

PHILOSOPHY OF JOURNALISM

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FOR want of better terms I am calling this subject *The Philosophy of Journalism*, although the Doctors of Philosophy of this University will probably smile at the title.

It seems to me that if Plato is the philosopher of transcendentalism and Aristotle of materialism, the philosophers of journalism are Daniel Defoe and John Wilkes. Although Defoe was also a great novelist, and Wilkes a politician and lord mayor of London, they are basic or primitive types in the *genus* of journalists. They began as journalists, and journalism led them on to their subsequent activities, and remained, especially in Defoe's case, the basic technique of their careers.

It is an unfortunate, and also quite possibly a *significant* circumstance, that to neither of these men as individuals can we pay a whole-hearted tribute of admiration. By any ordinary standard of behaviour, many of their activities and characteristics must be rigidly condemned. Must we conclude from this that a certain unscrupulousness of character and vulgarity and frivolity of mind are necessary equipment for a journalist?

I am not prepared to go quite so far. I have a suspicion, based on some experience, that that type of mind and character *does* thrive in the world of journalism—given reasonable cleverness and flair to accompany it—and that serious and scrupulous men may fail in that world through their very seriousness and scrupulousness. But good men have done well as journalists, and we must not be too sweeping in our conclusions.

Omitting the details of Daniel Defoe's early life—he was born in London in 1659, son of James Foe, a butcher of the parish of St. Giles, failed in several business enterprises, and spent some time in gaol for pamphleteering—we may come at once to the products of his pen that bear upon the point we are discussing and mark him as perhaps the earliest exponent of a typically journalistic philosophy.

In May, 1701, five gentlemen of the County of Kent presented a petition to parliament in which they presumed to advise the members in a matter of foreign policy. Parliament, having debated the petition for five hours, voted it "scandalous, insolent, and seditious," and ordered the petitioners taken into custody. They were held under arrest for several days, and

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then an extraordinary pamphlet, with the title *Legion's Memorial*, was presented to the Speaker of the House of Commons by Daniel Defoe in person, accompanied by sixteen gentlemen who, as he tells us himself in his *History of the Kentish Petition*, "if any notice had been taken of him (i.e., the pamphleteer) were ready to have carried him off by force." He adds that the Legion Memorial had been "brought out of Kent, and that *all the county* were at his heels to make it good."

Apparently the Legion Memorial had the desired effect. According to Defoe's own account, "the Paper struck such terror into the Party of the House that from that time there was not a word ever spoken of proceeding against the Kentish Petitioners; and the Members began to drop off, and get into the Country, for their management began to be so disliked over the whole nation, that their own fears dictated to them they had run things too far." The petitioners were released and returned to Kent, where they were met with tremendous public celebrations.

Now, what was there in the Kentish Petition, first of all, and secondly in the Legion Memorial, to cause this furore in parliament, and this complete rout of the House of Commons?

The petition concerned a matter of foreign policy. Louis XIV of France was carrying on a religious war, which threatened the Protestant states of England and Holland. William III of England, who was also the Prince of Orange, was asking parliament for arms and supplies to go to the aid of Holland, but the ruling Tory party, thinking him too much concerned about his native Holland, was delaying supplies and using every means to hamper the king as commander-in-chief of the military forces. This was the matter about which the Kentish petitioners complained, and this is what they said:

We most humbly implore this honorable House to have regard to *the voice of the people*, that our religion and safety may be effectually provided for, that our loyal addresses may be turned into Bills of Supply, and that His Most Sacred Majesty . . . may be enabled powerfully to assist his allies.

I want to direct attention especially to two phrases used in Defoe's history of the event, and in the petition itself. They are quite possibly from the same pen, as Defoe doubtless had something to do with preparing the petition. The phrases are: "all the County were at his heels", and "the voice of the people" Have they not a familiar ring? We see such things, I think,

every day in our newspapers. They are the very voice of the journalist, who speaks—who assumes and asserts that he speaks—for the public at large.

