

Write What You Want...As Long As It's About



“O h! Do you paint freckles on your face? How do you do that?” After 22 years as a researcher, I’ve arrived at a key interview to present 400 pages of new research to the press and this was the first question. What would you make of it? Or of an article in a prestigious newspaper about an “unholiness” of my work which states: “At age 50, Shere Hite touched down the stairs on remarkably high heels.” This was followed by a discussion of whether or not a woman of “my age” has the right to “still” wear anything other than “practical clothing.”

Sexual harassment in print, I guess. The reader is left to drown in oceans of “information” about my persona, while my ideas disappear in over-examined body descriptions.

Is it harmless? Could the journalist who asked—and kept asking—about my freckles really detect anything significant in my work, if her mind was geared to concentrate on my looks? And of course these incessantly body-sized articles (why discuss a woman’s ideas when you can discuss her body?) have an impact on the attitudes of publishers and reviewers. They cause the inherent trivialization and don’t always look further. They “know” who I am.

I am not the only woman to experience this by any means. The twentieth-century feminists Susan Faludi, Germaine Greer, Erica Jong, even Diana (of British royalty fame), or any woman who speaks out—all of us are called “colorful,” “dramatic.” Details of our bodies and appearances

are hashed and rehashed in the press, while we write and write and speak and speak, hoping to be heard.

Yet surely this trivialization, amenable as it is, is not censorship. Censorship is political discreditation or persecution of those who have certain views unfavorable to the “establishment”; those in power. But wait. This is not intentional censorship—but it operates just as surely to stop ideas from reaching people. And this repression can be worse than official censorship because it is invisible. It is not glorified by the noble martyrdom attached to the word “censorship.”

The censorship of trivialization is also evident in some of the editing of my work over the years, influencing which books I have been “allowed” to write, i.e., those for which I have obtained contracts. *The Hite Report on the Female* is the fourth in a series of Hite reports. Some of my reports contain much more comment than my other works. Some editors encouraged me to expand my ideas, while others cut back almost everything but the bare bones of the research. Sexist denial that women have anything important to say is inherent in some editors’ viewpoints, so soon I am sure they do not recognize. By excising my conclusions and comments, they would effectively silence me.

But, one always thinks, perhaps the editors are right and my words are not profound.

Censorship Feels Confusing to the Individual

Here are some entries from my diary written while my last book was being edited and I was asked to cut large sections of my writing:

BY SHERE HITE



"I am nauseous, I cannot speak, my throat is so blocked I begin to think I must have cancer. Someone, a friend, says to me, 'Maybe you feel like you are being strangled because they are cutting your words.' My throat clears up but my nausea remains, to remind me of my revulsion. I can't swallow what is happening, I stay up most nights and sleep little, writing endless faxes to keep my words intact. Wondering, always wondering, if my work is really 'so valuable' (a woman's question about her worth), wondering how much is 'right' to fight for. I feel alone."

"The atmosphere [at the publishing house] is more and more impregnated with silence. There is fear all around, from those who would lose their jobs, from those who aren't used to fear, from those who hope to keep their heads down, be safe at all costs...like ducks lined up in a row, ready to be shot."

"I feel on trial, having to explain over and over again the simplest points, then still being 'misunderstood,' called names, accused of being an 'imposter' (in everything from my name to my research methods). Like Galileo, I'll say I never meant it: 'The sun goes around the Earth, women's oppression is their own fault—clearly!'"

Censoring Women's Thought

Men are called "geniuses" and women are not, Christine Battersby noted in her brilliant book, *Gender and Genius*. This is not to say that I am anxious for the "genius" label. But consider that I have traversed the same route as Freud

and mapped a completely different territory; that my research is based on thousands of people, whereas he spoke with only a handful. I wonder whether people will be able to hear my conclusions or will insist on locating me within the confines of "sex and women's topics," while Freud's work is considered a profound commentary about the nature of human reality.

The very attitudes about women and men which I confront in my work also operate to confound my ability to speak and write freely. The media and publishing houses (but, fortunately, usually not the readers) converge to form an invisible net of entrapment and ghettoization.

In 1990 I attended a meeting of the women's committee of PEN in New York. Many women described being unable to get or renew publishing contracts. They lamented they did not make big enough profits for the company, saying "only the real moneymakers get published." I said that a financial explanation is not sufficient: after all, every day hundreds of books on obscure topics are published. Further, though my books have a track record of making money, publishers tend to be nervous and do not always accept my projects (unless they are about sex). Indeed, feminist projects are having trouble for political reasons in this reactionary climate. The agenda of many large publishing conglomerates is not only financial but also political. These politics range from "don't upset anybody, publish only safe books" to pushing a particular political philosophy. Financial decisions are also political: At one large conglomerate, no matter how much profit the feminist book division earns, it is not allowed to plow this money back into its own division nor to give more than small advances to authors, even those who made money for the house.

