



News in Our Time

Mass communications have given us a window on the world, and we often might not like what we see through it. But without the news, we would be without the means to correct the ills and injustices of modern-day life...

□ In his recent book *Eyewitness to History*, the distinguished English professor John Carey tells of how a correspondent from *The Times* of London was sent to France to cover the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. After the decisive battle of Sedan, he rushed back to England by train and ferry boat, staying up all night to write his account of the German victory. He arrived only to find that competing newspapers had published reports of the event sent by electric telegraph two days earlier. *The Times* had literally blundered into a new era in western society — an era in which the news from almost everywhere is available to almost everyone every hour of every day.

The improvement in the transmission of the news coincided with improvements in printing and paper-making technology which made possible the speedy production of huge quantities of daily newspapers that could be sold at minimal prices. Meanwhile the spread of literacy due to compulsory education was opening up a mass market for the “penny press.” Soon the ordinary people of the United States, Britain and Western Europe had a ready means of learning what was going on in the world, a privilege once reserved for a relatively small literate minority. Public access to the news had been established: from there on it was merely a series of technological steps to today’s 24-hour television news by satellite.

“Arguably the advent of mass communications represents the greatest change in human consciousness that has taken place in recorded history,” Carey wrote. “The development, within a few short decades, from a situation where most of the inhabitants of the globe would have no day-to-

day knowledge of or curiosity about how most of the others were faring, to a situation where the ordinary person’s mental space is filled (and must be refilled daily or hourly, unless a feeling of disorientation is to ensue) with accurate reports about the doings of complete strangers represents a revolution in mental activity which is incalculable in its effects.”

Public access to national and international news has deeply influenced popular culture, politics, and even philosophy. It has given ordinary men and women a more humanistic and tolerant outlook on life by making them empathize with all of humanity. New reports force us to look human suffering in the face, and make us want to do something about it, whether to donate money to aid disaster victims or call on our governments to put pressure on other governments to stop committing injustices. In the age of the news, no man is an island. We cannot help but be, as John Donne put it, “involved in mankind.”

So pervasive is the news in western countries that it has become one of life’s necessities. There are, of course, times when it is absolutely necessary to know what is happening for our own well-being, as when a hurricane is heading in the direction of where we live. But beyond immediate practical information, we need the news to help us cope with the pace and complexity of modern living. As the Canadian journalism professor Wilfred Eggleston wrote: “Survival of all living creatures requires an awareness of the changing environment ... Speedy and accurate information is required for people to react.”

Out of our need for news has evolved a principle which would never have been thought of in the days before the telegraph: that the public has a *right* to news that can be trusted. The Canadian Royal Commission on Newspapers broached this concept in 1981 by declaring that people have a "right to inform themselves" which is inseparable from their right to express themselves. Canada is one country where the right to the news is enshrined in legislation. To hold a broadcast licence, every Canadian radio station must carry news reports.

The ability to keep track of what is happening and of what is being said is central to our system of government. "A people without reliable news is, sooner or later, a people without the basis of freedom," political scientist Harold Laski wrote.

Wherever there is no political freedom, the news is always controlled — not only internal news, but news from abroad which invites comparisons with conditions elsewhere and exposes the repressed populace to "alien" ideas. No less a tyrant than Adolf Hitler objected fiercely to free reporting. "Our law concerning the press is such that divergences of opinion between members of the government are no longer an occasion for public exhibitions," he said at the height of his power.

A man of an opposite cast of mind, the American statesman Thomas Jefferson, once declared that if he had to decide between government without newspapers and newspapers without government, he would choose the latter. At the same time Jefferson was the first to admit that the freedom of the press which he so eloquently upheld could be abused. This freedom (which today covers the electronic media as well) is by no means unbridled. News organizations are not free, for instance, to ruin a person's reputation, to invade a person's privacy, or to subject a person to "trial by publicity." They are prohibited from doing such things by various laws.

