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 SFChronicle
 Supreme Court's
 Odd Decision

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, and perhaps even freedom of thought, suffered a lapse in the United States Supreme Court Tuesday in an 8-1 decision, Justice Douglas dissenting.

Peter Bridge was a reporter for the Newark, N.J. Evening News, which suspended publication recently. In May the reporter wrote a story dealing with alleged corruption in the Newark Housing Commission. He named a Housing commissioner as saying he was offered a \$10,000 bribe for his vote in a Commission case.



Bridge was taken before a Grand Jury and was willing to testify regarding matter in his news story. But he refused to testify regarding unpublished matter he had gathered. He was cited to a Superior Court and again refused to answer five questions. The Court sentenced him to jail, and he went yesterday for an "indefinite" stay, depending on statutory quirks.

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NEW JERSEY LAW PROTECTS news sources of reporters, but the Supreme Court in another case in June decided newsmen did not have any special protection against assisting Grand Juries in their investigations.

In sentencing Bridge, Judge H. Curtis Meanor held the reporter waived immunity by identifying the commissioner alleged to have received the bribe offer. Why this is germane is not clear, and the news story did not say why the prosecutor and the court did not attempt to force testimony from the principal, the identified commissioner.

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NEWSMEN MUST CONCEDE that if a reporter has specific information of a felony, he has a responsibility to disclose it to the proper authority. Misdemeanors are another matter, and in any case the line between a privileged news source and becoming an accessory to a crime, is not easily drawn in statutes.

But refusal to testify regarding matters tangent to the reporter's work, which may merely be in his mind, or in notes he did not use, is in another dimension.

Dispatches did not report the substance of the

five questions not involving Bridge's newswriting. They could have dealt with his opinions, or only suspicions or deductions from pieces of information he possessed.

Then can a reporter, or any citizen, be jailed for refusal to convey such nebulous matter to the prosecuting authority, and the trial court sitting in contempt? Apparently the Supreme Court holds he can.

But this dangerously verges on thought control with court sanction, and imprisonment if the defendant declines to submit to such arbitrary procedures. This puts the entire news media, and all freedom of speech at the mercy of any prosecutor or his colleagues grasping for undue power. The Supreme Court has a long and honorable record in restraining such presumptions, and it is astonishing today's Court did not perceive the implications of the Bridge case — but eight justices didn't.

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