has dramatically changed radio/television programming and access and provides with fiberoptic cables, computer internets and FAX, instantaneous information everywhere on the planet. The proliferation of special interest groups, citizens groups, political action committees, 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 (also advertising throwaways), own or syndicate programs on radio/television networks and commercial internets -- all of this print and visual/babble saturates us with information, virtually all of it self-promotional, biased and of questionable veracity.

The growth of huge interlocking newspaper chains and entertainment networks 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 views and perceptions.

Television of course 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 ourselves through its one-way prism. More than any other medium or mode of communication, television has precipitated the question of who is in control of the information that assaults us through its flickering window night and day in an interminable stream of words and visions.

More people watch TV than read. Reading although antique is yet a relatively recent form of communication, a cumbersome abstract that beams its script directly to the brain. First radio, now TV, and of course film which has upstaged theater, (and VCRs), return information to its ancient forms of voice and performance. The spoken word is mesmerizing and its eloquence surpasses its content. What might be recognized as hogwash when read is often captivating when spoken or presented visually as melody and form rather than content or substance. (MTV and the infamous political/commercial sound-bite have telescoped the form even more.)

The greater part of a century of radio/TV advertising during which a daily average of 70% or 80% of Americans have passively accommodated outrageous commercial falsehoods have probably eroded our capacity to recognize or critically evaluate truth. At some point language is obscured, transposed from communication to promotion and transaction -- from clarification to obsfucation and manipulation. Truth is not necessary, only the appearance of truth -- or more pertinent, adhering to the principles of advertising, if a lie is told often enough it is accepted as truth; agreed upon fictions that masquerade as reality to distort and manipulate circumstances and are eventually recorded as historical certainty.

A workable definition of information and the purposes it serves is necessary, whether it is a source of public dialogue and crucial to an open society or if it should be privately controlled to reflect only certain ideas and points of view. A corollary question is if the use and dissemination of information should be treated as a business regulated by a relative few who seek profit from it. A. J. Leibling, who was generally dyspeptic about subordination of information, caustically claimed that a free press was available to anyone wealthy enough to own it.

The trend is that megacorporations are increasingly in control of the information we receive and they influence political and legal decisions about its use and flow, such as a 1985 Oregon State Supreme Court ruling that corporations, which are classified as individuals under the law, cannot be investigated and reported about with great risk of libel suit. That ruling, which was against a Portland weekly newspaper and favored a major bank, said essentially that while celebrities of the moment can be inexhaustibly exhumed in the media, institutions that affect the lives of millions are virtually sealed off from public scrutiny.

Technology, in particular satellites, fiberoptics and computers, has enabled the immense growth of communications conglomerates that are instantaneous and global. Multinational corporations, which might be considered private governments that influence and often dominate public governments, are able to transmit and receive data to/from subsidiaries everywhere on earth. They are also able to control and manipulate information pertinent to their activities, which gives them powers unanticipated by the framers of the Constitution whose concerns were limited to the powers of reigning government.

