



BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."
— THOMAS JEFFERSON

Everyone loves the idea of freedom of the press, radio and television, but most feel uncomfortable with freedoms they do not endorse. The born again North Coast Times Eagle celebrates its 13th birthday this month in the usual climate of verbal and political civil war between those who would enlarge free debate and those who would restrict it.

The very first amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and a free press in the assumption that liberty survives only in an atmosphere of free and open expression of thought and opinion, no matter how diverse, uncomfortable, obscene or absurd. "Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much," U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun wrote. "That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order."

Controversy, that feared word, is the language of democracy — the robust dialectic of conflicting opinions. Without controversy there is no dialogue, only obedience to command. The only appropriate response to controversial or unpopular speech or ideas is public rebuttal, not censorship, yet those who claim to rule in democracy's name, to enlarge their own powers, continually attempt to limit the range of ideas and information necessary to engage in the argument of opinion indispensable to political and personal freedom.

The assumption of freedom is that the average human being is intelligent and inspired by compassion and that most people will think and act reasonably most of the time. The assumption of government is that the common citizenry is unintelligent, primitive and brutal and must be shielded from its own perfidious nature. The tendency of government is to rule and it is a parasite. It must by the implication or force of its sovereignty feed upon and subtract the political liberties, rights and powers of those it rules. It is the responsibility of the people to always contain the power of their government, which without that restraint will relentlessly take power away from the people. In this century the U.S. government has taken much power for itself, some of it for the betterment of the people such as civil rights laws, but also much of it against the people such as the rule of terror,

secrecy and doubt caused by the cold war and the nuclear arms race.

The idea of the authority of law is a recognition by most of us that some of us will cheat, rob, murder and otherwise make life uncomfortable for the rest. A majority desires protection from the psychopathy of an avaricious minority. For exactly the same purpose, to protect us from predatory or cruel government, the political freedom and power of the common citizenry has been made the law of this nation. Yet a government of the people is assumed to also be a government for the people, so it is entrusted to act in the people's behalf to prevent or correct the excesses of despotic and unprincipled interests, which is in contrast to the present era of virulent capitalism. Former President Reagan was wrong when he said that a free government must be free of government. The dismantling of government protections which has continued since his administration simply altered government's role from acting as benefactor and protector of civil rights and liberties to its more ominous nature as military policeman.

To remain at liberty, or at least preserve what remains of our liberties and eventually venture into a more just and compassionate climate, the influx and dissemination of information, ideas and opinions are necessary. The problem is that it has been nearly sacred doc-

trine that an informed citizenry will act reasonably and with sound judgement. The reality seems to be that the vast bulk of information and data on virtually every conceivable and esoteric matter from everywhere in the world at all times of day every day, and the sheer volume of its variety — statistics, fact(oid)s, opinion polls, ideas that range from fantastic to meretricious, and reportage of events from births to wars — is incomprehensible. At some point the beleaguered brain overloads and shuts off.

Public apathy 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 know too much.

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

There are currently as many forms of communication as there are groups of special interest using them. It would seem that half of the stars at night are communications satellites in the Clarke Belt. They have forever changed radio/television programming and access, and provide with fiber optics cables, computers and fax machines instantaneous information worldwide. The proliferation of special interest groups, citizens groups, political action groups, even library boards and soap opera fan clubs that publish newsletters, fanzines, micromedia videos, tapes and newspapers, engage in political, religious or business mass mailings, own or syndicate programs on radio/television stations or networks — all of this print and babble saturates us with information, virtually all of it self-promotional, biased and of questionable veracity.

The growth of huge newspaper chains and entertainment networks both nationally and worldwide has long made newsgathering and reporting hostage to advertising and profit, and concentration of ownership threatens the diversity of independent media through which the public is presented multiple viewpoints.

Television, of course, has changed everything. Without TV a person has little to talk about with anyone. The vision television projects has become a prevailing, not to say pervasive, vision of our culture. Even when it is criticized as a narrow, superficial and self-serving distortion, TV is yet the defining edge — it represents, reflects and is a cause of what we are and how we view

