

The Press: The Tool and Foil of Tyranny

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When Adolf Hitler, dictator of Germany, sat down for a session entitled *Hitler's Table Talk* on May 14, 1942, he claimed that journalists were men “with the sacred mission of defending the highest interest of the State” (Hitler 205). At the time the press in Germany behaved as Hitler's lapdog, realizing his belief that “those in authority must never permit their decisions to be criticized by those subordinate to them” (Hitler 206). However, while Hitler goes on to claim that “the people themselves have never claimed such a right” (206), it is common knowledge that American citizens value their freedom of speech dearly, holding it as an utterly essential tool for keeping local and federal government in check. An analysis of John Stuart Mill's philosophy of the freedom of expression and observations of its implementation in a blossoming modern democracy makes it clear that the power lies in the press: controlling the media is the ultimate source of power, be it with the citizen or the tyrant.

John Stuart Mill's opinion on thought and expression illustrates a stark contradiction to that of Adolf Hitler. Mill argues that “If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (245). Though Mill is arguing hypothetically, it is easy to see the similarity between his scenario and Nazi Germany: Hitler, having the power, “silenced” German citizens through absolute control of the media. In utilizing every facet of mass expression, he built a façade of sincerity for his bigoted argument. To the German citizen, no one else was refuting Hitler's claim, so it had to be true. Mill states that “to refuse a hearing to an opinion... is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty” (1). A similar scenario occurred in the United States when Senator

McCarthy began his attack on the American people under the veil of anti-Communist protectionism. Americans were silenced by fear of being labeled as Communists. It was not until responsible journalists like Edward R. Murrow spoke out against McCarthy that the “witch hunt” ended.

On the other hand, as control of the press moves from the tyrant to the people, avenues open for the introduction of democracy, progress, and affluence. As was the case in Nazi Germany, the country of Ghana was ruled by a supreme military council fifteen years ago. According to Carla Heath, Ph.D. Professor of Communication Studies, Ghana’s media was state run, with only one radio station, for fear that “too many voices” would “confuse” or “divide the public.” Small African countries like Ghana could not afford a slow moving government—which was not an unfounded concern—and so control was implemented over the discussion of legislation. Consequently, however, the people’s rights were infringed upon often, and there was no avenue for discussion of the injustices or for the possibility of change. Today, Ghana is a model for multiple-party democracy, enjoying lively debate in the media and, as of recently, over 80% voter turn out in the last election; these dramatic changes can be credited entirely to the liberation of radio waves and other media in the country.

It is easy to see how the media is a powerful tool for controlling a population as well as enlightening one. History has shown us that both uses serve a certain purpose—The American government’s use of propaganda during World War II to garner support for the war as an implement of control, the use of the media during the Civil Rights Movement as a tool for enlightenment—but that the liberal media is by far the more favorable. Though progress is hindered, it is by no means worsened in its deliberation. Nevertheless, as the media becomes more privatized in the United States, a new problem is rising. Today, news companies are big

money-makers. The possibility of a sort of private, corporate skewing of the facts in favor of ratings seems more possible now than ever. It is our duty as citizens to remain ever aware of the possibility of falsehoods in the media, especially when the media seem to be slowly straying from their purpose: to keep us informed and our government in check.

Works Cited

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