

# Who Writes the "Letters to the Editor"?

by IRVING ROSENTHAL

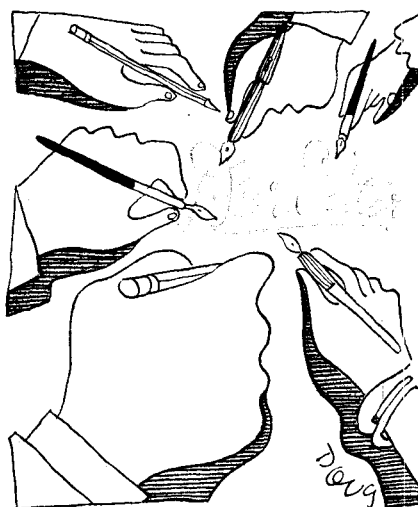
To some eight million Americans who write letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines each year, "access to the press," a phrase being bandied about increasingly in academic journalistic circles, is far from a reality. No one knows exactly what percentage of the letters mailed to newspapers around the country reaches publication, but the odds are decidedly against the letter writer. At *The New York Times* they're around twenty to one.

Most of those who write to newspapers, according to a recent survey in *Journalism Quarterly*, are elderly or middle-aged ("a refuge of the retired"), male by a ratio of three to one, predominantly well educated, well read, well informed, and ego-centered or "community motivated." These characteristics apply to most authors of the 40,000 letters that will have been mailed to the editor of *The New York Times* by the end of this year. But as one of the country's major and influential forums, the *Times* draws more letters from leaders and opinion-makers than does any other U.S. publication.

Letters to newspapers are no novelty. The *Times* ran its first one five days after its first issue appeared on September 18, 1851, and letters continued to appear frequently and in varying numbers, dropped as space-fillers wherever there was an opening on the editorial page. It wasn't until 1896, when Adolph Ochs took control of the paper, that letters began to work their way up to the important position they now occupy not only in the *Times* but in newspapers all over the country.

"A paper with principles and ideals has a bounden public duty to present every side of a question," Ochs told a Columbia journalism student writing a master's thesis about him in 1931. "Only in this way can a constructive, worthwhile public opinion be formed." He put himself on record that "no other newspaper stands as ready to open its columns to free and impartial hearings as does the *Times*. The only restriction is that these opponents have something worthwhile to say."

For years letters continued to be printed in random fashion, and when there weren't enough of them, the editorial page was filled out with news stories. It wasn't until April 23, 1931,



that they were brought together, as they are now run, in a designated space on the right side of the page under a standing head, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR. "I take the letters column of our newspaper seriously," said John B. Oakes, the editorial page editor, in a speech on "The Critical Responsibility of the Press" at the University of California a couple of years ago, "and I consider the letters to the editor as a vital counterpoint—or perhaps antidote is a better word—to the editorials themselves."

Winnowing the 6 per cent chosen for publication requires the full-time services of a six-person staff in the *Times* letters department. After going through a carefully worked out system of selection, the chosen letters are given a key position on the editorial page daily or the op. ed. page on Sundays. Seventy-five to 200 letters come in each day on the average. The volume has a high correlation with the intensity of the week's news, and a single event—such as President Kennedy's assassination, which drew the largest number of letters (and more than 2,000 poems) for any one event—can bring a thousand in a day.

The first step is to weed out the small quota every publication receives from kooks, obscenity-slingers, publicity seekers, and self-serving do-gooders. Like Congressmen, the *Times* is frequently the object of letter-writing campaigns; these are easily detectable and generally are given little heed. Not always detectable, however, is the authenticity of the letter writer, although care is always taken to check it. One hoax did manage to get through—a

letter criticizing General LeMay's candidacy last year from one Grant Hall, who described himself as a cadet at West Point. The letter appeared in the first edition, and was pulled after an alert copyreader pointed out that Grant Hall is a dormitory at the academy. The *Times* maintained its balance, though; it slugged in a letter captioned "Wallace's Choice" from a correspondent in Shreveport, Louisiana.

All letters received are analyzed statistically according to subject, pro or con, and the information is passed on to *Times* executives and editorial writers to let them know what their readers are thinking. The letters then go through the mill, with readings by Kalman Seigel, the letters editor; Mildred Liebowitz, his assistant editor; and Ralph Chodes, assistant to the letters editor, to make the final selection of the anywhere from four to six letters printed on what is referred to as "short days," seven to nine on "long days," and thirteen to fifteen on Sundays. Mondays and Saturdays, when only one signed column is run in the upper right-hand corner of the editorial page, are the long days; the other midweek days are short. The space is rigidly assigned, down to a fraction of an inch. Poems, for years a daily feature, are now printed only on long days and Sundays. To round out the selection, they are chosen, more for fit than any other reason, from a bank of verse purchased by Tom Lask, the poetry editor, and set in type.

