

# Censorship—the Gramophone mind vs. reality

by Paul Creelman

At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed all right-thinking people will accept without question. It is not exactly forbidden to say this, or that, or the other, but it was "not done" to say it, just as in mid-Victorian times it was "not done" to mention trousers in the presence of a lady. Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the high-brow periodicals.

To exchange one orthodoxy for another is not necessarily an advance. The enemy is the gramophone mind, whether or not one agrees with the record that is being played at the moment.

George Orwell, author of the novel 1984

## CENSORSHIP AND THE GRAMOPHONE MIND

Censorship. It is the attempt to suppress the dissemination of information, to limit knowledge, to curtail understanding. It is a very real danger both to society itself and to the democratic process which keeps our society running. Yet censorship of literature in our school system, censorship of art forms and even censorship of political or scientific statements are very real occurrences in our country. It is not a qualitative but a quantitative difference in the type of censorship which "rewrites history" in Nazi Germany or the USSR and the type of censorship which prevents the adult population of Nova Scotia from seeing "Last Tango in Paris". Each is equally reprehensible, but one can be seen to have more immediate deleterious effects.

There are three areas in which the suppression of information has traditionally been a danger—in literature and other art forms, in the press and news media, and in the advocacy of political opinions. Recently, a new threat has posed itself—the vulnerability of scientific hypothesis to public opinion and the vulnerability of scientific learning to a vocal new group of Christian Fundamentalists and other religious groups. Within each of these disparate divisions, we find a common conflict. It is the conflict between the 'right-thinking' person and the ideas which a 'right-thinking' person cannot tolerate, and wants to not only oppose ideologically, but wipe out of existence entirely. This ostrich-like attitude is the basic problem of censorship.

In the field of art forms and literature, we can find the most vocal and single-minded opponents of freedom of expression, and the most blatant censorship imaginable. Luckily, censorship of literature may be less damaging to society than in other areas, but this does not excuse the attempt to mutilate our cultural heritage for the sake of the few who cannot bear to see others read freely.

## BOOK BURNING—CENSORSHIP OF CULTURE

George Orwell, the writer of the excerpt on the 'gramophone mind' is also the author of the most famous anti-totalitarian novel in modern literature, 1984. In 1984, Orwell paints a grim picture of a society where censorship completely rules the citizens of a totalitarian dictatorship. The 'thought-police' not only rewrite history to fit the whims of the government's new party line, but also censor the thoughts of the population itself. Ironically, Orwell's classic work was itself censored by society, falling victim to the evil that it preached against. In 1961, the school board of Wrenshall, Minnesota, banned the book and fired the teacher who assigned it to students in a senior English class. Taking action on the basis of complaints about sex in the novel, the

school board was eventually persuaded to actually read the book they had banned and reinstated the book in the library and the teacher to his job.

The horror stories of book banners who have not even read the works they object to abound in the case studies of censorship in modern times, but even when a little more common sense seems to prevail, there are fundamental issues of principle behind the free availability

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of information. The Canadian Library association sums it up in their Statement On Intellectual Freedom:

"Every person in Canada has the fundamental right, as embodied in the nation's Bill of Rights, to have access to all expressions of knowledge, creativity, and intellectual activity, and to express his thoughts publicly. This right to intellectual freedom is essential to the health and development of Canadian society."

In other words, as the Chief Librarian of the Halifax Regional Library, Dianne MacQuarrie, puts it, "we believe that society will benefit from free availability of information". When threatened by a suit for libel by the Church of Scientology if they did not remove certain books unfavourable to the Church of Scientology from the shelves, MacQuarrie states that the library's Board of Directors decided not to remove the books in question but to support the Statement of the Canadian Library Association which had been adopted by the Library.

However, in a similar case in Dartmouth, the Dartmouth Regional Library quietly removed several of the books in question.

Responding to charges that the library could be doing more harm in the cases of seriously objectionable material (i.e. pornography), MacQuarrie defended the utility of the principle to society.

"I would say that there is no evidence of possible adverse effects on an individual because of what they read. What may be objectionable to one individual is not to another, and each must make his own decision as to what they read. There has been considerable discussion about this, but our responsibility is to make material available."

## SUPPRESSING TRUTH—THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

A similar code of ethics exists in the commercial press and news media. Unpleasant or scandalous events can no longer be as easily suppressed in the press as they could be in Britain from 1476 to the mid 1700's when government control of the press was almost absolute. However, the responsibility of the media to report objectively all they know to be true has come under more subtle attack than direct government control in the intervening years. Until the later part of the 20th century, the financial control of advertising revenue was a force to be reckoned with, and even today these are important considerations for the newspaper that wants to stay in business. (For example, H.H. Tammen said towards the beginning of the 20th century: "Sure I'm a crook! I'm a blackmailer. What are you going to do about it?" Tammen was half-owner of the Denver Post.)

