

Freedom and Suppression in the Press

About 10 or even five years ago, it was a lot easier for most people to believe that the public media of communication -- radio, television and the press -- is free from interference, that there is a free press and free broadcasting facility, at least in the so-called 'free world'

That freedom is no longer taken for granted. More and more the media, and the men who control it, are under attack, not only from the Left which has always found the communication apparatus to be totally unsympathetic, but also from the Right.

While Spiro Agnew goes into hysterics about the James Restons or Walter Cronkites in the United States, in our own country, Pierre Trudeau hardly makes any secret of his desire to muzzle those he calls "separatists" within Radio-Canada.

Why it has become so difficult, even for the right-wing people, to argue that there is a free communication apparatus in this country or anywhere else is that all the contradictions within broadcasting, the news, and the media generally, have become so much more apparent.

I mean, with events like the Vietnam war and Biafra, even an average superficial scanner of news easily detects inconsistencies of reporting and interpretations.

Here, as in Britain, the media is controlled either by government -- if not in theory, then for all practical purposes -- in the forms of a public corporation such as the CBC, or they are owned by big business. The workers at the CBC -- producers, artists or production workers -- may be subject to that subtle form of political pressure as is implicit in Mr. Trudeau's threat that he would "put a lid" on the French-language CBC if it does not clear its house of "separatists".

On the other hand, some private owners of the media unabashedly run the communication industry as just another business; in their monopolistic hunger they gleefully swallow the small local operators.

In either case, the free flow of communication can suffer, and the public doesn't get what it believes it does, and what it is entitled to.

Dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, particularly among journalists, is more widespread than is commonly believed. In some places their response has reflected itself in the mushrooming growth of the underground press and other off-beat journals, but in other places groups of journalists with varied persuasions and ideologies have come together to form free communication outlets.

The interview which follows is with one such group, calling itself the Free Communication Group, which came into being in London during the summer of last year.

Q. It was against a background of there being an enormous contraction in the ownership of press and television, the increase in the amount of power held by a small number of people and the thwarting of journalists and the people in television. It was formed largely by people in newspapers and television, and in this sense it is unorthodox as a political influence group because in classical terms you depend on either, say, students or an agency of the working class and so forth. Here you have fundamentally a middle-class constituency who are working within these organizations.

The Free Communication Group has been started against an enormous background of backlash in broadcasting and journalism. And so it is, in a sense, a defensive as well as an aggressive organization. The right-wing is famous for its paranoia about broadcasting, about free communications, and one of the defensive functions of the Group will be, by constant publicity of the erosion of broadcasting and newspaper rights of journalists and procedures, to make it much more difficult for this kind of process to happen, and then go on to an attack.

This is paralleled in the workers' control movements in industry where over the last few years there has been a steady erosion of things

like collective bargaining for workers, control over working conditions. In the same way as there has been a right wing backlash against the gains of the labor movements in the fifties and the forties, similarly now it is getting to be felt in radio and television. In that sense, the Free Communications Group does have some sort of common aims with the working class movements.

We are talking about producers on television shows, about scriptwriters, cutters, people who are producing serials, theatre critics -- the whole bulk of liberal-cum-socialists from the middle class who aren't too badly off. One of the major planks in our platform is the control of the media by the people who work there. We stress that this means not only journalists; it also means that the production workers and the maintenance workers in media should have a say. The argument about participation is a very deep one and a very difficult one for most journalists to follow to the end.

Q. Your argument seems to be a part of the philosophy which holds that those who are affected by a decision, should have a say in the process of decision making. But it is obvious that a different kind of responsibility is involved when one starts talking about the media of communication because one is making decisions not only about those people who are actually involved in the production of a newspaper or a television program, but decisions which affect the whole life of the community.

A. We completely agree. We stress that there are various levels of responsibility; in fact, everyone would stress this. There is a responsibility of a newspaper to its workers, no doubt, but more important, of course, there is a responsibility of that newspaper to the community at large.

Now we all know, on the other hand, that a newspaper is produced in an enormous hurry by a number of people working very fast and very hard. In newspaper terms, therefore, it is very hard to talk about total communal participation.

Where the argument gets to be more interesting on that level is radio and television. We are very interested, for example, in WBAI in New York which is an audience-subscribed radio station. We would say that if you take an average-size town, what is to prevent -- given allocation of air-space which is the only technical thing to be decided -- the people from setting up a station there with low capital investment, getting a subscription from their audience, and then being very open, being totally democratic.

Q. What if these stations are overtaken by other elements, by Fascists or by those who are interested in perpetuating the prevailing social injustices?

A. We think that argument in the end isn't valid. You have to take the risk. You have to say: "So what! We will do our station better than they will." The fact is, for instance, that WBAI in New York is the fourth most popular station.

Q. Do you think that the media is or can be objective?

A. People make a lot about this objectivity. It is a myth.

To be blunt, there are many socialists in the group. And as socialists, we have a view of the way the society is built -- the orthodox view that is, a class society. And the means of communication are largely in the possession of the governing class. Therefore, we don't think there is any sort of objectivity. To go on about objectivity, you only have to look at industrial coverage over the last few years. That's not objective. It's a fact of life.

Q. But the journalist in a paper, the industrial reporter, is neither the employer, nor is he a capitalist himself. Why can't he be objective in his reporting?

A. They themselves are not capitalists: journalists are a fink class. They work on these

papers; some of them are leftish, but they are always in a situation where they have to write copy for a boss -- the editor; the editor is responsible to another boss -- the managing editor who is eventually responsible to the board.

Therefore, by a very subtle process sometimes, the dominant ideology filters down -- right down to the sub-editor's desk, which is why we talk about control.

Q. Aren't you simply trying to attack objectivity only because the interests of a Group like yours are being denied expression in the media?

A. One has to accept that the dominant class has a more or less total grip on communications. For example, in our magazine, the Open Secret, we are about to mount an issue on business journalism. Business journalism is one aspect of the newspaper industry which, if you like, lies closest to the capitalist system. It means a lot of money to the newspapers. The Observer, for example, the Sunday paper in London, has a business supplement which is staked to the tune of 25,000 pounds per year. From it they get 750,000 pounds of advertising a year.

Obviously the pressures on that business editor of the Observer -- he is rather a good person in fact -- are going to be enormous and they interfere with objectivity a great deal. I don't think that objectivity in that sense exists.

It is one of the purposes of the Group to go beyond the immediate constituency and try, eventually, by circulation of our magazine and by meetings, to demonstrate what exactly the media means in social terms so that the communication industry will be demystified.

Most people have no definition of what are free communications. It never has existed, in no form of society has it ever existed and there is an enormous amount of theoretical work to be done.

We are trying to decide what are the concepts of free communications. Are you going to go back to some kind of moral evaluation of the 'cultural wealth' of a program which was of course, a great trend in 'cultural criticism' in our society of the fifties. Our direction is against that.

Chandra Prakash
-from Montreal Star

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The "INSIDE" urgently needs creative people to write short stories, essays, poetry, and prose. Also needed are people to do illustrations and graphics.

Anyone who feels they have something creative to offer, please contact the Brunswickan Office and leave your name and phone number or contact Blues Roberts at the Brunswickan Office or by calling 454-6570. We need you to make this a good magazine.

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