

A Roundtable Discussion....

Journalism, Media & Technology

With the permeation of media and technology into nearly every aspect of young people's lives, we recently asked three authors—Adam Mansbach, a novelist and educator; Lee Siegel, a writer and cultural critic, and Matt Taibbi, a journalist and political writer—to grapple with some of the timeless questions, such as what is the role of writers and media in a democracy, and some of the emerging challenges—and promise—of new technologies. All three authors are published under the new imprint, Spiegel & Grau. (See side-bar on page 103)

As always, we invite you, the teacher, to share your thoughts on these topics as well as general feedback to the authors' remarks, by writing to highschool@randomhouse.com with the subject line "RHI Roundtable Reaction."

How would you define censorship?



TAIBBI: In my mind there are two forms of censorship—direct and indirect. Direct censorship would be a state organ actually stepping in and forbidding some kind of public speech on either political or ideological grounds (as opposed to forbidding someone to scream "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, for instance). We have very little experience with direct censorship in this country—although there are occasional instances, like the Pentagon Papers incident.

Indirect censorship I'd define as a private entity placing speech limitations on an employee or a client—restricting speech on its private property. And we have tons of that in the United States. We have companies that prohibit employees from speaking publicly about its indiscretions, forcing them to sign non-disclosure agreements and the like. More commonly, we have journalists and performers who are told they can't say or report something because it conflicts with the interests of his or her publication's owner or an advertiser.



SIEGEL: I define it as the obstruction of free expression. Not free abuse, free hate speech, free slander, or free libel. Free expression: for example, rational discourse—even if couched in the most outrageous idiom. Lenny Bruce represents free expression. Don Imus, in his notorious remarks a year or so ago, does not.

MANSBACH: I think there are several levels of censorship. Most clear-cut is the suppression of information—news, art, opinion—on a governmental level; it is something that contradicts official policy or the alleged interests of the people, and so it's not permitted to be heard.

More ambiguous—and perhaps more pressing in this country right now—are cultural censorship and self-

censorship. It doesn't have to be some shadowy agency deciding that a piece of art is dangerous or pornographic; those who report the news and create the art can also give in to societal pressures and choose not to speak, not to push boundaries, or refuse to express themselves in ways that might prove controversial. In this way, censorship moves from enforced to internalized, which is in some ways worse.

TAIBBI: I agree. Really, the most common form of censorship in this country is censorship by omission. Our news agencies and other media outlets are assigned to cover topics and issues that fall within the range of acceptable debate, and are not assigned more dangerous or controversial topics. That is why we so rarely see scenes of poverty on national television, even though a substantial percentage of the population is poor. Images of poverty are a drag upon consumer spending and render advertising less effective; hence we see little poverty.

What are your personal experiences with censorship?



MANSBACH: I've had a few. When I was on tour for my novel *Angry Black White Boy*, a white supremacist group sent letters to every venue I

THE END OF THE JEWS: A Novel
by Adam Mansbach

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was scheduled to speak at—bookstores, universities, art spaces—objecting to my ‘hate speech.’ It was an attempt to silence me, because they didn’t like what I had to say about the need to examine white privilege in America. The irony, of course, is that they were attempting to stake out a high moral ground, and make me out to be a demagogue, when both their views and this tactic were absolutely antithetical to open, honest dialogue.

I’ve had related experiences when I’ve been a guest on right-wing radio shows, talking about my work. You’re at the mercy of the host, so if he feels like cutting your mic off, he can. It’s an enormously frustrating experience: to be in a position to go toe-to-toe with someone about issues you’re passionate about, only to realize that if you’re too articulate in defense of your points, you’ll be shut down.



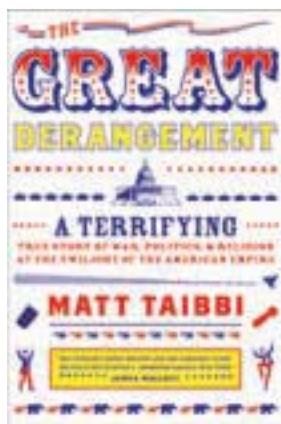
SIEGEL: I had a similar experience of being suppressed by what you might call censorship from below. While writing a weekly TV column, and then a blog for the online version of the New Republic magazine, I was shouted down, abused and libeled, by an angry mob of commentators.

TAIBBI: I lived in Russia for ten years, between 1991 and 2002. I had my life threatened for writing about gangland figures (one often overlooked form of censorship) and was also the subject of community boycotts at the hands of American expatriates who thought my newspaper, the *eXile*, was too vulgar. Several Russian colleagues of mine were assassinated, including two I knew fairly well: Anna Politkovskaya and Yuri Schekochikhin. A Russian newspaper I wrote for, called *Stringer*, had its entire editorial staff fired (including myself) for offending a powerful Russian politician. In America I’ve had very few experiences with censorship.

What are the rights and responsibilities, if any, of writers in a democracy?

SIEGEL: To tell the truth.

