

THE CURSE OF THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH Si Frumkin

One of democracy's drawbacks – and ironically one of its blessings as well – is freedom of speech. It inhibits governmental censorship and control, but is responsible for another censorship that is no less insidious. It is the *de facto* censorship by the media themselves that have morphed from meaningful information providers to shameless pursuers of profit by emphasizing sensationalism, titillation and cults of unimportant but photogenic “personalities”.

Freedom of speech practically guarantees that the individuals or entities that control the information media have almost full control of what they choose to print or telecast.

The non-governmental media control is absolute, effective, pervasive but, at the same time, it is unacknowledged, deniable and hardly ever discussed, evaluated or even noticed. Those who control the information industry – the corporations and conglomerates that own the newspapers, magazines, cable channels and TV stations, as well as the publishers and managers that run them have the right, based on the 1st Amendment, to publish anything they choose but they also have the *right not to cover anything they choose not to cover*.

Here are two admittedly absurd and hypothetical examples of both: If a publisher decides that the front page or the evening news should report an Elvis Presley sighting, riding a pink whale off Malibu, then that is what will be run. And if the same executive has an irrational dislike for say, Finland, he can decree that nothing about Finland will ever be aired or printed; the taboo country will cease to exist, with no questions asked. There may, of course, be protests from the slighted Finns or our State Department, but since this also will not be published, no one will know about it.

Is there oversight? Well, not really. Those who work in the information industries are supposed to be able to police themselves. We are expected to assume that reporters and editors are more ethical, moral, honest, responsible and truthful than physicians, attorneys, police (we all know of the dreaded Internal Affairs Dept.) or other professionals who have professional boards that investigate, govern and control their aberrant behavior. There are no boards in

the information industry. Some media organizations have salaried ombudsmen to judge and examine public's complaints but they are selected from, and appointed by, the executives of the entity to be investigated. Are they really impartial? Maybe.

I moved to Los Angeles in the early 1950s when there were many newspapers to choose from: Times, Examiner, Mirror, Herald, Daily News and a few others. With time, most of them merged, merged again, and disappeared. The winner was the L.A. Times whose circulation dwarfs the only remaining competitor – the Daily News – by about exposed for something that it overlooked. It doesn't have to try harder - if it wasn't printed in the Times then, for all practical purposes, it really didn't happen.

The other result is that the Times has become a politically biased, sloppy and self- important sheet that keeps losing readers but still produces an acceptable and respectable profit.

Here, just of the top of my head, are just a few examples of news stories that you probably haven't heard about. Believe me, there are many more.

In a recent poll, New Yorkers were asked whether presidential contender Rudy Giuliani, their former mayor, or current mayor, Michael Bloomberg, would make a better U.S. president. The surprising result was just 29% for the supposedly beloved Giuliani and 46% for Bloomberg - almost a *2:1 spread!* I think that this is interesting – L.A. Times apparently doesn't.

And then, as a real follow-up on the hypothetical taboo of Finland, there is Georgia. It is an independent country in the Caucasus that used to be a Soviet republic before 1991. It is a Christian democracy, has a population of about 5 million – about the size of Israel, Norway, Finland, Ireland or Denmark – and is our steadfast ally. A few years ago it elected a pro-American president and its relationship with Russia deteriorated. During the last year or so, Russia has been brutally deporting Georgian residents from Russia to Georgia, has prohibited the sale of Georgian wine (a major export item) in Russia, has repeatedly closed the pipeline supplying natural gas to Georgia – most heating and cooking in Georgia uses gas - and has stopped all air, rail, car and sea traffic, communications,

money transfers and *even all mail and package deliveries between Georgia and Russia*. A Georgian acquaintance in Los Angeles needed medicine from Georgia for his mother in Moscow. Since there is no mail, UPS or Fedex from Georgia to Russia, the medicine had to be mailed to the U.S. and was taken to Moscow by an American tourist. The L.A. Times, for reasons best known to its staff, apparently decided that this bullying of a small pro-American country was much less important than the adventures of Paris Hilton, the trial of Phil Spector, suffering Palestinians, or the selection for printing of overwhelmingly only those letters that blame Bush for everything bad that has happened in the world since Pearl Harbor.

Lack of competition has impacted our automobile industry, our school system, and the automatic election of incumbents. We are now seeing the impact of internal censorship and the absence of competition on our information industry.