

CHAPTER XXI THE BUYING PUBLIC

1 THE idea that men have to go forth and study the world in order to govern it, has played a very minor part in political thought. It could figure very little, because the machinery for reporting the world in any way useful to government made comparatively little progress from the time of Aristotle to the age in which the premises of democracy were established. Therefore, if you had asked a pioneer democrat where the information was to come from on which the will of the people was to be based, he would have been puzzled by the question. It would have seemed a little as if you had asked him where his life or his soul came from. The will of the people, he almost always assumed, exists at all times; the duty of political science was to work out the inventions of the ballot and representative government. If they were properly worked out and applied under the right conditions, such as exist in the self-contained village or the self-contained shop, the mechanism would! somehow overcome the brevity of attention which Aristotle had observed, and the narrowness of its range, which the theory of a self-contained community tacitly acknowledged. We have seen how even at this late date the guild socialists are transfixed by the notion that if only you can build on the right unit of voting and representation, an intricate cooperative commonwealth is possible. Convinced that the wisdom was there if only you could find it, democrats have treated the problem of making public opinions as a problem in civil liberties.¹ "Who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"² Supposing that no one has ever seen it put to the worse, are we to believe then that the truth is generated by the encounter, like fire by rubbing two sticks? Behind this classic doctrine of liberty, which American democrats embodied in their Bill of Rights, there are, in fact, several different theories of the origin of truth. One is a faith that in the competition of opinions, the truest will win because there is a peculiar strength in the truth. This is probably sound if you allow the competition to extend over a sufficiently long time. When men argue in this vein they have in mind the verdict of history, and they think specifically of heretics persecuted when they lived, canonized after they were dead. Milton's question rests also on a belief that the capacity to recognize truth is inherent in all men, and that truth freely put in circulation will win acceptance. It derives no less from the experience, which has shown that men are not likely to discover truth if they cannot speak it, except under the eye of an uncomprehending policeman. No one can possibly overestimate the practical value of these civil liberties, nor the importance of maintaining them. When they are in jeopardy, the human spirit is in jeopardy, and should there come a time when they have to be curtailed, as during a war, the suppression of thought is a risk to civilization which might prevent its recovery from the effects of war, if the hysterics, who exploit the necessity, were numerous enough to carry over into peace the taboos of war. Fortunately, the mass of men is too tolerant long to enjoy the professional inquisitors, as gradually, under the criticism of men not willing to be terrorized, they are revealed as mean-spirited creatures who nine-tenths of the time do not know what they are talking about.³ But in spite of its fundamental importance, civil liberty in this sense does not guarantee public opinion in the modern world. For it always assumes, either that truth is spontaneous, or that the means of securing truth exist when there is no external interference. But when you are dealing with an invisible environment, the assumption is false. The truth about distant or complex matters is not self-evident, and the machinery for assembling information is technical and expensive. Yet political science, and especially democratic political science, has never freed itself from the original assumption of Aristotle's politics sufficiently to restate the premises, so that political thought might come to grips with the problem of how to make the invisible world visible to the citizens of a modern state. So deep is the tradition, that until quite recently, for example, political science was taught in our colleges as if newspapers did not exist. I am not referring to schools of journalism, for they are trade schools, intended to prepare men and women for a career. I am referring to political science as expounded to future business men, lawyers, public officials, and citizens at large. In that science a study of the press and the sources of popular information

found no place. It is a curious fact. To anyone not immersed in the routine interests of political science, it is almost inexplicable that no American student of government, no American sociologist, has ever written a book on news-gather! ing. There are occasional references to the press, and statements that it is not, or that it ought to be, "free" and "truthful." But I can find almost nothing else. And this disdain of the professionals finds its counterpart in public opinions. Universally it is admitted that the press is the chief means of contact with the unseen environment. And practically everywhere it is assumed that the press should do spontaneously for us what primitive democracy imagined each of us could do spontaneously for himself, that every day and twice a day it will present us with a true picture of all the outer world in which we are interested.

2 This insistent and ancient belief that truth is not earned, but inspired, revealed, supplied gratis, comes out very plainly in our economic prejudices as readers of newspapers. We expect the newspaper to serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be. For this difficult and often dangerous service, which we recognize as fundamental, we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out by the mint. We have accustomed ourselves now to paying two and even three cents on weekdays, and on Sundays, for an illustrated encyclopedia and vaudeville entertainment attached, we have screwed ourselves up to paying a nickel or even a dime. Nobody thinks for a moment that he ought to pay for his newspaper. He expects the fountains of truth to bubble, but he enters into no contract, legal or moral, involving any risk, cost or trouble to himself. He will pay a nominal price when it suits him, will stop paying whenever it suits him, will turn to another paper when! that suits him. Somebody has said quite aptly that the newspaper editor has to be re-elected every day. This casual and one-sided relationship between readers and press is an anomaly of our civilization. There is nothing else quite like it, and it is, therefore, hard to compare the press with any other business or institution. It is not a business pure and simple, partly because the product is regularly sold below cost, but chiefly because the community applies one ethical measure to the press and another to trade or manufacture. Ethically a newspaper is judged as if it were a church or a school. But if you try to compare it with these you fail; the taxpayer pays for the public school, the private school is endowed or supported by tuition fees, there are subsidies and collections for the church. You cannot compare journalism with law, medicine or engineering, for in every one of these professions the consumer pays for the service. A free press, if you judge by the attitude! of the readers, means newspapers that are virtually given away. Yet t he critics of the press are merely voicing the moral standards of the community, when they expect such an institution to live on the same plane as that on which the school, the church, and the disinterested professions are supposed to live. This illustrates again the concave character of democracy. No need for artificially acquired information is felt to exist. The information must come naturally, that is to say gratis, if not out of the heart of the citizen, then gratis out of the newspaper. The citizen will pay for his telephone, his railroad rides, his motor car, his entertainment. But he does not pay openly for his news. He will, however, pay handsomely for the privilege of having someone read about him. He will pay directly to advertise. And he will pay indirectly for the advertisements of other people, because that payment, being concealed in the price of commodities is part of an invisible environment that he does not effectively comprehend. It would be regarded as an! outrage to have to pay openly the price of a good ice cream soda for all the news of the world, though the public will pay that and more when it buys the advertised commodities. The public pays for the press, but only when the payment is concealed.

