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ARE THE NEWSPAPERS SO BAD?

Keen Rafferty

EVERYBODY READS THE PAPERS, everybody from the savant to the man on the corner. All of them watch for the delivery boy each evening, and stumble out to the front yard for the paper every morning, and thus seem enamored of the public prints; and yet, aside from Congress, it is doubtful if any American institution comes in for so much criticism as the press.

Often editors say that you may not agree with what we print, but you *will* find the paper interesting. If they understand that those who disagree are not at all reluctant to say so, that when the press is free so are the people on the corners, they also understand that derogatory criticism is an old American pastime. There is nothing new about it. For that matter, it has been a habit elsewhere, and not just in the United States, from the days of the first public pamphlets.

A look at the records of such criticism makes it clear that since the first newspapers and magazines, or their equivalents, men have been constantly irritated and horrified at the temerity of the practitioners of press freedom. Mankind, at least in the western countries, seems to believe in "freedom of the press," but never to have accustomed itself fully to that freedom's exercise. Men's ideas of privacy, of personal honor, of good taste; their belief in themselves; their longing for prestige and social inviolability—all these things have made even the high-minded publicly rebel against the evidences of the very freedom they insist upon. The literary, political, and other lights of the past, and some newspaper cynics themselves, often have joined in the rebellion.

To get an idea of what people have been saying since the papers began, 189 quotations relating to newspapers and newspapermen, or their early equivalents, were compiled from many sources. All of these opinions came from intelligent persons: persons whose words were

important enough to become embalmed for later generations. When these quotations are classified (as neutral, favorable and unfavorable, say), the press comes off rather badly.

This is not an effort to give an objective appraisal of what men have said both for and against newspapers. Statesmen, philosophers, and newspapers themselves have long sung in praise of the American press. It is what people have said against the press that is most pungent and instructive. For even when most bitter, the adverse criticisms contain large elements of truth. There are bad newspapers and newspapermen, and among the best there is imperfection.

The point here is to try to show that there are elements of miscomprehension, as well as truth, in much of the faultfinding.

Of the 189 quotations, seventy-two were classified as neutral, fifty-three as favorable, and sixty-four as unfavorable. The classifications were somewhat arbitrary, but they were made without any preconception of result.

Perhaps the greatest single American influence behind our freedoms, and particularly freedom of the press, was Thomas Jefferson. What did Jefferson think about the papers? He was not at all sure about them. At the very times when he stood most strongly for the principle of freedom, he was often scathing in his remarks about the practice of journalism. Of the thirteen quotations from him, two went down as neutral, six as favorable, and five as unfavorable.

He could say at one time that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," and then deliver himself of this:

The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.

Here are his other "unfavorables":

Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper.

I read but one newspaper and that . . . more for its advertisements than its news.

Perhaps an editor might . . . divide his paper into four chapters, heading the first, Truths; 2nd, Probabilities; 3rd, Possibilities; 4, Lies.

But on the principle of freedom:

When the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.

The press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being.

The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary to keep the waters pure.

No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free none ever will.

Our liberty depends on freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.

Classified as Jeffersonian neutrals were:

Newspapers serve to carry off noxious vapors and smoke.

The printers can never leave us in a state of perfect rest and union of opinion. They would be no longer useful and would go to the plow.

Thus Jefferson. Thus, indeed, most critics. In all the 189 quotations there are only a few false notes—on freedom of the press, that is. Some such false notes have been recent, as in Russia and Russian-dominated countries, where our ideas of freedom seem foolish. Twenty-eight years ago Lenin said:

Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinions calculated to embarrass the government?

Pope Leo XIII said in 1885 that "The liberty of thinking and publishing whatever one likes . . . is the fountainhead of many evils," and

If unbridled license of speech and of writing be granted to all, nothing will remain sacred and inviolate; even the highest and truest mandates of nature, justly held to the common and noblest heritage of the human race, will not be spared.

Newspapermen and former newspapermen have thrown some heavy punches, not at press freedom, but at the way the press acts. Charles A. Dana said that journalism consists in buying white paper at two cents a pound and selling it at ten cents a pound. H. L. Mencken wrote:

All successful newspapers are ceaselessly querulous and bellicose. They never defend anyone or anything if they can help it; if the job is forced upon them, they tackle it by denouncing someone or something else.

Said another practitioner, identified as "A New York Editor" in E. W. Howe's *Monthly*, June, 1917:

There is no such thing as an independent press. You know it, and I know it. I am paid \$150 a week for keeping honest opinions out of the paper. We are intellectual prostitutes, and our time and our talents are the property of other men.