Now, let us glance at this Legion Memorial. Its final paragraph, couched in terms of the most aggressive self-confidence, gives the key to the title:

Thus, Gentlemen, you have your duty laid before you, which 'tis hoped you will think of; but if you continue to neglect it, you may expect to be treated according to the resentments of *an injured nation*; for Englishmen are no more to be slaves to Parliaments, than to a King. *Our name is Legion, and we are Many.*

Defoe wrote this Memorial, and his ideas and his alone are expressed in it. He might have got a dozen signatures to the paper, or he might have got a hundred—probably no more than tribunes to the rank of centurions. But *he* knew where his real Legion lay—in the printed leaves of his pamphlets and newspapers, thicker, far thicker than “the autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallambrosa.”

You are commanded, [says the letter to the Speaker of the House, which accompanied the Legion Memorial], by Two Hundred Thousand Englishmen to deliver it [the Memorial] to the House of Commons, and to inform them that it is no Banter, but serious truth.

I wonder how many of those two hundred thousand Englishmen he had consulted!

Again, the opening paragraph of the Memorial refers to “many thousands of the good people of England.” “You,” it tells the members of parliament, “are not above the people’s resentments; they that made you members may reduce you to the same rank from whence they chose you; and may give you a taste of their abused kindness, in terms you may not be pleased with.”

Defoe then sets out his views with finality:

These things we think proper to declare, as the unquestioned right of the people of England, *whom you serve*, and in pursuance of that right (avoiding the Ceremony of Petitioning our *Inferiors*, for *such you are by your present circumstances, as the Person sent is less than the Sender*) we do publicly protest against all your aforesaid illegal actions, and in the name of ourselves, and of *all the good people of England*, do require and demand—

The subjoined demands, in brief, undertook to direct a very considerable portion of the domestic and foreign policy of the kingdom; and did so in the name of "all the good people of England."

There were five tailors of Tooley Street who addressed a petition to the King that began, "We, the people of England," but surely their presumption was no greater than this of Daniel Defoe, who, alone, writing in his study, claims to speak for "all the good people" of the country, in defiance and contradiction of those people's elected representatives!

Now, before passing on to the other journalistic philosopher, John Wilkes, let us state Defoe's philosophy briefly. Here it is, in the words of one of his biographers: "The Legion Memorial asserted in the strongest terms the supremacy of the electors over the elected . . . The theory of the indefeasible supremacy of the freeholders of England, whose delegates merely, according to this theory, the Commons were, was one of Defoe's favourite political tenets." Taken with the fact that he presumed, in his own person as a journalist, to speak for the whole people, this gives a fairly clear indication of his point of view.

Recollect that in the previous century a party of the people had risen against the king to assert the rights of parliament, but that now it was parliament itself that was assailed, the elected representatives, supposedly, of the people, and that they were assailed by a new power, claiming to speak for the people with a voice superior to that of their elected representatives, and speaking through the printed sheets of the press.

We come now to consider the career and character of John Wilkes; and again it is necessary to emphasize that one cannot regard either character or career with anything approaching whole-hearted admiration. Wilkes became a popular hero in England, and the cry of "Wilkes and Liberty" rang from one end to the other of the kingdom, and even had repercussions in America. But listen to these opinions from men who knew him. Charles Johnstone, in 1760: "His humour was debased into buffoonery, and his wit was so prostituted to the lust of applause that he would sacrifice his best friend for a scurvy jest." Edward Gibbon, the historian: "A thorough profligate in principle as in practice, his life stained with every vice and his conversation full of blasphemy and indecency." Dr. Samuel Johnson, the lexicographer: "After hearing his name sounded from pole to pole as the phoenix of convivial

felicity, we are disappointed in his company." Burton Baker: "Trickster, tuft-hunter, bully, humbug, roue, false alike to man and woman, friend and foe, a sceptic in morals, politics and religion, without humour or honesty—what can be said in his favour?"

