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NEWSPAPER ETHICS

BY

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H. BARRON in "Journalism" in "Everyday Ethics".

"Commercialism and Journalism" - H. Holt.

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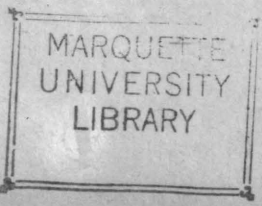
"Newspaper Writing and Editing" W. G. Eleyer 1913.

"History of American Journalism" J. Melvin Lee.

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Practically every newspaper before 1900 had been a law unto itself. Journalism was without a code of ethics or a system of self-restraint and self-respect. This is well shown by the fighting attitude of the early editor who left his newspaper office to visit a rival editor and force his opinion upon him with physical force if necessary. Early journalism had no sure standards of either work or duty. Its intellectual landscapes were anonymous; its moral destination was confused. From that time the journalistic standards have continued to raise until today it is said that the ethics of journalism are higher than any other profession. But why should they not be higher when the newspaper and its editor stand as the most vital instrument in the business and social world today? In view of the fact that the standards of journalism have continued to raise, there are still some great weaknesses in modern journalism that must be remedied and some highly important problems of the present day for the press to solve.

Today one of the hardest things that newspapers have to work against is public sentiment, and this will continue to be a great opposition. The newspapers have long lost the confidence of the public through these weaknesses of which I will speak. We no longer hear people say: "It must be so because I saw it in the newspaper," instead we hear this: "I saw it in the newspaper, but I suppose it is not true". Time and time again we hear the ironical statement, "Don't believe all you see in the news-

paper".

Probably no one sentence will more fully express in a general way the criticism against present day journalism, than the words of President Wheeler of the University of California, when he said, "We do not want news written up, we want news." In other words he expects the newspapers of today to serve as messengers from the source of the numerous events and happenings to the reader. They do serve as messengers, it is true, but not always the trustworthy messengers that we should like.

Papers tend to "play up" a sensational story even though it is unimportant. News should appear in all its nakedness and not made unrecognizable, under the paint and polish of politics, the black cape of crime, falsehood and evil, or the unsheathed sword of public sentiments. The importance of truthfull journalism is best stated in the words of ex-president Roosevelt, "The journalist who does evil does more evil, and the journalist who does good, does more good, than any other men are able to do."

The first fault of modern journalism that the public has found necessary to complain about is the persistent refusal to ~~write~~ ^{RIGHT} a wrong done editorially. The ways in which editorial wrongs may be made are many. At times an editor will receive an exceptionally good story and will "play it up" or exaggerate it. Sometimes he is careful and tactful but he never knows just when the overstating of facts will be a great harm to somebody. The present President of the United States is probably the only person who gets his addresses printed verbatim, but

there are many noted speakers who get credit in the newspapers for outrageous things that they did not say and who have their addresses slashed and hashed so that when they read them in the papers they can hardly recognize them. Very often these misquotations are detrimental to the speaker to an inestimable degree; for in politics it is what a man says that he is given credit for and not so much for what he does.

But you may ask, "Does the editor not correct the mistakes made editorially?" In most cases he does not. When an article has been "played up" it has been printed very conspicuously and if a correction is made it will be found in some obscure section of the paper. The correction is of little interest to the people and is not news. News is anything which is of interest to the greatest number of people, but the prevailing estimate of news is that whatever reflects discredit upon a person is news and whatever tends to remove that discredit is not news.

The reporter who is persistent in getting his news into the office without a great deal of effort on his part is one who sits back in the editorial rooms and "fakes" the news as he thinks it ought to be. He is the one who is most likely to be guilty of misrepresentation, for faking a story is as bad as lying. Tennyson once said that even half of a truth is as bad as the blackest of lies and faking may be placed in this category.

The reason the editors so persistently refuse to write wrongs that they do to individuals is because of the fear of sacrificing personal honesty and injuring the reliability of their

paper. They know that a newspaper full of corrections will soon find a decrease in circulation and with its decrease in circulation also goes a decrease in advertising and with it the financial foundation of the paper.

For an example of an organization which is frequently attacked as to reliability I might name the Associated Press. This organization which includes in its membership about a thousand newspapers is a central station where news is collected and then distributed through various channels. It tries to give both sides of the question giving no hints as to which side is right or wrong. The best way to refute attackers is stated in the words of Melville E. Stone, who says, "Such an organization is not perfect because the frailties of human nature are attached to it". The fact that the Associated Press strives after a truthful, unbiased report of the world's happenings raises it to the highest possible ethical degree.

