree that they tell their listeners slash viewers exactly what those people already want to hear.

Dr. Don Payne: Now, you, without getting too far off track here, and we may have to loop back to this, but in a previous conversation you had mentioned to me, if I understood you correctly, that this was sort of a return to an a much more dated European model of media.

Terry Mattingly: Back before printing press is sped up and you could print hundreds of thousands of papers up until about the mid to late 19th century. You know, New York City had two dozen newspapers and they all focused on tiny narrow niches because that made the most economic sense. Well, we're back to that, except now in the internet age, it's hundreds of niches, thousands of niches, and frankly, conservatives have hated, or maybe hated is too strong, a word, they have had such negative views of journalism and media for so long that in this sense, the cultural left has inherited all of the high ground of the New York Times and National Public Radio, the Washington Post, and increasingly even the Associated Press. And I would stress it. I think if you take the New York Times, I'm sorry to talk about the Times so much, but it is the second one of the top two newsrooms in the world in terms of cloud.

The other one, probably big BBC, the Times still practices old school, American journalism on a lot of subjects. Business reporting, a lot of international reporting a lot of Metro reporting, but when you start talking about cultural issues, moral and social issues back about, Oh eight years ago, at this time, the

retired, just retired only weeks later, editor of Bill Keller was asked point blank. Do you think that New York Times is a liberal newspaper? And he said, well, we're liberal socially. And culturally, he said, I don't think that we, I think we lean left on moral and social issues, but I still think we're doing a straightforward job of covering politics. Well, right now the New York Times has openly stopped saying that it's even attempting fairness in terms of coverage of the Trump. They would just say, they're telling the truth from their perspective about Donald Trump. And Trump is a rather target rich environment for journalists and always has been. But my point is that right now, the New York Times is mixed in terms of his journalism product.

But Keller was giving us an insight which has greatly affected my work at the website, getreligion. I mean, stop and think about it. How many of the most divisive issues in American life right now are directly linked to issues of morality, culture, and religion. In the post Roe V Wade era, I would say that at least half or more of them, whether it's abortion, whether it's gender issues, whether it's gay rights, whether it's free speech, all of these issues right now have a moral and social component. And our media at this point, I don't think are even attempting to cover those issues in a way that treats voices on both sides with respect, which then drives a lot of religious readers and viewers out of the mainstream press and out into the wild wild world. It was completely individualistic, separatists stick, fly by night, social media, where you know, conspiracy theories and everything else might reign Supreme. It's not an easy situation to tell people in your pews what to do these days. I don't have an easy solution for them. They're just going to have to read a lot of material on both sides yet. That's exactly what Americans don't want to do right now.

Dr. Mark Young:

Right. That's correct. But it seems to me, Terry, perhaps you can help, I know you can help us with this. There's got to be something better than conspiracy theories or intentionally deceptive or misleading posts that we find on social media. It's got to be something called journalism, which has a measure of discipline, a measure of process. If you are asked that question point blank and you want to help a group of people become well-informed and by well-informed, I mean, understanding or reading or taking in information from different perspectives, where do you lead them?

Terry Mattingly:

Well, ironically, let's take something that I used to say at Denver in 1992 or so, and transfer it to the internet age. I advised people who were going into the ministry in the Denver area to get themselves like a small circle of parishioners that they really trusted. No more than 10, no, fewer than five. People that you thought were really well plugged in and fair minded and trying to understand what was happening in Colorado and in their culture and once a month or so spend one hour with those people and say, what shows are you watching? Who are you listening to? The main class I taught at Denver, Haddon and I came up with a three way definition of discipleship that I used, which I think is relevant to your question. Even, you know, almost three decades later, I defined a discipleship, the way communication scholars do, which is in terms of questions. And those questions were, how do you spend your time? How do you spend

your money and how do you make your decisions? Now, if you can answer those three questions in America then, or now without hitting the mainstream media and the entertainment media, you have a promising future in ministry to the Amish. I mean, it's, that's, I mean, spend your time, spend your money, make your decisions.

Well, what I was hoping people would get from that kind of a committee was feedback on what was influencing people in their congregation and in their community. And let's apply that to your question. Today, I tell people to intentionally go on Twitter, but don't follow a whole lot of people. You're going to try to use Twitter as a way of saving you time, not wasting your time and talk to people in your congregation, do your own research and try to find 10 to 30 people, no more than 30, voices in our culture that you think stand somewhere in the middle of the debates. I always tell people Karen Swallow Pryor, Russell Moore, David French, Ross Douthat of the New York Times, you know Andrew Sullivan, the gay rights activist, one of the most important gay rights activists that there ever has been, but he remains a very strong defender of first amendment rights, including religious Liberty. Try to create a list of about 20 to 25 people that you think make both sides nervous, and then followed them on Twitter and find out what they're reading, what they're listening to, where they're getting their information, what publications they're reading, who are the journalists that they take seriously. Now, I think if a pastor or seminary profs or something like that are beginning to do that kind of research and that sort of a view of skepticism yet, you're still willing to do the work and read. You're not going to run off and hide.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, it sounds like that's the kind of thing we need to be encouraging other people to do that. At least that's a pathway forward with some rails to it, some safeguards.