After the final selection, the letters are edited, mainly for grammar and style—no major or substantive changes are made without consulting the writer (not infrequently precipitating a confrontation with "pride of authorship")—and every detail in the letters is checked for accuracy by a researcher. They are then sent down to the composing room and submitted to Oakes in page proof form late in the afternoon. He generally goes along with Seigel's judgment.

Oakes won't soon forget what he refers to as a "bitter experience" when he did assert his editorial prerogative on one occasion in May 1963 by cutting a paragraph out of a long letter from Bertrand Russell. A month before, Russell had written another letter protesting this country's Vietnam policy and accusing it of various atrocities. The

*Times*, no hawk itself, had published the letter and on the same day had printed an editorial criticizing Russell for "unthinking receptivity to the most transparent Communist propaganda" and characterizing one of his statements as "arrant nonsense."

In his reply to the editorial Russell attempted to offer evidence for his charges and included one long paragraph detailing chemical warfare allegations made by the "South Vietnam Liberation Red Cross." Oakes cut out this paragraph, both for reasons of space and a question about the reliability of the group. The deletion touched off a hot exchange of transatlantic cables and letters (with a threat by the British philosopher to "consult my solicitor") that will no doubt show up some day in a printed collection of Russell's letters. The *Times* has published two letters from him since then.

Seigel, who has headed the department since May of last year after thirty years on the *Times* staff as a prize-winning reporter and assistant metropolitan editor, makes it a point to read every letter that comes in. What he and his staff look for, he says, are letters that tie in with current news and are written by people who know their subject and present it clearly. They pass up vituperative or anonymous letters or those signed with a pseudonym, although on rare occasions they'll permit the use of initials if there's a good reason. They tend to shun "professional" letter writers, insist on exclusive publication, limit the length of a letter to a maximum of 400 to 450 words, and generally follow a policy of not printing more than two letters a year from a single contributor.

Seigel is particularly on the lookout for letters disagreeing with editorial positions taken by the *Times*. "The letters column," Oakes says, almost in the words of his uncle, Adolph Ochs, "is one place where the reading public can make itself heard. We consider it a major responsibility to give space to representative letters, especially those taking a point of view in conflict with our own."

On important controversial issues, during an election campaign or after some electrifying news break, when the letters sometimes run into the hundreds and even thousands, an effort is made to reflect the proportion of pro and con mail received and to give a cross section of views expressed. When the news and the volume of mail justify it, the *Times* devotes an entire letters section to a roundup on a single subject.

All letters that come in—they are never solicited or, of course, paid for—are filed away for at least six months; printed letters are kept for five years,

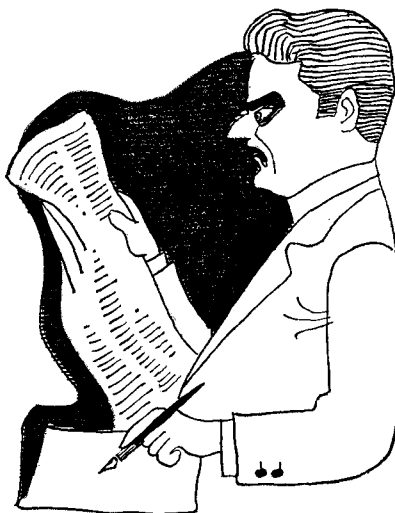
and the writers receive mounted copies. The contents of the letters, as the courts have ruled, belong to the writers, but the letters themselves become the property of the *Times*.

Without question, the single issue that has elicited the largest mail in the 118-year history of the paper is the Vietnam war. Since January 1, 1966, some 20,000 letters have been received, with a ratio of 7 to 1, against the war. The 6 per cent of the letters printed reflected the preponderance of reader opposition to the war, but in view of the paper's strong editorial stand against the war, the proportion has been somewhat weighted to give the "other side" more of a voice.

In the year from June 1, 1968, to May 31, 1969, according to an analysis of letters on issues that drew the greatest amount of mail, the opposition to the war, as reflected in letters, has become even more intense—10.68 per cent pro and 89.32 per cent con. Other major issues that drew large volumes of mail during the year were the student rebellion (42.19 per cent pro, 57.81 per cent con), black militancy (34.77 and 65.23), the anti-ballistic missile (17.98 and 82.02), poverty programs (80.28 and 19.72), "law and order" (23.82 and 76.18), draft reform (98.53 and 1.47), abortion (68.80 and 31.20), the space program (82.40 and 17.60), U.S. aid to Biafra (88.55 and 11.45), and school decentralization (38.57 and 61.43).

