

THE LAST SMUT SHOW

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"There is no need of a law to check the license of the press. It is law enough and more than enough to itself. Virtually, the community have come together and agreed what things should be uttered, have agreed on a platform and to excommunicate him who departs from it, and not one in a thousand dares utter anything else."

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1858)

Salman Rushdie attained the highest prize for a writer after he wrote his famous book, *The Satanic Verses*. He was awarded a death sentence, which makes all other literary award insignificant. The book created an awesome uproar when it was published in 1989. People rioted and were killed, buildings were burned as were copies of his book and a few bookstores selling it. Other bookstores pulled the book off their shelves though a few put it back when writers protested. Nine years later Rushdie continues to live in seclusion and is constantly guarded from zealous death squads lured by immortality and a few million dollars bounty for his blasphemous head.

The furor over Rushdie's book resulted in much extolling of the freedom of ideas and expression in the Christian West. The phrase "cherished tradition of freedom" was used in articles and commentaries about the frenzied reaction among Moslem populations. The scolding smugness was misplaced. Freedom of expression is paid at high cost and is always threatened with repossession. Not only in Islam do free-thinkers lose life and liberty — think of a few Catholic "democracies" south of our borders and the death squads our taxes pay to enforce orthodoxy by murdering dissenting writers, poets and artists as well as labor leaders, political activists and peasants.

The First Amendment has not prevented attempts to impose religious or political orthodoxy in this country. The excessive repression of the McCarthy era ruined the lives and professions of some of the nation's best writers. Christian fundamentalists have been trying to ban books from schools and public libraries for years and other censorious groups demand control over the contents of school textbooks and the suppression of everything from internet pornography to *Mother Goose*. In the matter of life's origins the pseudo-doctrine of "Creationism" is imposed on schoolchildren despite a Supreme Court ruling that it does not qualify as a science to be taught alongside evolution in public schools. Reaction to the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* in the USA was on a par with the Islamic reaction to its contemporary, Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*.

The persistent attempts by government and groups of powerful elites to control public dialogue, particularly in matters of social behavior, has always been dangerous and usually the guise for authoritarian usurpation of the apparatus of communication. Realization of this led directly to the First Amendment, which is only 208 years old this year. The First Amendment states simply and clearly that government has no right to interfere with freedoms of speech, press or religion or with public gatherings.

The right to speak implies a responsibility to those who listen; a listener to free speech is free to tune out the speaker. But shutting up the speaker is quite a different matter. Then the listener is threatening the right of the speaker, and as Chief Justice William Rhenquist wrote in a majority decision of religious evangelist Jerry Falwell, who was depicted in a *Hustler* magazine cartoon performing incest with his mother in an outdoor toilet — which tread upon a multitude of taboos — the First Amendment does not only protect the reasonable but also the outrageous.

If anyone took stock of the contemporary use of press and speech freedoms, the glimpse should confirm the worst fears of any cynic or social critic about the tastes of the greater



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mass of the people. Most of us acquiesce to the most banal, violent and sexually arousing entertainment: We are addicted to spectacle and blatantly commercial rituals.

The contemporary abuse of freedom of speech is by those who wish to turn the populace into witless automatons in possession of credit cards. These shameless promoters of the inane and unnecessary are the truly malignant conveyors of media and internet indecency. They are the blasphemous idolaters who appeal to base instincts and superstitions of the mass audience to sell a product and make a buck.

Little concern is shown toward demanding truth in advertising, nor is much attention paid to public outcry against consistent violence depicted on television. Only against "smut" does government strike. Matters of flesh are regarded as unfit for public consumption except in a caricature form of "soft-core porn." (Federal communications law defines indecency as material that "in context, depicts or describes in terms patently offensive by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs.") Sex — the real thing — and defecation are repressed as filth.

The immaturity of a culture can be gauged by the depth of its reluctance to publicly discuss the physiology of its inhabitants. Human beings often seem unwilling to come to terms with their organs and bodily functions. Contradictory values develop. Eating, even to gluttony, is acceptable to public view but display or discussion of ridding the body of wastes generated by stuffing the stomach is regarded as nasty and vile. Most of the time most of us past the age of 10 think about sex more than any other subject (except food) yet we shrink in shame and embarrassment at discussion of sexual organs.

Our civic Christianity still persists in the medieval abhorrence of the flesh, its soft sensuous corruption the cornerstone of scripture. Yet we live in an age of science that repudiates ignorance and superstition even as it replaces them with doubt and horror. Ecology, the interrelationship of life, is tacitly acknowledged. We are aware we are parts of nature and live and die in interdependent relation with other earthly life. We return to earth the sustenance we take by jettisoning our waste, which promotes and nourishes other biological growth which in

turn somewhere up the foodchain replenishes our sustenance. Our only real worth on the planet might be our excrement; our used up bodies return the loan of life by passing on their protean spark to the other side of the dirt.

