

# The *Times*—One Man's Poison

*What an aroused critic would do if he were editor*



The function of a newspaper, aside from making money, is to give the news to its readers thoroughly, clearly, concisely, and pleasurably. The New York

*Times* is thorough, but I find its headlines ugly and hard to read; its layout inflexible and chaotic; its writing notoriously inept and long-winded, and its editing slovenly. The *Times* buries the significant news under a junkheap of useless information, and the only pleasurable part of a typical story is the last sentence.

I have no special qualifications for making this sweeping criticism of the country's most respected newspaper. Although I have edited magazines, I have never worked on a newspaper. But I think the *Times's* defects will become evident to any one who simply stops and thinks about the paper, without being intimidated by its formidable reputation. They are mostly self-evident, and doubtless any experienced newspaperman could point out many others. The curious fact is, however, that both its editors and its readers have taken the *Times* for granted for some forty years. No one has discovered, or at least announced, that the emperor is naked. That melancholy report it falls to this article to make.

It is not just the *Times* that is journalistically pantless, of course. Most of the criticisms made below would apply also to the rest of the American daily press. Most papers present the news in a disorganized and discontinuous fashion; their editors, too, might profit greatly if they decided to Stop and Think what they are trying to do. If the *Times* is singled out here, it is because it is the country's leading paper, and because its very excellence as a gatherer of news brings into special

*This is the first of two articles presenting different reactions to the New York Times. The second, "The Times—Another Man's Meat," will appear in an early issue.*

relief its inadequacies as a disseminator of news.

When the late Adolph Ochs took over the New York *Times* in 1896, he had a creative idea. Up to then, New York dailies had followed one of two archetypal patterns: that of Horace Greeley's high-minded *Tribune*, which crusaded for Fourierist socialism; or that of James Gordon Bennett's low-minded *Herald*, which went in for scandal and sensationalism. Ochs's idea was a paper which would be neither a political organ nor a "yellow" journal. He proposed neither to elevate nor to titillate his readers, but simply to give them "All the News That's Fit to Print." With his managing editor, Carr Van Anda, Ochs over the years created the greatest newsgathering organization in the world. Their *Times* was dullish ("Diversion for readers is not a main feature," a 1922 blurb stated complacently) and intellectually mediocre compared to Greeley's *Tribune*, Dana's *Sun*, or the *World* of the 1920's. But it did come reasonably close to living up to Ochs's slogan.

The *Times* still does. It prints more news than any other paper in the world; its foreign coverage is still unsurpassed; it is still the one indispensable newspaper source for scholars, historians—and journalists.

Unhappily, Ochs and Van Anda were much better at getting the news than they were at communicating it. This defect was more forgivable forty years ago, when the world was a

simpler, or at least a more innocent, place than it is now. Today, when private and governmental sources use highly developed propaganda techniques to conceal their real aims in power-struggles of the utmost complexity, the news has, so to speak, lost its innocence. One needs more than a simple Ochsian determination to print all the "facts," if one is to avoid misleading and confusing the reader. The idea that was creative in 1896 is so no longer. The lack of critical discrimination, which in 1910 was simply a drawback in the *Times*, today has become a radical flaw which vitiates to some extent the entire paper.

Ever since Ochs gave it the first push, the *Times* has just kept rolling along, gathering lots of moss. It has become bureaucratized, routinized, set in a rigid, antiquated form that no longer serves a useful purpose. The *Times* resembles a dinosaur: an unwieldy bulk of matter directed by inadequate consciousness. Lumbering in their saurian, unreflective way along the old trail blazed by Ochs and Van Anda, the

present editors appear to have given no thought to how they communicate the information they amass.

The *Times* is not edited. It just happens once a day.

In what follows, I am concerned only with journalistic technique. For the purpose of this argument, I

assume the *Times* is wholly free from bias, slanting, suppression, and special-pleading. Nor am I concerned with anything but the paper's general news columns.