Despite these legal constraints, news organizations remain very much responsible to themselves, and there is plenty of room for breaches of that responsibility. Newspapers, radio and television stations carry not only accounts of events, but commentary on those events. Writers and broadcasters of opinion do not need an array of indisputable facts to blacken a reputation or

throw suspicion on the motives of an organization; sufficient to mix a few suggestive facts in with a lot of innuendo. A clever writer or editor with an axe to grind can paint a biased picture even in an apparently impartial report.

At one time it was left almost entirely up to newspaper proprietors and their synecophants to decide how much restraint would be applied on their ability to play with the facts, or to publish absolute falsehoods. Their papers frequently distorted the "news" to suit their own political objectives. Sensationalism ran rampant among hotly-competitive big city dailies. The truth was often slaughtered in the crossfire of their circulation wars.

The new breed of journalists put the public interest first

For better or for worse (some say worse) the new generation of newspaper proprietors in North America are for the most part detached from the day-to-day operations of papers they own, running large chains from corporate head offices. News organizations have become big businesses, whether their outlet is in print or by electronic means.

The decline of the old-time imperious press barons coincided with the rise of professional journalists who insist that their first duty is not to the boss but to the reader. Sensational dailies still exist, but beneath their splashy lay-out, they will usually be found to be quite scrupulous about getting their facts straight, at least in their news columns.

Today, any news organization worthy of the name pledges itself to ensure as far as possible that the news it presents is accurate, fair and balanced. While this has always been an informal understanding among ethical journalists, many organizations have adopted formal codes of ethics, and some employ ombudsmen to protect the public interest.

By adopting such self-restraint, the media have acknowledged that the dissemination of the news is not just another business. It is a form of public trust, not only because people need information to live out their everyday lives, but because the media have so much latent power. Power must be counterbalanced by responsibility, and news organizations have chosen to exercise that responsibility

themselves, rather than risk the threat to democratic practice posed by having governments do it for them.

What the public thinks about lies in the choice of the news

The greatest power of the media to influence public opinion lies not so much in their commentary on the news but in their selection and presentation of it. "Of course the people won't always vote the way the editorial-writers tell them on next week's sewer bylaw," observed the 1970 Canadian Senate Report on Mass Media; "but who decides when they'll start thinking and talking about sewers — or whether they'll worry about pollution at all?"

Back in the comparatively simple world of 1920, the great American columnist Walter Lippmann wrote: "The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumour, suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering the news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy."

All sorts of judgments come into play when a newspaper or news program is being produced: How long should a story be? Should it come first, last, or in-between? Within the story itself, which points should be emphasized over others? In a controversy, which spokesmen for which side should be quoted more prominently? The answers to all these questions have a strong influence on what people think about issues and events.

How do editors and news directors choose what you will or will not hear about? According to George Kennedy in his textbook *News Reporting and Writing*, there are five usual criteria: impact (what everybody will be talking about); proximity (all things being equal, something that happens a few streets away is bigger news than something that happens 1,000 miles away); timeliness (news has a short shelf life); prominence ("names make news"); conflict (as in strikes, politics, crime, sports competition), and novelty ("if a dog bites a man, that's not news; if a man bites a dog, that's news").

The yardsticks used by professionals to judge what makes news frequently come in for criticism from the public and its spokesmen. "Trouble: that's

[what's] wrong with journalism's current definition of the news," complained the Senate Report on Mass Media. "There is more to life than hassle and strife, but the media's entrapment in drama, conflict and disruption prevents them from reporting it."

The trouble is that people like to hear about trouble as long as it is not happening to them, and the news is to a large extent "market driven." A perhaps-apocryphal story is told in the business about a man who started a wire service which carried only good news, and promptly went broke.

It is an open question whether it is the consumers or processors of news who demand that it be delivered at great speed, but certainly any news organization that is consistently beaten to the punch on stories would fear losing market share to more alert competitors. Many of the failings of the media can be traced to the haste with which reports are prepared.

The scope for error is enormous when reporting is done in a rush, which is why newspapers and agencies obligate themselves to publish corrections when the inevitable mistakes occur. Speed breeds superficiality; when something is reported in a hurry, important details may be overlooked or misunderstood.

