

Campaign Finance's Funny Loophole

BY PENN JILLETTE

WANT TO SPEAK YOUR MIND AFTER McCain-Feingold? Learn to juggle. Then get a business partner and start a magic show that's funny.

That's all it took to get me on *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher. They book me whenever they need a libertarian/atheist/free speech wackjob (or when Charo cancels at the last minute and they need someone with big hair). And I agree to go on so I can pimp my little Penn & Teller show—that's accomplished when Bill says, "Welcome Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller. Penn & Teller are playing next week in Wherever-the-hell-we-are-next-week."

Then I speak my mind. TV likes a nut. If I just speak my mind honestly, I fulfill all my nut obligations.

(I hate to break this to y'all, but being a Libertarian, pro-freedom, governs-least-governs-best, free market advocate makes you as bugnuty in the TV world as Christopher Walken tangoing with Dennis Hopper while Sinéad O'Connor plays finger cymbals.)

But even I don't say everything that's on my mind—what with the FCC (now run this by me again, how is the FCC constitutional?) and the usual network "let's-keep-it-politically-correct-even-though-it's-*Politically Incorrect*." And I have to keep the producer happy by not talking too crazy or too serious, or being too aggressive or not aggressive enough. (Come to think of it, they've never told me I'm not aggressive enough, but I've heard it happens to others.)

I also have to keep it funny. The more punch lines I deliver, the more the producer likes me and the more camera time I get. So I make jokes as I speak my mind. And I speak it loudly and clearly. I don't try to be seductive, I just try to tell the truth as I see it and then wrangle it around to a punch line. I don't know if I change any minds when I do that, but I get lent the ear of millions of countrymen, countrywomen, friends, and maybe even a few Romans.

I don't know exactly how much *Politically Incorrect* broadcast time I've spent trashing Clinton, Gore, Bush, and Lieberman. (I'm not going to start doing research just because I'm writing for a magazine that's brimming with facts, truth, and hard work.) But I would guess that I get to yap for about six minutes on each episode. That's six minutes of airtime in exchange for a few on-topic jokes.

Now, what if you wanted to go on network TV and trash some politician, but you're not a magician/juggler who can make jokes? Well, ABC would still give you the time they give me—in exchange for \$300,000. Yup, six minutes of airtime during *Politically Incorrect*, at about 25 grand per 30-second spot, comes to 300 grand. But, too bad for you, that's approximately a lot more than the government allows you to spend during a campaign.

So, how come I get to do my political spiel for free but the federal government won't even let you pay to do yours? Because I can tell jokes and do magic tricks, and juggle broken bottles and twist myself into a pretzel. Because of that, I have my (limited) freedom of speech and I have my soapbox. But you, you loser, chose to do something different with your life like developing drugs to

relieve suffering, or building computers to solve problems, or teaching children—stuff that society considers less useful than being able to hide a rabbit on your person and toss off (get it?) double-entendres with a busty soap opera ingénue.

Now, I'm not stupid. (After all, I can find a "freely" "selected" card in a perfectly "ordinary," "shuffled" deck, which gives me free political TV time.) I know that all the campaign finance reform crusaders don't really

worry about individual nuts. They're just trying to stop those pesky unions and corporations from saying bad things about people in power. The last thing they want is for groups of workers or businesses to have something to say about an election.

And the campaign finance crusaders are getting plenty of help from incumbents and the supposedly pro-free-speech media. The media know all about the value of speaking one's mind; after all, the media are just people who get paid to say whatever they want, whenever they want, to huge audiences. That's what they do. So, campaign finance reform has a huge upside for anyone in the media, whether it's the news or the arts. And it has a huge upside for incumbents who won't have to deal with people getting together and buying ads to say that the incumbents are wrong.

They're working together to make sure the revolution will not be televised.

Now that the campaign finance reformers, media, and incumbents all agree, what should you do if you want your voice to be heard? First, quit your job. Now, start juggling, monkey-boy.



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