3 Circulation is, therefore, the means to an end. It becomes an asset only when it can be sold to the advertiser, who buys it with revenues secured through indirect taxation of the reader.⁴ The kind of circulation which the advertiser will buy depends on what he has to sell. It may be "quality" or "mass." On the whole there is no sharp dividing line, for in respect to most commodities sold by advertising, the customers are neither the small class of the very rich nor the very poor. They are the people with enough surplus over bare necessities

to exercise discretion in their buying. The paper, therefore, which goes into the homes of the fairly prosperous is by and large the one which offers most to the advertiser. It may also go into the homes of the poor, but except for certain lines of goods, an analytical advertising agent does not rate that circulation as a great asset, unless, as seems to be the case with certain! of Mr. Hearst's properties, the circulation is enormous. A newspaper which angers those whom it pays best to reach through advertisements is a bad medium for an advertiser. And since no one ever claimed that advertising was philanthropy, advertisers buy space in those publications which are fairly certain to reach their future customers. One need not spend much time worrying about the unreported scandals of the dry-goods merchants. They represent nothing really significant, and incidents of this sort are less common than many critics of the press suppose. The real problem is that the readers of a newspaper, unaccustomed to paying the cost of newsgathering, can be capitalized only by turning them into circulation that can be sold to manufacturers and merchants. And those whom it is most important to capitalize are those who have the most money to spend. Such a press is bound to respect the point of view of the buying public. It is for this buying public that newspapers are ! edited and published, for without that support the newspaper cannot li ve. A newspaper can flout an advertiser, it can attack a powerful banking or traction interest, but if it alienates the buying public, it loses the one indispensable asset of its existence. Mr. John L. Given,⁵ formerly of the New York Evening Sun, stated in 1914 that out of over two thousand three hundred dailies published in the United States, there were about one hundred and seventy-five printed in cities having over one hundred thousand inhabitants. These constitute the press for "general news." They are the key papers which collect the news dealing with great events, and even the people who do not read any one of the one hundred and seventy-five depend ultimately upon them for news of the outer world. For they make up the great press associations which cooperate in the exchange of news. Each is, therefore, not only the informant of its own readers, but it is the local reporter for the newspapers of other cities. The ru! ral press and the special press by and large, take their general news from these key papers. And among these there are some very much richer than others, so that for international news, in the main, the whole press of the nation may depend upon the reports of the press associations and the special services of a few metropolitan dailies. Roughly speaking, the economic support for general news gathering is in the price paid for advertised goods by the fairly prosperous sections of cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants. These buying publics are composed of the members of families, who depend for their income chiefly on trade, merchandising, the direction of manufacture, and finance. They are the clientele among whom it pays best to advertise in a newspaper. They wield a concentrated purchasing power, which may be less in volume than the aggregate for farmers and workingmen; but within the radius covered by a daily newspaper they are the quickest assets.

4 They have, moreover, a double claim to attention. They are not only the best customers for the advertiser, they include the advertisers. Therefore the impression made by the newspapers on this public matters deeply. Fortunately this public is not unanimous. It may be "capitalistic" but it contains divergent views on what capitalism is, and how it is to be run. Except in times of danger, this respectable opinion is sufficiently divided to permit of considerable differences of policy. These would be greater still if it were not that publishers are themselves usually members of these urban communities, and honestly see the world through the lenses of their associates and friends. They are engaged in a speculative business,⁶ which depends on the general condition of trade, and more peculiarly on a circulation based not on a marriage contract with their readers, but on free love. The object of every publisher is, ther! efore, to turn his circulation from a medley of catch-as-catch-can news stand buyers into a devoted band of constant readers. A newspaper that can really depend upon the loyalty of its readers is as independent as a newspaper can be, given the economics of modern journalism.⁷ A body of readers who stay by it through thick and thin is a power greater than any which the individual advertiser can wield, and a power great enough to break up a combination of advertisers. Therefore, whenever you find a newspaper betraying its readers for the sake of an advertiser, you can be

fairly certain either that the publisher sincerely shares the views of the advertiser, or that he thinks, perhaps mistakenly, he cannot count upon the support of his readers if he openly resists dictation. It is a question of whether the readers, who do not pay in cash for their news, will pay for it in loyalty.

1 The best study is Prof. Zechariah Chafee's, Freedom of Speech.[Back to 1](#)

2 Milton, Areopagitica, cited at the opening of Mr. Chafee's book. For comment on this classic doctrine of liberty as stated by Milton, John Stuart Mill, and Mr. Bertrand Russel, see my Liberty and the News, Ch. II.[Back to 2](#)

3 Cf. for example, the publications of the Lusk Committee in New York, and the public statements and prophecies of Mr. Mitchell Palmer, who was Attorney-General of the United States during the period of President Wilson's illness.[Back to 3](#)

4 "An established newspaper is entitled to fix its advertising rates so that its net receipts from circulation may be left on the credit side of the profit and loss account. To arrive at net receipts, I would deduct from the gross the cost of promotion, distribution, and other expenses incidental to circulation." From an address by Mr. Adolph S. Ochs, publisher of The New York Times, at the Philadelphia Convention of the Associated Advertising Clubs of The World, June 26, 1916. Cited, Elmer Davis, History of The New York Times, 1851-1921, pp. 397-398.[Back to 4](#)

5 Making a Newspaper, p. 13. This is the best technical book I know, and should be read by everyone who undertakes to discuss the press. Mr. G. B. Diblee, who wrote the volume on The Newspaper in the Home University Library says (p. 253), that "on the press for pressmen I only know of one good book, Mr. Given's."[Back to 5](#)

6 Sometimes so speculative that in order to secure credit the publisher has to go into bondage to his creditors. Information on this point is very difficult to obtain, and for that reason its general importance is often much exaggerated.[Back to 6](#)

7 "It is an axiom in newspaper publishing--'more readers, more independence of the influence of advertisers; fewer readers and more dependence on the advertiser' It may seem like a contradiction (yet it is the truth) to assert: the greater the number of advertisers, the less influence they are individually able to exercise with the publisher." Adolph S. Ochs, of. supra.[Back to 7](#)

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CHAPTER XXII THE CONSTANT READER