More subtle censorship also affects the role of the press in a free society. This is the censorship which is wielded inside the news media, as opposed to censorship which is imposed from without. In Berninghausen's *The Flight From Reason* he elucidates this danger.

"Sometimes interpretations come primarily from the opinions or prejudices of the reporter. Obviously, there is a kind of objectivity that takes everything at face value and lets the public be imposed upon by a demagogue such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, who waved sheets of paper in front of TV cameras, claiming that he had a list of traitors. . ."

Berninghausen also criticized the New Left of the 1960's for much the same influence on

This retreat to advocacy journalism is a style of news-writing which went out of favour shortly after the turn of the century in the United States, at least partly due to the growth of a large and self sufficient newspaper

industry, but also due perhaps to a twinge of conscience in the profession. Certainly the New York Journal has been blamed more than once for actually being one of the prime causes of

media reporting. This is a danger which is less formidable than the spectre of the McCarthy witch-hunt for communists, is certainly a danger of exactly the same form:

"To the activist-journalist what he thinks about the news is as important as the news itself. Hence the younger generation's impatience with the newspaper as mirror of the world, and its desire to transform it into a weapon with which to win the future.

This is, however, a formula for getting opinions first, and thereafter looking for facts to bolster those opinions. . . No doubt objective reporting is more difficult than the zealot's instant truth. . ."

—Herbert Brucker

the Spanish-American War at that time, through an amazing disregard for the facts in its news-reporting.

Modern newspapers, with a solid commitment to reporting objectively the facts of each case, have adopted ethics which have the same basis as the librarian's Statement on Intellectual Freedom. The free availability of information will always be to the benefit of society, and in the case of the news media, the principle is that the information is made available no matter how many people are displeased by the facts of the case. Gramophone mind or no, all must be presented with the truth as far as the news media can uncover it.

Certainly the principle itself is unchallenged in the world of the commercial press, although how well the commitment is carried out is another matter entirely.

## ENFORCING THE STATUS QUO

The last of the traditional areas of attack by censors on the freedom of speech occurs in the area of political advocacy. This is a policy which has a long and notorious history ever since its implementation in Britain in the Tudor period, when the newspapers were controlled by the government to ensure adherence to the authority of the King. In this century, we have witnessed the most appalling use of political censorship three times: in Nazi Germany, the USSR and the United States.

The rewriting of history in Germany to fit the party line was one of the most incredible frauds ever perpetrated on a populace. After organized book-burnings in the pre-war period, the Nazi's moved into more extensive re-education in a way similar to events described in Orwell's 1984. As part of Hitler's Big Lie, this propaganda was disseminated not only throughout the ministry of propaganda, but also in the educational system as well.

Similar atrocities have been recorded in the Soviet Union. When Stalin's death released the Soviet media to systematically debunk the myth of his greatness in the party, one of the victims of the political re-alignment was Beria (known to be intimate with Stalin). He was not only assassinated but deemed never to have existed. Shortly after the re-alignment, sub-

scribers to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia received a package with an article about whaling in the Bering Sea. They were instructed to remove the previous article containing Beria's bibliography and carefully paste in the new pages.

In the United States, matters never reached this level of informational authoritarianism. However, the McCarthy investigations certainly did manage to censor a number of prominent American intellectuals and creative artists right out of their jobs. Surely the best example of this would be the classic Peoria film which was widely criticized when distributed because it was considered to be communist propaganda. (The film was a documentary on human rights which was produced by the United Nations.)