TAIBBI: I believe free speech should be absolute, and that the increasing encroachment of private property rights upon speech are a serious



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threat to democracy. There is a new legal concept called “dilution” which I perceive to be the most serious: it argues that writers may not “dilute” the value of a product by writing negatively about it or satirizing it. This idea is catching on in some lower court rulings and may soon become widely applied. (Come to think of it, I have had items taken out of one of my books by an American publisher for this reason.)

MANSBACH: Writers need to keep the public discourse vital, fresh, and as diverse as possible in terms of the views and topics discussed.



In my new novel, *The End of the Jews*, my character, Tristan Brodsky, is a novelist who finds himself ostracized by the Jewish community in the early ‘50s after he writes a novel about the voyage of a Jewish-owned slave ship to America with a hold full of captured Africans. The critics are irate; they ask how he can write a novel so out of step with what the morality of the times demands. His response is that to understand evil in the world, we must first recognize it in ourselves. He’s trying to create a conversation folks aren’t willing to have, and it effectively ruins his career.

TAIBBI: Regarding the second part of the question, I don’t think writers have any particular responsibilities at all in a democracy—citizens do. Writers, I think, have a responsibility to write well. Normally that involves telling the truth on some level; be that artistic truth or literal truth. If that instinct is restricted, writers can’t function and they should protest and fight until that right is restored.

What do you see as both the emerging opportunities and the growing pitfalls for freedom of speech in a rapidly changing media-world?

TAIBBI: Obviously the internet will make free speech of the absolute variety almost impossible to restrict. But here’s the problem: because we now live in vast media landscapes, mass societies whose citizens can only be moved to change public opinion via prolonged, coordinated campaigns of major media outlets, it will become increasingly important to think about free speech in terms of volume and reach. In other words, free speech is somewhat meaningless if you’re only allowed to say what you want in obscure websites that only a few people read.



MANSBACH: Absolutely. The paradox of media proliferation and diversification is that speech becomes freer, but also potentially less meaningful. There are more outlets, more opportunities, and more self-reliance; but in the absence of hierarchy it becomes hard to know what to trust, how to distinguish reliable reportage from phony, or



AGAINST THE MACHINE: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob
by Lee Siegel

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how to wade through the cacophony of voices. I think people are savvy enough to figure some of this out—which internet news sources are legitimate, whose blog is worth reading, what news station is a mouthpiece for what agenda—but it takes time, and the proliferation may be faster than the ability to sift.



SIEGEL: Agreed. In a world where popularity, the bottom line, and the “wisdom of the crowd” now shape the media—all these trends hastened by the internet—I fear for the lone, dissenting, individual voice. On the other hand, the internet can certainly be used to combat these oppressive trends. But internet users have to learn to ignore popularity, the bottom line and the “wisdom of the crowd.” They have to learn to think for themselves.

TAIBBI: The real trick is in seeing how restricted the speech is on major cable networks and major newspapers. Increasingly, those who have political power understand that they can safely permit almost any kind of speech, so long as it’s in obscure publications (or even in one-time articles in well-known publications). That is why the issue of corporate ownership of media outlets is so important; if only a few people control all the major media, they will control the national debate no matter how free the speech is on your own website.com.

MANSBACH: There used to be three networks that people watched for news, and they all took seriously the imperative to be fair and ethical—didn’t always succeed, but understood themselves in that context. Now, your personal ideology determines your news source. And it goes beyond media; you’ll shop at different supermarkets and see totally different products depending on your politics, your economic class, and so on. It’s a kind of de jour cultural segregation, and the enormous decrease in public space—much of it replaced by virtual

public space, which is not the same—exacerbates the balkanization.

How can today’s teachers co-opt the energy and ubiquity of media in a non-fearful, useful, and educational manner?

TAIBBI: Good luck with that. I don’t know. Certainly the smartest way is to adopt the “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” attitude here—teachers should become experts on the technology of modern media and offer students the chance to get involved in creating the kind of media that they probably grew up only consuming. Teachers would do well to encourage kids to start web pages, submit film/video projects to Youtube and similar sites, do their own desktop publishing, and so on. The beauty of modern media is that anyone anywhere can become famous and influential overnight; teachers should embrace that situation and help young people develop and express their ideas for public consumption.

SIEGEL: The media will find its way to children and young people, or they will find their way to the media. Teachers should not feel that they have to train students to use the internet and so forth. What they should be doing is instilling a spirit of skepticism about the media in young people. They should subject the new media to the same scrutiny to which they subject everything else that they teach. And they should teach them the values of print culture—i.e. humanistic culture—so that when their students inevitably immerse themselves in the digitalized new world, they will be able to infuse it with values that will make it humanly worthwhile.

MANSBACH: I think the most important thing to teach young people is how to be active, rather than passive, consumers. Media literacy is a crucial skill, because young people are bombarded from all directions. If you can teach them to reflexively analyze whatever they’re presented with, however—to ask themselves what they’re being offered, what tactics are being used to make it attractive, what assumptions those tactics are based on, how effective they are, and so on—you can turn the overwhelming power of the media around. You can make confronting it an empowering thing; a way to understand the world. ■



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