

IS JOURNALISM DECADENT?

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IS modern journalism decadent? Is it inaccurate? Does it tend to excite crime? The question whether newspapers in our day are improving or deteriorating, whether they have "favourites" more than the newspapers of old, whether they are more given than formerly to the suppression of news that is unfavourable to their own side,—this is a question well worth asking. What are the facts? Who can give them? The answer depends on the point of view of the authority quoted. I can adduce evidence on either side of each question raised, according to the authority I choose to call.

For example, Oswald Garrison Villard, himself a journalist, former owner of *The New York Evening Post*, now owner and editor of *The Nation*, has a poor estimate of the modern newspaper. In an address to the City Club of Chicago he declared that failure to tell the truth and to report all of the news is a main weakness of the journalism of to-day. Here is a vigorous paragraph:

The five years' orgy of lying, government propaganda, forced on the newspapers by the character of the war, has greatly aggravated the tendencies towards intolerance, hatred, unchecked hysteria and ignorance of foreign affairs. Following the lines of organization effected by war propaganda, the newspapers have very generally closed their columns to "the other side", and have not distinguished between liberals, radicals, and extremists. They have refused to print the truth about the new problems of the day. As a result, it is widely admitted that the public has lost faith in the press.

Present day journalism is still less excusable for the part that commercial motives play in its degradation. The newspapers think more of business success than of ethical standards. According to Mr. Villard, such commercial influences are a hundred times stronger than they were before the war, largely because of the huge increase in costs, particularly of paper, and the consequent greater dependence on advertising. "Press associations," he said, "do not rise above the level of the newspapers. The Associated Press has some good qualities, such as its non-profit making motive of service to its members; but outside of the largest cities it is

dependent for its news on the local newspapers, which undoubtedly colour the news, sometimes until all lines of accuracy vanish." As the worst instance of this, the critic quotes to us the prostitution of the Pittsburgh press during the steel strike of 1919. With gross mis-statements and without investigation, the seven Pittsburgh dailies made bolshevism, radicalism and disloyalty the sole issue, in spite of the fact that the federal government never made an arrest on this charge! The unreliability of the press as a news-gathering instrument is exemplified by what has been printed about Russia, the Polish pogroms, and Haiti.

Were things better at an earlier time? Mr. Villard emphasized the superiority of the press of 1860 above that of the present day. At that time verbatim reports of the speeches of Opposition leaders were given, and the people received facts upon which they could base their own opinions. It is encouraging, however, that a few newspapers to-day are turning to liberalism and fairness, breaking off from the practices imposed by government interference and the censorship of bureaucrats. But we are warned that the day is gone when the man of small means can start a newspaper. To do this in a large city at present, one must be a multi-millionaire, or else be backed by a group representing great wealth. The typical owner is the rich man of little or no political idealism, the associate of big business, honest, but out of touch with the people. Owners are often the victims of their editors, who are often less scrupulous. Few editors dare to risk loss of circulation by standing out against the crowd and assuming leadership. The average newspaper man is not well grounded in principles or well educated. It is because of all these factors, Mr. Villard believes, rather than owing to any press conspiracy or deliberate suppression of news, that American journalism has deteriorated.

Another source of danger lies in the recent widespread tendency to form chains of newspapers on the one hand and consolidated papers on the other, such as prevails in so many cities of Michigan. Mr. Villard dates the degradation of the press approximately from the entrance of Mr. Hearst into this field. He feels that the remedy is not to be found in a municipal newspaper or a State-owned journal. For the public already receives too much "inspired news," such as the Secretary of State distributes under camouflage in secret interviews. What about the project of endowed newspapers? The trusteeship of millions of dollars would yield to financial and economic influence, resulting in a policy of reaction and conservatism. Mr. Villard places his greatest hope in the independent weeklies and non-profit making papers:

They are now taking the place of the so-called "muck-raking" journals of ten years ago, which fell into the hands of capitalists soon after they had brought about the political upheaval that split the Republican party. Experience and experiment will find the way out. Wisdom can have no other way than the spoken and written word to reach the hearts of the people.