An unpromising subject! And to these unprepossessing twists of character, there is also added some extraordinary evidence regarding his personal appearance. "His face was so hideous," says Lord Macaulay, "that the caricaturists were forced in their own despite to flatter him." It was said that he was so exceedingly ugly that a lottery-office keeper once offered him ten guineas not to pass his window while the tickets were being drawn, for fear of bringing ill-luck to the house.

There is a possibility that some of this may have been ill-will or envy, and in any case, ugly as he was, and with squinting eyes, Wilkes once boatsed to Lord Townshend, who was reputed to be the handsomest man in the kingdom, that given a quarter of an hour's start he could get the better of any man, however good-looking, in the graces of any lady—and indeed, there seems to be a fair amount of evidence to suggest that this was no empty boast.

Wilkes was born in London in 1727. In his early life, a natural tendency to gaiety and debauchery was accentuated by an unhappy marriage, and before long he left his wife and devoted himself to concentrated drinking and gambling, and, in serious intervals, to politics. With other wild young blades, he formed what was called "The Sublime Society of Beef Steaks," and later joined another group of *bon vivants* known as "The Monks of St. Francis"—though they might better have been called for Master Francis Rabelais' Monks of Theleme. It was an exclusive society, only twelve in number. Sir Francis Dashwood, afterwards Lord de Spencer; Thomas Potter, son of the archbishop of Canterbury; Lord Sandwich, later a member of parliament; and Charles Churchill, a rather beefy poet, were among the members. Their evenings were riots of extravagance and folly.

Wilkes' sorties into politics, however, at last got him into the House as member for Aylesbury. His method was simple—he bought his way in. Palmistry, he said, was his technique, and he sank his opponent by sheer weight of metal. He had shown that he knew a trick or two in a previous election, when one of his opponents tried to bring a shipload of voters from London to the polls, via the Thames. Wilkes bribed the captain

to take them to Norway instead, and they were unable to get back in time for the election.

It was quite apparent that Wilkes was interested in his seat in parliament purely for what it was worth in position and emoluments. But his applications for various posts—including the governorship of Quebec—failed, and for this he blamed Lord Bute, the Prime Minister.

Thus it was that Wilkes' journalistic career began with what Jeffrey, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, called "a rancorous thirst for revenge." He hated Bute, for having frustrated his ambitions, and the whole of his early journalism was directed to a furious campaign against the Prime Minister. Bute had established a weekly called *The Briton*, edited by the Scottish author Tobias Smollett, and in opposition to it, Wilkes published a paper which he called, in sheer derision of its rival, *The North Briton*. Bute was a Scot, and the whole of Scotland fell under Wilkes' journalistic wrath from the beginning. *The North Briton*, published each Saturday, was a great success. Wilkes was witty, shrewd, and clever. His jokes and responses were the talk of the town.

Through 44 numbers, *The North Briton* devoted itself to furious and utterly unscrupulous attacks on Bute and his associates. Wilkes was even charged with perpetuating a scurrilous attack on Bute's son, a mere boy in Winchester school. This very early English journalist seems to have used all the most up-to-date methods of the yellow press—and he won his battle. Bute resigned, and the issues of *The North Briton* ceased for a while. But when a new ministry was formed under George Granville, and it became apparent that there would be no change in policy, Wilkes took to the pen again and produced the most famous of all the issues of *The North Briton*, No. 45. It was a terrific attack on Granville's speech from the throne, and although Wilkes was careful to explain that "the King's speech has always been considered . . . as the speech of the minister," it was regarded as an attack the King himself, George III, and as such, seditious.

"The honour of the Crown," wrote Wilkes, "is sunk even to prostitution." These, in George the Third's day, were daring words. A warrant was promptly issued for the arrest of the printers and publishers, and Wilkes, after many dodgings and protests, was taken and confined in the Tower of London. A week later he was released on the ground that his privilege as a member of parliament gave him immunity from arrest.