Within these limits, I have two main criticisms: The paper takes far too long to read for what is in it; it fails to give a clear or coherent picture of the day's news.





To remedy these defects, I have a few modest and practical proposals.

First, the editors should edit. Most news stories in the *Times* don't appear to have been edited at all, but simply to have been set up just as the "takes" came in over the wire. In effect, every reader must be his own editor.

Consider the way the *Times* handled Truman's Economic Report to Congress. Its front-page story on January 7 begins with an inchoate summary of the report in stately, cumbrous language that requires a half to two-thirds more words than workaday English to convey the same information. Suddenly a quite different report is introduced, one not even mentioned in the headlines—that of Truman's Council of

Economic Advisers. This is kicked around for a couple of turgid paragraphs, after which the story wanders back to the Truman report, but in so furtive a way that only a very alert reader can detect the transition from one to the other.

The story goes on for fifteen inches, stumbling around among statistics which should have been presented in tabular or chart form, and which make baffling reading when thrown into declarative sentences introduced by "The President added" or "Mr. Truman noted." Then back to the council's report, which is presented with equal opacity—to such an extent that the council is made to assert that "a falling price level . . . would hurt fixed-

income groups." The *disjecta membra* of the council's report are spread over no less than three other stories, no more closely related in layout or typography to each other than to nearby stories on Czechoslovakia and the water shortage. Subheads might have helped matters, but the *Times* uses subheads not to clarify structure (which, to be fair, is generally quite beyond clarification), but, in a perverse way, merely to break up the type at regular intervals. This latter is a function which a black dot or just a white line could perform more effectively.

Second, the *Times* should avoid all the news that's not worth printing.

The trouble with *Pravda* as a news-reporting instrument is that it conceals practically all the news by omission. The *Times*, which prints five times as much news, keeps the facts from the public by sheer largesse. This is the *Purloined Letter* principle in journalism: Tell the reader so much that he will overlook the real point.

It is amazing how much information the *Times* prints every day that could be of no possible use or interest to any reader, not even the scholars whose peculiar requirements are made an excuse to explain away an appalling lack of editorial enterprise. This information appears for no better reason than that the *Times* has always reported the news that way, and the editors have never stopped to think why, any more than a tailor stops to think why he sews little buttons on the cuffs of men's coats. It is hard to estimate how much space (and readers' time and energy) would be saved if the *Times's* editors did stop and think. It should certainly be in the neighborhood of twenty-five per cent.

Why must we be reformed daily that Acheson and Eisenhower were christened Dean and Dwight respectively, and that the President of the U.N. General Assembly is a Brigadier-General whose middle initial is "P."? Why, during the weary months of the trial of the twelve Communist leaders last summer and fall, did we have to be told every morning what offense the defendants were charged with—as we have been every morning during the Hiss and Coplon trials?

In a single story (on the verdict in the Communist trial), the following useless information was given: that the

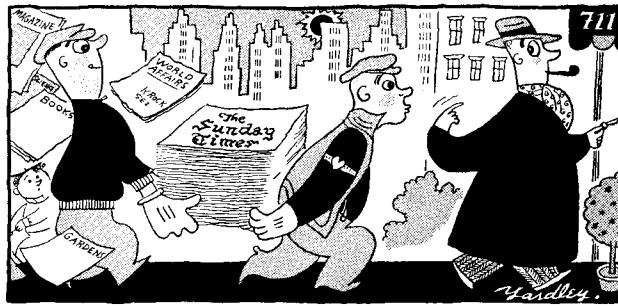
hotel where the jurors were lodged is at 120 West 45 Street; that the court adjourned at 12:35 P.M.; that the prisoners shook hands with their lawyers (instead of slugging them, as is the usual custom); and that it was a long trial (you're telling us). What does it add to an account of a radio talk by Mr. Dulles to state that it was broadcast from the Whitman Hotel, at 160-11 Eighty-ninth Avenue, Jamaica, Queens? (On the other hand, let us by all means continue to read about the fox that was captured in a Bronx housing project, the electrocuted cat that blacked out Price, Utah, and, of course, any and all items about talking fish.)