The difference between the facts and the truth

Even when the time to prepare a report is not unduly short, there is a constant danger of getting events or issues out of perspective. At a time when life is growing ever more complicated, salient facts may be lost in the shuffle of all the considerations that come into play. Also, news people see things through their own pre-conditioned perceptions, and "the observer is part of what he observes," as communications scholar P.W. Bridgman put it. They must deal with words, and words can be slippery. They sometimes pass on their biases to readers or listeners through their choice of language.

Reporters, as opposed to opinion journalists, traditionally have tried to keep their personal feelings and opinions out of their reports, but objectivity is not without its pitfalls. There is a decided difference between the facts and the truth. It might

be a fact that a person involved in a newsworthy situation says something, but what he says might not be true. Still, his words must be reported objectively in the absence of evidence that they are lies.

The school of "new journalism" that grew up in the 1960s contended that true objectivity was a psychological impossibility and should therefore be dispensed with. In any case, the new journalists insisted, objectivity was merely an excuse for the established media to support the *status quo* on questions of justice that cried out for reform.

Though it was practised in the name of democracy, subjective reporting proved to be distinctly undemocratic, which perhaps explains why it is now discredited among most mainstream journalists. Its practitioners felt free to ignore the precept that there are two sides to every story when one side did not agree with their point of view.

The aberrant one-tenth of what happens makes the news

Worse, the freedom from the discipline of objectivity blurred the distinction between personal interpretation of the facts and pure fiction. It became just too tempting for some writers not to invent convenient "facts" when a story was (so they thought) written from such a personal point of view that no one could check up on it. In several cases, someone *did* check up, and found that stories had been falsified.

Although members of every profession will occasionally bring it into disgrace, the cases of fabrication seemed to confirm the views of those who regard the entire media with unwavering suspicion. Such derelictions are, in fact, very uncommon. The great majority of writers and editors strive intently to ensure the integrity of the news.

People who excoriate the sins of the media frequently fail to differentiate between reportage and commentary. The media themselves sometimes contribute to the confusion by mixing the two in the form of "interpretive reporting," and not clearly identifying the line between the verifiable facts and what the writer speculates those facts might mean.

Mostly, though, people who rail against the media are indulging in the time-honoured sport of shooting the messenger. They are upset by the end-

less chronicle of folly and evil which journalists deliver — "the usual depravities and basenesses and hypocrisies and cruelties" which Mark Twain said could be found in any morning's news. It is natural enough to want to ascribe blame for all the tumult and grief that seems to surround us. And so journalists are blamed for going out of their way to make the world look worse than it is.

This is particularly so in the case of "investigative reporting," which digs out news rather than waiting for it to happen. The public sometimes seems to have more sympathy with the subjects of revelations of misbehaviour than with the journalists who have uncovered them. "There they go again," people will say. "Why do they have to tell us these things? Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

The answer is that our society would be a lot worse off if the media did not play such a role; the fear of being exposed is a strong deterrent to corruption. Granted, the media sometimes go too far in their pursuit of real or supposed villains. That is one reason why there are now press councils in many parts of North America. The councils are there to see that, in their lust for justice, the media do not commit injustices themselves.

The most commonly-heard complaint against the purveyors of news is that they "blow things out of proportion." In the most general terms, they certainly do. The bad news which comprises the bulk of national and international reports is out of proportion to the great mass of "good news" that is never reported. At any given hour, nine-tenths of human affairs around the world are proceeding peacefully, smoothly and safely. The stuff of headlines is the other aberrant one-tenth, or less.

Walter Lippmann said that the task of news people is to provide a picture of reality upon which men can act, but the news does not and cannot reflect the whole of reality. Still, it does give us grounds for action to build a better world. There are times when we would prefer not to know just how stupid and bad human beings can be, but if we did not know about it, we would never be able to correct the stupidity and badness. The news is a necessary evil in the advancement of civilization. It might even be said that there can be no civilization without the news.