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The Role of the Newspaper

THERE ARE, TO NEWSPAPERMEN, three personages of particular distinction in history. Edmund Burke, great parliamentarian, flattered the press gallery by pointing to its members and naming them the Fourth Estate, far more important than the other three estates in Parliament. Thomas Jefferson said that he would prefer newspapers without a government to a government without newspapers. Voltaire set a standard for freedom of speech by telling Helvetius: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Canadian newspapers, by and large, accept and remain steadfast to these three eighteenth century authorities. Their virtues deserve to be recognized because they are greater than their faults.

Most reporters and editors are able, responsible, and ambitious to do a good job. They believe that the product of their work is vitally important to their readers and to Canada. They justify their freedom to report by writing accurately and interestingly and by interpreting fairly and intelligently the significant happenings and trends of their time. They cannot be legitimately blamed if people do not desire the best, but settle for debased reading matter.

Lord Hewart, Chief Justice of England, declared: "In a country that enjoys, or has, or is supposed to have representative institutions, the newspaper is, of course, a necessity."

A newspaper cannot please everyone every day. Here is a situation wherein each side benefits by having knowledge of the needs and difficulties of the other. It has been said often that the newspaperman must know his public: it will help if the reader knows something of the problems of the reporter and the editor, and how they go about solving them.

The newspaper is produced for commercial gain, sold under highly competitive conditions, and must have careful business management. If it is not issued for sale so as to make a profit, it is not a distinct individual, but a part or adjunct of something else. If published to advance any cause, it is an organ, not a newspaper. It cannot be independent unless it earns its living.

The perfect newspaper will be the voice of the lowly and oppressed and forgotten people, champion of the under dog. If, in discharge of its responsibility, it occasionally troubles the public conscience, that is not to its discredit. If it is a defender of civil liberty and a friend of righteous causes it is performing a worthy service.

Its chief function is to hold up a mirror to the happenings of the day. If it is careful to keep the mirror clean and as flawless as possible, the reflections will be honest, clear and interesting.

Any list of qualities that makes a show of being ideal in all characteristics may be unattainable in action, but failure should be due to impediments in the process and not to neglect of the purpose. When seeking to form principles there is no use in looking at any but the best practices as aiming points.

People want news

People are hungry for news. Ever since articulation came to primitive man, he has been asking of those he meets: "What do you know?" In *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton reported the first sensational human story — one having to do with the probationary apple tree and the serpent — Adam and Eve welcomed eagerly the arrival of Raphael with news from Heaven. In this twentieth century we ask everyone we meet: "What is new?"

It is not surprising to find that readers should look upon those who mix the magic newspaper potion with something of the awe and frustration of Faust as he watched the witch concocting the golden drink which was to give him happiness, love and knowledge. (Parenthetically, it may be noted that Faust remarked of the witch: "What balderdash doth she recite? Methinks I hear in chorus, quite a hundred thousand idiots prating.")

Newspaper writing and newspaper reading are not jobs for people who cannot, when necessary, look at a subject objectively. The reader needs to distinguish between knowledge and guessing, between trained and casual observation; between verification and credu-

lousness. Learn to appraise the piece you are reading: is it statement of fact, interpretation, opinion, argument, or special pleading? In an important report, is someone named as authority?

You will find the news of the world reported broadly and objectively in virtually every Canadian daily newspaper, large or small.

Our country has a broad and tolerant outlook on the world. Its people have learned to be friends of great nations that are not always too friendly with one another. Its newspapers report their political, economic and cultural affairs as being matters of interest to all Canadians.

This is a spirit and a practice that might with advantage be applied to national and provincial news more widely than is done at present.

The Chairman and President of this bank touched upon the matter in an address before the Chancellor's Club, University of Calgary, in March. He said: "While I am encouraged, indeed bullish, on the prospects for Canada as a single, unified nation, I am nevertheless discouraged and alarmed by the degree of mischief which may be done in the short run by the zealous action of those whose vision is limited either in time or geography."

Commenting on the sheer difficulty of communicating with one another because of the vast size of the country, he asked: "So what do we do about the communication problem? Clearly, we must improve the mobility of people, facts and ideas across Canada. A truly national newspaper would be helpful, but perhaps this is just wishful thinking. While we want national unbiased news, we want it delivered to our homes while it is still news."

A courageous publisher, supported by an inspired, intelligent, and dynamic editorial staff, might find his greatest fulfilment as a newspaperman and as a Canadian in making his publication desired by the public outside its present limited circulation area because of its authentic and well-written reports about national matters.

Criticism of newspapers

It is commonplace for a writer to be surprised by what some critics find to be critical about in his articles. They are likely to see in a reporter's story not what he has written but what they are looking for. They may have purely local knowledge, and may be unlearned outside their own particular fields, and talk about a piece of writing with the perspective of a washerwoman talking about Niagara Falls.

Anyone can make complaints, but criticisms that arise out of positive, constructive thinking may yield valuable guidance. Knowledge, and therefore civilization, are advanced by criticism and negation as well as by positive suggestion.