Assuming that man-bites-dog is news, and dog-bites-man is not, let us glance at three especially vapid types of *Times* reporting.

*The Dog-Bites-Man Story.* When the trial of the Communists ended, the *Times* revealed that among those approving the convictions were the Attorney-General of the United States and several members of the Un-American Activities Committee. Another column-length item reported that, on the one hand, Governor Dewey saw the verdict as "a vindication of [our] system," while, on the other, William Z. Foster deemed it "a body blow against our democracy."

*The Man-May-or-May-Not-Bite-Dog Story.* The *Times* often gives as much space to something that may (or may not) happen as to something that did happen. Thus, a story headed ROMULO HOPEFUL OF BALKANS PEACE takes ten inches to say just that, which was hardly worth noting anyway. Hopes and fears are sometimes news, but they are gaseous stuff and demand severe compression in the telling.

*The Dog-Doesn't-Bite-Man Story.* A fine specimen was the recent 28-inch front-page item: JOHNSON IS SILENT ON DEFENSE SHIFTS; VISITS PRESIDENT. Here, too, the headline contains "All the News That's Fit to Print." We learn that Bernard Baruch hopes the Air Force will make up with the Navy (including full text—seven inches—of his letter); that the Joint Chiefs-of-Staff held a meeting (no comment); that Johnson had met with various subordinates (listing six, with full



names and titles) to hold "a general discussion of lessons to be learned from the House committee's hearings" (no comment); that Admiral Denfeld might or might not be replaced as Navy chief (no comment); and that Johnson's talk with Truman (no comment) lasted twenty minutes.

Next the *Times* should do something about its front page.

To begin with, two minor points:

The headlines are printed in a type that lacks both force and refinement, that is hard to read, and that gives the front page a gray, washed-out look. It has been used at the *Times* for about forty years, and it would probably be no more difficult to persuade the editors to change it than to get the Pope to revise the mass.

Like other papers, the *Times* begins each story with a lead paragraph, summarizing, for the hasty reader, the story. This is a sensible practice, but why not set the lead in boldface to make it easier to find—or to skip? Also the two or three banks of subheadlines under the main headlines serve no purpose, since the information they give is at once repeated in the lead just below them. Why not drop them? Some of the inches thus saved could be used to expand the lead into a more adequate summary than it now is.

But the great trouble with the *Times* front page lies much deeper than typography: It is made up according to a false theory of news. In this, as in most of its other flaws, the *Times* is no more culpable than many other American newspapers.

"The best news judgment of the newspaper's staff," writes an editor of the *Times*, in *The Newspaper, Its Making and Its Meaning*, "will be concentrated on the make-up of page one. On it will be displayed the news that the editors think most significant and important to its readers. . . . The flow

of news is never even . . . so a story may find itself decorating page one one day that would be inside on another." This blandly unconscious statement, written with true *Times* felicity (note the ingenious "one one" construction) could hardly be improved on. Granted that the important news should be on page one, the question arises: important

in relation to what? To the continuity of the news? Or to the other news of that particular day? The former would seem the more valid criterion; we don't evaluate each day separately, as though we were newborn that morning, but rather we fit its events into a remembered continuum of past days. A fetishist of the immediate might be fascinated by the special physiognomy of today, but more normal readers presumably don't change their opinion of, say, the opening of a dog show just because a paucity of news that particular morning has made it relatively important. Since "the flow of news is never even," this inflation of minor items must often take place if the one-day-only criterion of importance is used. Nevertheless, it is precisely this absurd criterion that the *Times*, like other American dailies, does use in making up its front page.

The result is confusing. Often it takes a scholarly investigation to discover what, if anything, of importance has happened—though one might think an elementary function of a front page would be to make this clear at a glance. The confusion comes from the fact that the editors of the *Times* use one criterion of importance (this-day-only) while the readers use another (many-days).