Even if a book has a chance of selling well, if it expresses radical political opinions (such as those of Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, or Salman Rushdie, as well as feminist activists) its publication may be hampered. But not overtly.

Even in overt censorship, the ripples can be subtle. During the McCarthy era, when Hollywood screenwriters and actors were investigated as "communist sympathizers," some were jailed and most lost their ability to make a living in the industry. Hollywood films lost the complicated and interesting Betty Davis-type female characters of the 1940s to happy-girl or "innocent" characterizations of Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds types of the 1950s.

Modern Mechanics of Censorship

Censorship today is not a man in a suit with a big red pen. There is no formal bulletin on the six o'clock news that says, "Your news is now being censored" so that those watching can conveniently decide if they are prepared to do something about it. It just creeps around you, a vaguely unpleasant feeling. You have to be alert to see what it is before it must engulf you.

Censorship happens in small ways, gradually. Only eventually does it amount to a big problem, a stifling way of life.

How serious a problem is it now in the West? We have our own "disappeared" here—authors and other political dissidents disappearing from public sight, going down for the third time with only a gurgle or two. For those who take a stand, questions of "is it worth it?" and "how long can I carry on?" surface daily.

In fact, it is hard to recognize censorship or suppression



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when you see it—hard to know if it is really happening or just some kind of bizarre mistake, funny, not really serious, Kafkaesque.

Within the publishing houses, decisions are often made by committees, with unanimous agreement required: If even one person on the editorial board strongly disagrees with taking on a book another editor wants, it cannot be published. One person can blackball it. I do not know the rationale for this corporate policy, but new opinions and radical ideas almost never make it past these editorial boards.

Censorship today is increased by the consolidation of publishing, magazines, film, and television into a few hands. The term "free" market is Orwellian doublespeak when media conglomerates buy up book publishing houses not because they are so profitable but because books and their reviews are part of the creation of public opinion. The story is told in Ben Bagdikian's *Media Monopoly*.

Another cause of decreasing diversity in publishing is that in the United States, the majority of bookstores are owned by two chains which control demand by cutting prices to a level with which the independents cannot compete. New publishing does spring up, but small new presses do not have the connections and the financial ties with the chains that will enable them to reach large numbers of people.

Finally, the last step of contemporary publishing can be the most censorious of all, as every author knows. Whether the media indulges in harassment and misinformation or simply ignores a book, it can be devastating. Modern democracy is closely linked to media politics. The first action in military coups in foreign countries is usually to take over the radio and television stations by force. Was it a coup in the West when behind-the-scenes financial interests bought up the media during the 1980s? They didn't need guns.

An aura of spreading censorship is hanging in the air, but the word, its name, is not spoken. People change the subject, feeling unsafe, nervous.

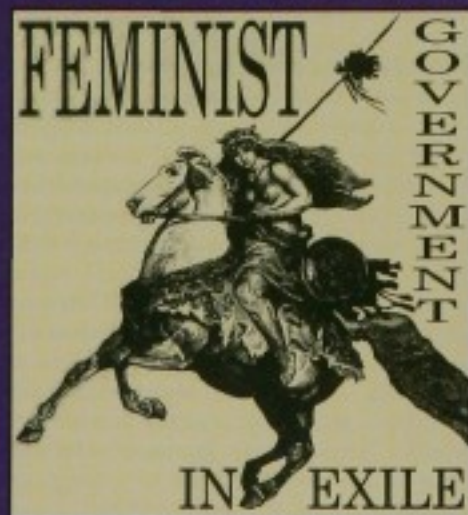
Despite the seeming plethora of "information," what is available to the public to read is more and more dictated by media monopolies, not by our own interests and tastes. Diversification of media ownership and programming control is key to keeping democracy running, keeping mass democratic twenty-first-century society from developing an Orwellian madness—without wit or humor.

As in previous centuries, the official canon of history will again make women invisible, except in decorative ways. Margaret Mead did groundbreaking research on Samoa, yet *The New York Times* front-page obituary a few years ago felt it correct to prominently note that "although she was never a scientist, nevertheless..." This would never have been said about a man who achieved what she achieved. Simone de Beauvoir mused from time to time about whether "the canons" would have seen her or accepted her if she weren't aligned with Jean Paul Sartre.

When the BBC and other worldwide networks sum up our era in their end-of-the-century programming, will including women mean only showing the reels of the suffragettes over and over, valuable as these are? Perhaps women need to buy their own stations or to control programming for half the hours of the day and create our own "canon." Then perhaps our women thinkers and authors will be remembered for more than wearing high heels at an advanced age. ♦

Shere Hite's most recent books are Hite Report on the Family: Eroticism and Power Between Parents and Children (1994) and Hite Report on the Family: Growing Up Under Patriarchy (1995).

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