THE loyalty of the buying public to a newspaper is not stipulated in any bond. In almost every other enterprise the person who expects to be served enters into an agreement that controls his passing whims. At least he pays for what he obtains. In the publishing of periodicals the nearest approach to an agreement for a definite time is the paid subscription, and that is not, I believe, a great factor in the economy of a metropolitan daily. The reader is the sole and the daily judge of his loyalty, and there can be no suit against him for breach of promise or nonsupport. Though everything turns on the constancy of the reader, there does not exist even a vague tradition to call that fact to the reader's mind. His constancy depends on how he happens to feel, or on his habits. And these depend not simply on the quality of the news, but more often on a number of obscure elements that in our casual relation to the press, we hardly take the trouble to make conscious. The most important of these is that each of us tends to judge a newspaper, if we judge it at all, by its treatment of that part of the news in which we feel ourselves involved. The newspaper deals with a multitude of events beyond our experience. But it deals also with some events within our experience. And by its handling of those events we most frequently decide to like it or dislike it, to trust it or refuse to have the sheet in the house. If the newspaper gives a satisfactory account of that which we think we know, our business, our church, our party, it is fairly certain to be immune from violent criticism by us. What better criterion does the man at the breakfast table possess than that the newspaper version checks up with his own opinion? Therefore, most men tend to hold the newspaper most strictly accountable in their capacity, not of general readers, but of special pleaders on matters of their own experience. Rarely is anyone but the interested party able to test the accuracy of a report. If the news is local, and if there is competition, the editor knows that he will probably hear from the man who thinks his portrait unfair and inaccurate. But if the news is not local, the corrective diminishes as the subject matter recedes into the distance. The only people who can correct what they think is a false picture of themselves printed in another city are members of groups well enough organized to hire publicity men. Now it is interesting to note that the general reader of a newspaper has no standing in law if he thinks he is being misled by the news. It is only the aggrieved party who can sue for slander or libel, and he has to prove a material injury to himself. The law embodies the tradition that general news is not a matter of common concern, ¹ except as to matter which is vaguely described as immoral or seditious. But the body of the news, though unchecked as a whole by the disinterested reader, consists of items about which some readers have very definite preconceptions. Those items are the data of his judgment, and news which men read without this personal criterion, they judge by some other standard than their standard of accuracy. They are dealing here with a subject matter which to them is indistinguishable from fiction. The canon of truth cannot be applied. They do not boggle over such news if it conforms to their stereotypes, and they continue to read it if it interests them. ²

There are newspapers, even in large cities, edited on the principle that the readers wish to read about themselves. The theory is that if enough people see their own names in the paper often enough, can read about their weddings, funerals, sociables, foreign travels, lodge meetings, school prizes, their fiftieth birthdays, their sixtieth birthdays, their silver weddings, their outings and clambakes, they will make a reliable circulation. The classic

formula for such a newspaper is contained in a letter written by Horace Greeley on April 3, 1860, to "Friend Fletcher" who was about to start a country newspaper: ³ "I. Begin with a clear conception that the subject of deepest interest to an average human being is himself; next to that he is most concerned about his neighbors. Asia and the Tongo Islands stand a long way after these in his regard.... Do not let a new church be organized, or new members be added to one already existing, a farm be sold, a new house raised, a mill set in motion, a store opened, nor anything of interest to a dozen families occur, without having the fact duly, though briefly, chronicled in your columns. If a farmer cuts a big tree, or grows a mammoth beet, or harvests a bounteous yield of wheat or corn, set forth the fact as concisely and unexceptionally as possible." The function of becoming, as Mr. Lee puts it, "the printed diary of the home town" is one that every newspaper no matter where it is published must in some measure fill. And where, as in a great city like New York, the general newspapers circulated broadcast cannot fill it, there exist small newspapers published on Greeley's pattern for sections of the city. In the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx there are perhaps twice as many local dailies as there are general newspapers.⁴ And they are supplemented by all kinds of special publications for trades, religions, nationalities. These diaries are published for people who find their own lives interesting. But there are also great numbers of people who find their own lives dull, and wish, like Hedda Gabler, to live a more thrilling life. For them there are published a few whole newspapers, and sections of others, devoted to the personal lives of a set of imaginary people, with whose gorgeous vices the reader can in his fancy safely identify himself. Mr. Hearst's unflagging interest in high society caters to people who never hope to be in high society, and yet manage to derive some enhancement out of the vague feeling that they are part of the life that they read about. In the great cities "the printed diary of the home town" tends to be the printed diary of a smart set. And it is, as we have already noted, the dailies of the cities which carry the burden of bringing distant news to the private citizen. But it is not primarily their political and social news which holds the circulation. The interest in that is intermittent, and few publishers can bank on it alone. The newspaper, therefore, takes to itself a variety of other features, all primarily designed to hold a body of readers together, who so far as big news is concerned, are not able to be critical. Moreover, in big news the competition in any one community is not very serious. The press services standardize the main events; it is only once in a while that a great scoop is made; there is apparently not a very great reading public for such massive reporting as has made the New York Times of recent years indispensable to men of all shades of opinion. In order to differentiate themselves and collect a steady public most papers have to go outside the field of general news. They go to the dazzling levels of society, to scandal and crime, to sports, pictures, actresses, advice to the lovelorn, highschool notes, women's pages, buyer's pages, cooking receipts, chess, whist, gardening, comic strips, thundering partisanship, not because publishers and editors are interested in everything but news, but because they have to find some way of holding on to that alleged host of passionately interested readers, who are supposed by some critics of the press to be clamoring for the truth and nothing but the truth. The newspaper editor occupies a strange position. His enterprises depend upon indirect taxation levied by his advertisers upon his readers; the patronage of the advertisers depends upon the editor's skill in holding together an effective group of customers. These customers deliver judgment according to their private experiences and their stereotyped expectations, for in the nature of things they have no independent knowledge of most news they read. If the judgment is not unfavorable, the editor is at least within range of a circulation that pays.

But in order to secure that circulation, he cannot rely wholly upon news of the greater environment. He handles that as interestingly as he can, of course, but the quality of the general news, especially about public affairs, is not in itself sufficient to! cause very large numbers of readers to discriminate among the dailies. This somewhat left-handed relationship between newspapers and public information is reflected in the salaries of newspaper men. Reporting, which theoretically constitutes the foundation of the whole institution, is the most poorly paid branch of newspaper work, and is the least regarded. By and large, able men go into it only by necessity or for experience, and with the definite intention of being graduated as soon as possible. For straight reporting is not a career that offers many great rewards. The rewards in journalism go to specialty work, to signed correspondence which has editorial quality, to executives, and to men with a knack and flavor of their own. This is due, no doubt, to what economists call the rent of ability. But this economic principle operates with such peculiar violence in journalism that newsgathering does not attract to itself anything like the number of trained and able men which! its public importance would seem to demand. The fact that the able men take up "straight reporting" with the intention of leaving it as soon as possible is, I think, the chief reason why it has never developed in sufficient measure those corporate traditions that give to a profession prestige and a jealous self-respect. For it is these corporate traditions which engender the pride of craft, which tend to raise the standards of admission, punish breaches of the code, and give men the strength to insist upon their status in society.

