

The Right to Be Wrong and the Obligation to Be Right

CHARLES R. LADOW

IT IS DIFFICULT to remember the time when most of us were reached by one newspaper a day, perhaps one radio newscast, and when public opinion polls were infrequently promulgated and analyzed. However, we hardly have to go back thirty years to find the time when such conditions prevailed. In the short intervening period we have come to be battered, on a twenty-four hour schedule, with opinion-making news and punditry including statistically analyzed samples of public opinion, brought up to date by the day.

Man has progressed materially by standardization of parts and functions and it is not too hard to understand the standardization of ideas which has been the product of the mechanization of the mass media. It is likewise possible to see why media-men react to critics of their product much as motor-

makers have reacted to Ralph Nader. After all, haven't they simply followed the demands of the market? Should they pay attention to the Hooper ratings and public polls; or let a few high-brow critics bend the policies of their firms?

Being the latest comer to the communication scene, television has been the chief beneficiary of bitter criticism. Its well-noted advantage in courting an audience by picture (even color), as well as sound and words, should not blind critics to similar developments in radio and the press. Licensing policies in the former of these, and the rising costs of entry in either, have led to the development of networks and chains and, in turn, to greater standardization of product in stations and newspapers.

Indeed, the entire publishing business has been totally altered by the exigencies of manufacture and dedication to the mass mar-

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ket in a grossly similar manner. While there are minority book and magazine publishers who cater to scattered intellectual demands, the vast majority of print is devoted to the ephemeral democratic standard: statistically sampled public taste. William James had prescience of this in 1910, when he dreaded the day when America might fall under the spell of “the 10 cent magazine.” (That was before inflation!) In quite recent times, the late Joseph Wood Krutch, in a charming essay, entitled *No Essays — Please!*, entertained a more knowledgeable generation by showing how *Time* and *Life* generated copy and, with gentlemanly good humor, what had happened to such once-great magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*.

Wrong at One's Own Risk

It is always tempting to nail down one's points with the crudest and most obvious of examples. It is difficult to nail down this example, because there are no extant public opinion tables for 1492. However, there is strong secondary evidence that the majority of persons in Columbus' day believed the earth to be flat. Columbus differed with that opinion and was ready to risk his life and fortunes on his assumption of the earth's sphericity. According to public opinion, Columbus was wrong.

However, the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution suggests that he had “the right to be wrong” — at least so long as he didn't force anyone to agree with him. If Voltaire really said, “I disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it,” those of us acquainted with Voltaire's works will know it was Columbus' form of free speech he so favored rather than the “free speech” often claimed for terrorists and criminals today.

For, in any society worth inhabiting, every right involves responsibility and responsibility means obligation. The right to use the public highways involves the obligation to keep to one's own side of the road, with chaos and death the only alternative. Columbus had the “right to be wrong,” according to public opinion; but he had the obligation to prove himself right at his own risk, and of those who voluntarily joined him, without in any way involving those who disagreed and without overturning society.

Columbus' right to free speech only existed so far as he did not use or advocate force in proposing his theory and projected exploration. His obligation to be right was implicit in his duty to protect the lives and property of his fellow mariners and the investment and prestige of the Spanish crown.

Any other view of such matters would be clearly disruptive of any viable society. Men cannot live together successfully without a good measure of mutual trust and forbearance.

There is certainly no dearth of argument in America today in favor of "free speech." In common parlance, it has become the nearest to an absolute principle, in our Constitution, making the First Amendment even superior in regard to the shibboleth of "equality." We have reached the absurd point where burning down an opposition headquarters can be equated with free speech and where any means of chicanery or force may be tolerated in gaining or disseminating information or opinion. Innuendo, and even outright falsehood, have equal standing to honestly spoken truth, where, as Hitler once suggested, the biggest lie may be the most palatable public information.

Flouting Social Custom

It seems to be generally overlooked, or forgotten, that absolute freedom of expression has always been in question by the very best minds and that that questionable ideal has never been supported by any society which ever existed. Samuel Johnson said: "Every man has a physical right to think as he pleases; for it can-

not be discovered how he thinks. He has not a moral right, for he ought to inform himself, and think justly. But, Sir, no member of a society has a right to *teach* any doctrine contrary to what the society holds to be true . . ." What our society holds to be true has been eroded by permissiveness; but, however, attenuated, sanctions are still inveighed, both legally and morally, against those who break the remaining taboos. Even our widely revered Marxist philosopher, Dr. Marcuse, has made it perfectly clear that, if he had the power, he would shut up the opposition. All radical and "progressive" elements, who most loudly proclaim "Freedom of Speech," are the first to shout down, or attack physically, any vocal opposition. Meanwhile, as we nurse a childish faith in the magic of free expression, the majority of the earth's citizens, including our worst enemies, exist totally without that amenity.

The worldwide and historical lesson which we should be getting is that freedom of speech is no exception to the rule: No right can long survive without its concomitant responsibilities. Milton's *Areopagitica* and our Jeffersonian First Amendment were the products of morally educated men: men who deeply felt the obligation to be right. Like Dr. Johnson,

they recognized the duty to “inform (themselves), and think justly.” To men of such mind and spirit, the *hubris* of an attorney like Kunstler would be unthinkable. Free speech is the fruit of humane civilization. Primitive savagery, however intellectualized, can never create it, or sustain it. Attached to the right of free speech is forever attached the obligation to be right.