The philosophers and the literary men speak out through the centuries. Schopenhauer thought that exaggeration of every kind is as essential to journalism as it is to the dramatic art. "What is the newspaper but a sponge or invention for oblivion?" asked Emerson. "A newspaper consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not," said Fielding. "The more of these instructors a man reads," wrote George Crabbe, "the less he will infallibly understand."

Statesmen and orators are in the company. "The press is like the air, a chartered libertine," said William Pitt. "We live under a government of men and morning newspapers," said Wendell Phillips.

Mark Twain, once an editor, said:

I have been reading the morning paper. I do it every morning—well knowing that I shall find in it the usual depravities and baseness and hypocrisies that make up civilization, and cause me to put in the rest of the day pleading for the damnation of the human race.

Even if this is a criticism more of humanity than of the press, it leaves the feeling that Mr. Clemens was a little disillusioned with the papers, too.

There was a "silent revolution" in England "when the press fell off from literature," said Coleridge. Fenimore Cooper said that we ought not to boast about the number of public journals in the United

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States, "since the quality . . . diminishes in an inverse ratio to the quantity;" and at another time, he questioned whether ". . . one half of the circumstances that are related in the newspapers of America as facts are true in their essential features."

Thoreau declared:

Blessed are they who never read a newspaper, for they shall see Nature, and through her, God.

Oscar Wilde said modern journalism justifies its own existence "by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest." John Quincy Adams called newspapermen "the sort of assassins who sit with loaded blunderbusses at the corner of streets and fire them off for hire or for sport at any passenger they select."

Arnold Bennett declared that "Journalists say a thing that they know isn't true, in the hope that if they keep on saying it long enough, it *will* be true." And, as Kipling put it:

He wrote for divers papers which, as everybody knows,
Is worse than serving in a shop or scaring off the crows.

From a source "Unidentified" comes the pronouncement that "The function of the newspaper is to make the ignorant more ignorant, and the crazy crazier."

Is it all so? Or are human beings unable to take human journalism without blowing off the steam of resentment at really pitiless freedom, at real representation of the push and pull and agony and joy of the business of living? Are newspapermen and newspapers really worse than doctors and clinics, politicians and governments, clergymen and churches, professors and universities, businessmen and corporations, scientists and atomic cities? Or are they just human, like everybody else? How many men, even the greatest of them, have fully understood the newspapers and all the *implications* of the practice of news freedom? One begins to think, looking over the criticisms, that, despite the faults of the press and its abuses of its privileges, men have sometimes understood people and principle better than they have understood themselves and the papers.

Once in a while someone has come up with an idea that the loudest denouncers can be those who know the press the least. Richard Sheridan had one of his characters speak as follows:

The newspapers! Sir, they are the most villainous—licentious—abominable—infernal—not that I ever read them—no—I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper.

The New York editor who said that “We are intellectual prostitutes, and our time and our talents are the property of other men” may have misunderstood his own profession. In a much more subtle way, Henry Adams said a great deal more:

The newspaper-man is, more than most men, a double personality, and his person feels best satisfied in its double instincts when writing in one sense and thinking in another.

Adams seems in this extraordinarily calm and perceptive statement to have meant that the newspaperman writes as popular feeling runs, whereas his personal conviction may run the other way. He wrote at the time when President Grant faced his battles with the United States Senate, and when the people and the papers were with Grant. But Adams seems to feel that the Senate was right and Grant was wrong, and that newspapermen knew it.

Adams could also have meant that newspapermen sometimes write what publishers and editorial executives want them to write, even when such writing goes against conviction. Or he could have meant that no *one* newspaperman can consider himself an oracle on all issues.

Or he *could* have meant that newspapermen try to write fairly and objectively, regardless of their personal feelings.

Whatever any extension of his remarks might mean, it can apply to both kinds of newspaper writing: that is, to the main job of writing the news, and to the incidental job of writing the editorials.

Some reporters write as publishers and editors want them to. But good newspapermen cherish the ethic of the objective approach to their job, and good editorial writers are men who write not so much what they think as what the many minds of the paper think.

The idea of objectivity in news is one not always grasped by people who may follow through their lives a set of convictions, or spend their lives in a battle for one cause, or devote themselves to some particular code or dogma or sectarianism, and who therefore have difficulty with any other viewpoint than their own.