Yet all this does not go to the root of the matter. For while the economics of journalism is such as to depress the value of news reporting, it is, I am certain, a false determinism which would abandon the analysis at that point. The intrinsic power of the reporter appears to be so great, the number of very able men who pass through reporting is so large, that there must be some deeper reason why, comparatively speaking, so little serious effort has gone into raising the vocation to the level say of medicine, engineering, or law. Mr. Upton Sinclair speaks for a large body of opinion in America, ⁵ when he claims that in what he calls "The Brass Check" he has found this deeper reason: "The Brass Check is found in your pay envelope every week--you who write and print and distribute our newspapers and magazines. The Brass check is the price of your shame--you who take the fair body of truth and sell it in the market place, who betray the virgin hopes of mankind into the loathsome brothel of Big Business." ⁶ It would seem from this that there exists a body of known truth, and a set of well founded hopes, which are prostituted by a more or less conscious conspiracy of the rich owners of newspapers. If this theory is correct, then a certain conclusion follows. It is that the fair body of truth would be inviolate in a press not in any way connected with Big Business. For if it should happen that a press not controlled by, and not even friendly with, Big Business somehow failed to contain the fair body of truth, something would be wrong with Mr. Sinclair's theory. There is such a press. Strange to say, in proposing a remedy Mr. Sinclair does not advise his readers to subscribe to the nearest radical newspaper. Why not? If the troubles of American journalism go back to the Brass Check of Big Business why does not the remedy lie in reading the ! papers that do not in any remote way accept the Brass Check? Why subsidize a "National News" with a large board of directors "of all creeds or causes" to print a paper full of facts "regardless of what is injured, the Steel Trust or the I. W. W., the Standard Oil Company or the Socialist Party?" If the trouble is Big Business, that is, the Steel Trust, Standard Oil and the like, why not urge everybody to read I. W. W. or Socialist papers? Mr. Sinclair does not say why not.

But the reason is simple. He cannot convince anybody, not even himself, that the anti-capitalist press is the remedy for the capitalist press. He ignores the anti-capitalist press both in his theory of the Brass Check and in his constructive proposal. But if you are diagnosing American journalism you cannot ignore it. If what you care about is "the fair body of truth," you do not commit the gross logical error of assembling all the instances of unfairness and lying you can find in one set of newspapers, ignore all the instances you could easily find in another set, and then ! assign as the cause of the lying, the one supposedly common characteristic of the press to which you have confined your investigation. If you are going to blame "capitalism" for the faults of the press, you are compelled to prove that those faults do not exist except where capitalism controls. That Mr. Sinclair cannot do this, is shown by the fact that while in his diagnosis he traces everything to capitalism, in his prescription he ignores both capitalism and anti-capitalism. One would have supposed that the inability to take any non-capitalist paper as a model of truthfulness and competence would have caused Mr. Sinclair, and those who agree with him, to look somewhat more critically at their assumptions. They would have asked themselves, for example, where is the fair body of truth, that Big Business prostitutes, but anti-Big Business does not seem to obtain? For that question leads, I believe, to the heart of the matter, to the question of what is news.

1 The reader will not mistake this as a plea for censorship. It might, however, be a good thing if there were competent tribunals, preferably not official ones, where charges of untruthfulness and unfairness in the general news could be sifted. Cf. Liberty and the News, pp. 73-76. [Back to 1](#)

2 Note, for example, how absent is indignation in Mr. Upton Sinclair against socialist papers, even those which are as malignantly unfair to employers as certain of the papers cited by him are unfair to radicals. [Back to 2](#)

33 Cited, James Melvin Lee, The History of American Journalism, p. 405.] [Back to 3](#)

4 Cf. John L. Given, Making a Newspaper, p. 13.] [Back to 4](#)

5 Mr. Hilaire Belloc makes practically the same analysis for English newspapers. Cf. The Free Press. [Back to 5](#)

6 Upton Sinclair, The Brass Check. A Study of American Journalism, p. 116. [Back to 6](#)

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Chapter XXIII THE NATURE OF NEWS

ALL the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings in the world. There are not a great many reporters. And none of them has the power to be in more than one place at a time. Reporters are not clairvoyant, they do not gaze into a crystal ball and see the world at will, they are not assisted by thought-transference. Yet the range of subjects these comparatively few men manage to cover would be a miracle indeed, if it were not a standardized routine. Newspapers do not try to keep an eye on all mankind. ¹ They have watchers stationed at certain places, like Police Headquarters, the Coroner's Office, the County Clerk's Office, City Hall, the White House, the Senate, House of Representatives, and so forth. They watch, or rather in the majority of cases they belong to associations which employ men who watch "a comparatively small number of places where it is made known when the life of anyone... departs from ordinary paths, or when events worth telling about occur. For example, John Smith, let it be supposed, becomes a broker. For ten years he pursues the even tenor of his way and except for his customers and his friends no one gives him a thought. To the newspapers he is as if he were not. But in the eleventh year he suffers heavy losses and, at last, his resources all gone, summons his lawyer and arranges for the making of an assignment. The lawyer posts off to the County Clerk's office, and a clerk there makes the necessary entries in the official docket. Here in step the newspapers. While the clerk is writing Smith's business obituary a reporter glances over his shoulder and a few minutes later the reporters know Smith's troubles and are as well informed concerning his business status as they would be had they kept a reporter at his door every day for over ten years. ² When Mr. Give! n says that the newspapers know "Smith's troubles" and "his business status," he does not mean that they know them as Smith knows them, or as Mr. Arnold Bennett would know them if he had made Smith the hero of a three volume novel. The newspapers know only "in a few minutes" the bald facts which are recorded in the County Clerk's Office. That overt act "uncovers" the news about Smith. Whether the news will be followed up or not is another matter. The point is that before a series of events become news they have usually to make themselves noticeable in some more or less overt act. Generally too, in a crudely overt act. Smith's friends may have known for years that he was taking risks, rumors may even have reached the financial editor if Smith's friends were talkative. But apart from the fact that none of this could be published because it would be libel, there is in these rumors nothing definite on which to peg a story. Something definite must occur that has unmistakable form. It may be the act of going into bankruptcy, it may be a fire, a collision, an assault, a riot, an arrest, a denunciation, the introduction of a bill, a speech, a vote, a meeting, the expressed opinion of a well known citizen, an editorial in a newspaper, a sale, a wage-schedule, a price change, the proposal to build a bridge.... There must be a manifestation. The course of events must assume a certain definable shape, and until it is in a phase where some aspect is an accomplished fact, news does not separate itself from the ocean of possible truth.