But we balk. We claim to be descended from gods not ascended from feces. We wish supremacy not cooperative empathy. This wrongheaded arrogance has put us at odds with our planet which we despoil with life exterminating filth and call it civilization.

So we invert our sensibilities and values to cope with an unexpected world we have constructed. A bowel movement in our cultural psyche is regarded more indecent than an oil spill. Genitals, the organs of pleasure and reproduction are reviled as unfit for public exposure or dialogue, but in contrast we accept the dark visions of horror and death, of violence and inhumanity as entertainment.

And we seem obsessed with denying our children exposure to things they most want to know on their own. We disregard our own youthful impatience to learn and grow up and inflict identical deceptions we endured upon our children. We wish to shield them from unpleasant realities and attempt to forcibly repress their sexuality — yet we expect them to somehow cope and mature. This exaggerated fear of children learning anything about life is a prime palpitation of government censorship.

No one should be surprised that a government does not encourage liberty or independent opinion among its subjects. Democracies are only elaborate power balances between ruled and rulers. A most important assumption of a democracy is that the flow of information should not be restricted nor tampered with. 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 Astoria's KMUN wish for more than babble shrieking from their radios and viewers of public television search for more than the drivel and schlock beamed to the masses by commercial networks. Yet intimidation from the Federal Communications Commission, 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 newspapers, listen to on radios and view on television — and are ultimately persuaded to accept as truth and reality, when in reality our vision has been distorted, our perception atrophied as well as our personal values and liberties. That is the real indecency we should worry about.



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BY NORMON SOLOMON

April ended with some very good news: Wages are stagnant. If you work for a living, that may sound a bit odd. But for the news media, it makes perfect sense to claim that what's bad for workers is good for the economy.

So the front page of *The New York Times* trumpeted the latest economic news with a cheery headline — "Markets Surge as Labor Costs Stay in Check."

"The stock market rocketed yesterday to its greatest gain in more than five years," the *Times* reported. Why? Because important people were happy that wages had barely increased in the United States. And employers hadn't shelled out more for "benefits like health insurance and pensions."

The *Times* front page spotlighted the jubilant comment of a senior economist at the huge brokerage firm of Goldman, Sachs & Co.: "There is no question this is a better labor cost report than we had anticipated."

"Better" for employers. But how about workers? Well, they're not worth much ink. And they're certainly not worth hearing. The 18-paragraph *Times* article quoted a few current and former government economists — without a word from workers, their representatives or labor advocates.

When more money is in our pay envelopes, most news reports tell us that's bad. It's "inflationary," and it means that the economy is "overheating." But when stocks and bonds soar in value, that's supposed to make us feel good about economic progress.

News outlets often seem dazzled by Wall Street. That fascination is especially intense on public television, where programs like the "Nightly Business Report" and Louis Rukeyser's "Wall Street Week" keep close tabs on stock market trends.

Catering to an upscale audience, public TV depends on millions of dollars from major companies pleased to "underwrite" programming that promotes their outlooks. It shouldn't surprise us that the "News Hour With Jim Lehrer" — funded by an agribusiness giant and an insurance company — devotes long and fervent segments to the stock market.

The media emphasis has gotten so out of whack that we're encouraged to care more about the fortunes of Wall Street than the incomes on our own street.

But only 2% of the public owns half of the country's individual stock and bond holdings. Other people in the market are very small investors. And 80% of Americans have no direct stake in the stock markets at all. (Employees with indirect holdings via pension funds

have no say in how the money is invested and can't get access to proceeds until they retire.)

Although most news accounts leave the vague impression that an upswing in the stock market augurs well for the nation's workforce, the opposite has been the case.

For nearly a quarter of a century, despite advances in education, the picture for America's workers has been bleak. During that time, real wages for males have dropped 15%. And while women have entered a wider range of jobs, their real wages have increased by only 4%.

Meanwhile, investor gains and corporate profits went through the roof. Government macroeconomic policies have served Wall Street interests — while flattening workers' income.

Just as evidence of wage stagnation makes stocks rise, Wall Streeters are frequently ecstatic to learn that a major corporation has decided to slash its payroll. "Downsizing" usually sends stock prices climbing.

Clearly, big-money investors and average workers have very different interests. But anyone who points that out is liable to face media attack for encouraging class warfare.

Actually, the mass media don't seem to mind the class warfare that's continually waged from the top down — undermining the economic security of workers in the name of streamlining production.

"Sacred though jobs allegedly are, the institutions that have been eliminating them by the scores of thousands for their own private profit advantages are never condemned for this in mainstream comment," writes economist Edward Herman. "They are even complimented for having taken steps to improve efficiency, productivity and 'competitiveness.'"

Herman is professor emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania's esteemed Wharton School. But he's out of step with the news media because he is much too concerned about the well-being of workers: "The euphemisms, including 'purr' worlds like restructuring and efficiency, divert attention from the fact that human lives are being shattered."

The news media are absolutely bullish on Wall Street. But workers remain undervalued — and suffer the consequences.

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