Probably the complaint most often heard is that the press is sensational. Reporters on a good story are reluctant to prick the bubble that reflects the

world in brilliant colours and turn it into a little soap and water. Some persons mistake this addiction to brightness for sensationalism.

Critics seem to imply that in some way the prominent printing of dramatic reports is not a very good or decent thing to do.

Looked at without prejudice, this charge boils itself down to an allegation that newspapers recognize human interest values and play them up, realizing that their readers are intelligent people, interested in the colourful truth revealed in world happenings every day. Objection may be made legitimately to the manner of reporting or the over-emphasis given reports of violence and crime in some newspapers.

Passion, force, outrage and tumult have become part of today's life, if not universally approved at least widely accepted. Lucille Ball, for 23 years past the "first lady of television", said in an interview published by the Christian Science Monitor: "Right now, I'm beginning to be shocked that I'm not as shocked as I used to be." As one writer put it: "The grandchildren of the kids who used to weep because the Little Match Girl froze to death now feel cheated if she isn't slugged, raped, and thrown into a Bessemer convertor."

The urge to play up conflict in print and in conversation is widespread, and newspapers might improve their image by curbing it. If at an interprovincial gathering there is agreement on something, and disagreement on something else, a newspaper is likely to mention first and point up in its headline the matter on which the provinces did not agree. This is, of course, appealing to a low estimate of the readers' sensibility, but it seems to some newspapers to be realistic.

In 1971 a paper called *Good News* was launched in California to print all the bright, happy doings which most newspapers cannot spare room for. After sixteen months it had to throw in the towel, thousands of dollars in the red. People did not want *Good News*.

Advertising and propaganda

Another complaint is that the newspapers contain too much advertising, but advertising is necessary not only to provide revenue for the paper but to give information to the reader. We need to know, so that we can plan our day-to-day living, what things are available for our convenience, comfort, and efficiency.

Advertisements have circulation value, as one large Canadian newspaper found to its cost. When a big store withdrew its advertising from the paper, the circulation slipped until it was far below that of a rival paper, formerly in second place. This fact, of the circulation value of advertising, works two ways. It is indicative of the value of advertising to the newspaper, but it is also evidence of the value of the newspaper to the advertiser and to readers.

There are some variations in the treatment of

advertising by newspapers. Finland's *Helsingin Sanomat* throws out advertising to make space for late news, while the *Argyllshire Advertiser* has been known to announce: "To avoid disappointing our advertisers a number of news items have had to be held over this week."

A criticism levelled at some newspapers is that they are organs of propaganda. Propaganda is anything you read that makes you feel some action should be taken, and it would be a poor news sheet that never gave that feeling.

On the other hand, newspapers are criticized because they do not print things that people want to have printed free to support some good cause. The reason for refusal may be that the articles are boring, amateurishly written, or without a spark of human interest. Some newspapers make it a point, when the project is a good one, to have a competent person rewrite the article, perhaps with new material added, so that the story performs a worthy function and at the same time informs readers in an interesting way.

What news is

News is accurate information about any event of public or human interest, or the record of significant acts or opinions. It tells about something that is different from daily routine.

Airplanes that fly safely and without being hijacked, people who live together without quarrelling, rivers that flow within their banks, and the nations that conduct their affairs and resolve their differences without fighting — these are not news. An ordinary person doing an ordinary job in an ordinary way is not the subject of a news story, but if you have an extraordinary man or woman in action, or an ordinary man or woman doing an extraordinary job, or doing an ordinary job in an extraordinary way, that is news.

There are sorts and degrees of news. Some things which happen in a village are news there but not in a town a few miles away. Happenings on the stock exchange are news on the financial page, and not anywhere else except on days when there is a financial upheaval.

About newspapermen

There is nothing mysterious about a reporter. He is a working man who probably lives as well as his salary affords, marries, has children, and takes a normal interest in the politics, poetry and perplexities of life.

The glamour belongs to the institution which, more than steam or gunpowder or gasoline or atomic energy, has revolutionized the world.

When into the complacency of the seventeenth century there was thrown this yeasty art of newspaper printing, a ferment was set up which has not been abated by the passage of three centuries. It was magical, indeed, that knowledge hidden from the common people before that time should be revealed

to them; that the secret movements of lofty and sacrosanct leaders should be spread upon cheap paper for all to read.

Two attributes of the good newspaper reporter today are selection and sincerity. He knows what incidents to include to give his canvas the image of life, and he cannot be induced to omit an iota of what he believes to be essential. He is neither too dainty to face facts as they are, nor too blind to discern their full significance, but he will not revel in the unhealthy or set down anything in malice. He is true to the facts whether he is writing an account of a high school concert or a report of the clash of events in world politics.

A reporter would not gather much notable news by going around asking people: "Have you any news today?" They do not know what news is. The skills peculiar to getting a story and writing it professionally and attractively are: an open mind linked with unquenchable curiosity, an invincible scepticism, and a disposition not to be easily brushed off.

All good writing implies selection and organization. Efficient editorship is essential. By applying hindsight, foresight, imagination and initiative the editor trains his staff in knowledge of what news is and in the techniques of getting it and writing it.

