

Technology can bring out the Mencken in us all

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

As with vampires, animal rights activists may only enter a property if they are invited. And like vampires, animal rights activists must weave a deception to gain that invitation.

The usual method that animal rights activist employ to seduce this invitation is to pose as a job applicant. Once on the farm, the activists will use a small camera to record what they decide is animal abuse or what might be edited into appearing as animal abuse.

Idaho's farmers were sufficiently fearful of seeing their operations highlighted on the evening news that they convinced the Legislature to pass a clearly unconstitutional law that imposed criminal penalties on whoever did that sort of thing. Surely, many of those legislators knew that the law would never survive judicial scrutiny, but they had well-healed constituents to mollify and passed the law that came to be known as "Ag Gag."

And although the targets suffer discomfiture, the fact remains that these rogue, undercover sting operations have come to serve a useful purpose in our society. Small cameras, cell phones and the Internet allow anyone to act as a citizen journalist. H. L. Mencken viewed conscience in the most cynical sense when he claimed that "conscience is the little voice that tells you that someone might be looking."

In too many cases, that is all the conscience that some people have. And too often we have people who lack even Mencken's conscience.

In the autumn of 2009, citizen journalist James O'Keefe posed as a pimp and walked into the office of the Association of Community Activists for Reform Now and asked if ACORN could help him smuggle underage Central American girls into the United States so that he could employ them as prostitutes.

ACORN agreed to help.

In 2011, O'Keefe released a video showing a prominent National Public Radio executive repeating standard, left-wing Democrat boilerplate condemnations of conservatives. NPR is funded in part by taxpayer subsidies and purports to serve as an unbiased news source for all Americans. O'Keefe's video proved that it was, in fact, just another propaganda organ for the Democratic Party.

O'Keefe has also filmed Democrats plotting just the sort of vote fraud that the Democratic Party insists does not exist.

More recently, the Center for Medical Progress released a series of videos exposing Planned Parenthood's trafficking in human baby organs. The videos show ghoulish Planned Parenthood executives talking about how they intended to enrich themselves through this trafficking. They boasted about their skill in "crushing" the babies in such a way that preserved the value of the

organs that they had contracted to sell. The latest video shows Cate Dyer, the chief executive officer of StemExpress, Planned Parenthood's customer, talking about how her company sometimes collects and ships intact fetuses: "I mean if you have intact cases, which we've done a lot, we sometimes ship those back to our lab in its entirety."

She also joked about the distress that this occasionally caused the recipient of the dead baby: "You know, open the box and go, 'Oh, God,' ha ha ha."

There's nothing quite like a dead baby joke.

StemExpress and Planned Parenthood had no Christian conscience telling them that what they were doing was every bit as reprehensible as Joseph Mengele's vivisection of Jews at Auschwitz. And they didn't even have Mencken's version of conscience warning them.

But citizen journalists, whether they be pro-life activists, anti-corruption activists or animal welfare activists, can create the dread in the morally bankrupt that someone might be watching.

This is why so many people now advocate body cameras for policemen. The thinking goes that if a policeman's actions are recorded and available for public review, then the policeman will be less likely to abuse his authority. I favor body cameras for just this reason. But I also favor body cameras because, had Ferguson, Mo., Police Officer Darren Wilson been wearing such a camera a year ago when he shot Michael Brown, the video would have disarmed Barack Obama and Al Sharpton before they could incite all the racial animosity and violence that followed.

Farmers could protect themselves similarly. If they install cameras that keep a record of their employees' behavior, then those employees will hear Mencken's little voice in their head and they'll adjust their behavior accordingly. Animal rights activists who worm their way onto the property will find employees accustomed to being watched. No need for Ag Gag.

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