The *Times*'s front-page formula is simple: an average of a dozen slots into which are inserted the dozen most important stories of the day. Since the slots must always be filled, obviously some of the time they are filled with trivia. This inflexibility produces monotony as well as confusion. The really big stories do get some emphasis by larger headlines, it is true. But the bulk of any morning's front page is taken up with petty or



routine items all masquerading in the same costume (the one-column head) as front-page news. So the dramatic impact of the front page is dribbled away, and from an esthetic or a utilitarian standpoint, the formula is a failure.

The difficulty is a theoretical, indeed a philosophical, one. Although their paper is ironically named the *Times*, the editors are insensitive to time, which in a journalist is like a piano tuner's being slightly deaf. Their "this-day-only" criterion of importance is really a timeless concept, since it lifts each day out of the context of preceding days (that is, out of the "time-continuum," "the stream of history") and treats it as a separate entity, to be fitted into a rigid twelve-slot formula.

As Bergson shows in his little essay, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, which should be on every newspaper editor's desk, our scientifically-hypnotized culture finds it easier to think in space than in time terms. Whether Bergson is right or not in claiming that the nature of reality can be grasped better through time-concepts like change and duration than through space-concepts, I think it will be granted that the *Times*, like all other newspapers, has a peculiarly intimate relation to time, both in structure (its issues are related to each other by their dates) and in function ("news" is after all simply the plural of "new"). Thus, Bergson's difficult art of time-thinking would seem to be essential for a newspaperman. Unfortunately, few of them have mastered it; confirmed and quite unconscious space-thinkers, they almost universally adapt time (the flow of news) to space (the rigid layout).

What is needed is a theory of the front page which will be just the reverse of that of the *Times*—one that will allow the ever-changing stream of events to reshape the layout each day. This means above all flexibility: a layout that will "breathe," contracting and expanding as required to fit each day's different needs, one that will shout about big things and whisper about small things, one that will make clear the continuity of news.

This could be done in various ways. Here is one: The important news (over many days, not this day only) could be treated the way the whole front page is now treated: each story

played up by itself with emphatic headlines. This section could extend as far down the page as the quantity and quality of such news justifies. Some days, the whole page might be given to it; other days, there might be no really important news, in which case there would be no big headlines at all; on the average, such news would perhaps fill the top half of the front page. The rest, typographically distinct and separated by a white space or a line, is devoted to the lesser news stories. These are departmentalized; each story has its own headline, but the stories are grouped



according to subject instead of being, as is now the practice, strewn through the paper according to some esoteric whim of the layout man. There are two kinds of departments: the general, or permanent, ones, such as the news weeklies now have ("Labor," "Local Politics," "England," etc.); and *ad hoc* headings to mark special events that develop over many days ("Hiss Trial," "Tito vs. Stalin," etc.). These department headings could be typographically bold and simple—perhaps a reverse-plate block: they should be flags stuck up to guide the reader through the news columns. Their aim, and the aim of the departments themselves (which of course would extend from the front page all the way back through the paper), would be to make it easier for each reader to find the special topics he is interested in, instead of having, as is now the case, to read every headline in the paper and to rustle through every page to make sure he is not missing something.

This layout would *emphasize*, instead of (as the present one does) concealing, the continuity of the news.

In five issues of the *Times* chosen at random, I found that almost two out of every three front-page stories were continued from the preceding day, week, or month; such stories as the Tito-Stalin conflict, the steel and coal strikes, and the Air Force-Navy row had been appearing on the front page almost every day for weeks. But just as the editors of the *Times* isolate each day's issue from its time-context, so they treat each installment of one of these continuous stories as a completely separate item. It is as if they thought each issue, and each story, was read by a wholly different set of readers. So the same facts are repeated over and over; the same basic story is told anew each morning. There is, of course, some discontinuity in readers: Each issue has occasional new readers, attracted by some special feature, such as Lieutenant General Smith's excellent series on Russia; and regular readers sometimes miss or skip issues. (Some mornings one just doesn't feel up to wrestling with the *Times*.) But there should be a happy medium between giving no background at all and running each installment as a totally new story.