The newsman recognizes his fallibility; and for that very reason he knows when he sits down to write the news that he must avoid the ave-

nues of pressures. He learns a kind of aloofness, partitioning himself off from the public he serves, as well as from a biased publisher if he can. He can serve only by keeping away from biased contact. I have said before in the *NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY REVIEW* that in time nearly everybody—every freak, every power in town, every rich man, every intellectual, every bum, every *grande dame*, every statesman—tries to get into the newspaper office, and that every one of them has an ax to grind, sometime, somehow. It may be a very fine, useful ax, worthy of being ground. It is inconceivable to its possessor that any newspaper might not want to grind it. The paper is his first and last recourse for this sharpening.

The man who writes the news comes to understand the world in a special crazy way. He sees the minister seeking publicity for his sermon, the corporation sending its legman for free advertising. He sees the doctor, reserved and contemptuous of public notice in professional character, secretly elated, as Mr. Hyde, at appearance of his name in a news story. He has to fend off the lady of teas and drawing rooms, the scholar and his new book, the statesman and politician.

If he gives in and helps, sometimes, the once is not enough. Nearly all come back for more. Contestants for newspaper space—who are nearly everybody except the most selfless of men—are insatiable, and there is always a cause good enough to convince the outsider that he is justified in demanding the paper's help anew.

Editors are men who struggle to keep themselves free, and who do so, in good part, in order to retain a full balance of belief in mankind under the difficult circumstance of having to see so much of the cheapness in men.

Such a man was the editor who, though he drew a high salary, would own no stock in anything, not even his own paper. He was known to argue with his publisher. He never registered under any political party. He divided his personal insurance among five companies so as to have no prejudice for any one of them. He would join no Kiwanis club for fear of bias against the Lions. He refused to see, or talk by phone to, anyone but his own professional staff, unless trapped. Editors, he used to say, have no friends. Perhaps he was remarkable, but there are more like him, working anonymously in newsrooms, than the outsider who sees only the columnists' by-lines might think.

If he thought in one sense and wrote in another, it was when he

insisted upon objectivity no matter what he thought, or took the judgment of his colleagues no matter how his own opinions ran. If Adams, talking of double personality, meant that the newsman often exerts titanic effort to write honestly, perhaps he understood the character of such an editor. In such a case—and it is not a very untypical one—“double personality” becomes something pretty good and pretty inspiring.

Ethically, then, opinion has no place in the news. Opinion emerges in the editorial columns. It emerges often in the news columns, too, and it should not. It emerges there because editors and reporters and publishers are human beings.

But when it emerges in the editorial columns, *it does not often represent the full opinion of any one man*. This statement will have to be even further qualified than it is because on many papers the editorials come pretty close to representing only the opinion of the publisher or the owner. Nevertheless, on a majority of newspapers and magazines, editorial opinion represents to a great extent *what the paper thinks*, not altogether what some individual thinks.

I doubt if even the worst publisher is always sure he is right on all issues. Even the worst publisher must at times seek counsel and take up some of the wisdom of his editorial leaders. Usually editorial policy is determined by several persons connected with a newspaper or magazine, in conference on the given issue. No one man is capable of reaching sound decisions on all questions, and most editorial writers and publishers know it.

Any good editorial writer knows it and hence can approach the paper's policy, which may conflict with his own views, with more equanimity than might seem possible. It would be impossible to find an editorial writer whose real personal views always were the same as all those of the paper. Editors and publishers often have in their “double personalities” a kind of humility in the face of events which enables them to take the wisdom of many, or several, even when the conflict exists. Most editors know they are not God, sitting in judgment. Laymen would do well to know as much.

Your best editorial writer is sure of nothing except that the wisdom of many is greater than the wisdom of one; and your best newswriter is sure of nothing except the validity of the idea of the objective approach. Moreover, they know that, whatever the approach or the policy, it will never have one hundred per cent support from readers. No

matter what the paper's stand, large groups will be angered, insulted, and aggrieved. They will attack the paper under any circumstances. One stand frequently may be as valid as another. It is not easy to decide where you stand on issues which can confuse and deceive the best of men.

The editor has as much reason to be cynical of the public as the public has to be cynical of the editor. It is as difficult for him to avoid being carried away by mass whim and desire as it is for him to be sure that his paper is an organ of the people. It is as bad for him to listen too often to the demands of public taste as it is for him to fly in the face of public will. If it is true that during recent national campaigns, when the people were for Roosevelt or Truman, the newspapers were against them, it is also true that every good newspaper constantly refuses to become the kind of paper which large segments of the public are known specifically to want.