Terry Mattingly: Exactly. But you know, that nothing like that enters the life of a congregation without the support of the pulpit. And what we were trying to do briefly at Denver Seminary was discuss it in terms of homiletics, but also Christian education, youth work. And even to some degree counseling. Do you know enough about what's framing the minds of the audience that you're addressing? And I'm sorry to quote Haddon again, but as you know, hadn't talked constantly talking about, do you understand the mind of the people to whom you're preaching, what's going into it, what's shaping it.

Dr. Mark Young: Terry, let me ask you this question. Is there good journalism out there?

Terry Mattingly: Yeah. some of it is interpretive journalism right now. I mean, if you're reading the Atlantic Monthly and you're reading the work of a tremendous writer named Emma Grain, you're getting probably left of center American journalism, but she takes religious voices very seriously.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. Peter Wayner is there as well.

Terry Mattingly: yeah, if you're reading the Washington Post, you know that the Washington Post political coverage of evangelicals is horrible. But if you go to the religion section, Sarah Pulliam Bailey, and some of the people that worked there are doing very insightful coverage of tensions and debates within evangelicalism. You may not like everything that they write, but they're using terms accurately. You can tell that they know enough about the subject to respect it. And that's, that's as good as you can do right now.

Dr. Mark Young: So let me just say that the single most influential voice in major parts of evangelicalism today is not the voice of God. It's the voice of Fox News. So what is your assessment of the journalistic value of particularly the cable news channel Fox News?

Terry Mattingly: Well, okay, well, you're going to have to pair Fox News of course, with MSNBC and CNN. Just once again, we're talking about this 50, 50 division in American culture. I tell people, frankly, that they also need to, American public doesn't separate news and opinion. They say Fox News, like it's all one thing. And most of the time when they say Fox News, what they actually mean is the evening opinion and interpretive shows, correct?

Dr. Mark Young: Yes, that's correct.

Terry Mattingly: Okay. They're not talking about the 6:00 PM news broadcast with Brit, used to be Brit Hume. Oh, now it's Brett Bear, which is in my opinion, one of the most fair minded and balanced shows in American television news. And it's the only show at Fox that I watch on a regular basis at all. It was founded by an evangelical Protestant named Brit Hume, former ABC News, white house reporter, and Brit based it on a memo by Dan Rather of all people. That Dan Rather wants wrote the CBS News executives and said, if you gave me an hour, this is what I propose I would do with it. You know, in terms of news coverage, then leading into a discussion where if you've ever noticed that that panel that's at the end of that show at Fox always has someone from the right, the left, and the center. And that's a throwback to Brit Hume. Well do you think your people are watching that show? Are they watching the show on Fox News that Trump actually hates?

Dr. Mark Young: I think what you're, what you're pointing out is correct. It's the evening voices on Fox News that carry the most weight. I thought it was so interesting that Bill Riley called himself a bloviator.

Terry Mattingly: Well, but see, but see, the dominant worldview of Fox News evening is actually libertarianism. And that was especially true in the Bill O'Reilly era. It's not a moral and cultural conservatism. Hannity sort of is, although I've never paid any close attention to his show. The important thing you've got to understand is MSNBC and CNN are for the most part, doing the exact same thing in terms of journalism approach, only they're preaching to a different choir.

Dr. Mark Young: It's interesting. You should say that. I did a seminar in a local church here recently on politics and they were asking me these questions about information. And I basically said, don't watch anything on cable news after 6:00 PM. Well, now I have to back it up to seven of course, out here it's on at six. So we're all right in that regard.

Terry Mattingly: You're in mountain time, right? The time zone nobody knows about.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. So let's, let's go. What other direction here is we, you know, kind of continue and move toward the end. This pastor that asked me to come and speak with him about helping their folks kind of discern what's going on in the world has a fairly significant block of his church that follows Quinone [?], and the whole question of these conspiracy based voices or driven voices. What on earth do you say to help a Pastor interact with and to a certain degree, help people realize what they're doing when they're engaged in that type of world?

Terry Mattingly: You know, this may sound extremely ironic, but right now I would tell those Pastors to pay very close attention to the tensions inside the Southern Baptist convention, at the moment. As it discusses racism and other conspiracy surrounding race. And you remember, of course, what was it two or three years ago? I remember they were meeting in Phoenix when they had that incredible discussion when a emotion, resolution, I should say a resolution on the alt right was put aside. And then the very powerful growing, weighing of the Southern Baptist Convention, consisting of African American pastors spoke about that, and the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention repented and used that word. Put that thing back on the docket and let that thing be debated on the floor. And you had that riveting moment when Russell Moore, an Albert Mahler protégé, who of course now is one of the most important voices in kind of centrist evangelicalism. When Russell Moore said, we have a name for the alt right, we have a name for white supremacy, and that name is six, six, six. Well, I don't know how many pulpits you could get away with that in this day and age, that kind of theological candor.

Dr. Don Payne: Terry, why is it that so many evangelical Christians seem to be so in chanted by conspiracy theories?