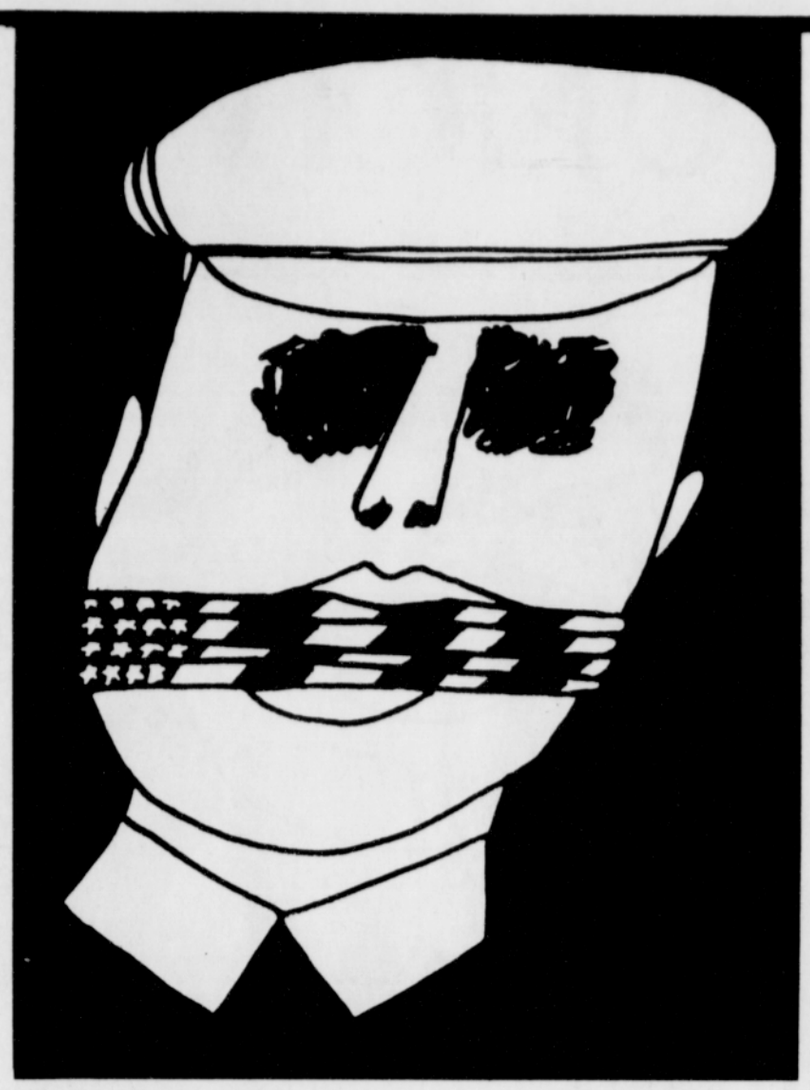
The basic idea of communication in the vast centralized societies of the current era is to profit from the self-interested reflexes of couchpotato masses and to stimulate world markets. Rarely is education or libertarian stimulation given priority or airtime.

Information presented to the American public is in the form of events which is called news. Ideas and opinions in mainstream media are subdivided into editorial sections of newspapers or as commentary segments of radio/TV newscasts. Most women and men in the newsgathering business do not think of themselves as propagandists or ideologues. On the contrary, most of them earnestly attempt the improbability of objective and unbiased recording of events, incidents, facts, and sometimes account for ideas through opinion polls and random surveys. They try to treat the news, in the words of Gene Fowler, as history shot on the wing. But of course they reflect the contemporary and cultural biases of their society and ultimately of the industry they serve -- The Media, an intertangled mafia of smoke and mirrors to which truth is ephemeral, chimerical and expendable, an item of profit and loss. The insidious aspect of the pursuit of objectivity as the cornerstone of modern journalism is that inevitably the form is used to disguise and project very partisan ideas and perspectives by those who manage and rule society and own the major media.

The real purpose of the press (or media) is little understood, which is as much its own fault as it is from public skepticism and distrust. The people expect event and spectacle, which are ardently chronicled, and the infotainment mediacrity provides instant celebrity and fashion, as instantly recycled and refashioned. But the central function of the press (and media) is to act as the public conscience and critical watchdog of authority -- the cry of alarm when authority is exceeded or corrupt. It must act as a forum and instrument of public dialogue and debate, presenting differing views, even as U. S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "expressions of opinion that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death." Above all, the press and media must be honest and open with its readers, viewers and listeners.

The media in all its hydra forms does an inadequate job. It is probably impossible to examine, publish and broadcast the billions of bits of data generated every day. There is too much to write about, to televise and report, to think about, to debate and discuss; and it moves too quickly, changes too rapidly to pin down well enough or process adequately.

In response to the impossible glut of information, a significant trend in media traffic is paradoxically toward specific, or more ominously, specialized audiences. Mainstreaming more often seems to mean segmenting into selective user groups that become hermetically sealed by appropriate media.