True, man is a frail creature, apt to be wrong. Also, to be right is a most difficult feat: one which leads many to the extremes of despair or arrogance. Nevertheless, this obligation is faced by each of us from the first breath of life, which, if not properly taken, leads to suffocation. Each day we make many decisions, like crossing the street, or taking to the woods, wherein lie mortal chances of defeat, dishonor, or destruction. Our security, and that of society and humanity, is dependent on the correctness of decisions. Unlike most living things, man is largely bereft of instincts; so his continued existence is largely based on inherited lore, the funded experience of history. When, in his opinion, a man's obligation to be right is outweighed by his right to be wrong, that man is close to extinction. So it is with a society.

We would not dream of submitting a navigational plan for the

astronauts to a public poll for correction. It would not occur to us to send a watch to a plumber for repair, or invite the milkman to remove our appendix. Then, why should we make obeisance to a common denominator in instructing and entertaining the human mind? The human mind is infinitely variable and any cross-section, of taste or capacity, is sure to leave out of concern the vast majority of variables. At any rate, do not the media and press have an obligation to improve public taste and capacities? It seems manifestly one-sided that so many agencies are applying themselves to protect the consumer of food, drugs, or material goods, while scarcely anyone pays responsible attention to the mass consumption of the mind. Gossip, innuendo, and even palpable falsehood are accorded equal representation with the truth.

The exaltation of statistical public opinion is an outgrowth of the dogma of pure democracy. It is part and parcel of the notion that a majority vote is the final answer to any dispute. This not only negates the religious view that “One, with God, is a majority,” ignores Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence which termed men “equal and independent,” and evades the division of powers and differences of

education and abilities; but it also invites the absurd assumption that all knowledge is a matter of opinion. Most of our erratic, and often disastrous, behavior as a nation today stems from attempts to impose the dogma of pure democracy upon the constructive forms of our Constitutional Republic. In this, we ignore the clearcut lessons of history, reaching back to ancient Athens and Rome. We have turned Alcuin's remark to Charlemagne that "The voice of the people is the voice of God" into a materialistic parody.

In our halls of government and in the public media, the amount and quality of intellectual "shooting-from-the-hip" is appalling. Because of the inevitably loaded nature of polls, one is fortunately able to believe that the real majority would not, if properly reached, agree with such shenanigans. However, even though, as Lincoln said, ". . . you can't fool all of the people all the time," he also said, ". . . you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time." Since the day of "snake oil" salesman, false advertisers and charlatans have found these latter categories adequate to their purposes. They can, in any event, count on the commonness of a short span of attention and a short memory to save them

from the majority. But, they cannot release themselves from the moral obligation to "inform (themselves) and think justly." And, even if bereft of civilized morals, they should be able to obey nature's injunction: "A bird should not defoul its own nest."

Attacks on the Government of the United States, "giving aid and comfort to their enemies," have become commonplace. Deadly attacks are made on the firms and industries, freedom of enterprise, and the sanctity of property and privacy, which have made this nation a haven for the beleaguered everywhere. Such things happen and are accepted blandly, and even supported, by officials sworn to uphold these institutions and by those whose calling is to inform the public of the true state of affairs and uphold propriety of opinion. Beyond this, anyone who points out that such things are happening is labeled a "kook," or "a crazy," or a victim of paranoia. Presumably, only those who are busily dismantling all the mores and institutions of this nation, without even any clearcut alternative, are sane and properly "adjusted" individuals. Well, they had better be right; for, if not, they have clearly exhausted their "right to be wrong" — as far as anyone in our history has done so. 

Freedom/Responsibility

the Quest for Individual Dignity

ROBERT G. BEARCE

So blood flowed in rivers down the gutters of the Place de la Concorde from la Guillotine. Liberte...Egalite...Fraternite...

Ah, but in the end, murder,

drunken mobs with heads on pikes,

lawlessness,

frenzied promiscuity,

anarchy

turned out to be not freedom — but chaos.¹

BUCHENWALD . . . the Place de la Concorde . . . Auschwitz . . . Siberian labor camps. The mention of such names and places causes indignation from free and civilized men. The tragic irony, however, is that both the guillotine of the French Revolution and the communist labor camp of today were erected ostensibly "for the good of humanity" or the "general good." Robespierre and Marat were willing to sacrifice fellow Frenchmen on the guillotine in order to create a society of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." Hitler would purify the human race by genocide, while the Marxist theoretician liquidates in the name of an ideal, classless society.

Individuals who value their freedom ought to apply some in-depth, radical thought to the

causes of tyranny. Simply associating authoritarianism with "evil" and "wicked" dictators is a superficial analysis. We must first comprehend what motivates the twisted idealism; secondly, we should recognize this mentality before it degenerates into the pseudo-righteousness responsible for the modern Buchenwald or communist labor camp.

The cause of regimentation and dictatorships can be traced to one of two outlooks on man's inherent nature. Men are motivated by their fundamental belief as to what governs man's essential character and behavior. Depending upon what they believe in this matter, men create (or impose) their social, political, and economic institutions. These institutions

¹ Dr. Peter Marshall in *John Doe, Disciple* (McGraw Hill: 1963).

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