

*400
Years
Of
Bloggging*

William Bowles

ColdType

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ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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SOME writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness POSITIVELY by uniting our affections, the latter NEGATIVELY by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.
– *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine 1776.

If nothing else, the explosion of the electronic ‘Penny Dreadful’[1] that we know as the ‘Blog’ has at long last enabled us to challenge the long-held assumption that to be a journalist you need to have some special dispensation from some higher power that enables one to stand aside from the human race and cast an ‘objective’ eye over events.

‘Blogs’ have been with us in one form or another for 400 years, beginning with the invention of moveable type, which enabled the relatively inexpensive production of printed material, and an increasingly literate society.

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Early ‘bloggers’ such as Thomas Paine suffered imprisonment and worse for publishing tracts that the state found embarrassing and, in fact, the earliest ‘sedition’ laws came about as a direct response to the ‘self-published’ pamphlet, so fearful was the state of the spread of ideas contrary to the dominant ideology. And up until the 20th century, many pulled no punches in their descriptions of the ruling elite that even today, would not be tolerated.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) is perhaps the most well known of the early pamphleteers. His satirical 1720 Irish Manufacture essay attacked English economic policy towards Ireland and suggested a boycott of English goods and was later declared seditious by the British government.

Most of the early pamphleteers were anonymously written to keep their writers out of the clutches of an over-zealous government. In London at the beginning of the 17th century there were only five licensed printers but

... by the beginning of the seventeenth century, England’s capital housed an estimated several hundred unlicensed printing presses, and by the middle of the century, printing facilities (and even the beginning stages of local weekly newspapers) were available in such cities as Norwich, Bristol, and Exeter.

Considering the new availability of the printing press to the masses, it is no coincidence that the media revolution played a significant role in the outbreak of armed conflict. Tim Harris, in “Propaganda and Public Opinion in Seventeenth-Century England” concurs:

It is well known that from the eve of the [English] Civil War there was a sudden and dramatic surge in the output of the press. As censorship controls broke down following the meeting of the Long Parliament in late 1640, there was a great explosion of pamphlet and other printed materials, discussing a wide range of political, constitutional, and religious topics, and it is probably not too controversial to assert that the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century was accompanied by a concomitant media revolution.[2]

The proliferation of the pamphlet is illustrated by the numbers, estimated at almost 2000 in 1642.

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One pamphleteer of the time marveled at the lethal power with which the printing presses of revolutionary England were invested:

To come to the presse is more dangerous, then to be prest to death, for the payne of those Tortures, last but a few minutes, but he that lyes upon the rack in print, hath his flesh torne off by the teeth of Envy, and Calumny euen when he means no body any hurt in his graue (Elizabethan Pamphleteers 30).[3]

The first libel laws were passed in the 16th century and consisted of four main sections: “seditious libel, defamatory libel, obscene libel, and blasphemous libel” and were the means whereby the state sought to control the thoughts its citizens.[4] But they were more than that: the state sought (and succeeded) to transform the very consciousness of the people in order to establish the new capitalist order. But in fact, many of the very first pamphlets printed in the 16th century were used to spread the ‘danger’ posed by ‘Witches’, a pogrom conducted almost exclusively against peasant Women, who represented the last stand of the old pre-capitalist order.[5]

The ‘professionalisation of opinion’

What marks the current period from those early, glorious days, is what might be called the ‘professionalisation of opinion’, in other words, the journalist. Even the concept of ‘news’ is essentially an invention; after all, what constitutes news? In other words, who decides that one event is news and another, not? Received opinion would have us believe that the ‘market’ decides, but this is a fallacy (falling newspaper readership and the increasing importance of Web-based sources of information illustrate the fallacy of ‘popular demand’ in determining the content of ‘news’ papers).

For years, even within the so-called alternative media (a term I detest) I have challenged the concept of the ‘news’ as we know it, for the ‘left’ media consider an alternative presentation of events is what independent news consists of. But this approach to the ‘news’ is a defensive posture, as it assumes that putting a left ‘spin’ on a story selected by the mainstream (corporate) press in the first place, constitutes ‘real news’. Indeed, I question the entire idea of ‘alternative’ press as it presumes that the corporate media represents the views of the ‘masses’, where-

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as it would be more accurate to describe the content of the corporate media as representing the interests and values of corporations and the advertisers.

The fact that the dominant (capitalist) culture has been able to monopolise the space of what it's fashionable these days to call 'public discourse' is something unique to our times and reflects the importance of ideas in challenging the assumptions peddled by the dominant culture and how dangerous ideas that challenge these assumptions are to preserving the status quo.

As such, (leading) journalists are part of an elite section of the working class, who operate on behalf of their paymasters in preserving the status quo and who enjoy a special dispensation both in remuneration and in status. Hence the elevation of journalism (historically, journalists have heretofore been regarded as pretty much the dregs of humanity) to its present role in society as arbiters of values and of dispensing some kind of fundamental, objective, view of events, free from 'personal' prejudices.

The core premise behind the 'professional' journalist is the entirely false idea that there is some kind of 'objective' space that the journalist occupies (consider for example that the very term journalist originates with people who kept journals or diaries that recorded events), whereby the 'journalist', equipped with a set of 'rules' can record events accurately.

But the simple recording of events explains very little about the nature and causes that underpin events, and it is at this junction that values enter the process. 'Professional' journalists would have us believe that, in what is probably the most complete confidence trick ever played on humanity, values and opinions can be left behind. In part this sleight of hand is practiced by having the profession of journalism 'blessed' by academia, in a process akin to the monopoly enjoyed by the established religions.

