

Free to be human

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A review of the book 'Free to be Human' by David Edwards, which explores the relationship between business and the media and the cultural forces that create the dominant social 'story' that maintains the status quo.

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For anyone curious about why things are the way they are in the world, this book is a good place to start looking for the answer. How we arrived at where we are today is another story, but *why* we seem so incapable of addressing with any great urgency, the enormous problems now threatening humanity, and indeed all life on Earth, is the subject of FREE TO BE HUMAN.

This is a book about the powerful forces working to keep the truth from us. It's about the giant filter system that ensures we remain uninformed, confused, and above all, passive, so that we do not notice the chains that keep us hitched to the goals of the powerful business and political elite in their feverish pursuit of the irrational values of corporate consumerism.

But this is not a book about consumerism. In an eloquently made argument, it takes in philosophy, literature, religion, psychology, human rights and the environment, as well as politics and the corporate world, to support the central premise: that we are not free to do as we wish - only to do what is required.

Such a wide range of subject matter might give the impression that FREE TO BE HUMAN is a heavy tome but that's not the case. In under three hundred pages, David Edwards shows

clearly and in a most compelling way, how the thought-control and disinformation processes of the totalitarian state envisaged by George Orwell, when he wrote his famous 'Nineteen-Eight-Four' (in 1949) are not only well-established in modern society, but are even more pervasive and insidious than Orwell predicted.

"Because the filter system acts to maintain a framework of beliefs that are essential to corporate capitalism but utterly superficial, inadequate and absurd as an answer to human life, the search for more adequate answers is limited, and effectively stifled as far as the majority of the population is concerned." In this reference to the framing conditions of society that keep us conforming, Edwards argues that not only do we not see the possibility of alternative answers, we don't even perceive that there is a question any more. We simply accept the status quo, as being 'how life is'.

What exactly are these 'framing conditions' that keep us so meekly subservient, like donkeys lashed to a treadmill?

David Edwards draws widely on the work of other authors and thinkers in constructing his argument, including Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* in which the authors propose a hypothesis which they call their 'propaganda model'. This model concerns the way the media works to mobilize support for the special interests of the state

and private sector élite, while marginalising thoughts and actions that are less supportive, or opposed to, such interests.

The model is not just about the capability of dominant interests to lightly influence the general direction of the media, which undoubtedly is a distinct possibility from time to time, but is in fact a “dramatically effective system of *control*” by which those dominant interests manipulate media behaviour to ensure it only serves their goals and objectives. It is a far tighter system of control than anything imagined by Orwell.

A key point of his proposition is that the system is facilitated by, and only possible due to its invisibility. It is perhaps the ultimate security system: because it has every appearance of complete freedom, very few feel any need to challenge it!

The transparency of the control system is central to Edwards’ argument. Most people would accept that there is at least the possibility that those with power in politics and business - including the media business - *could* exert influence over what appears or doesn’t appear in the media. But no one would believe that *everyone* working in newspapers, in radio and television stations all over the world, is part of a huge conspiracy to misinform.

And of course, there is no conspiracy. And journalists and editors everywhere robustly refute any suggestion of bias or influence whenever it is made. “No one tells *me* what to write!” they protest loudly. But no one *has* to, Edwards would argue. The system takes care of it.

To try to explain how the system works, the author returns to an old chemistry experiment used in schools to show how crystalline structures like snowflakes form almost perfect, symmetrical shapes without any apparent control or design. Basically, it works like this.

If you place a square frame like a box lid, on a table, and pour over it a stream of tiny balls, it

will eventually and inevitably create an almost perfect pyramid shape. This is because the most stable resting position for each ball is one that contributes to the structure. Those that settle like this, build, while those in less stable positions either move to a more stable position or bounce out. No one is in control. The pyramid shape is simply the inevitable outcome of the *framing conditions of round objects falling onto a square frame*.

The experiment is a good analogy for understanding why certain ideas and their promoters are strongly supported by the media, while others barely feature. Given the fact that for the most part, the media institutions have themselves become part of BigBusiness with shareholders to satisfy, and advertisers to court, they must support the framing conditions of maximised economic growth, fuelled by mass production, fuelled by mass consumerism - in order to survive.

