

Canned features, hand-outs, and organized laziness, says a young newspaperman, have turned our daily press into . . .

Newspapers *WITHOUT* News

Anthony Harrigan

IT is the constant boast of American newspapers that there is a free press in the United States. And, admittedly, despite considerable ranting, not even Harry S. Truman is likely to seize the plants of our newspapers. No American need fear that the New York *Herald Tribune* or the Kansas City *Star* will, because of their support of General Eisenhower, suffer the fate of Argentina's *La Prensa*. Thus in the ordinary sense the press in the United States is free.

Nevertheless, in a larger sense, the press is not free, for it is under a thrall of its own creation. It possesses freedom, but does not exercise it. The American press does not use the resources of freedom, takes

no advantage of a priceless opportunity to be, not the voice of the people (newspapers never are that), but the voice of strong and thoughtful individuals. The hundreds of medium-sized dailies in the land are without conviction and without distinction. Only a handful of large newspapers are responsible and serious. They stand apart and they stand for something. They are of a vanishing breed.

In this country, where there is neither an established church nor a trained upper class, the chief directing and enlightening force is the press. The press in our history has played a powerful role. Whether in colonial Virginia or Virginia City on the frontier, it was no respecter of persons, or of the politicians whom one great southern editor dubbed the "Office-holding Industry." The press has been a bulwark against lying and corruption.

Americans, from garbage man to bank president, "keep up with the

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newspapers." Reading the newspapers is a national habit. And the press is highly regarded. It is a stock reply to say "I read it in the papers." It is democratic scripture. For the press is not venal. American newspapers cannot be bribed and bought by political factions. If the owners do not always have firm principles, they do possess solid and deep-seated prejudices. Because most American newspapers enjoy the confidence of the people, it is all the more tragic that they are partly enslaved to frivolity and irresponsibility.

Newspapers are immense corporate properties with huge and complicated mechanical plants. They create a bustle, a stir; their front pages carry headlines in exceedingly large type faces, headlines blaring forth the pettiness as well as the turbulence of the modern world. Yet behind this façade little genuine newspaper work goes on.

I refer here to the mechanization, standardization, and syndication of material prepared for the pages of newspapers so called. The press in this country is not using any large portion of its available resources in seeking the news or presenting the meaning of the news. It is making no effort to bring the best to the public, nor is it training a new generation of serious journalists. The former is too expensive, it has decided, and the latter too difficult.

To be sure, night and day, year in and year out, the wire services,

AP, UP, and INS, carry millions of words of copy purporting to report the full story of the day's happenings everywhere in the world. But what are these words about? A cat climbs on the weather vane above a steeple in a Nebraska village. A Frenchman in Paris constructs a five-wheeled motorcycle. An East African river is given a new name. These inconsequential events and countless others like them are reported over the wires of the press associations, and then the meaningless stories appear in the morning and afternoon papers across the land.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED to our newspapers has been a long time in the making. The evil that the yellow journalists did in their lifetime lives after them. The press associations and wire services have monopolized the distribution of news; they are depended on for virtually everything. Speed in the distribution of news is good. But so is completeness, understanding, and analysis. The arrangement for bartering news that is the heart of the Associated Press idea has become an excuse for laziness. It is planned laziness. It has made the laziness of the medium-sized American newspapers economically wise. The "scoop," boldness of any kind, independent judgment, these are now of lesser importance to newspapers. The wire services insist that they are not partisan. Hence managing

editors need not fear that a single partisan idea will creep into their pages and offend a single reader or organized group. And the management of newspapers are far more concerned about losing that one reader than they are to win a flock of new readers who have some appreciation of forthright reporting.

American life today is ridden with taboos. Democracy is interpreted as meaning that you can't say anything that will hurt anyone's feelings. Ideas are not especially welcome, nor is originality, nor force of expression. Wrongdoers are referred to in the abstract. It is always the "five per centers," or the White House "palace guard," or the "bureaucrats," or the "deep freeze gang." Newspapers are increasingly reluctant to name names or point a finger; it is somehow in bad taste. In brief, the newspapers are reluctant to step on toes. So the dispatches filed with the wire services are cleaned, smoothed over, blunted. They are emasculated and watered down, their content removed or altered out of recognition.

This trite, this emasculated, this watered-down thing termed news is carried at the speed of light to hundreds of dailies. Cut up like pie, marked with guide lines, given a head, it is fitted in among the recipes, dress patterns, medical advice, gossip columns, Washington cocktail party talk, "human interest" stories, Dorothy Dix ad-

vice, and Walter Lippmann lucubration — and called news. Except for the articles written by the reporters on the police and city hall beats, this is all the news our newspapers carry.

MECHEANIZATION, standardization, and syndication are not the only blighting influence on the modern newspaper. Totalitarian countries have the government censor — we have the federal public relations handout. Indeed, totalitarian countries have something to learn from our federal government about the techniques of suppressing news. Certainly, there is no more effective censorship device than the handout — that "explanatory" news release whose gobbledygook means all things and nothing. In addition, there is the calculated "leak" of puzzling information and the "off-the-record disclosure" that bedevil and confuse the reporter, and blind him as to what he is honor bound to report and what he is honor bound to keep secret. What dictatorial governments achieve with blue pencil and scissors, the federal government in the United States achieves with its barrage of handouts, reports, conferences, bulletins, and brochures. There is a vast publicity apparatus working for every government department and ranking official. Pressure groups, unions, management groups have their public relations offices. All these let loose such a

flood of publicity that the newspapers are swept along on it without making any serious attempt to get to the rock bottom of public issues. Investigations are inconclusive. Public attention skips here, there, and everywhere. Instead of latching onto and staying with the few important issues, newspapers prefer a variety of tidbit and scandal. The wire services want a stream of live stories, more and more grist for the mill. The slow catching hold, the hauling in of a big fish, takes time. And the wire services and the newspapers haven't the patience or the interest or the responsibility to wait for the big story to develop and mature.