Yet if this mordant critic were to be subjected to the mercies of a skilled cross-examiner, he might be convicted out of his own mouth of almost as many shortcomings as he attributes to the modern press generally. Mr. Villard is a propagandist, a pacifist, a radical; he sees events through these eyes, and so reports them. Impartiality would scarcely be the term used to describe him. He is just as liable to error in the way of over emphasis or under emphasis, in behalf of his own causes, as are representatives of the "big interests." *In my view it is this tendency to err in the matter of emphasis which lies at the basis of the objection to modern journalism.*

Not long ago I was reading about the reviews of a book, more or less inconsequential in character and value. Two papers praised it, two condemned, but not one of them sought to evaluate. What was the explanation? Two papers praised it because it supported a cause they supported. The other two condemned it because they were on the other side. The emphasis was determined by the attitude of the paper on the issue under discussion, and not by the intrinsic value of the book itself. If in the matter of a book review such a policy prevails, what will the policy of the paper be when vital facts of every-day news are being treated?

Reference was made by Mr. Villard in his Chicago address to the Associated Press, the reports of which multitudes accept as being as nearly accurate as human ingenuity and industry can produce. Kent Cooper is the present general manager, succeeding Melville E. Stone in that position. In an article in *Collier's* under the caption "What do you want in the news?" he replied "You want the truth. That is the way I would sum up my personal experience and that of the Associated Press during more than thirty years of active journalism. Editors and journals have come and gone, mechanical inventions have speeded up newspaper production, circulations have multiplied, all kinds of sensational experiments have been tried; but straight, unprejudiced news reports are still the journalist's best-selling commodity. That, I think, speaks well for human nature, and promises well for journalism. As an official of the Associated Press, I take pride in the thought that Melville Stone, the founder of our organization, discovered this principle

and put it into practice at a time when bias and inaccuracy were the leading journalistic sins."

When Mr. Stone assumed the general managership of the old Associated Press in 1893, Mr. Kent had just begun setting type in a small Indiana newspaper office, and he well remembers setting up copy that fairly blazed with fiery reflections upon the acts of a political adversary. It seemed to him that there was a lot of unnecessary vituperative adjectives to be laboriously put into type—unnecessary in that they added nothing to the news.

Mr. Stone was confronted in the field of national journalism with the same kind of biased reporting. Besides being manager of a news service that had to be acceptable to the owners of hundreds of newspapers with varying political, religious and economic beliefs, he was a man with ideals and ideas. He adopted a formula of accuracy and impartiality, Mr. Kent declares, that was morally right as well as practicable. To-day that formula is accepted by all journalists worthy of the name. This achievement was not without its difficulties. Newspapers of that time appealed to a restricted reading class. Thousands never read newspapers at all except when some cataclysm had taken place. So it occurred to some journalists that they would obtain more readers if they could provide a cataclysm a day to be emblazoned across the front page. Now he tells us, as a trained newspaper man, that "it is difficult to find in all the world a daily cataclysm that will make screaming headlines." "Lacking this, there were two avenues open to sensational editors. One was to exaggerate a comparatively unimportant event into a cataclysm. The other was to publish pipe dreams of cataclysms. Both were tried—with results on which I need not dwell."

Another menace to accuracy was the growing necessity of haste. Thirty years ago most newspapers had a single edition a day. With the establishment of several daily editions of a single newspaper, and the struggle of each to be first on the street, the danger of errors of statement increased. The greater the speed, the greater the chance of inaccuracy. The more the accuracy, the less the speed. But the Associated Press resisted this speeding-up tendency, and so did the great mass of responsible journals, most of which made use of its news services. At the present time, in Mr. Kent's judgment, bias has almost disappeared, excessive exaggeration is slowly disappearing; and when a choice has to be made, accuracy is put before haste.

Accuracy is not, of course, the only criterion of news. Another measuring-stick is the kind of news selected for publication or for

"playing up". Why, it has recently been asked, do newspapers give so much space to crime? One answer, Mr. Kent says, is that they probably do not give as much space, relatively, as they used to give. Another is that an actual service may be rendered by the publication of facts about crime. If it is realized that the publication of news of this kind is the sounding of the alarm to society as to the dangers that beset us, we need not blame readers for reading it or editors for printing it. If a news report is true, it is, within the limits of decency which everyone understands, publishable.

"I come back" Mr. Kent declared, "to the question of truth in news, because it seems to me fundamental. Accurate journalism will never be vicious journalism. In fact, inaccurate journalism is not journalism at all, for it is the truth in the news that makes the news, and which therefore produces a salable article for the publisher. Facts are stranger than fiction, and consequently more interesting. They seem to be, in the long run, what the public wants. I do not think the average reader quite realizes how deeply the instinct to get and print the unvarnished truth is instilled into the hearts of present-day newspaper men. If he did, I believe he would fully share my confidence in the rock-bottom soundness of American journalism." Mr. Kent has no fads or fancies so far as I know, nor is he a propagandist. He is just a newspaper man, and that is what we want when we are concerned about gathering news.

