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A NEGLECTED OPPORTUNITY AND DUTY IN JOURNALISM

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In two papers that have appeared in this journal¹ the present writer has discussed the actual and possible rôle of the modern newspaper in the political and moral life of the people—or in the education of the great reading public. The shortcomings of the average commercial newspaper were touched upon, but the conclusion that was reached was, on the whole, by no means as cheerless and pessimistic as that of many severe critics of contemporary journalism. Independent, honest, and high-minded journalism, the writer firmly believes, is entirely possible, and in no wise incompatible, moreover, with “enterprise,” readableness, and popularity.

But to say that such journalism is possible even on a commercial basis—to say, in other words, that a publisher need not sacrifice *reasonable* profits to dignity, moral courage, and righteousness—is, of course, not to say that the actual supply of honest and independent journalism is even approximately equal to the demand for it. The truth is, not many of our newspapers answer the reasonable requirements of the intelligent and decent elements of the community. Only a few do this; the majority leave much to be desired. Some are too sensational; others are erratic and unstable. Many are utterly indifferent to the questions that really matter, in the long run, simply because the average person is supposed to be indifferent to them. In the handling of political, civic, industrial, and social news, few of the big newspapers even pretend to adhere to any standard, or to care for method and consistency. The personal, the trivial, the cheap, the “yellow” incidents are generally exploited at the expense of the substantial and serious

¹ See especially the paper entitled “Is an Honest and Sane Newspaper Press Possible?” *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 1909.

matters that underlie the news. The unpardonable sin, the intolerable thing, in commercial journalism is "dulness," and absolutely everything is ruthlessly sacrificed to "dramatic, human interest," to "breeziness" or "appeal." And, of course, the managing editors and their reporters and copy-readers always think of interest and appeal in terms of crowds and multitudes. Hence sensational or melodramatic items will, at the last moment, displace and "kill" important but "dry" civic, administrative, or political matter that is appreciated only by small groups of citizens and readers.

It is a fact which hardly requires further elaboration that our greatest commercial newspapers cannot really be depended upon to "give the news." Their boast in this respect is totally unfounded. They give *certain* news, and give it without system or method. They omit and suppress other news with equal capriciousness and lack of any definite policy save the one avowed policy of making the whole paper as exciting and lively as possible. Certain Chicago papers recently suppressed a grand jury report which criticized sensationalism and charged journalism with responsibility for juvenile criminality.

To this familiar complaint against contemporary journalism there must be added the even more grave, if perhaps less common, complaint of deliberate unfairness, class bias, and political or factional partisanship in handling news. This complaint is made against the national news agencies as well as against individual papers. Many social workers, labor leaders, and progressive thinkers feel that big business, big finance, and capitalism unduly control the news machinery of the country. This control, they believe, results in much injustice, and in prejudice and confusion of vital issues. The Colorado mining strike is usually cited as an illustration of the unfairness of the news agencies. The way in which the hearings, by a Senate subcommittee, on the appointment of Mr. Brandeis to the federal Supreme Court were treated or "digested" and "summarized" in the press reports is another illustration furnished in certain "advanced" circles. The writer's own opinion is that the unfairness of the press associations is the result rather of narrow ideas and ignorance than of deliberate

prejudice, or of the conscious desire to pander to the monopolistic elements of the country. That, however, unfairness there is, can hardly be doubted.

Now, the probability of press reform in these directions is very faint. Practically every factor in contemporary journalism militates against reform. How many of our big newspapers are published and controlled by men who love journalism, have lofty professional ideals, glory in good work worthily done, and realize the responsibility that rests upon them? After all, a newspaper is what the owner chooses to make it. A man of principle, of intelligence, of self-respect, of poise, will run one kind of a newspaper. He will, first of all, run a newspaper in which the editorial expressions of opinion will be scrupulously differentiated from the presentation of facts in the news columns. He will not color, or manipulate, either the news or the headlines. He will demand strict honesty and impartiality of his reporters, correspondents, and desk men. He will give all sides worth giving. He will insist, first and last, on furnishing the raw material of opinion to all his readers—of carrying knowledge to them, and of carrying the power that goes with knowledge. His own views he will state candidly and vigorously, but he will state them *as* his own views, and neither claim to know what public opinion is when he does not know it, and has no means of knowing it, nor assume to reflect the opinions of the many publics that make up the great public.

But how many men of principle, of self-respect, of dignity and ability, run newspapers? We have men who are in the business for profit. We have men who are in it because they are vain, ambitious, pushful. We have men in the business who have political axes to grind, who have friends in public life whom they wish to advertise and “boom.” We have men in the business who love power and notoriety. We have men in the business who use their papers as adjuncts to financial promotion and speculation. Finally, we have men in the business who, though personally unfit for it, have succeeded fathers or grandfathers of conspicuous fitness for journalism, and who live on past reputation and past prestige.