Naturally there is room for wide difference of opinion as to when events have a shape that can be reported. A good journalist will find news oftener than a hack. If he sees a building with a dangerous list, he does not have to wait until it falls into the street in order to recognize news. It was a great reporter who guessed the name of the next Indian Viceroy when he heard that Lord So-and-So was inquiring about climates. There are lucky shots but

the number of men who can make them is small. Usually it is the stereotyped shape assumed by an event at an obvious place that uncovers the run of the news. The most obvious place is where people's affairs touch public authority. *De minimis non curat lex*. It is at these places that marriages, births, deaths, contracts, failures, arrivals, departures, lawsuits, disorders, epidemics and calamities are made known. In the first instance, therefore, the news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself. The news does not tell you how the seed is germinating in the ground, but it may tell you when the first sprout breaks through the surface. It may even tell you what somebody says is happening to the seed under ground. It may tell you that the sprout did not come up at the time it was expected. The more points, then, at which any happening can be fixed, objectified, measured, named, the more points there are at which news can occur. So, if some day a legislature, having exhausted all other ways of improving mankind, should forbid the scoring of baseball games, it might still be possible to play some sort of game in which the umpire decided according to his own sense of fair play how long the game should last, when each team should go to bat, and who should be regarded as the winner. If that game were reported in the newspapers it would consist of a record of the umpire's decisions, plus the reporter's impression of the hoots and cheers of the crowd, plus at best a vague account of how certain men, who had no specified position on the field moved around for a few hours on an unmarked piece of sod. The more you try to imagine the logic of so absurd a predicament, the more clear it becomes that for the purposes of newsgathering, (let alone the purposes of playing the game) it is impossible to do much without an apparatus and rules for naming, scoring, recording. Because that machinery is far from perfect, the umpire's life is often a distracted one. Many crucial plays he has to judge by eye. The last vestige of dispute could be taken out of the game, as it has been taken out of chess when people obey the rules, if somebody thought it worth his while to photograph every play. It was the moving pictures which finally settled a real doubt in many reporters' minds, owing to the slowness of the human eye, as to just what blow of Dempsey's knocked out Carpentier. Wherever there is a good machinery of record, the modern news service works with great precision. There is one on the stock exchange, and the news of price movements is flashed over tickers with dependable accuracy. There is a machinery for election returns, and when the counting and tabulating are well done, the result of a national election is usually known on the night of the election. In civilized communities deaths, births, marriages and divorces are recorded, and are known accurately except where there is concealment or neglect. The machinery exists for some, and only some, aspects of industry and government, in varying degrees of precision for securities, money and staples, bank clearances, realty transactions, wage scales. It exists for imports and exports because they pass through a custom house and can be directly recorded. It exists in nothing like the same degree for internal trade, and especially for trade over the counter. It will be found, I think, that there is a very direct relation between the certainty of news and the system of record. If you call to mind the topics which form the principal indictment by reformers against the press, you find they are subjects in which the newspaper occupies the position of the umpire in the unscored baseball game. All news about states of mind is of this character: so are all descriptions of personalities, of sincerity, aspiration, motive, intention, of mass feeling, of national feeling, of public opinion, the policies of foreign governments. So is much news about what is going to happen. So are questions turning on private profit, private income, wages, working conditions, the efficiency of labor, educational opportunity, unemployment, ³ monotony, health, discrimination, unfairness, restraint of trade, waste, "backward

peoples," conservatism, imperialism, radicalism, liberty, honor, righteousness. All involve data that are at best spasmodically recorded. The data may be hidden because of a censorship or a tradition of privacy, they may not exist because nobody thinks record important, because he thinks it red tape, or because nobody has yet invented an objective system of measurement. Then the news on these subjects is bound to be debatable, when it is not wholly neglected. The events which are not scored are reported either as personal and conventional opinions, or they are not news. They do not take shape until somebody protests, or somebody investigates, or somebody publicly, in the etymological meaning of the word, makes an issue of them. This is the underlying reason for the existence of the press agent. The enormous discretion as to what facts and what impressions shall be reported is steadily convincing every organized group of people that whether it wishes to secure publicity or to avoid it, the exercise of discretion cannot be left to the reporter. It is safer to hire a press agent who stands between the group and the newspapers. Having hired him, the temptation to exploit his strategic position is very great. "Shortly before the war," says Mr. Frank Cobb, "the newspapers of New York took a census of the press agents who were regularly employed and regularly accredited and found that there were about twelve hundred of them. How many there are now (1919) I do not pretend to know, but what I do know is that many of the direct channels to news have been closed and the information for the public is first filtered through publicity agents. The great corporations have them, the banks have them, the railroads have them, all the organizations of business and of social and political activity have them, and they are the media through which news comes. Even statesmen have them." ⁴ Were reporting the simple recovery of obvious facts, the press agent would be little more than a clerk. But since, in respect to most of the big topics of news, the facts are not simple, and not at all obvious, but subject to choice and opinion, it is natural that everyone should wish to make his own choice of facts for the newspapers to print. The publicity man does that. And in doing it, he certainly saves the reporter much trouble, by presenting him a clear picture of a situation out of which he might otherwise make neither head nor tail. But it follows that the picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. He is censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers, and to the whole truth responsible only as it accords with the employers' conception of his own interests. The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties.

The good press agent understands that the virtues of his cause are not news, unless they are such strange virtues that they jut right out of the routine of life. This is not because the newspapers do not like virtue, but because it is not worth while to say that nothing has happened when nobody expected anything to happen. So if the publicity man wishes free publicity he has, speaking quite accurately, to start something. He arranges a stunt: obstructs the traffic, teases the police, somehow manages to entangle his client or his cause with an event that is already news. The suffragists knew this, did not particularly enjoy the knowledge but acted on it, and kept suffrage in the news long after the arguments pro and con were straw in their mouths, and people were about to settle down to thinking of the suffrage movement as one of the established institutions of American life. ⁵ Fortunately the suffragists, as distinct from the feminists, had a perfectly concrete objective, and a very

