

Thoughts on Media Practices
Related to Freedom and Responsibility
Of the Press

How free is your publication? Free of ideological slant? Of restrictive policy, or practice on news and oped articles, letters to the editor, guest columns?

If Thomas Jefferson could walk into your establishment, what would he observe? And what would be his reaction? Would he find you to be an ally, or an adversary? Jefferson in declaring the great principle that man may be "governed by reason and truth", said further that "our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all avenues of the truth".

Or, Sir Edmund Burke who said "Three Estates in Parliament (legislative, executive, and judicial); but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth estate more important far than they all".

Have you perpetuated the implied integrity of that inherited responsibility? Do you extend the full freedom of expression in your medium, that the government of your country allows you? If not, do you not tamper with, and deny readers one of their fundamental constitutional rights? An abbreviated quote from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to.....impart information through any media regardless of frontiers".

The media, especially newspapers, should be sounding boards vs. ideologues and propagandists. Let their editorial opinions and ideas compete with general citizens. Proprietary professionalism, even ownership, does not justify restrictive and exclusionary policy.

It is a disservice to democracy to exclude dissenting views of mutual interest and import. Let the readers judge and decide.

Is a press that is virtually free from government control, really free if it imposes its own restrictions by denying publication of news and opinions, based on its biased ideological, political, or cultural grounds?

Again from Jefferson, the essential part of a sentence, wherein he said that "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it".

This should be a practically unlimited, natural process--excepting some necessary restraints against the publication of sensitive information involving the national security interests of the nation in wartime conditions, including imminent threats of serious subversion or attack. Society has also recognized historically that unrestrained public expressions of graphic sexual language, specific acts of sex, pornography, etc. are inherently harmful to the morality of our youth, and potentially society as a whole. So that we have elected to impose limits in the various media and other

public arenas on such material and acts. But, unfortunately, there has been an increasing breakdown in the maintenance of those standards.

It gets down to some touchy, problematic cases where constitutional freedom is put to a tough test of its rightful extent. Which, except for the security and morality reasons cited, should be virtually unlimited; subject to no countermanding authority!

Take, for examples, teachers who disseminate, or discuss whatever ideas or beliefs they choose to speak on, or a student newspaper's right to print its opinions and viewpoints.

A professor rants against the government, espouses a contrary ideology, trying to indoctrinate the students with his thinking, even to the possibility of inciting a revolution. A student newspaper does a similar thing.

What can, or should the administration do about these matters? Remember, our premise is total freedom to express ideas, information, and opinions. We must be careful not to interfere with this constitutional right, by making exceptions to it--however compelling the reason to do it may appear.

In a secular society, bad ideas have the same academic or philosophical freedom of expression as good ideas do.

Ideally, in an unrestrained atmosphere, truth or the best decision for all should prevail. This, of course, presupposes that the majority at least want right to win out over wrong (even good vs. evil, or better vs. worse, at a minimum).

In all of this, we are dealing with a relativistic world, not one with absolute principles and values. And even if the world was essentially absolutist, the non-conforming, dissenting element would be there; actively espousing and promoting their opposite agenda.

It is ironic, but because the nature of man is disposed to rebellion and contention against customs, laws, standards, and mores of society--that error increasingly gains acceptance, and truth is given a hard time. The controversy over evolution vs. creation is a prime example of the problem.

While fixed or established truth should be the criterion by which everything contending with it should be compared and judged, the tables are turned so that truth is put on trial, instead of error, and seldom gets a fair shake at that.

But, be that as it is, and getting back to our question about the radical, haranguing teacher, and the student newspaper--what should the school authorities do about them?

Well, No. 1, they probably don't want to do anything, and wouldn't if it were not for public outcry and protest. And even that may not be by more than half of the community.

If we say that freedom of expression should not be circumscribed by anything or anyone, then what kind of censure or disciplinary action can be exercised.

If a teacher violates some terms of his contract--for example, being hired to teach a certain subject, and instead engages in making unrelated speeches (demagogic, or other) then he would be culpable for not adequately performing his job.

But, administrative authority should not have jurisdiction over the personal right to the thought and expression of ideas and opinions.

The institution's leadership can disclaim agreement with whatever it doesn't approve of, or objects to--but cannot conscionably make decisions contrary to constitutional rights. Not against a citizen because he is an employee, or because the school or whatever, has control of the location, curricula, operations, or any other assumed prerogative.

I believe a bad judgment was made, and a dangerous precedent established by the Supreme Court in 1988 when it upheld "that the principal of a school had the right to review and block controversial articles of a school paper funded by the school and published in the school's name".

That contradicts both the constitution, and the basic object of a learning environment that a school is supposed to be all about.

Funding is not justification for controlling free expression, any more than administrative authority is. Simply put, the constitution cannot be made subject or subservient to any other institution or entity, because its provisions should continuously be regarded as authoritative and inviolable!

If, that is, we advocate holding to absolute principles; and not yielding to the growing relativistic trend of the day.

Departure from strict adherence to the principles of the constitution is the secular counterpart of dishonoring the literal meaning of the spiritual principles of the God-given scriptures. Because both instruments were established for perpetual sovereign authority and guidance! The constitution is, of course, amendable (as has been done). The authentic scriptures are, however, permanent (as established by God)--never to be altered, or modified by man, from their original intended meaning. Which means that there is only one true, determinable, interpretation of any particular doctrinal subject.