

Censorship in the Media

In some parts of the world, the government controls the media. This means that no one can broadcast or publish anything a government considers immoral or harmful, or that threatens the country's "stability" (which usually means the government's own power base). This is what we usually think of when we hear the word "censorship."

Democratic countries, on the other hand, take pride in upholding the principle of freedom of speech. People are free to say and write whatever they wish. There are a few exceptions, of course. You can't yell "fire!" in a crowded theater, for example. Still, for the most part, people are free to express their views. The government doesn't engage in censorship.

But even in democratic countries, there is a hidden form of censorship. This hidden censorship is controlled by the power of money. Consider magazines. In North America, most magazines depend on two sources of income: subscriptions and advertisers. Both connect to money. And both will influence editors' decisions about what gets published in the magazine. Readers must find the magazine interesting, tasteful, and entertaining, or they will drop their subscriptions and the magazine will lose money. So editors look for articles or stories that are interesting, tasteful, and entertaining. No problem. The problem comes from the other source of revenue – advertising. Companies might stop advertising in magazines if they think the magazine contains articles or stories that make it more difficult to sell their might undermine or challenge their products.

Consider the following:

- The tobacco industry has enormous advertising power. According to the Federal Trade Commission, annual advertising and promotions expenditures for the U.S. tobacco industry in 2000 were over \$9.5 billion.

The tobacco industry's economic clout goes beyond tobacco products.

- R. J. Reynolds Tobacco, for example, owns Nabisco foods.
- Philip Morris also owns Kraft Foods, the largest packaged food company in North America.

Does the tobacco industry influence news coverage in magazines? Consider this:

- Between 1950 and 1969, *Time*, *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* between them wrote 210 articles about cigarettes and tobacco – most of these related to the health dangers of smoking. On January 1, 1971, cigarette advertising was outlawed on U.S. television, and advertising revenue began to flow into the print media. What happened? Between 1970 and 1986, *Time*, *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* included only 64 articles about tobacco and cigarettes, and most of these dealt with political or business issues, not health. Not only did these three major national news publications fail to cover the health dangers of smoking, they routinely failed to mention smoking in most articles about cancer and heart disease.

- In November 1983, *Newsweek* ran a 16-page special health supplement written by the American Medical Association. Although the original AMA manuscript included information on tobacco addiction, *Newsweek* resisted any mention of cigarettes. Do you think it was just a coincidence that that issue of *Newsweek* had 12 full-page cigarette ads?
- According to a 2001 study by the American Council on Science and Health: *“Women’s magazines continue to publish cigarette ads, but rarely include information on the negative health effects of smoking. Of the 2,414 health-related articles published, only 24 articles – less than 1 per cent – addressed the health effects of tobacco. Moreover, the image of female smokers as independent, attractive and lean was portrayed overwhelmingly in the advertisements.”*

We rely on the media for our health information, but the information that we get is tremendously distorted and censored, on behalf of the advertisers ...Many studies have shown that magazines don't bite the hands that feed them.

-Jean Kilbourne in the video “Pack of Lies”