The warrant was declared illegal, and the secretary of state who issued it, Lord Halifax, was sued and compelled to pay large sums. It was said the business cost the ministry a hundred thousand pounds. The power of the press was beginning to be felt in no uncertain manner.

But Nemesis was on Wilkes' heels. In an obscene and scurrilous poem, printed on his own private press, he had libeled two innocent bishops. To do him justice, he had not intended to distribute the poem to more than a few of his private friends. But somebody wrapped a pound of butter in it, and it got into the hands of Wilkes' ministerial enemies, of whom there were by now a fair number. It was read in the House, and voted a breach of privilege. Wilkes was ordered prosecuted, and was expelled from the House of Commons in January, 1764. He had bolted to France by this time, having been wounded in a duel with Samuel Martin, M.P., for Camelford, who had delivered in the House one of the most telling strokes against Wilkes and against the whole business of anonymous scurrilities in the press. "A man capable of writing in that manner," Martin had said, "without putting his name to it and thereby stabbing another in the dark, is a cowardly rascal, a villain, and a scoundrel." It is not certain that this charge, as applied to the press generally, has ever been successfully refuted.

Though declared an outlaw in his absence, Wilkes returned to London after a few years, and after two attempts, got himself elected for the constituency of Middlesex. Thereupon he went boldly to the King's Bench and obtained a reversal of his outlawry on a technical point, but the verdict for libel remained, and he was sentenced to a fine of a thousand pounds and imprisonment for 22 months. And once again, in spite of his re-election, the House expelled him.

With this second expulsion began a series of contests between the parliament and the electors of Middlesex which, to quote one of Wilkes' biographers, was "without parallel in English history." The electors promptly re-elected Wilkes again (16 February) and the parliament once more declared him incapable of sitting, and his election void. Once again, (16 March) he was returned, and once again rejected. Recollect that all this time he was in gaol, despite the fact that when a mob had rescued him and dragged him, carriage and all away to an inn, where he had actually had to escape by himself and go on foot to the gaol. In his journalistic efforts of the period, he took full advantage of this absurd event.

By this time, of course, the whole of London was in an uproar, and the cry of "Wilkes and Liberty" was rising on every hand. Mobs of Wilkes' partisans patrolled the streets, and the windows of prominent ministerial houses were broken all over town. A mob besieged the house of the Duchess of Hamilton and nearly gained entrance. The Austrian ambassador, most stately of diplomats, was dragged from his carriage and "No. 45"—referring to Wilkes' famous edition of *The North Briton*—chalked on the soles of his shoes. All over London there were pictures of Wilkes, and many inns changed their names to "The Wilkes Arms" or "The Wilkes Head." One old Scots lady, looking up at a likeness of Wilkes hung over an inn door, was said to have remarked: "Aye, he hangs everywhere but where he should!"

Finally a fourth election was called. Colonel Henry Lawes Luttrell, with all the support of the parliament behind him, and unlimited money, opposed Wilkes. He got 296 votes to Wilkes' 1143. Nevertheless, the House two days later declared that Wilkes was incapable of holding office, and that Luttrell had been duly elected. This caused a storm of indignation from one end of England to the other. Parliament, however, held out, and it was a long time, with intervals as alderman and Lord mayor of London, before Wilkes entered the House. But he did at last, and thus it came about that a libertine, a sceptic, and an opportunist, with very little to recommend him as a man, and no expressed policy for the benefit of his countrymen, by the sheer power of the journalism of which he was a very early and very clever exponent, swept all opposition before him, routed both parliament and ministry, and realized his political ambitions.

And now, what are we coming at in all this rather long story, and what is the significance of Wilkes' career in relation to the philosophy of journalism? I think it must be clear that the Middlesex election, and the whole business of "Wilkes and Liberty," was a revolt of the electors against the men whom they, themselves, had elected to represent them—that is, the parliament. Or was it "the people" who revolted? And if it was, what does the expression "the people" mean? What is this "public" about which the journalists speak so frequently and claim to represent? Was it really two hundred thousand Englishmen, as Defoe suggested, or was it just Defoe? Was it the electors of Middlesex, or was it only Wilkes, the journalist whose journalism was begotten originally of a "rancorous thirst for revenge" against Lord Bute?