It is the editor's duty to see that stories are developed so as to explain for the reader's benefit what has happened. The "how" and the "why" of events are most important. If the editor ignores this function he will turn out a paper that seems to indicate that it is in business for this day only, or that he anticipates a wholly new set of readers tomorrow.

The editorial page

An editorial page which offers genuinely worthwhile fare will not have to worry about lack of readers. People are eager for authoritative guidance by writers who know they are writing about and take pains to illuminate what is going on.

The editorial writer with a sense of responsibility will try to give his readers a balanced presentation of basic facts, tell the purpose of proposed action, suggest alternatives, and illuminate the whole matter by his skilful thought and observation. Then his readers can weigh and examine the matter that is being discussed with some approach to knowing on what grounds they base their opinions.

In a society that is largely affected by fear, insecurity, uncertainty, the deterioration of values, disillusionment and materialism, readers do not desire editorials that are bland recitals without any challenge to think. More people than ever before are interested in knowing not only what is happening but why it is happening. They need strongly interpretative material to help them to think their way through the fog of events.

The editorial writer must investigate and appraise, and write his copy with logic and learning. His appeal

is to truth and reason and intelligence, not to prejudice, passion and ignorance.

Freedom of the press

Freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes freedom of expression. Where men cannot without fear convey their thoughts to one another, no other liberty is secure.

Freedom of the press means that an idea shall have its chance even if it is not shared by those who own or manage the press. The press is not free if those who operate it behave as though their position conferred upon them the privilege of being deaf to ideas which the processes of free speech have brought to public attention.

Freedom of the press is to be guarded as a vital right of mankind. Canada has no peace-time censorship, puts no embargo on the import or export of news, and does not tell editors what to print, what opinions to express, or what "causes" to support.

This freedom, however, does not confer the liberty to be carefree in newspaper publishing. Freedom of the press does not give liberty to publishers, editors and reporters to print what they like. It is freedom for the people to get information and to express opinions. The first amendment to the Constitution of the United States was not adopted for the benefit of newspapers but to prevent interference by the government with the citizens' right to receive news.

In *A Free and Responsible Press*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1947, freedom and obligation are linked in this way: "This implies that the press must also be accountable. It must be accountable to society for meeting the public need and for maintaining the rights of citizens and the almost forgotten rights of speakers who have no press."

Not all newspapers hew to this line. Dr. Robert Redfield, author, anthropologist and educationalist, said in a lecture in 1954: "The heaviest price we have to pay for that incalculable good, freedom of speech, is listening to the uses to which the freedom is put."

Some newspapers exploit their freedom by harassing people, by publishing material that is not news but private business, by invading privacy, and by printing half-truths based upon "leaked" information.

Walter H. Page, distinguished United States ambassador in England, said in a letter home: "If there's anything I'm afraid of, it's the newspapers. The correspondents are as thick as flies in summer — all hunting sensations — especially the yellow American press."

Protective measures

There are four principles that tend to keep the press from infringing the public's rights: accuracy, factual reporting, decency, and fairness.

A newspaper is not to be excused for inaccuracy that is caused by lack of thoroughness within its

control. At *Le Monde*, nonpareil of newspapers, all articles written even by senior members of the staff are read by two of his or her peers before publication.

The newspaper must be decent, not only in the language and pictures it uses, but in the way it goes about obtaining the news. There are situations occurring in human life into which no newspaper can decently justify intrusion. Public opinion should be quick to punish a newspaper which transgresses the decencies of the level to which its community has attained.

Plausible arguments are brought forth by those who approve the use of obscenity and verbal titillation. It is contended by some persons that such material is the stuff of life, and that it is the duty of organs of public information to leave no one deceived about the real nature of the world. Men and women who support the policy of publishing "the raw stuff of life" are not avant-garde but throw-backs toward barbarism. Civilized people seek refinement. In fact, civilization itself is the result of refining coarse ways of living.

If a newspaper's self-imposed discipline fails to prevent the damaging of a person's reputation there remains recourse to the law of libel, designed to protect people and associations of people from damaging assertions.

That a newspaper is free to publish something without prior permission does not mean that it may say what it likes with impunity. If the article is defamatory or seditious or blasphemous or obscene, or commits any other legal wrong, the paper can afterwards be made liable for it.

A healthy ambition

Just as the citizen tries to order his life so as to live decently, effectively and fruitfully, so a newspaper can contribute to its generation by telling the news in accord with the principles of honesty, impartiality, integrity, accuracy and fairness.

A person who has lived fifty or sixty years is like a man who sits some time in a conjurer's box at a show and witnesses the performance twice or thrice. The tricks lose their novelty through repetition. At seventy, a person has read about how three or four generations faced problems that are the same today, and tried to solve them.

This generation is talking about disarmament and world peace, women's liberation and liberal, conservative and socialistic politics, the abuse of drugs, the relative virtues of classical and popular music, and the various sorts of new art — just as *his* generation did. But all of these must be interpreted in terms of changed world conditions and of new knowledge in the sciences and arts. That is the task of the newspaper.

In all this the newspaper has a double duty. It must comport itself so that it is read by mature people because of its reliability, and by young people because of its forward look. It is to the newspaper's credit if it keeps a bit above the level of its time.