Is there anything that can be done to improve things?

Obviously, it is not possible to persuade the prelates of the Associated Press and other news-gathering and distributing organizations that their creation needs to be overhauled and kept within bounds. The newspapers are doing well, they are making money. And the majority of newspapers know no other test of achievement than the financial one. The associations and newspaper managements are satisfied. They listen to no other advice than their own; they read nothing but their own pronouncements. In such an atmosphere, reform or innovation at first seems impossible.

However, newspapers have it within their means to re-establish the

dignity and power and freedom of the press. The program is simple enough, but immensely difficult to put across to the management of newspapers, because it means spending money. It requires talent, and talent costs money in this country, although there is enough talent in the United States for many great newspapers, and not only for a handful. Individual journalism will never become a thing of the past. The material for a revival of a distinctive and trenchant journalism is in the city rooms of newspapers, waiting for the green light and the necessary greenbacks.

What is essential is that the medium-sized dailies engage staffers who will search out the news on their own, in a more ruthless and far-ranging fashion. Rather than depend on the wire services for their coverage of Washington, the medium-sized dailies ought to maintain at least one good staffer and researcher for the capitol scene.

Representation in Washington or New York or Chicago or Los Angeles of course costs money. To send one man to cover a national convention for a week, let alone maintain a good staffer or staffer-research team in one of our major cities, is an undertaking impossible on a shoe-string editorial budget. Unfortunately, the editorial side has little of its old importance in relation to the total operation of publishing a newspaper. In many newspapers the

"big wheels" are the business office chiefs; the editorial workers are little heeded. Petty financial limitations are imposed upon the editorial department, its picture or travel budget is narrowly restricted, so that oftentimes excellent locally written features are not carried because for a trifling sum a passable "canned" feature can be got from a feature syndicate. The business office wants to "get by"; it is not interested in maintaining or raising journalistic standards.

DESPITE the fanfare and the pronouncements concerning a free press, it is evident that the medium-sized newspapers in America have abdicated responsibility in the gathering of national news. And the same thing is now taking place in regard to local news. News staffs are not digging and investigating. They are relying on handouts, accepting the statements of public officials as to what takes place in closed meetings, tolerating the exclusion of the press from the sessions of local governmental bodies, and growing used to accepting news at second hand.

Anyone acquainted with the workings of a modern newspaper realizes, if he is at all acute, that the newspaper management, the business office, is bringing about a withdrawal of the paper from the news field. To a greater and greater extent the newspapers are engaged

in peddling. They continue to carry a dummy front of news and editorials because it is a convention fixed in the public mind. But the trend is to frivolity, to a competition in frivolity, and pages are pasted together with "canned" food or clothing features in order to lend background to supermarket or clothing store ads.

This is a great loss to the country because newspapers provide, ideally, the sole inexpensive source of information and comment on public affairs. The newspaper constitutes the only post-graduate school the ordinary man and woman have the money and time to attend—the day-to-day school in which current events are unfolded and analyzed. The newspaper is *the* institution in the republic by which educated men and women can pass along their understanding of events to their fellow-citizens. Instead, the management of the typical modern newspaper patronizes its readers, contemptuously feeds them pap, calls *them* stupid to excuse *its* incompetence.

The rock upon which a powerful newspaper is built is a body of faithful readers who trust and value its word, who believe in its integrity. They constitute a newspaper's life. Nevertheless, our pinchpenny, "newsless" newspapers are surrendering this great asset. They do so in a misguided attempt to make money. Our newspapers are directed

by men who are not newspapermen. They are directed by men who have come into the field from business life, and do not understand the history of the press in the English-speaking world, its role and significance, the springs of its greatness. For newspapers are not shoe factories or soft drink concerns. Our

press will thrive, newspapers will sell, circulation will rise, when newspapers return to the old policy of reporting news with intelligence and courage. Not dress patterns but politics is the subject matter of the press. In sound reporting and strong editorials are the praise and the profits.

One is Enough

» And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter — we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea.

HENRY D. THOREAU, in *"Where I Lived, and What I Live For,"* 1854.

FILM

William Barrett

Chaplin as Chaplin

Death of a Clown

CHAPLIN'S NEW FILM *Limelight* is one of the most perplexing works of art I have ever experienced. The perplexity seems to originate in the character of Chaplin himself, for he is the real subject of the movie, and while this character is almost hypnotic in its fascination, there remains something unexpressed and mysterious about it. One comes away haunted by the feeling of Chaplin the man, which saturates almost every foot of the film, but one doesn't have any very definite idea as to how much of the real personality is conveyed and how much held back. The intentions of the film seem to be in part frankly autobiographical: here is Chaplin returned to his origins in

the London Music Halls; yet when we have come to the end of the autobiography, the real character of the man remains a sealed book.

Why, for example, should Chaplin — rich, famous, and still the unparalleled master of his art — project himself as Calvero, a broken-down and impoverished comedian? Why should the ideas of death and failure loom so large? What is there in Chaplin's own life that should bring out such bits of lament and bitterness here and there in the film?

These are some of the puzzling questions the movie left with me, but before going on to unravel the perplexity a little, I should say, on the positive side, that I also found this the most powerful of Chaplin's films. Not the best, for it is uneven and in certain stretches drags badly; and certainly not the

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