

Who Has Deceiv'd Thee So Oft As Thy Self: How We Are Corrupting Our Own Free Press

The concept of “Freedom of the Press” is most commonly cited as a component of America’s First Amendment, but long before our nation was anywhere near independence, our future founding fathers still recognized its importance. Benjamin Franklin, himself a printer, was well-versed in this concept, and made his beliefs known through the publishing of “Apology for Printers” in 1731.

In this work, Franklin states:

Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter: Hence they chearfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute.

Printers, Franklin points out, know very well that no two people have identical opinions; therefore, it is immoral to censor these opinions in favor of one of these sides. Unlike today, colonial American media was largely restricted to newspapers, and the information published therein was itself limited to what writers and printers were willing to produce. Thus, corrupting the public through printed publications was relatively easy: all a printer had to do was omit the sides of an argument that he did not want to be heard, misinforming the masses and forcing them to agree with whatever they read. If both sides were not presented, the people would never have the full chance to make their own choices.

Franklin notes, though, that while the presentation of all sides of a debate is essential in keeping the public autonomous and informed, this freedom also allows room for immorality to leak into the press. Printers would be hypocrites to say that there should be no media censorship towards certain beliefs, and then turn around and eliminate articles they deem “immoral”. But while freedom of the press would inherently contain publication of intolerance and dishonesty, Franklin was confident that the public would nevertheless gravitate towards fairness and truth. The point is that the public would be able to *experience* both arguments, whether they agreed or not.

In the 1730’s, these concepts made sense.

But almost three centuries later, what Franklin and other printers could never have foreseen is the overwhelming influx of media: biased and unbiased news sources alike are now available by the hundreds in only a few clicks. Freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of democracy, but it is also dangerous—for once again, we see the theme that though some media sources do their best to tell the complete truth, others are still free to lean in one direction. This bias has become exacerbated in the digital age.

Americans can now easily view an entire spectrum of opinions in an instant, and with so many independent sources now available, media censorship is no longer an issue. The trouble is that the people are censoring *themselves*. They live in a so-called “echo chamber,” where their opinions are reflected and strengthened through the cherry-picked media outlets of their choice. We dislike being proven wrong—such is human nature. So by consuming only those sources that we know are biased in our favor, we are only affirming and reinforcing our own beliefs, whether factual or not.

Bias is not a problem with the media as a whole, because all citizens have relatively equal access to any argumentative stance. The system breaks down on the individual level. Americans now believe that they have the ability to decide what is fact and fiction—from working citizens all the way up to political leaders. If we agree with an idea, it is fact; if we disagree, or if it inconveniences us, it is fictitious. Even when we discover that all evidence may be against us, we cling to our tenets nevertheless, struggling to grasp when we have been wrong. In a society where we grow up trained to be correct at all costs, we never like to be wrong. So we deceive ourselves.

It is the writer's job to inform others of the truth, and the printer's job to make sure this knowledge is communicated. But it is the citizen's job to keep himself open to both fact and fiction, and to decide which is which not by political affiliation, but by case-by-case judgement.

And when Truth and Error have fair play, it is up to *us* to make sure that the former is always an overmatch for the latter.

Works Cited

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