simple one. What the vote symbolizes is not simple, as the ablest advocates and the ablest opponents knew. But the right to vote is a simple and familiar right. Now in labor disputes, which are probably the chief item in the charges against newspapers, the right to strike, like the right to vote, is simple enough. But the causes and objects of a particular strike are like the causes and objects of the woman's movement, extremely subtle. Let us suppose the conditions leading up to a strike are bad. What is the measure of evil? A certain conception of a proper standard of living, hygiene, economic security, and human dignity. The industry may be far below the theoretical standard of the community, and the workers may be too wretched to protest. Conditions may be above the standard, and the workers may protest violently. The standard is at best a vague measure. However, we shall assume that the conditions are! below par, as par is understood by the editor. Occasionally without waiting for the workers to threaten, but prompted say by a social worker, he will send reporters to investigate, and will call attention to bad conditions. Necessarily he cannot do that often. For these investigations cost time, money, special talent, and a lot of space. To make plausible a report that conditions are bad, you need a good many columns of print. In order to tell the truth about the steel worker in the Pittsburgh district, there was needed a staff of investigators, a great deal of time, and several fat volumes of print. It is impossible to suppose that any daily newspaper could normally regard the making of Pittsburgh Surveys, or even Interchurch Steel Reports, as one of its tasks. News which requires so much trouble as that to obtain is beyond the resources of a daily press. ⁶ The bad conditions as such are not news, because in all but exceptional cases, journalism is not a first hand report of the raw material. It is a report of that material after it has been stylized. Thus bad conditions might become news if the Board of Health reported an unusually high death rate in an industrial area. Failing an intervention of this sort, the facts do not become news, until the workers organize and make a demand upon their employers. Even then, if an easy settlement is certain the news value is low, whether or not the conditions themselves are remedied in the settlement. But if industrial relations collapse into a strike or lockout the news value increases. If the stoppage involves a service on which the readers of the newspapers immediately depend, or if it involves a breach of order, the news value is still greater. The underlying trouble appears in the news through certain easily recognizable symptoms, a demand, a strike, disorder. From the point of view of the worker, or of the disinterested seeker of justice, the demand, the strike, and the disorder, are merely incidents in a process ! that for them is richly complicated. But since all the immediate realities lie outside the direct experience both of the reporter, and of the special public by which most newspapers are supported, they have normally to wait for a signal in the shape of an overt act. When that signal comes, say through a walkout of the men or a summons for the police, it calls into play the stereotypes people have about strikes and disorders. The unseen struggle has none of its own flavor. It is noted abstractly, and that abstraction is then animated by the immediate experience of the reader and reporter. Obviously this is a very different experience from that which the strikers have. They feel, let us say, the temper of the foreman, the nerve-racking monotony of the machine, the depressingly bad air, the drudgery of their wives, the stunting of their children, the dinginess of their tenements. The slogans of the strike are invested with these feelings. But the reporter and reader see at first only a strike and some catchwords. They invest these with their feelings. Their feelings may be that their jobs are insecure because the strikers are stopping goods they need in their work, that there will be shortage and higher prices, that it is all devilishly inconvenient. These, too, are realities. And when they give color to the abstract news that a strike has been

called, it is in the nature of things that the workers are at a disadvantage. It is in the nature, that is to say, of the existing system of industrial relations that news arising from grievances or hopes by workers should almost invariably be uncovered by an overt attack on production. You have, therefore, the circumstances in all their sprawling complexity, the overt act which signalizes them, the stereotyped bulletin which publishes the signal, and the meaning that the reader himself injects, after he has derived that meaning from the experience which directly affects him. Now the reader's experience of a strike may be very important indeed, but from the point of view of ! the central trouble which caused the strike, it is eccentric. Yet this eccentric meaning is automatically the most interesting. ⁷ To enter imaginatively into the central issues is for the reader to step out of himself, and into very different lives. It follows that in the reporting of strikes, the easiest way is to let the news be uncovered by the overt act, and to describe the event as the story of interference with the reader's life. That is where his attention is first aroused, and his interest most easily enlisted. A great deal, I think myself the crucial part, of what looks to the worker and the reformer as deliberate misrepresentation on the part of newspapers, is the direct outcome of a practical difficulty in uncovering the news, and the emotional difficulty of making distant facts interesting unless, as Emerson says, we can "perceive (them) to be only a new version of our familiar experience" and can "set about translating (them) at once into our parallel facts." ⁸ If you study the way many a strike is reported in the press, you will find, very often, that the issues are rarely in the headlines, barely in the leading paragraphs, and sometimes not even mentioned anywhere. A labor dispute in another city has to be very important before the news account contains any definite information as to what is in dispute. The routine of the news works that way, with modifications it works that way in regard to political issues and international news as well. The news is an account of the overt phases that are interesting, and the pressure on the newspaper to adhere to this routine comes from many sides. It comes from the economy of noting only the stereotyped phase of a situation. It comes from the difficulty of finding journalists who can see what they have not learned to see. It comes from the almost unavoidable difficulty of finding sufficient space in which even the best journalist can make plausible an unconventional view. It comes from the economic necessity of interesting the reader quickly, and the economic risk involved in not interesting him at all, or of offending him by unexpected news insufficiently or clumsily described. All these difficulties combined make for uncertainty in the editor when there are dangerous issues at stake, and cause him naturally to prefer the indisputable fact and a treatment more readily adapted to the reader's interest. The indisputable fact and the easy interest, are the strike itself and the reader's inconvenience. All the subtler and deeper truths are in the present organization of industry very unreliable truths. They involve judgments about standards of living, productivity, human rights that are endlessly debatable in the absence of exact record and quantitative analysis. And as long as these do not exist in industry, the run of news about it will tend, as Emerson said, quoting from Isocrates, "to make of moles mountains, and of mountains moles." ⁹ Where there is no constitutional procedure in industry, and no expert sifting of evidence and the claims, the fact that is sensational to the reader is the fact that almost every journalist will seek. Given the industrial relations that so largely prevail, even where there is conference or arbitration, but no independent filtering of the facts for decision, the issue for the newspaper public will tend not to be the issue for the industry. And so to try disputes by an appeal through the newspapers puts a burden upon newspapers and readers which they cannot and ought not to

carry. As long as real law and order do not exist, the bulk of the news will, unless consciously and courageously corrected, work against those who have no lawful and orderly method of asserting themselves. The bulletins from the scene of action will note the trouble that arose from the assertion, rather than the reasons which led to it. The reasons are intangible.

