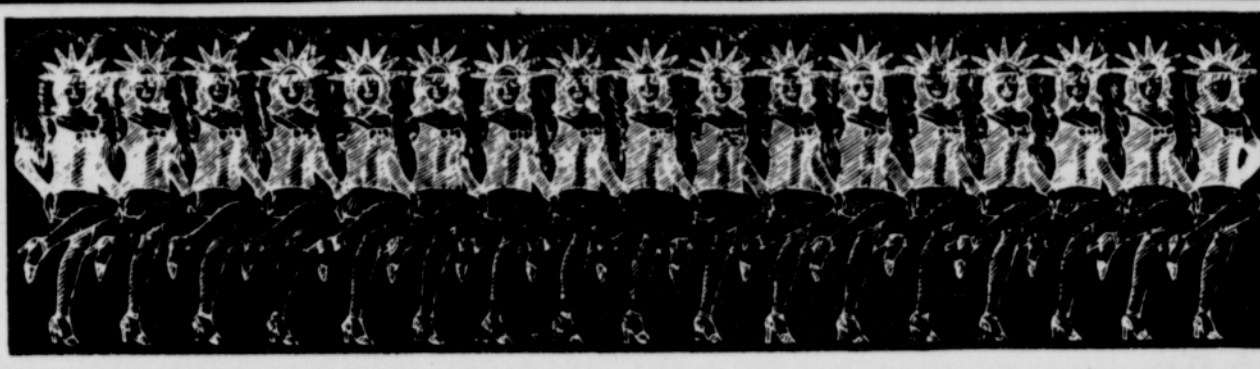


AMERICAN



GRAFFITI

THE PRESS

FROM PAGE ONE

To remain free, or to at least hold onto what might remain of political independence and perhaps sortie out from there in a more liberal or compassionate climate, the influx and dissemination of information and ideas are necessary. The problem is that it was almost sacred dogma that an informed citizenry would act reasonably and with good judgement. The reality seems to be that the vast bulk of information on almost every conceivable and esoteric subject from everywhere in the world at all times of the day every day, and the sheer volume of its variety — statistics, facts, opinions, ideas and reportage of events — is incomprehensible. At some point the beleaguered brain overloads and shuts off.

Apathy among adults is not accidental or the result of not having access to information. It is most usually the opposite, a premeditated response to a society awash in paper and verbiage. We opt out. We do not want to know. We know too much.

It is this which confounds the believers of information as the temple of freedom. To cull through the immensities of banal drivel to discover what is pertinent — or work through the purposely misleading, might finally be too much to require of a citizen. Suppression, after all, fires the wronged spirit. Gluttony buries it.

There are presently as many forms of communication as there are groups of special interest using them. Half of the stars at night are communications satellites in the Clarke Belt. They have forever changed television programming and access, and provide, with computers, instantaneous information worldwide for governments and businesses. The proliferation of special interest groups, citizens' groups, political action groups, even PTA and library boards that publish newsletters, magazines and small newspapers, engage in political or religious mass mailings, and own or syndicate programs on radio and television stations or networks — all of these saturate us with information, virtually all of it self-promotional, biased and of questionable veracity.

The growth of television has, of course, changed everything. If you do not have one you have little to talk about with anyone. That which television presents becomes a prevailing view of our culture. Even when it is criticized as a narrow, self-serving distortion it is yet the defining edge — it represents and is a cause of what we are and how we view ourselves through its one-way prism. More than any other medium or device it has caused the question of who is in control of the information that assaults us through its window in an unending stream of words and visions.