As news and information and ideas and people are constantly ‘poured’ over this economic framework, and the ones that support the framing conditions stick, and those that don’t, disappear off the radar. It’s as simple as that.

Returning to the question posed at the top of this review - why are we so incapable of addressing the important issues of our day - readers may now see that the media corporations have no interest in investigating the root causes of the serious problems facing humanity, such as ozone depletion, global warming, famines, drought, disappearing resources and so on, because that would mean questioning the framing conditions of our society, which would threaten the structure of the pyramid, effectively attacking the ground upon which they themselves stand.

Instead, the ‘news’ we get is at best a distorted version of reality, and at worst it can be nothing short of lies. And the whole illusion is kept in place by a series of ‘reality filters’ that make sure there is no critical thought or deep questioning, or even doubt expressed about the sanity of the framing idea that puts the economy before society. Money before Life.

These filters include the size and concentrated ownership patterns in the media. Anyone can start a newspaper of course - if you happen to have a few million to spare. In other words, the huge investment needed, acts as a barrier to new outlets for alternative voices coming on stream.

Then there's advertising. Advertisers have extraordinary power to influence what gets in and what's left out. And they use it. Or threaten to use it, which is often enough.

Government and corporate bodies have deep pockets when it comes to the distribution of promotional material, so the source of news also constitutes a filter. As the focus is increasingly on the media business's bottom line, costly news-gathering resources have become thin on the ground so there is an ever heavier reliance on PR 'hand-outs'. In December 2003, an academic research project in the US found that 40% of news content there comes from PR sources.

Then there's 'flak'. Flak comes in many shapes - letters, phonecalls, speeches, petitions, publications, even law-suits. Just as state and corporate power tend to assist supportive media, the same flak machines aim to undermine unsupportive media.

And finally, the creation of an 'evil' of one sort or another. At one time, Communism was enough to justify political or corporate behaviour abroad, or control critics at home. In another era the 'savage' Red Indians, or the 'treacherous' British would have been a convenient *bête noire* to keep us believing the story. And, haven't we heard a lot about a certain 'war on terror' in recent times?

All of these 'reality filters' work to distract ordinary people from asking awkward questions, and ensure that we conform to the framing conditions of society, and stay in buying mood.

Edwards suggests that our assumption that we live in a free democracy goes unquestioned for the same reason as does our understanding of what we mean by freedom and democracy.

And we don't truly know this, because it is never questioned - publicly. And therein, the author suggests, is a general law of social life: wherever we find an unchallenged social goal, we are in the presence of a great lie, supported by power.

Why should we care about any of this?

The link between media behaviour and the sustainability issue is absolute but inconspicuous. As the willing cheerleader for BigBusiness and its goal of economic growth without limits, business and the media need each other. And those of us who are interested in changing the gameplan need to be acutely aware of the distortion this alliance creates in every aspect of our lives, that results in a constant sidelining of the core issues concerning sustainable living.

In David Edwards' words, we need to 'master the art of intellectual defence, if we are to challenge the deceptions of a system that subordinates people and planet to the drive for profit'.

FREE TO BE HUMAN contains many powerful ideas. I have merely sought to focus on the central issue of the role the media plays in maintaining the illusion that we are free. But as the author of this thought-provoking work reminds us, there is often no greater obstacle to freedom than the assumption that it has already been fully attained.

This is a wonderful, informative and absorbing book. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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About the book

Free to be Human was first published in 1995. In its fourth print it is still available from Green Books, Foxhole, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EB. sales@greenbooks.co.uk

MediaLens

Readers may be interested in MediaLens, a media watchdog run by David Edwards and David Cromwell (author of Private Planet). MediaLens' subtitle is "correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media" and issues an excellent e-newsletter reviewing current British newspapers and television. www.medialens.org

About the author

David Youell is a partner at **downey youell associates** and works with individuals and organisations to address issues of culture and change in the workplace and the community.

He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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