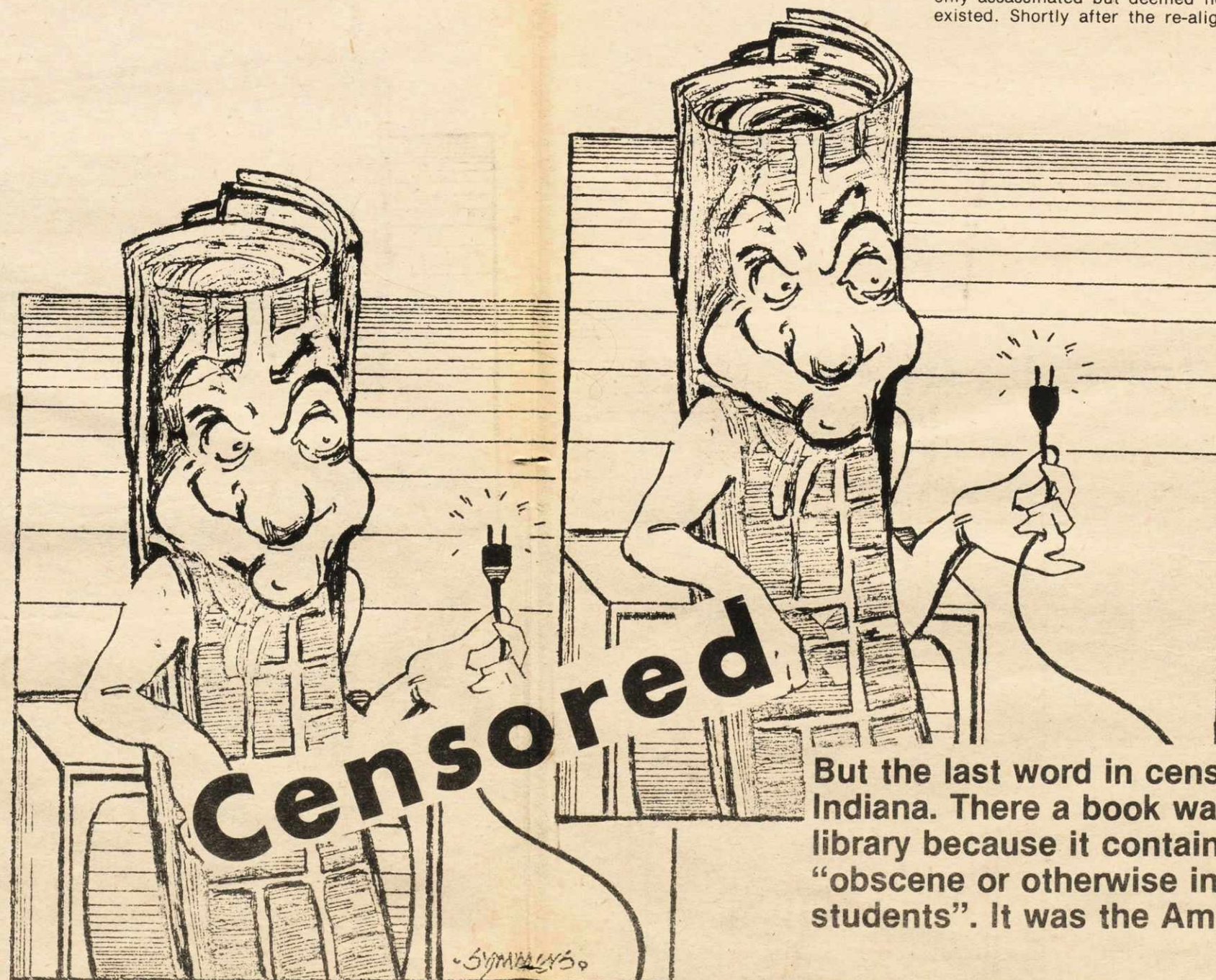
Even today, political considerations are important to a small newspaper or publishing company. As one experienced owner of a busy maritime publishing company said, you have to be careful with your politics, because if you're in the wrong party on election day, your advertising will suffer.

## MOVEMENT TO IGNORANCE—CENSORSHIP OF SCIENCE

The final attack on freedom of information has to do with the scientist and his profession, traditionally dedicated to the determination of the truth. However, some groups are apparently not content to let the scientific investigator manage his own search of truth.

Controversial theories concerning the heredity of intelligence have raised tremendous outcries of racism, perhaps justifiably. When Harvard Professor Herrnstein theorized that there is a genetically divergent class structure of intelligence, the predictably vigorous attacks on his theory led the president of Harvard to warn that the campaigns of persecution were leading scientists to abandon investigation in those areas. This in turn was limiting the capability of the scientist to perform his primary function, that of discovering the truth. The same effect of political values affecting scientific judgement often arises during discussion of political issues with the roots of their controversy in a scientific debate. The dangers of nuclear energy when harnessed for the production of electricity is one issue that is often debated with little effort made at anything resembling objective or rigorous analysis. Instead arguments centre on emotive-laden labels. This loss of information because of preconceived political ideas hurts society yet again.

A more harmless but just as ominous foreboding of this approach can be seen in the vocal creationist groups forming in the United States to oppose the teaching of the theory of evolution in the schools. In California, changes to the text have already been made to suit the creationists. Although presently lobbying for equal space with the theory of evolution, these Christian Biblical fundamentalists could very well be the start of a trend away from reason and towards faith in innate moral value. If the creationists are the start of a new wave of Gramophone minds, then freedom of information and society may be in for a hard time indeed.



But the last word in censorship comes from Cedar Lake, Indiana. There a book was removed from the high-school library because it contained 70 or more words that were "obscene or otherwise inappropriate for high-school students". It was the American Heritage Dictionary.

Maclean's magazine,  
August 10, 1979