I do not know, and to you, as citizens of a democratic state, I can only say that you will have to decide the matter for yourselves. But you *will* have to decide it, for beyond a doubt, this question will sooner or later be thrust upon you: Is it better that I, a citizen of a democracy, should be ruled by men elected in the storm and fuss and mob psychology of the hustings, but at least openly; or by an organized demagoguery with its roots in quite private councils of which I know nothing, and existing chiefly for profit? Is it better for people to follow the anonymous counsel of controlled and organized journalists, whose writing may be individual—one man's opinion—or may be the expression of the opinions of their unrevealed paymasters, or may be a genuine attempt to estimate the opinion of such numbers of their fellow-countrymen as they may be able to consult within their limited field—is it better for people to follow this counsel, or to listen to the voices of their elected members, however faintly those voices may sound amid the drum-fire of the press?

I don't know how you will decide this question, but perhaps you will permit me to suggest some trends that seem to be emerging in the modern world of journalism.

In the early 18th century, about the time of Defoe and Wilkes, the population of England was five or six millions. The population of the United States at that time was possibly two or three millions, and of Canada, a few hundred thousand. In the two centuries which have elapsed since then, these populations have increased to forty-five millions, a hundred and thirty millions, and twelve millions, and, what is in some respects even more important, they have spread over enormous areas of land, so that citizens of the same state may be as far as 3,000 miles apart. Here in our own country, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet associates, situated in a little town on the banks of the Ottawa River, are trying to govern people living on the banks of the Peace, 2,000 miles away in northern Alberta. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the people on the Peace are nearly as far away from Ottawa as the people of Boston were from London at the time of the Boston tea party; and it seems not unreasonable to suggest that the Prime Minister and his Cabinet would have very considerable difficulty in extending their rule to the Peace if they had not the advantage of modern public communications such as the press, radio and telegraph.

Now, the hen may have come before the egg, or the egg

before the hen, and I do not know, frankly, whether growing populations challenged men's ingenuity and brought about technical advances, or whether the technical advances made larger populations possible. What is certain is that the growth and spreading of population in the English-speaking countries made large and complex systems of communication such as telegraphs, press and radio, not only an important but an essential factor in the business of government, and with the growth of these systems the function and the importance of parliament have been progressively lessened. From the day of Defoe and Wilkes to today, parliament has been helpless in the hands of the organized demagoguery of the press. Perhaps you will doubt that. But Defoe put parliament to rout with his Legion Memorial, and Wilkes forced the resignation of the Prime Minister with his *North Briton*. And what do you think is the situation today?

Perhaps you may have noticed in the news during the last few years the frequent references to "press conferences." President Roosevelt said this or that at a press conference. Mr. Churchill held a press conference at Quebec. And so on. In Washington, it was no longer a matter of the President granting the press occasional interviews. Mr. Roosevelt held press conferences regularly, week by week. They were a part of his technique of government, and to me at least, they seemed to be rapidly becoming quite as important as the Congress.

Let us see why. When, for example, the President planned the system of lend-lease to enable American industry to supply the weapons and munitions of war to Great Britain, did he thereupon present it to Congress and say: "Gentlemen, there is a law on our statute books which will not permit us to lend money or grant credits to nations in default for debts of the last war, but here is a way of getting around that statute?" No, that was not the way he proceeded. Instead, he made the suggestion first of all at a press conference, and thereupon in all the newspapers of this hemisphere the plan began to be written about and discussed, and public reactions were observed, in editorials, in letters to the editor, in one way and another. There is nothing new about this technique. It is what journalists call "kite-flying." You put up a kite to draw the enemy's fire, if any, and then you know where the enemy is and can deal with him. The novelty was the deliberate use of the press to sound out public opinion, the playing upon this medium as

a virtuoso might play upon a harp or a violin, and, above all, the direct communication by the President with the public at large, by-passing the Congress. It was the President and the press who were doing the job, and Congress stood helplessly on the sidelines.