LAWRENCE RATZKIN

Consolidation and distortion of a free press have continually given rise to small newspapers and magazines, and to independent radio stations such as Astoria's KMUN-FM and Portland's KBOO (celebrating its 25th birthday), whose only allegiance is to the 1st Amendment. (Public broadcasting, highly praised and severely criticized, often accomplishes exemplary work.) The independent media, which has few pretensions toward objectivity and fewer illusions about its probability, provides an insistent and vital forum that megamedia ignores for the exchange, analysis, understanding and argument of issues that are at the base of every culture and society. Its lineage reaches back to the rough and prickly press that gave birth to the 1st Amendment, and though it seldom reflects popular opinion and operates on the cultural edge where megamedia fears to go, the independent micromedia is powered by the belief that if it does not remain free nothing soon afterward will be free.

Freedom implies a mature citizenry while the nature of authority requires that no one grow up. To be free and remain that way is a large responsibility and many people don't want it. Political freedom insists upon the value of the individual but the accelerated complexity of American society is constructed on aggregates and consensus and makes the contributions and usefulness of each of us less valuable. Our thinking and sense of self-worth are critically affected. An individual and ultimately collective sense of personal and political helplessness settles in.

No one should ever be surprised that a government does not encourage liberty or independent opinion among its subjects. Democracies are elaborate power balances between diverse parties that constantly seek advantage over the others. A most important assumption of a democracy is that the flow of information should not be tampered with nor be restricted if democracy is to survive the incessant tugs of war between its parties. But of course interfering with and manipulating information is among the highest priorities of political power which accurately assumes the general populace will not give much thought to mind control efforts most of the time.

People who listen to independent radio stations like KMUN wish for more than babble shrieking from their radios and viewers of public broadcasting search for more than the drivel and schlock beamed to the masses by commercial networks. Yet intimidation by the FCC, the gestating ministry of truth Orwell predicted would rise to be the temple of the state, suppresses creativity and controversy. Risk taking, essential to creativity and independence, shrivels to mumbles of acquiescence. We should remember Orwell: He invented a language, Newspeak, which was based on erasing unwanted ideas in the pretense of simplifying the public dialogue. He warned that what is removed from language is forgotten in the individual and collective mind.

Orwell was wrong, though, when he suggested that a propaganda system depended upon violent coercion. Instead, in a post-Orwellian world we suffer the benign control of a powerful system of indoctrination and propaganda that needs little coercion to set an agenda for what people will think about.

Policing public morality, claiming of course that it is only being reflected, is usually an indecently popular and effective method of intruding control over what we read in our newspapers, listen to on our radios and view on our televisions, and are ultimately persuaded to accept as truth and reality when in reality our vision has been distorted, our perception atrophied, as are our personal values and liberties. There is no single right or truth, nor is there a single wrong or deceit. Shades fog every issue, denying absolutes no matter how insistently projected.

A free and open flow of information regardless of ideology or opinion, despite the strenuous labor of separating truth from fiction, deceit, gossip and obscenity -- information from disinformation -- is quite truthfully the only method of preserving what remains of our freedoms and the only chance to enlarge them in a turbulent world that is recoiling from the collapse of a morbidly tyrannical and static empire that claimed to be a dictatorship of the people.

The 1st Amendment is unequivocal: nothing shall abridge freedom of speech, therefore freedom of thought. It is our distinguishing ideal, unfortunately more in theory than actuality. Not our wealth or world power nor our system of acquisition and consumption is as important as the inspired attempt to reverse history and make it possible for people to be equal and independent under laws of their own choice.

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

This is a revision of a speech made in early November to the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Seaside, written as a synthesis of a few earlier MPMc articles that appeared in the NCTE.

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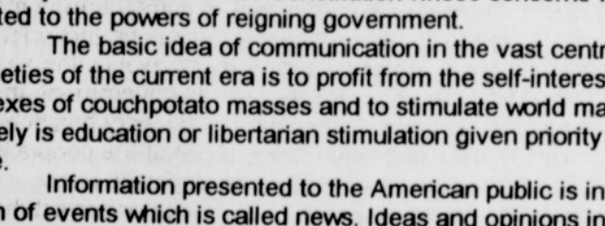

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