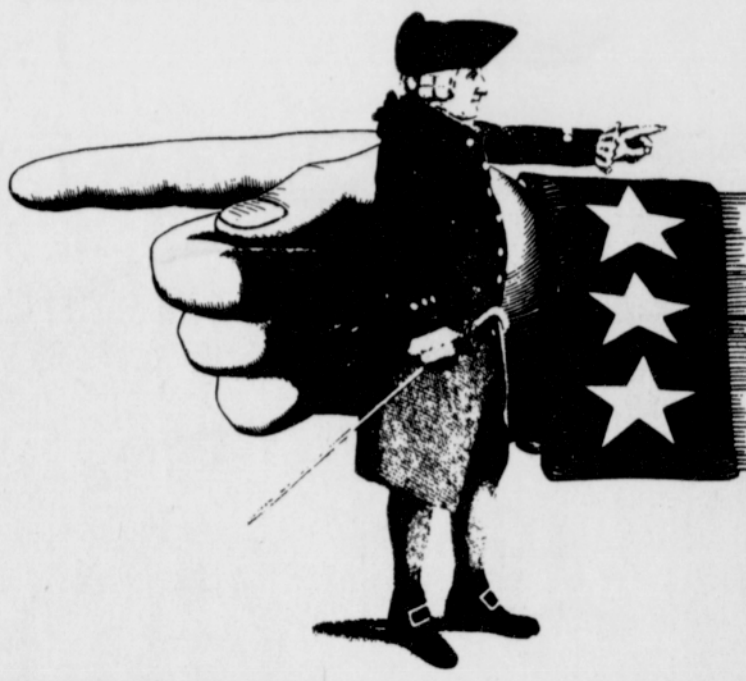
More people watch television than read. Reading is a relatively recent means of communication, abstract in form and actually cumbersome. Radio first, now television, and of course films, return information to its ancient forms, performance and articulation. The spoken voice is mesmerizing and its eloquence surpasses its content. What might be recognized as hogwash when read might prove captivating when spoken or presented visually as melody and form rather than content and substance.

Thirty years of television advertising during which a daily average of seventy or eighty percent of Americans have passively accommodated outrageous commercial falsehoods have probably eroded our capacity to recognize or critically evaluate truth. At some point language changes from communication to promotion and transaction. The dazzle of technology blinds us to issues of human rights and freedoms, renders them insignificant or naive. It seems medieval: all that brilliant jewelry that glows from portraits of unwashed and diseased bodies.

The basic idea of communication in the vast centralized societies of the present is, as described in an essay in *Manas*, to profit from the weaknesses and reflexes of the masses and to stimulate the movement of goods. Rarely is any sort of education or awakening provided.

A workable definition must be made of information and what purposes it serves, whether it is a public dialogue and serves as a necessary function of an open society or whether it should be privately controlled to reflect only certain ideas and points of view.

The First Amendment answers unequivocally: Congress, which makes law, shall make no law that abridges freedom of speech or press, or for that matter deny the right of people to peacefully assemble in dissent; nor can the right of



free religion be tampered with. The First Amendment can be broken down into several categories, at least the following eight by Harriet F. Pilpel: First, the freedom to speak, the right to communicate freely and without restraint. Second, the right to listen, the freedom to read, to watch, and to hear. Third is the right not to speak or write, to refuse to communicate. Fourth is the right not to be forced to listen or see, part of another basic Constitutional right, to privacy, in this context the right to not be subjected to sight, sound or smell that one wishes to avoid but has no way of avoiding. Fifth is the right to anonymity, the right to communicate and receive communication anonymously. Sixth, the right to know, the right not to have government keep secrets from us. Seventh is the right of access, which is in a way a part of the First. It is not enough to have freedom to speak if all of the effective media of communication are unavailable either as a result of government action or non-action on the part of private interests which control the media. The eighth category asks the question of whom, in all its various meanings, does the First Amendment apply. It applies to government itself in all its branches, federal to local, and to private groups which in effect exercise government power, such as company towns or shopping centers.

The purpose of the press is little understood, which is as much the fault of itself as it is the result of public unconsciousness. The people expect event and spectacle, which are ardently

reported. But the main function of the press is to act as the conscience of authority, the critical watchdog, the cry of alarm when authority is exceeded or corrupt. It must present differing views, act as a forum and instrument of public dialogue and debate. Above all, whatever its various points of view, it must be honest and open with its readers, its viewers and listeners.