Although scientific validity is limited, the information gleaned from a study of the letters that pour in provide what Dr. James N. Rosenau, a Rutgers political scientist, refers to as "hard" data on the views of the "attentive public" that makes up the bulk of the *Times* readership. Rosenau, who has been conducting a continuing survey of the public's influence on our foreign policy, makes periodic visits to the *Times* to pore through letters and statistics.

Although the principal function of



the letters department, located a few doors down the hall from Oakes's office on the tenth floor of the *Times* Building, is to screen letters for publication, it also acts as a clearinghouse for mail that it passes on to other departments and individuals. Some letters are printed in the drama, sports, or other sections, and some have even served as springboards for news and feature stories. For example, a flurry of suggestions, with drawings, of shapes for the conference table at the Paris talks produced a sprightly feature for the news columns last year. Criticisms of news handling are routed to the news department for investigation and reply by George Palmer, a former foreign correspondent. Oakes dictates replies to three or four letters a day.

Seigel, like his predecessor, Louise Polk Huger, who ran the department for twenty-two years, acknowledges every letter. He uses a set of forms graded from simple, anonymous "thank you" cards to signed letters expressing regret over "space limitations." What the formula is he'd rather not disclose, but he obviously has a system to determine who deserves what.

By signing his name to most of the notes, he is fair game for every disappointed letter writer, and he gets a sizable flow of personal mail—besides telephone calls and even visits from delegations if they can get through—to complain, argue, threaten, invoke their friendship with the publisher, or drop the names of anyone else they may know. One University of Wisconsin instructor up for promotion tried to wheedle publication of his letter by pleading that it was important to him for his "publish or perish" vita. Another man attached a note to his letter saying that he'd love to see at least one of his letters published "before I die."

On highly charged issues Seigel is generally in the hot seat, with proponents of both sides often accusing him of unfairness. Part of his job is being diplomatic with Jews and Arabs, union teachers and community supporters, Biafrans and Nigerians. When he gets it from both sides, he knows he hasn't been all wrong.

One disgruntled writer, Robert Yoa-kum, described his travail in an article in the Winter 1966-67 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* captioned, "How I tried to write a letter to the *Times* and found myself cut to the quick." In 1964, it appears, the *Times* had endorsed a candidate for a Congressional seat from Connecticut. Yoa-kum took exception and wrote a letter that did not appear, but Oakes responded with a friendly note explain-

ing the reason for the endorsement. Two years later, Yoakum wrote again when the *Times* re-endorsed the same candidate in opposition to his own. This time he got a call from Miss Liebowitz to inform him that the letter would be run, but it had to be cut. He agreed it was too long and called back with a shorter version. She called later to say it was still too long and asked him to cut it to 300 words, explaining that the pre-election pressure of letters was enormous. He cut it to 340 words. The next day Miss Huger telephoned to ask him to boil it down further to a couple of paragraphs, "on instructions from Mr. Oakes." Yoakum felt his letter would have no meaning then, but he couldn't budge Miss Huger.

Oakes replied in the following issue of the *Review*:

I am really surprised that your esteemed publication saw fit to give as much space as it did to that silly piece by Mr. Yoakum. His letter was not published—as he well knows—because of its length.

In essence, Mr. Yoakum's complaint, similar to that of many hundreds of other Letters-to-the-Editor writers, is that the *Times* did not give him the space he thought was his due. We have to make a judgment on letters space and subject matter every single day, and we try to exercise that judgment fairly. Mr. Yoakum's special pleading should be viewed in light of the fact that his letter would have been run if he had not been so incredibly stubborn in refusing to cut it to what we considered a reasonable length. Our own editorial comment on the Congressional race to which he took exception occupied not more than three or four lines.

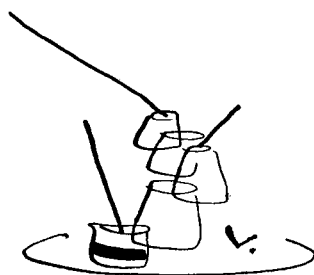
Prompted no doubt by a conditioned reflex that springs whenever he thinks of letters space, Oakes then added a third paragraph suggesting that "you can use this letter in whole or in part if you wish. I'd suggest the second paragraph above would be all that's necessary, but you can use the whole thing if you care to." The *Review*, not similarly afflicted, used the whole thing.