This is a fact which the critic of the newspaper, and especially the academic kind of critic, so frequently fails to understand. No one is more voluble about the newspapers than professors, and I have frequently sat over a cup of coffee with a campus colleague and listened to him explain the press. There is a kind of arrogance, among the very intelligent and the highly trained, with respect to the newspaper, which cannot be matched anywhere; and the college professor will explain anything to you (including the newspaper), no matter how far removed it is from his field or how little he knows about it. He simply cannot help believing that he knows not just a lot about a few things, but everything about all things.

Now, no one can very well argue that newspaper attitudes are not frequently determined by conservative business attitudes of publishers. Every critic of the press for the past fifteen years has made this point. It is an old point and it is accepted as having much truth in it.

I submit that this conservatism of the American newspaper, deriving from the conservatism of the American businessman-publisher, is usually sincere. And I am not so sure, any more, that all right is on the "liberal" side and all wrong on the "conservative" side. I am not so sure that Hamilton was a bad man because Jefferson was a good one, or that Charles Evans Hughes was a small man while Woodrow Wilson was a big one, or that Arthur Sulzberger of *The New York Times* is a bad publisher because he is "conservative," or that Marshall Field is a good publisher because he is "liberal."

There has been too much assumption for a long time, among intellectuals particularly, that to be conservative is automatically to be bad, and that to be liberal is automatically to be good. I am not saying that selfishness, and abuse of responsibility, on the part of the American businessman are justified; I am only saying that the conservative American businessman has been a great American, and that if he is human and has human weaknesses that is to be expected.

Our greatness has not been in literature, or art, or music, but rather in politics, the sciences—and business and manufacturing and production. Let us admit it and have done with the contention that to be a leader in America's most expert field is somehow to be bad and cheap. We should have had many less living young Americans had it not been for American business and American production in World War II, and I for one shall not be driven, by the assumptions of others, to the point of asserting that all businessmen—and all publishers—are evil because they humanly defend the system under which they have been able to participate so heavily in the creation of a great nation.

The fact that a newspaper publisher is usually primarily a businessman does not necessarily make him usually a venal man. It might not be any easier to demonstrate that most publishers fail to understand and represent the public than it would be to demonstrate that frequently large parts of the public, especially the intelligent public, fail to understand the aims and honesty of the newspaper. The present quotations seem to show as much passion and error among the critics of the press as there are among those who own and produce the newspapers. And nearly all these quoted critics were men of superior intellect.

There is certainly error in any assumption that the spirit behind the paper is always selfish, always opportunistic. I am convinced that a great many of the attacks on newspapers as a business are really a reflection of the same old resentment against journalism in general; indeed, against the vigorous and honest manifestations of a truly free press.

For today as well as yesterday there is a kind of fiery get-into-trouble character in the newspaper; and in the criticisms, today and yesterday, there is a kind of character, too. Most of them, then and now, express indignation and grievance, and many have a tone of pious intellectuality and snobbery. One gets the feeling that whether the journal is a Colonial postoffice newssheet, or a nineteenth-century paper, or a present-day

big business, it is simply an ideal butt for freedom of speech, since it so fully practices freedom of publication. The people are as free as the papers, and don't mind illustrating it.

Newspapers were "licentious, dishonest, inconsistent" in the nineteenth century, and they are described the same way today. If they seem so at times, remember two things: that they represent life, and that that's the way life looks at times; and that they are human organizations staffed with human beings, so that when it comes to making a profit in order to survive, and getting advertising to make a profit, and seeking circulation to get the advertising, and kissing babies to get the circulation, they are, like everything and everybody else, far from infallible. They are doing what the system demands of them for survival. If they cannot survive, they are nothing. But in surviving, journals and journalists cling stubbornly, even if with too many forced compromises, to the ideals that make them great, the ideals of factuality and of consultation.

That is why even bad publishers cannot fully enslave their staffs. It is also why good publishers employ good staffs and leave them relatively alone. There are more publishers like this, and more editors with high ethical sense, than recent criticisms might imply.

It is as hard for the outsider with his many fixed ideas to understand devotion to facts or to the editorial writer's peculiar kind of open-mindedness as it is for him to understand the character which permits a newspaperman to break with his devotion under pressures, either from outside or inside. After the break, the devotion remains, and that is what is important.

Editors find detachment gives them courage. They are freer than many of us think. Push them and they are not afraid of trouble. Wilbur Storey may have had the key when he wrote the statement of the *Chicago Times* in 1861:

It is the newspaper's duty to print the news, and raise hell.

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