The editor deals with these bulletins. He sits in his office, reads them, rarely does he see any large portion of the events themselves. He must, as we have seen, woo at least a section of his readers every day, because they will leave him without mercy if a rival paper happens to hit their fancy. He works under enormous pressure, for the competition of newspapers is often a matter of minutes. Every bulletin requires a swift but complicated judgment. It must be understood, put in relation to other bulletins also understood, and played up or played down according to its probable interest for the public, as the editor conceives it. Without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would soon die of excitement. The final page is of a definite size, must be ready at a precise moment; there can be only a certain number of captions on the items, and in each caption there must be a definite number of letters. Always there is the precarious urgency of the buying public, the law of libel, and the possibility of endless trouble. The thing could not be managed at all without systematization, for in a standardized product there is economy of time and effort, as well as a partial guarantee against failure. It is here that newspapers influence each other most deeply. Thus when the war broke out, the American newspapers were confronted with a subject about which they had no previous experience. Certain dailies, rich enough to pay cable tolls, took the lead in securing news, and the way that news was presented became a model for the whole press. But where did that model come from? It came from the English press, not because Northcliffe owned American newspapers, but because at first it was easier to buy English correspondence, and because, later, it was easier for American journalists to read English newspapers than it was for them to read any others. London was the cable! and news center, and it was there that a certain technic for reporting the war was evolved. Something similar occurred in the reporting of the Russian Revolution. In that instance, access to Russia was closed by military censorship, both Russian and Allied, and closed still more effectively by the difficulties of the Russian language. But above all it was closed to effective news reporting by the fact that the hardest thing to report is chaos, even though it is an evolving chaos. This put the formulating of Russian news at its source in Helsingfors, Stockholm, Geneva, Paris and London, into the hands of censors and propagandists. They were for a long time subject to no check of any kind. Until they had made themselves ridiculous they created, let us admit, out of some genuine aspects of the huge Russian maelstrom, a set of stereotypes so evocative of hate and fear, that the very best instinct of journalism, its desire to go and see and tell, was for a long time crushed. [10](#)

Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have. There are no objective standards here. There are conventions. Take two newspapers published in the same city on the same morning. The headline of one reads: "Britain pledges aid to Berlin against French aggression; France openly backs Poles." The headline of the second is "Mrs. Stillman's Other Love." Which you prefer is a matter of taste, but not entirely a matter of the editor's taste. It is a matter of

his judgment as to what will absorb the half hour's attention a certain set of readers will give to his newspaper. Now the problem of securing attention is by no means equivalent to displaying the news in the perspective laid down by religious teaching or by some form of ethical culture. It is a problem of provoking feeling in the reader, of inducing him to feel a sense of personal identification with the stories he is reading. News which does not offer this opportunity to introduce oneself into the struggle which it depicts cannot appeal to a wide audience. The audience must participate in the news, much as it participates in the drama, by personal identification. Just as everyone holds his breath when the heroine is in danger, as he helps Babe Ruth swing his bat, so in subtler form the reader enters into the news. In order that he shall enter he must find a familiar foothold in the story, and this is supplied to him by the use of stereotypes. They tell him that if an association of plumbers is called a "combine" it is appropriate to develop his hostility; if it is called a "group of leading business men" the cue is for a favorable reaction. It is in a combination of these elements that the power to create opinion resides. Editorials reinforce. Sometimes in a situation that on the news pages is too confusing to permit of identification, they give the reader a clue by means of which he engages himself. A clue he must have if, as most of us must, he is to seize the news in a hurry. A suggestion of some sort he demands, which tells him, so to speak, where he, a man conceiving himself to be such and such a person, shall integrate his feelings with the news he reads. "It has been said" writes Walter Bagehot, ¹ "that if you can only get a middleclass Englishman to think whether there are 'snails in Sirius,' he will soon have an opinion on it. It will be difficult to make him think, but if he does think, he cannot rest in a negative, he will come to some decision. And on any ordinary topic, of course, it is so. A grocer has a full creed as to foreign policy, a young lady a complete theory of the sacraments, as to which neither has any doubt whatever." Yet that same grocer will have many doubts about his groceries, and that young lady, marvelously certain about the sacraments, may have all kinds of doubts as to whether to marry the grocer, and if not whether it is proper to accept his attentions. The ability to rest in the negative implies either a lack of interest in the result, or a vivid sense of competing alternatives. In the case of foreign policy or the sacraments, the interest in the results is intense, while means for checking the opinion are poor. This is the plight of the reader of the general news. If he is to read it at all he must be interested, that is to say, he must enter into the situation and care about the outcome. But if he does that he cannot rest in a negative, and unless independent means of checking the lead given him by his newspaper exists, the very fact that he is interested may make it difficult to arrive at that balance of opinions which may most nearly approximate the truth. The more passionately involved he becomes, the more he will tend to resent not only a different view, but a disturbing bit of news. That is why many a newspaper finds that, having honestly evoked the partisanship of its readers, it can not easily, supposing the editor believes the facts warrant it, change position. If a change is necessary, the transition has to be managed with the utmost skill and delicacy. Usually a newspaper will not attempt so hazardous a performance. It is easier and safer to have the news of that subject taper off and disappear, thus putting out the fire by starving it.

1 See the illuminating chapter in Mr. John L. Given's book, already cited, on "Uncovering the News," Ch. V. [Back to 1](#)

2 Op. cit., p. 57. [Back to 2](#)

3 Think of what guess work went into the Reports of Unemployment in 1921. [Back to 3](#)

4 Address before the Women's City Club of New York, Dec. 11, 1919. Reprinted, New Republic, Dec. 31, 1919, p. 44. [Back to 4](#)

5 Cf. Inez Haynes Irwin, The Story of the Woman's Party. It is not only a good account of a vital part of a great agitation, but a reservoir of material on successful, non-revolutionary, non-conspiring agitation under modern conditions of public attention, public interest, and political habit. [Back to 5](#)

6 Not long ago Babe Ruth was jailed for speeding. Released from jail just before the afternoon game started, he rushed into his waiting automobile, and made up for time lost in jail by breaking the speed laws on his way to the ball grounds. No policeman stopped him, but a reporter timed him, and published his speed the next morning. Babe Ruth is an exceptional man. Newspapers cannot time all motorists. They have to take their news about speeding from the police. [Back to 6](#)

7 Cf. Ch. XI, "The Enlisting of Interest." [Back to 7](#)

8 From his essay entitled Art and Criticism. The quotation occurs in a passage cited on page 87 of Professor R. W. Brown's, The Writer's Art. [Back to 8](#)

9 Id., supra [Back to 9](#)

10 Cf. A Test of the News, by Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, assisted by Faye Lippmann, New Republic, August 4, 1920. [Back to 10](#)

11 On the Emotion of Conviction, Literary Studies, Vol. III, p. 172. [Back to 11](#)

[Ch.22](#) [Ch.24](#)

Chapter XXIV.

NEWS, TRUTH, AND A CONCLUSION

As we begin to make more and more exact studies of the press, much will depend upon the hypothesis we hold. If we assume with Mr. Sinclair, and most of his opponents, that news and truth are two words for the same thing, we shall, I believe, arrive nowhere. We shall prove that on this point the newspaper lied. We shall prove that on that point Mr. Sinclair's account lied. We shall demonstrate that Mr. Sinclair lied when he said that somebody lied, and that somebody lied when he said Mr. Sinclair lied. We shall vent our feelings, but we shall vent them into air.