No argument that the press can and often does harm people unnecessarily and cruelly. No argument that special interests control ever more parts of the flow of information and manipulate it to project their demands and points of view. And no argument that the press in all its Hydraic forms does an inadequate job. It is probably impossible. There is too much to write about, think about, to debate and discuss, and it moves too quickly, changes too rapidly to pin down well enough. The tendency is frequently to view the chaotic mass through a narrow prism, usually power and economics.

Amnesia and distortion of a free press have continually given rise to small newspapers and magazines, and to independent radio stations, whose only allegiance is to the First Amendment, and not unlike third political parties that incubate ideas that the major parties eventually adopt, the small independent press provides a vital forum for the exchange, analysis, understanding and argument of issues that are at the base of every culture and society. Its goals, which are the same for this newspaper, are debated everywhere on Earth; to increase human liberty and assist in eradicating sexism, racism, poverty and war. These are the true horsemen of death. They are human diseases which are inflicted upon each other. Yet there is a fifth rider, a scribe, a scribbler who documents the dooms and glooms, the perversities and horrors of our busy, illtempered species. This newspaper is a direct descendant, at least in its intent, of the radical newspapers that bloomed briefly in the late 1960s, but its lineage goes much farther back, to the rough and prickly press of our ancestors that ultimately fostered the First Amendment. It is a heritage of responsibility that is immediate but often lost in the pursuit of profit and protection of a status quo that ensures profit over human rights.

Most of these small journals are underfunded, understaffed and seldom understood. They do not generally reflect popular opinion. They operate on the cultural edge where megamedia fears to go. They act, often arrogantly or insensitively, as consciences and torchbearers, and they are advocates of particular reasonings and causes.

A conference of small critical publications was held in California in June. Both the political right and left were in attendance because both are threatened with extinction by the pervasive growth of the megamedia, by rising production and postal costs, and by dwindling subscriptions and counter sales as a result of rising apathy. All that could be agreed upon at the conference was that they should meet again. One of them, the publisher of a leftist rag, "In These Times," said he started the paper because he wanted to be an editor but economic realities made him a beggar instead.

It is obsession with the idea that truth is liberating and that all human beings ought by right of birth be free that keeps the majority of the poverty press struggling on. Our freedoms seem to be only wishful lies, bedtime stories told us by those we select to place our minds in chains to avoid responsibility. Truth becomes event translated into entertainment. Nobody gives a damn is what everybody says about everybody. But that is not true. Almost everyone is fearful of the dangerous, uncertain period we are trying to live through. Fear shows concern and masquerades as apathy. No one seems to know what to do, and the simplest answers are probably wrong. Small publications that seldom make money are large on seeking answers and truths. Though never quite satisfyingly pure, truth must yet in the real world be free of deceit and distortion. It must be like a rock or a star, a fact defined by its existence. William Allen White wrote in a Pulitzer Prize winning article a statement that is applicable to current conditions:

"You say that freedom of utterance is not for times of stress, and I reply with the sad truth that only in time of stress is freedom of utterance in danger. No one questions it in calm days, because it is not needed. And the reverse is true also; only when free utterance is suppressed is it needed, and when it is most needed, it is most vital to justice. . . . This state. . . is in more danger from suppression than from violence. Violence indeed, is the child of suppression."

Judge Learned Hand should have the last word. He said, "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it."



The North Coast
TIMES EAGLE

A JOURNAL OF ART AND OPINION
PUBLISHED MONTHLY IN ASTORIA,
OREGON, 286 BOND STREET (#4),
97103. 50 CENTS PER ISSUE OVER
THE COUNTER. SUBSCRIPTIONS
PENDING.

Michael Paul McCusker
Editor & Publisher

