

MEDIA SHANGRI-LA
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For several weeks now, we've been struggling to put down on paper the gist of an article that appeared in the last issue of the quarterly *American Scholar*. It was written by a Leopold Tyrmand who is identified as a Polish-born, Paris-educated newsman and lecturer living in this country since 1966. Titled "The Media Shangri-La," the article discusses freedom of the press and, in general, is critical of the attitudes, methods and power developed by the communications media in the last two decades.

We are in agreement with most of what Mr. Tyrmand says. Our struggle has not been with what he says but the way that he says it. Most journals like the *American Scholar* are academically oriented and written by an intellectual elite for limited circulation to other intellectually inclined readers. On rare occasions someone will write with the clarity and simplicity of a George Orwell, but mostly the prose is convoluted, overly erudite and not well organized. Tyrmand's article, in spite of its excellence, suffers from all of these failings. Nevertheless, he does air some pertinent observations and criticisms about our modern communications media.

Our concept of press freedom, he says, has been a blessing under which American democracy has blossomed and profited . . . although, of all our institutions, the media themselves seem to have profited least. As they have become more powerful, they have become more arrogant and, while proclaiming themselves the enemies of demagoguery and totalitarianism, have developed a demagoguery and totalitarianism of their own. This transition developing progressively since the early 1960s has created conflict, growing antagonism and even hatred between a frustrated American society and its communications media.

In recent years society has lost its say about what news should be emphasized and what ignored or played down. The media, by virtue of their willingness to give unqualified support and publicity to the "anything goes" extremes of fashion, behavior, life styles and sexual practices, have been able to impose on everybody the opinions of nonconformist minority groups, resulting in a reckless derangement of the whole social fabric of society.

The influential newspapers, news magazines and television networks have all embraced liberalism wholeheartedly. Although he sees their attitude as one of "liberal bigotry," Tyrmand finds no evidence of conspiracy because, as he says, there has been no need for one since the media have achieved like-mindedness by establishing themselves as a separate power in the name of freedom and liberal causes. They have achieved this

power status by an almost unconscious conformity in news reporting and by accepting the handy wisdom that the best arguments are those which share the media's own point of view.

The real sources of press monopoly, says Tyrmand, are its freedom to select and edit its formidable powers of repetition, and its absolute control of exposure. The most exposure is given to that which enhances the press's reputation of fairness without endangering its gospels. By constant repetition and prolonged exposure, viewpoints agreeable to those of the press can be established, while the viewpoints of dangerous opponents, however valid, can be barred effectively from public sight by presenting them briefly as a sop to media fairmindedness and then minimizing exposure thereafter.

After a long period of reporting facts, the media have begun to create facts. Someone has called these "factoids."—facts that had no existence before appearing in a magazine, newspaper or on a TV screen; fragments of truth, not lies, but not truths either. The old fashioned newsman once sought fame by defending the weak and oppressed and by helping innocent victims threatened by dishonest evidence; the new breed of newsman has discovered that fame and fortune may be had by digging away at powerful men and institutions and accumulating a mass of "factoids" and dishonest evidence of his own (often using any type of fraud, theft or deception to obtain them) and peddling his story to the highest bidder. Once the journalistic community itself looked upon muckraking and tabloid sensationalism as a despicable practice of "yellow journalism"; now these same practices, dignified by the new name of "investigative reporting," have become acceptable and have proven to be a mine of gold.

Whenever criticism of the media occurs or whenever there is some attempt to limit or control the media's power, the sacrosanct concept of "freedom of the press" is invoked. The media maintain that they are subject only to the control of public opinion. They ignore the fact that the media themselves create "public opinion" in a democracy. The public only knows what it reads in newspapers and magazines and sees and hears on television and radio; its opinion is thus formed by what the media themselves choose to offer for consumption.

Another hypocrisy is that whenever the power of the media is challenged, the media have been able successfully to create its own image as one of a weak, harassed entity whose performance of lawful service to the public is being endangered by powerful forces in government. They insist that freedom of the press is very fragile and should not be subject to control, and that any limitation, criticism or discussion of media practices could lead to catastrophe. Actually, the situation is exactly opposite. This was demonstrated in the case of the Pentagon Papers where the all powerful media defeated in

humiliating fashion bumbling, overcautious government and had its way. The media triumphed once more against the power of the Presidency in the recent case of Nixon. They are presently in the process of dismantling two more government agencies and a Secretary of State.

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