The hypothesis, which seems to me the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. (1) The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at those points, where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide. That is a comparatively small part of the whole field of human interest. In this sector, and only in this sector, the tests of the news are sufficiently exact to make the charges of perversion or suppression more than a partisan judgment. There is no defense, no extenuation, no excuse whatever, for stating six times that Lenin is dead, when the only information the paper possesses is a report that he is dead from a source repeatedly shown to be unreliable. The news, in that instance, is not "Lenin Dead" but "Helsingfors Says Lenin is Dead." And a newspaper can be asked to take the responsibility of not making Lenin more dead than the source of the news is reliable; if there is one subject on which editors are most responsible it is in their judgment of the reliability of the source. But when it comes to dealing, for example, with stories of what the Russian people want, no such test exists.

The absence of these exact tests accounts, I think, for the character of the profession, as no other explanation does. There is a very small body of exact knowledge, which it requires no outstanding ability or training to deal with. The rest is in the journalist's own discretion. Once he departs from the region where it is definitely recorded at the County Clerk's office that John Smith has gone into bankruptcy, all fixed standards disappear. The story of why John Smith failed, his human frailties, the analysis of the economic conditions on which he was shipwrecked, all of this can be told in a hundred different ways. There is no discipline in applied psychology, as there is a discipline in medicine, engineering, or even law, which has authority to direct the journalist's mind when he passes from the news to the vague realm of truth. There are no canons to direct his own mind, and no canons that coerce the reader's judgment or the publisher's. His version of the truth is only his version. How can he demonstrate the truth as he sees it? He cannot demonstrate it, any more than Mr. Sinclair Lewis can demonstrate that he has told the whole truth about Main Street. And the more he understands his own weaknesses, the more ready he is to admit that where there is no objective test, his own opinion is in some vital measure constructed out of his own stereotypes, according to his own code, and by the urgency of his own interest. He knows

that he is seeing the world through subjective lenses. He cannot deny that he too is, as Shelley remarked, a dome of many-colored glass which stains the white radiance of eternity.

And by this knowledge his assurance is tempered. He may have all kinds of moral courage, and sometimes has, but he lacks that sustaining conviction of a certain technic which finally freed the physical sciences from theological control. It was the gradual development of an irrefragable method that gave the physicist his intellectual freedom as against all the powers of the world. His proofs were so clear, his evidence so sharply superior to tradition, that he broke away finally from all control. But the journalist has no such support in his own conscience or in fact. The control exercised over him by the opinions of his employers and his readers, is not the control of truth by prejudice, but of one opinion by another opinion that it is not demonstrably less true. Between Judge Gary's assertion that the unions will destroy American institutions, and Mr. Gomper's assertion that they are agencies of the rights of man, the choice has, in large measure, to be governed by the will to believe.

The task of deflating these controversies, and reducing them to a point where they can be reported as news, is not a task which the reporter can perform. It is possible and necessary for journalists to bring home to people the uncertain character of the truth on which their opinions are founded, and by criticism and agitation to prod social science into making more usable formulations of social facts, and to prod statesmen into establishing more visible institutions. The press, in other words, can fight for the extension of reportable truth. But as social truth is organized to-day, the press is not constituted to furnish from one edition to the next the amount of knowledge which the democratic theory of public opinion demands. This is not due to the Brass Check, as the quality of news in radical papers shows, but to the fact that the press deals with a society in which the governing forces are so imperfectly recorded. The theory that the press can itself record those forces is false. It can normally record only what has been recorded for it by the working of institutions. Everything else is argument and opinion, and fluctuates with the vicissitudes, the self-consciousness, and the courage of the human mind.

If the press is not so universally wicked, nor so deeply conspiring, as Mr. Sinclair would have us believe, it is very much more frail than the democratic theory has as yet admitted. It is too frail to carry the whole burden of popular sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth which democrats hoped was inborn. And when we expect it to supply such a body of truth we employ a misleading standard of judgment. We misunderstand the limited nature of news, the illimitable complexity of society; we overestimate our own endurance, public spirit, and all-round competence. We suppose an appetite for uninteresting truths which is not discovered by any honest analysis of our own tastes.

If the newspapers, then, are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic, they fail, they are bound to fail, in any future one can conceive they will continue to fail. It is not possible to assume that a world, carried on by division of labor and distribution of authority, can be governed by universal opinions in the whole population. Unconsciously the theory sets up the single reader as theoretically omniscient, and puts upon the press the burden of accomplishing whatever representative government, industrial organization, and diplomacy have failed to accomplish. Acting upon everybody for thirty minutes in twenty-four hours,

the press is asked to create a mystical force called Public Opinion that will take up the slack in public institutions. The press has often mistakenly pretended that it could do just that. It has at great moral cost to itself, encouraged a democracy, still bound to its original premises, to expect newspapers to supply spontaneously for every organ of government, for every social problem, the machinery of information which these do not normally supply themselves. Institutions, having failed to furnish themselves with instruments of knowledge, have become a bundle of "problems," which the population as a whole, reading the press as a whole, is supposed to solve.

The press, in other words, has come to be regarded as an organ of direct democracy, charged on a much wider scale, and from day to day, with the function often attributed to the initiative, referendum, and recall. The Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, is to lay down the law for everything all the time. It is not workable. And when you consider the nature of news, it is not even thinkable. For the news, as we have seen, is precise in proportion to the precision with which the event is recorded. Unless the event is capable of being named, measured, given shape, made specific, it either fails to take on the character of news, or it is subject to the accidents and prejudices of observation.

Therefore, on the whole, the quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organization. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news. At its best the press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst it is a means by which a few exploit social disorganization to their own ends. In the degree to which institutions fail to function, the unscrupulous journalist can fish in troubled waters, and the conscientious one must gamble with uncertainties.

The press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision. The trouble lies deeper than the press, and so does the remedy. It lies in social organization based on a system of analysis and record, and in all the corollaries of that principle; in the abandonment of the theory of the omniscient citizen, in the decentralization of decision, in the coordination of decision by comparable record and analysis. If at the centers of management there is a running audit, which makes work intelligible to those who do it, and those who superintend it, issues when they arise are not the mere collisions of the blind. Then, too, the news is uncovered for the press by a system of intelligence that is also a check upon the press.

That is the radical way. For the troubles of the press, like the troubles of representative government, be it territorial or functional, like the troubles of industry, be it capitalist, cooperative, or communist, go back to a common source: to the failure of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice, by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge. It is because they are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world, that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the more obvious failings of democracy, against violent

prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three legged calves. This is the primary defect of popular government, a defect inherent in its traditions, and all its other defects can, I believe, be traced to this one.

1. When I wrote *Liberty and the News*, I did not understand this distinction clearly enough to state it, but *cf.* p. 89 ff.

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