One need only look at journalism courses taught in (especially British) universities to see this process in action, consisting largely of a formal set of rules about the use of language. Opinions should be left at the door as opinions are, as the saying goes, like arseholes – everybody has one. But this neatly sidesteps the issue, as opinions are ultimately based on values and you'll be hard-pressed to find a journalism course that teaches values, let alone includes the idea. Values belong in the philosophy department – 'just give us the facts ma'am, just the facts'.

But as many analysts have pointed out over and over again value systems are

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implicit in everything we do, even if they are often cunningly disguised. The very fact that we have a dominant culture into which we are all ‘embedded’, that in turn contains a set of assumptions about the way the world allegedly works, forms the basis of journalism – as it does everything else we do. These assumptions (values) determine what the dominant culture considers to be important or worthy of our attention.

In part, the monopoly on ‘truth’ enjoyed by the established media lies in the slippery notion of ‘credibility’, which has been accumulated much as the ‘good-will’ a restaurant collects contributes to its value as a business. In part also, it lies in its place in the establishment. In a word, it’s established and hence more believable.

Enter the ‘Blog’

Proof of the ‘Blog’s’ growing accumulation of credit(ability) is easy to find when we find the ‘established’ media (reluctantly) recognizing the ‘Blog’s’ existence, albeit as a free source of information that can be massaged into something the dominant culture can use to its advantage.

In the early days of online news and information publishing, the generally accepted approach of the established media was to ignore the entire phenomenon, primarily because it was the ‘left’ or progressive media that took advantage of the new technology. And even here, progressives were initially themselves reluctant to take advantage of computer-mediated communications (I speak from more than 20 years of experience in using this medium as a means of communication).

But, as the state and corporate media have lost their legitimacy and the trust of the public they have for so long deceived, and assisted by the spread of new technologies of communication, people are increasingly turning to the Web for news and information. This is a challenge that the dominant culture can no longer afford to ignore. The traditional arguments that have given the corporate media its advantage no longer work, especially as they consist largely of a set of basic, good sense ‘rules’ about how one covers or reports a story. (For example, attributions supply a source for a ‘fact’ or even an ‘opinion’ when including it in a piece, so readers can check for themselves and reach their own conclusions.)

Ultimately, what the Web represents is in some way a return to the days of Swift and Paine, before the time when corporations and the state had a monop-

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oly on the flow of information but in order to retake this space it has first been necessary to challenge the orthodoxy of the unholy alliance between corporations and academia.

Back in the 1980s, Howard Fredericks and others proposed an addition to the UN Charter on Human Rights, a 'New World Information Order' of which a key component was the idea of the eminently sensible proposal of the Right to Access the Means of Communication. Well now we've got it, so whatcha goin' to do with it?

Notes

1. The term 'Penny Dreadful' didn't actually appear until the early 19th century and was used to describe the proliferation of the short story published in magazine form that became very popular during that period (See The Barry Ono collection in the British Library) , so I've taken some liberty in using the term to describe what is more accurately described as pamphlets or single page newspapers that first appeared in 16th century but really came into their own in the 17th.

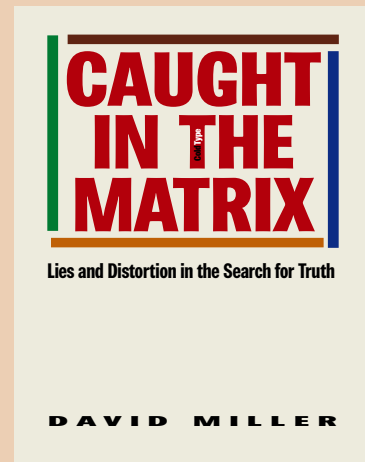
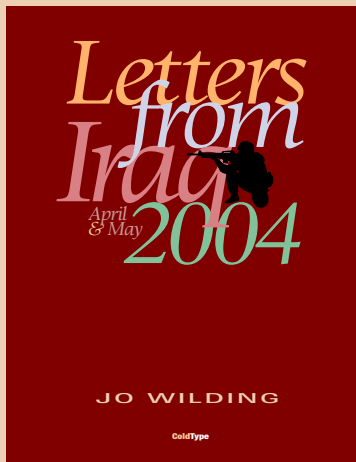
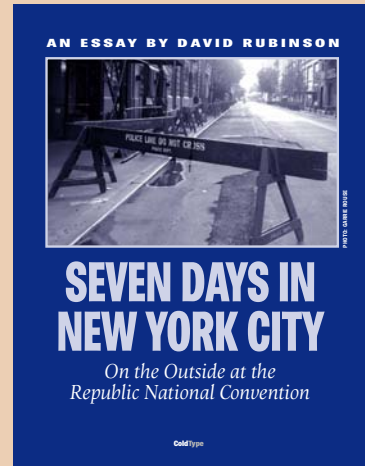
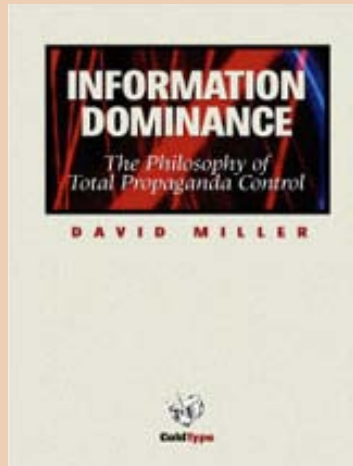
2. See The function of the new media in seventeenth-century and for an overview of the rise of the pamphlet.

3. *ibid.*

4. See eg Truth, the State, and Democracy: The Scope of the Legal Right of Free Expression G. Stuart Adam Carleton University.

5. 'Alerting the public to the dangers posed by witches, through pamphlets publicizing the most famous trials and the details of their atrocious deeds, was one of the first tasks of the printing press'. Caliban and the Witch – Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation by Silvia Federici. Autonomedia, 2004. P. 168

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