With the increasing number of letters coming to the *Times* each year and the fact that the death of the *Herald Tribune* has put added responsibility on the paper to give the "other side" a voice, the tightness of space for letters is a problem. Oakes is trying to do something about it. Last spring three-fourths of the op. ed. page on Sundays was turned over to letters (during the less turbulent days of the Twenties and Thirties letters were given a whole page on Sundays), and although the 40,000 letters expected

this year will be higher than the record 37,719 received in 1968, the percentage published will probably rise to over 7 per cent.

Oakes is sensitive about charges that preference is given to big names. Although the *Times* has published many letters from the mighty, and likes to add a couple of lines in italics explaining who they are, most letters come from "average readers." Some names that have graced the letters column in recent years include three men who later became President: Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon; also Hubert Humphrey, Dean Acheson, Robert Kennedy, John Kenneth Galbraith, Felix Frankfurter, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Luther King, Helen Keller, William Faulkner, and a number of others Seigel doesn't have to look up in the *Who's Who* at his elbow. He won't mention names, but some well-known people have also been turned down, either because of lack of merit in what they said or because they have used up their two-a-year quota. Arthur Hays Sulzberger, former publisher and father of the paper's present publisher, once complained semi-petulantly, "Can't I get a letter into my own paper?" He managed to get eight of them published, under a pseudonym.

The most prolific, and persistent, writer of letters to the *Times* is a Brooklyn Tech economics teacher, Martin Wolfson. He has been keeping up a steady stream of five or six letters a week, sometimes on three or four subjects a day, with frequent notes of criticism or suggestions to various editors thrown in, for over twenty years. He also writes regularly to a dozen other papers, and estimates that he has had 2,000 letters published since his first one in *New Republic* in 1927. "I think the country is on the way down and out," he said. "Even if much of what I write is not used, I think editors and others learn something from it. I have seen some of my ideas and phrases in *Times* editorials, in the mouths of statesmen and union heads. I want to contribute to the salvation of our country, and I feel it is my duty to save it for a better life." Since 1946, when the *Times* started its card file, he has had fifty-three letters published.



But he has a long way to go to catch up to Charles Hooper, who described himself as "the world's leading newspaper letter writer," a title that will probably never be challenged. Hooper, a native of New York, left the city in 1913 to go West. He settled in Coeur d'Arlene, Idaho, and living on a private income, spent the rest of his life until his death in 1941 as, he stated, "probably the only man who day in and day out, year in and year out, spends all his time in writing letters." His purpose, he added, was "to expose error, correct abuses, and reform evils, especially in the fields of religion and morality." He never quite realized his ambition to have a letter published in every newspaper in America (he also wrote to papers in England, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain—in their own languages), but he produced "an output beyond calculation—my feeble guess is hundreds of thousands." In 1936, before the two-a-year limit was imposed, he had sixteen letters published in the *Times*.

Two years earlier the *Times* had paid tribute to him as "Letter writer to the World," and said in an editorial:

Letters to the editor are a valued part of every newspaper. Their variety of topic is endless. They correct—and make—errors. They reflect a multitude of views and moods. They abound in curious information. They constitute a debating society that never adjourns, in which everything knowable is discovered. A sodality of voluntary correspondents, approving, wrathful, critical, philosophical, humorous, full of admonition, reproof, instruction, miscellaneous knowledge, has succeeded the long-winded Publicolas and Catos of our long-suffering ancestors.

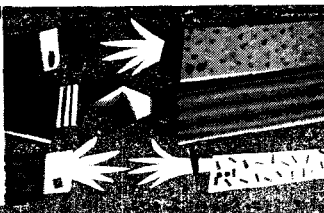
A recent critic has said that the daily column of little letters to the *London Times* is an evidence and index of a high civilization. Apart from persons with axes to grind, the mass of newspaper letter writers must be amateurs. So it is a happiness to discover in Idaho a professional letter writer who is also an amateur in the sense that he asks no pay.

That last sentence is not quite accurate. It is true that Hooper asked no pay, but he estimated that he had received something like \$70 for his letters through the years, from a handful of newspapers that used to pay a dollar or two for each letter published.

That may have been one way to make a buck—and little more—in the old days. But more than that, letter writing has obviously always provided a lot of people with all kinds of satisfaction, be it from an opportunity to engage in a form of individual public service, to enlarge one's ego—or simply to get something off one's chest.