The present *Times* layout conceals, in short, the two main characteristics of the news: change and continuity. The rigid front page cannot expand or contract enough to fit the ever-changing flow of news. The isolation of each day's installment of a many-day story breaks the continuity that ties events together; the proposed treatment would reveal this continuity.

It is true that these proposals would be more difficult to carry out than the present formula. But why should the readers do *all* the work on the *Times*?

—DWIGHT MACDONALD

### Same-Day Service

BERLIN, DEC. 29: The Communist *Nacht Express* said: "Those who do not see that German reconstruction is possible only if we depend on our own strength and friendship with the Soviet Union must disappear from the political life of the German republic."

BERLIN, DEC. 29: The newspaper *Abend* reported that Erich Baumann, one of five Liberal Democratic members of the Brandenburg legislature, had disappeared.

# War of Wits in Washington

*How the bloodless battle between press and government is waged in the shadowy areas of 'intelligence' and 'counter-intelligence'*



Of all the bloodless battles currently being waged in Washington, the least publicized and most persistent is the guerrilla activity between the government and the press, stemming from their divergent notions about how much public business should actually be public.

Like most other wars, this one is being fought both in the open—the field of straight reporting—and in the shadowy, secret area of espionage and counter-intelligence. At the front, the moves and countermoves are standard, and perfectly understood by both sides. Newspapermen and bureaucrats operate directly against one another—through questions and answers, denials, insistence, double-talk, amplification, and confirmation.

The planning and maneuvering in the secret war are a good deal more elaborate. Operations on both sides are executed by echelons which shun the day-to-day combat of the press conference and the formal interview in favor of stratagem, wile, and innuendo.

In the Second World War, Lisbon was the meeting ground for secret and semi-secret agents of both sides. In the press-government war, Lisbon is often the dinner table. At it the official and the reporter sound each other out, in a friendly but guarded manner. The official fears being led into an indiscretion; the reporter fears that a story may be planted on him. Both have reason enough to be wary. Worthy of study is the food-and-drink technique employed by a celebrated radio and newspaper commentator who maintains a delightful old house in George-

town. Mint juleps in the garden in summer, and cozy dinners before open fires in winter, keep newsworthy personages streaming through his doors. Some competitors claim that the officials come because they are afraid not to; whether or not this is true, the cuisine, atmosphere, and assortment of guests are all enticements to the tired bureaucrat.

Days later, perhaps, the government man may realize that a careless remark of his has provided the tip for a violent attack on a colleague or a personal friend.

Less often, when one official conducts a spirited defense of a colleague who is under fire, the host may take up the cudgels in the latter's behalf. David E. Lilienthal, the retiring chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, has for years been the beneficiary of support acquired in this manner.

Approval by a columnist is, of course, not always pure gold for the recipient. When Kenneth C. Royall was Secretary of the Army, he once complained, only half jokingly, that a certain commentator had said nothing bad about him lately. "If he ever says anything good about me," Mr. Royall said, "I will pack my bags and go home to Raleigh." This particular columnist had just been characterized by the President with a reference to the initials of the Senate Office Building.

Another syndicated observer, a bachelor, has little trouble keeping his Georgetown house interestingly filled with Men of Distinction. His specialty is the small stag dinner, with excellent food, old port, and other niceties. This reporter keeps up with inside data given by Washington bigwigs to prominent foreign visitors simply by having the foreigners to dinner, and, over the brandy, adroitly guiding them onto the

topics they have discussed with government officials. The guests are naturally careful to avoid any breach of confidence, so this technique requires a good knowledge of Washington political background and the ability to make reasonable deductions.

Usually, intelligence and counter-intelligence operations are less devious. A favorite spot for press reconnaissances used to be the Metropolitan, one of