We can no more expect genuine journalistic reform from these types of publishers and editors than we can expect the proverbial

silken purses from sows' ears. The style, verily, is the man. The newspaper, to repeat, and its style, from headlines and offensive, nauseating self-advertising up to the editorial manner and the mode of presenting news, reflect the proprietor's mental and moral traits.

Nor is this all. The basic material conditions of contemporary journalism are fatally unsound. Journalism that is too "cheap" to be self-supporting as journalism cannot be satisfactory. Newspapers that cannot make their ends meet without heavy, abundant advertising, and to which circulation is merely a means to advertising, cannot be independent, sober, and honest. They are under the constant necessity of "splurging," of trafficking in rumors and false reports, of making mountains out of molehills. And this in turn carries with it the necessity of rigorous economy in handling news that cannot possibly be rendered sensational and exciting. Inexperienced and uneducated reporters are too often assigned to "cover" civic and local news of moment. The ability and the experience available in the office are required elsewhere.

Has not the time come to revive definitely the idea—vaguely broached years ago—of privately endowed newspapers?

We have various "foundations" for education, for research, for progressive philanthropy, for certain social and industrial reforms. They are indispensable. We know that higher arts, the higher music, could not exist without liberal endowment. Is it not sufficiently clear that sound, clean, and dignified journalism cannot hope to take root, to establish itself in modern cities, without at least temporary endowment?

It is idle, of course, to expect municipal or state endowment of journalism. The remedy, were it practicable, would prove worse than the disease. The endowment of a newspaper, or chain of newspapers, by a single multimillionaire, or group of multimillionaires, would undoubtedly also prove vain or undesirable. The policies of such newspapers would either actually be controlled and dictated by the rich patrons, or else the general public would suspect such control and dictation. Such suspicions, even if unfounded, would be fatal. Newspapers supported by any of the existing "foundations," for example, would become targets for all manner of attacks and misrepresentation.

But we are by no means limited to this form or mode of endowment. If it be admitted that the education of our democratic masses cannot be safely left to commercialized newspapers; if it be admitted that it is desirable to set up and maintain standards of journalism—intellectual and moral; if it be admitted that it would be a boon to a community to have a great, trustworthy, vital, honest, ably edited, and ably written newspaper, and that gradually the influence of such a newspaper would make itself felt even in the worst of the commercialized newspapers—if all these things be admitted—and the writer does not believe that there is serious doubt as to them—then it must be admitted that there is no insurmountable obstacle in the way of a reasonable and carefully safeguarded endowment plan.

Tentatively, and in order to provide a basis of discussion, to elicit suggestion and criticism, the writer submits the following outlines of a plan.

1. Organize a national foundation for the special and sole purpose of establishing a chain of absolutely independent and sober-minded newspapers in the big cities of the country.

2. Appeal not only to men and women of great wealth, but to persons of moderate fortunes, or even of small means—small, that is, for our day, but not too small to permit indulgence in an intellectual, moral, and artistic luxury—to become contributors or supporters of this newspaper foundation.

3. Enlist progressive and honorable business men, professional men, educators, labor leaders, journalists, social workers, authors, artists, and others, and organize a national board of trustees representing these several elements of the community to direct the foundation.

4. Organize a smaller but representative board in each city where one of the proposed newspapers is to be started.

5. Adopt and prescribe a definite and practical news policy for the proposed chain of newspapers. That is, decide how to handle news relating to vice and crime, to family scandal, to sport, to trivial gossip, and the like.

6. Proclaim an absolutely non-partisan editorial policy. Announce that all controversial and contentious questions—Mexico,

for example, or the meaning of neutrality in connection with the great world-war, or the submarine and its uses, or the trade in arms and ammunition—will be frankly treated as such. That is, while the editorial columns of the journal will present the views of the editor or editorial board, other columns will be opened to writers of authority and standing for the sober presentation of differing views; nay, that care will be taken to secure the timely presentation of divergent views, so that the reader may have before him the best statements of the several points of view actually occupied with reference to any important question.

7. Organize an editorial board in every city represented in the proposed chain, but at the same time let one responsible managing editor be selected and engaged, and let ample power be vested in him for all ordinary journalistic purposes.

8. Charge a "living price" for the paper—two or three cents a copy, if necessary—and let circulation grow naturally in response to the appeal of an independent, reliable, well-written, progressive, and wide-awake newspaper.

9. Do not exclude advertising—except, of course, quack and immoral advertising—but do not solicit it. Let it, too, come naturally, as a recognition of the value of the journal as a business medium.

10. Pay good salaries and wages, but not excessive, inflated ones. Let it be known that absolutely honest and careful work will be required of all reporters, desk men, correspondents, special writers, department editors, etc., and that flippancy, sensationalism, artificiality, exaggeration, affectation, theatrical sentimentalism will be frowned upon and discouraged. Let it be known that the paper respects the public, regards it as capable of appreciating truth, accuracy, dignity, and sanity in journalism. There are thousands of young men and women who will work joyfully and enthusiastically for such a newspaper. There are thousands of capable and progressive journalists who are ashamed of the style and method that are imposed upon them. Some have the courage to say so in print; many say so in private conversation.