# Public Relations



## Performance Comes First

**F**ar too many public relations practitioners forget that publicity for its own sake has many inherent dangers. Under pressure, or hoping that a story will get press notices, they often act without considering the aftereffects. Other press officers seem to be either oblivious or not concerned that certain types of publicity can boomerang. As long as they can add up the column inches of print space for their monthly reports to the boss or the client, they are happy.

How unwise this is can be seen by the many published stories of what is being done by corporations in the inner cities when the announcement of intentions often reads better than what is actually being done. Sooner or later it will be discovered how little the corporation is doing, and even the most thoughtless press relations man should realize that it deteriorates the company's credibility with the media and with those who expect to benefit from a corporate program of public service.

Both management and public relations directors in the better-run corporations are exceptionally cautious in releasing information on programs to provide employment for minority groups or similar projects unless there is solid performance first. Many philanthropic actions are allowed to speak for themselves. While information about these programs is not kept secret, there is no pressure to gain publicity for doing what is expected of an intelligently directed corporation.

An excellent example of the corporation that prefers performance over talking in public service is the International Business Machines Corporation. At its last annual meeting, in Santa Monica, California, on April 28, a stockholder asked about IBM's progress in hiring hard-core unemployed. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., IBM's chairman, said: "We have a plant right in the middle of Bedford Stuyvesant in the toughest part of Brooklyn. It is going so well that we are keeping our fingers crossed, and we don't like to talk about it. After we have been there two or three years we are going to have a major presentation about it at an annual meeting."

When it comes to product publicity, IBM is by no means bashful, nor

should it be. But the corporation's performance in the arts, aid to education—in the entire field of corporate philanthropy—participation by its executives in public affairs speaks for itself. IBM actions obviously are known by those most intimately involved, and blowing trumpets would be unseemly—not only unseemly but unwise because such publicity might give the impression that the corporation is doing its public service job for reasons of notoriety rather than conviction.

IBM's philosophy is expressed by Mr. Watson: "All of us must try to cooperate to make our society better. In this task businessmen have a special opportunity to set a standard for responsible action in the national interest. Not only *can* we do this, I am convinced we *must*, if we are to meet our obligations in the world."

It is worth taking a look at a few of IBM's efforts to meet these obligations. In 1939, the company began collecting works of art from the seventy-nine countries in which it then conducted business. The collection, emphasizing American art, now includes oil paintings, watercolors, and original prints. It also includes a small collection of sculpture, mostly pre-Colombian work from Mexico.

The collection is put on tour in nine art exhibitions that are made available to cultural, educational, and civic organizations throughout the country. Last year, they were shown on loan for three-week periods, without charge, in approximately 125 communities. IBM pays all transportation charges, makes all shipping arrangements, provides a catalogue for general distribution. Last year, approximately 500,000 people saw IBM's touring exhibitions. In addition, there is the IBM Gallery on East 57th Street in New York City, which was opened in 1955. Eight exhibitions are held there annually; last year they attracted some 80,000 visitors.

IBM's aid-to-education program is based on the rationale that while any corporation's efforts are naturally limited when measured against the total need, they can be significant if properly structured. Last year, grants-in-aid to education ran to more than \$6-million. They included direct grants to institutions throughout the country

for scholarships, fellowships, education supplements, and special programs such as the post-doctoral fellowship awards of \$10,000 each. Other programs include aid to neighboring colleges, Negro education, and liberal arts colleges generally. IBM's matching grants program last year awarded \$646,000 to 930 schools that matched contributions by 7,300 IBM employees.

The company's corporate philanthropic programs run about \$10-million a year and include contributions to social welfare, medicine and health, and civic and cultural aid. Substantial contributions are also made to the



—H.M.

United Negro College Fund, the Urban League, and the Urban Coalition.

IBM encourages its employees to be active in public affairs. Leaves of absence are given to fill full-time positions in federal, state, and local government agencies, and in charitable organizations. Employees also receive continuous service credit for the full period of the leave. These are normally limited to two years, but may be extended to four, with most fringe benefits continuing in force. Employees are also granted leave to serve in the Peace Corps or as VISTA volunteers.

At IBM, performance comes ahead of publicity. This is a good example to follow for those public relations men who value the reputation of their companies.

—L. L. L. GOLDEN.

## WIT TWISTER #130

Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

*The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.*

He's never felt

\_\_\_\_\_ blow,

This leader who

\_\_\_\_\_ himself;

With one \_\_\_\_\_,  
the man must go

Into \_\_\_\_\_, back  
on the shelf!

—Contributed by  
HERMANN F. VIEWEG.

(Answer on page 125)