Terry Mattingly: Well, I've been writing about this a tremendous amount at getreligion. And also I did a syndicated column about it a couple of weeks ago. It's really quite easy to understand the mechanism as the press has become more and more biased on issues of moral, cultural, and social issues. They have spent a larger amount of time stomping on the worldview of that other half of America. You had a very interesting moment in the weeks, right after Donald Trump was elected the public editor of the New York Times. I would suggest you look, this material up, at getreligion and your listeners might want to search for the name, Liz Spayd, S P A Y D Spayd. And she was the public editor. She's a New York City, a liberals liberal, Columbia journalism faculty, former editor of the Columbia Journalism Review. But she challenged the editors of the New York Times and basically said, the issue is, do you want to even attempt to cover half of America? Because it

doesn't seem like you have any interest in listening to them at all. And I don't know if you remember following that drama. Do you remember what happened to Liz Spayd when she wrote those columns?

Dr. Don Payne: No, I don't.

Terry Mattingly: They fired her. Okay. So why are people on the cultural Right, so open to conspiracy theories, alternative media, unqualified journalists, make it up as you go journalists, because they're so fiercely turned off by what they've been forced to consume through mainstream press miss coverage of morality, culture, and religion for decades. That it's made them willing, just take about anything. It's kind of like Chesterton old saying in reverse, you know, Chesterton said, when people stop believing in God that the problem isn't, you know, that they don't believe anything is that they believe anything. I mean to some degree, that's where a lot of evangelicals are today. They're so upset. And please hear me say for valid reasons, they are so upset with the mainstream press, that they're willing to just go jump off a cliff in a completely opposite direction.

Dr. Don Payne: It creates a real vulnerability, sort of an epistemological vulnerability, if you will.

Terry Mattingly: Yeah, and meanwhile, conservatives, aren't willing to invest in media that is committed to an old school fair-minded journalism approach because they want to fight fire with fire, right? Just like so many people were tempted to say, well, Trump is not our guy, but he's our bully. So many evangelicals basically see Trump as a street fighter who at least doesn't hate them. And he's willing to get muddy and bloody for their sake.

Dr. Don Payne: He'll do the dirty work.

Terry Mattingly: He'll do their dirty work in response to the thugs. And I'm saying thugs in the sense of biased media, the world's view of that side. So they swing the pendulum completely to the other side, not realizing of course that what they're doing is they're buying the exact same kind of journalism just on the opposite side of our cultural spectrum.

Dr. Mark Young: It's not even journalism, right? It's just ideas.

Terry Mattingly: There are journalists over there, but not a lot of them.

Dr. Mark Young: No. I mean, this idea you can say, well, what couldn't it possibly be X? And then all of a sudden people fixate on X and they take it in all these different directions. There's no facts.

Terry Mattingly: Well, I like what Ross Doubtton, though admitted a couple of a year or so ago. He was talking about the scandals in the Roman Catholic church. And Ross of course, is a convert to Roman Catholicism in a culturally conservative Catholic.

He said a lot of journalists have come to realize that they were writing off the far right. Catholic press, because they thought it was out of control. Didn't have any standards and was just making stuff up. He said, the problem is that about 90% of what they were writing turned out to be true. Now that didn't mean that it wasn't twisted and that it wasn't flawed and that it wasn't unfair, but they were raising a lot of questions that the mainstream press didn't want to ask, about the often left of center, Eastern Catholic establishment.

Dr. Mark Young: So you just gave my friend's congregation a reason to keep reading those conspiracy theories.

Terry Mattingly: No, no, no. I didn't. What I, once again, what I hope I gave your Pastor friend permission to do is to be bold enough to take these issues into the pulpit and say, be careful. We need as Christians to discern the spirits of our age. And frankly we need more Pastors and religious educators and others who are prepared to do apologetics in this day and age. And the sad thing is that's exactly what we were saying in the early nineties. And we haven't even talked about the dominant force in American public life, which is not news media it's entertainment, right?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I wish we had time to chase that one because that is of huge significance and the I'd love to explore it at some point, the character of media as it has become part of the entertainment industry. That's maybe a topic for another conversation, but wow, you've opened a big one there. We're going to have to bring things to a close, but Terry, thank you very, very much for all your insights and bringing your expertise and background to bear on these really tough questions. And you've given us a lot of really helpful stuff to wrestle with. Terry Mattingly again, and I want to refer you to Terry's websites. He's got two, I believe getreligion.org and then TMATT, that's T M A T T.net. And you can find a lot of Terry's writings, his columns, blog, and he's got his own weekly podcast as well. That you'll want to consult if you're looking for even more information on a weekly basis from Terry. We're really grateful, Terry. Thanks a lot.

Terry Mattingly: Well, thanks for calling me up and talking and I hope our paths cross again.

Dr. Don Payne: I hope they do as well for all of us here at Denver Seminary and Engage 360 production team and Dr. Mark Young, want to thank you again for spending a little time with us and hope you'll communicate with us. If you have some questions or follow up podcast@denverseminary.edu is our email address. And we hope to talk to you again next week. Take care.