There is nothing utopian about these requirements or conditions. Newspapers of the type described might never become

“gold mines,” but no person of sense and experience can doubt for a moment that in time they would become self-supporting. The dissatisfaction and the disgust with many of our “great newspapers” are more widespread and profound than one realizes. As a very thoughtful and active woman of national reputation said to the writer lately: “The public is supposed to be getting what it wants in journalism. It is really taking what it gets. Why, I have to read every day a newspaper I despise. I have to obtain my information, and often I unconsciously form opinions, under the direction and manipulation of men I know and do not respect either morally or intellectually. But what can I do? There is no choice. The other papers in my city are even worse in some respects than the one I take.” Thousands of men and women in every city will heartily subscribe to these words. Thousands would heave a sigh of relief if they were assured of honest, independent, and sincere treatment of the issues of a great campaign.

Let me, however, anticipate and meet some objections to the plan that are certain to be raised.

The first may be formulated as follows, “Why, the proposal involves syndicated ‘journalism.’ What is a newspaper without the personality behind it? When you read opinions, you wish to know whose opinions they are. What weight attaches to syndicated policies? How can a foundation or a board of directors shape and determine newspaper policies?”

The answer is simple. How many of our newspapers *have* personalities behind them? How many readers *know* these personalities? And what if the personalities are known unfavorably? What if we actually know that greed, political ambition, love of notoriety, etc., inspire the opinions expressed by certain newspapers? We may be compelled to read these organs in spite of our knowledge.

Besides, if we want opinions, a truly independent and honest newspaper will know how to satisfy this want. It will interview known experts and authorities, or invite them to contribute careful articles. The sensible person is not deceived by the tacit claims of the editorial writer. Anonymity covers much ignorance and ludicrous pretension. If certain facts require interpretation,

one wants to know the qualifications of the ready interpreters. The editorial "we" guarantees nothing. It is often a false and impudent pretense. It often pretends to speak for a community, or class, or group, even when it deliberately misrepresents that community, class, or group. And it certainly speaks before it has made an effort to sound public opinion. It cannot wait—that would not be "enterprise," and a rival editor would be sure to rush in ahead of the man who hesitates, investigates, or waits.

The proposed newspaper foundation would represent all honest opinions and views. Its object would be to bring data, facts, information, knowledge, to the readers, and of course opinions are facts. The existence of differences of opinion among those who are really entitled to form and hold an opinion on a given question is itself a fact of importance. He who wants advocacy, special pleading, partisan treatment of a subject, and who would rather not hear the other side, is generally accommodated. It is the reader who wants "the full record" that is disappointed and neglected.

Here is one "burning" illustration of this statement. The controversy over the new submarine boats and their "rights" in warfare—the controversy over the defensive armament of merchantmen and the rights of civilians and neutrals on such ships—seriously troubled many Americans. They wanted to know what international law had to say on the issue. They wanted to know whether our national administration was fully justified in taking the position it finally took on that question. Did any newspaper deem it necessary to ask the leading professors of, and authors on, international law to prepare statements thereon? The issue involved momentous and tremendous consequences, yet the most enterprising of the newspapers contented themselves with the expression of personal and valueless notions, or with little scraps and fragments of expert opinion. One gathered the impression somehow that the supposed authorities were not agreed. The anxious reader was perplexed, not enlightened, by the little that was put before him. Yet to have put before him the mature views of the eight or ten men in the country whose authority could not be challenged would have been a relatively simple matter.

Another objection to the plan may be anticipated. It is this: that people will look with contempt on a newspaper that depends on "charity" or endowment for its very existence. To this there are two answers. Do people look with contempt on science, art, education, that depends on private and enlightened beneficence? Is dependence on a few big advertisers, with all the direct or indirect "control" of news and policies such dependence notoriously implies in many cases, preferable to dependence on voluntary, unselfish endowment? In the second place, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Contempt would not long survive the testing of a respectable and fit newspaper by its "consumers." Good writing, good reporting, good book reviews, good art criticism, good special correspondence, timely and able articles on current subjects, honesty and independence, fairness to all parties and schools that are entitled to consideration—such qualities as these would not be long in commanding attention and admiration, in bringing enthusiastic praise and support.

We have plenty of syndicated trash, syndicated falsehood, syndicated malice, syndicated vulgarity and sensationalism. Why should not decency and integrity, sobriety and common-sense use the resources of co-operation and beneficence? What is more important to democracy than freedom and honesty of discussion? What is more dangerous and pernicious than the pollution of the sources of popular education?

This or that multimillionaire may be satisfied with existing conditions in journalism. But there are thousands of wealthy men and women who are emphatically not satisfied and who would cheerfully contribute to an endowment fund of the kind suggested. A newspaper conference was held a few years ago to discuss the evils and vices of contemporary commercial journalism. Cannot a conference be called to consider the feasibility of a newspaper foundation? Is not the matter worthy of the attention of the sociologists?