This is the significant trend of modern times. You see the actual government channeling itself more and more into the hands of a few outstanding men—the President, the Foreign Secretary, and one or two others in the United States; the Prime Ministers and key Cabinet ministers in British countries. And with them always, and always to some extent at least influencing and directing them—the barons of the press. When press conferences have become as important, or more important than parliaments or sessions of Congress, then you have a situation that, whatever you may think of it, demands your close and serious attention.

There is one other modern development of the ancient philosophy of journalism that it would be well to watch from now on, and that is the Public Opinion Poll, so-called. Here again, the method is the journalistic one, the attempt to speak with the voice of the mass, the people, the *demos*, the mysterious entity—or nonentity, if you wish—upon which journalism rests its whole case. The Public Opinion Polls are conducted by people who go about asking certain current public questions—chosen by themselves, or their newspaper collaborators—of people in various walks of life. They are based on the theory that a few hundred individuals chosen from various walks represent a fair cross-section of an entire city or territory. I don't know whether this theory has any sound basis or not. In the election of President Truman it certainly did not work. But the importance of these polls is growing, and we must recognize that they are a further extension of the technique of the Legion Memorial, which claimed to speak for 200,000 Englishmen, to 199,900 of whom its author had never spoken in his life.

In this two-centuries-old battle between parliament and press, parliament, too, has had its champions. One of the most recent has been Mr. Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior in the Roosevelt administration, whose book, *America's House of Lords*, should be read by anyone interested in this subject. In recent times, a new champion has arisen to defend parliament, a champion so powerful in the newspapers' own field of

conflict that it bids fair to dominate that field and to establish parliament as it has never been established before, even in its earliest days, in its proper predominant position as the true representative of the people's will and the highest court in the land. The new champion is the radio. Within the last year or so the national radio system of Canada—over which parliament has wisely kept some measure of control—has instituted a regular routine by which members of parliament are enabled to speak directly to their constituents in their homes. Most listeners in Canada are familiar with the national radio series called "The Nation's Business." Listening to it, they hear their own elected representatives, members for their constituencies speaking soberly and reasonably to them on local or national issues of the day. They have received an entirely new impression of their members of parliament, and in letters to the radio authorities they have again and again expressed their astonishment.

Yes, astonishment—because previously their main and almost sole source of information regarding members of parliament has been the press, and everyone who reads newspapers knows what that has meant—misrepresentation, garbling of public statements for special purposes, political and economic bias, ridicule, savage caricature, rumour, gossip—these have been some of the tactics of the press toward politicians. The name "politician" has become a term of opprobrium. People refer to "politics" as if it were something necessarily evil and corrupt, and fail to notice that nearly all their information regarding "politics" comes from the press—the press which, since Defoe and Wilkes, has assiduously cultivated this attitude of contempt and ridicule toward parliament and its individual members. Public thinking has been guided in this direction, because the press has been from the beginning, as Defoe and Wilkes demonstrated beyond doubt, anarchical—using the term in its strict sense, in the sense of non-government. The attitude of the press for two centuries could be interpreted as meaning that it sets itself up as an entirely free agent, "the fourth estate," untrammelled by the rule of the people's elected representatives, a law unto itself. This is what "freedom of the press" really means, as the newspapers employ the phrase.

Threatened now by a new champion, more powerful than themselves and held to some extent under the control of parliament, the barons of the press, genuinely frightened for the first

time in two centuries, are hostile towards national radio systems, while at the same time seeking to buy and control radio stations of their own, a course that would ultimately give them control of *both* media of public communication. Parliament would again be at the mercy of the press.

But if parliament understands and realizes its own interest, and its own responsibility, to hold the reins of government given into its hands by the people, they will not succeed.

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