Whether he would stand any better than Mr. Villard under cross-examination, I cannot say. If I were to be assigned that task, the first question that I would ask him would be—What good purpose, news or otherwise, was subserved by telegraphing recently all over the country the fact that one of our chief Church dignitaries had been summoned for speeding over a straight road, with which he was most familiar and with no cross roads for miles, and with no other car in sight? Is not that a form of over emphasis?

Church news suffers more at the hands of the local press than any other class of news. It suffers chiefly from ignorance, but mis-statements are not unknown. *America* (a Roman Catholic weekly) is responsible for the following statement. Some weeks ago, J. E. Brady, formerly a detective on the New York police force, took the stand in one of the city's "investigations." On the following day nearly every newspaper in the city of New York announced that the students of Fordham University were flocking to a certain neighborhood restaurant, which regularly served beer of an illegal alcoholic content. What the text of these reports left unsaid was very fully supplied by the headlines. As a matter

of public record, Mr. Brady's testimony was of an exactly opposite import. Assuming various disguises, he had dined at this restaurant for about seven weeks. It was not particularly crowded, serving only from sixty to seventy meals at noon, mostly to students of the university. But he had never seen beer served; and although his purpose was to secure evidence against the proprietor, he had been quite unable to purchase beer or any other intoxicating beverage.

Mr. Brady had mentioned that the suspected restaurant was in the vicinity of the university, and that was sufficient foundation for the bright young men of the Fourth Estate. They built up their story on the principle that vice was interesting and virtue dull. The fact that it put Mr. Brady in the position of testifying to the truth of what he knew to be untrue and had testified to be untrue, and that a charge of this kind might easily damage the reputation of a college or university, meant nothing to them. A retraction, published two weeks after the publication of the original story, was the barest justice, but it by no means compensated for the inconvenience occasioned to Mr. Brady and to the Student Council.

In passing, I might point out that our Roman Catholic brethren do not allow such misrepresentation to pass unchallenged or uncorrected. How many Anglican Churchmen challenge the common custom of so many papers to speak of their Church as the "Protestant Episcopal" and to refer to the Roman Catholic as "Catholic"? If our legal title is given, then our sister should be referred to by her legal title. If her popular title is given, then in all fairness our popular title should be given; but to use the legal title in one case and the popular title in the other is to "play favourites."

Editorial and propagandist misrepresentation, of course, is another matter, and in some respects less important, because the editorials do not command the attention they once did. Nevertheless the potency of the printed word is still strong, and an editorial in the paper we regularly read carries weight, especially if it is about something concerning which we are not particularly well informed.

While writing on this subject I should like to call attention to a book entitled *The Ethics of Journalism*, by Nelson Antrim Crawford, Professor of Industrial Journalism at the Kansas State Agricultural College. In his view "Where a newspaper is unable to withstand an attack by advertisers, it is weak in either financial backing or editorial prestige, commonly in both." Again, he says "Circulation is merely a means to an end, that end being advertising,"

and reminds the reader that a large newspaper "seldom gets enough from subscribers and news-stand buyers to pay its paper bills." The real cause, Mr. Crawford believes, is "not corruption, but ignorance, inertia and fear." This fear is not a physical fear, but "rather an intellectual and spiritual fear, fear of and deference to the herd, the whole body of people within the nation." This affects the entire newspaper, from the reporter to the publisher, and is manifested especially in "conscious unwillingness to give the people the facts." His philosophy of journalism is "a philosophy which presents objectivity in the dissemination of facts as the primary ideal of the press."

Years ago the Sacramento *Bee* published some "shop rules" which bear repetition to-day:

The Bee demands from all its writers accuracy before anything else. Better lose an item than make a splurge one day and correct it next.

Equally with that, it demands absolute fairness in the treatment of news. Reports must not be coloured to please a friend or wrong an enemy.

Don't editorialize in the news columns. An accurate report is its own best editorial.

Don't exaggerate. Every exaggeration hurts immeasurably the cause it pretends to help.

If a mistake is made, it must be corrected. It is as much the duty of a *Bee* writer to work to the rectification of a wrong done by an error in an item, as it is first to use every precaution not to allow that error to creep in.

Be extremely careful of the name and reputation of women. Even when dealing with an unfortunate, remember that so long as she commits no crime other than her own sin against chastity she is entitled at least to pity.