The second fault of modern journalism is the suppression of news for profit or because of fear of some powerful influence. This fault has become one of the most powerful evils of the profession. Since the days of the editors of personal journalism have passed, wealthy men or corporations, it is charged, have been able quietly to buy up the stocks of newspapers and hiring their own editors, secretly direct the news and editorial policies to their own personal advantage. This is one form of organization within the newspapers and one can easily imagine the great

influence in directing the public line of thought.

Then we have the "independent" editor who is secretly governed and influenced by a number of outside forces. There may be two reasons for the faults of the "independent" editor. First, he may be so unprincipled that his own personal gain comes first. Secondly, the influx of the day's news may be so great that it is impossible for him to always select the best news for the people. Due to this hurry he is unable to judge with accuracy the relative value of each piece of news, because of the change in value as each important piece of news reaches the office.

Now his final decision in regard to what news shall be printed and what shall be omitted and the amount of space to be given each item, the personal judgment of the editor is to be the determining factor. This is where suppression and distortion creep in, first in the form of inaccuracy and incompleteness and then in the complete omission due to the influence of various outside forces. This has become so evident that persons are beginning to think that the newspapers are owned by the great capitalists.

An outside force which is often instrumental in suppressing the news is the advertiser. If, for example, a department store manager requests all newspapers in which he advertises to suppress all news of accidents and happenings in his store which will cast reflection upon it, the editor will undoubtedly accede to the demand of the manager, because the large amount of adver-

tising received from the department store is so great that the paper cannot afford to dispense with the revenue received from the store's advertisements. So the editor thinks, why should he jeopardize the paper's connection with the store by printing an item which would be detrimental to the store's sales. Moreover, the store manager may request the paper to publish things which happen near his store which have a favorable impression and may draw business, and this is often the reason why some stores obtain "free advertising" in news stories on the front page.

But let us take the example of an elevator accident. Which would be the better thing, to suppress the news of the accident which was caused by an inexperienced operator or to let the public know the fact and thereby make possible some action which will act for the good of the public? This is where the question arises in the mind of the editor, "Which is more important, the good of the public, or my paper's welfare?" Sorry to say it is the paper's welfare, measured in dollars and cents, that wins.

Suppression in politics is very common. While the papers of today have gotten away from being mere party organs they are however important factors in influencing the public vote. Very often politicians and their principles are belittled by the papers both on the editorial page and on the news page. Reports of political meetings are often exaggerated and misquoted but this

blame can sometimes be put upon an inexperienced reporter. The editorials, however, are the convictions of the editor who generally has a great following and it is he who is responsible for the making or breaking of a political party. Here again the danger of some outside influence creeps in. Very often political parties will try to buy up the editor. There are many problems in which the editor could be an instrumental factor in bringing before the public eye, but he sees it too much worth his while to suppress such problems because of certain influential forces. Many an individual has been harmed by a "muck raking" editor who overlooks the good for society to accomplish his own end. Many such an editor has brought disgrace upon himself and his paper because of his own selfish policy.

Another great defect in modern journalism is the laying of false emphasis on the news. This adulterating or "coloring" of news is as harmful to the opinions of the newspaper readers as impure and poisonous food is to the physical being. Before pure food laws went into effect the buyer was at the mercy of the unscrupulous manufacturer and today we have the newspaper reader in a similar circumstance, at the mercy of the unscrupulous editor. Public sentiment has demanded laws to prevent impure foods but it has not yet insisted that its food for thought be furnished unadulterated. And so it is possible that the next generation may see every newspaper of the country compelled by public opinion, if not by legislation, to give complete, unbiased reports of all

The papers by their writings had made the people think that the

events of general interest.

The first temptation to depart from the truth generally comes in an apparently innocent form. In the absence of good news, or in an effort to show ~~his~~ cleverness, the reporter will take some little incident and working it up with imaginary details, makes it an amusing little feature story. This type of writing, however, should be classed as fiction, not news. Such stories generally seem harmless to the reader or the persons mentioned in the write-up, but there are instances where drastic results have followed. This embroidering of the truth with fictitious fancies leads to sentimentalism which has been the result of an effort to attract large numbers of readers and thereby increasing the profits of the paper. This idea is very dangerous because it gives the public a distorted opinion of current events and facts. Big headlines in bold face and sometimes colored printing is one of the common instruments of laying false emphasis. This is especially found in papers which get out several editions a day. Each edition blares forth a different headline and when we look for the story we find only a "stickful". The "noisy" headline has been used as a means to sell the paper while the story connected with the headline is of little or no importance. It is in such a case as this that the uni-

Where critical topics are falsified and emphasized public opinion is liable to be vitiated. We can easily recall a few years back when President Wilson was making preparations for his European trip, the antagonistic attitude taken by the papers. The papers by their writeups had made the people think that the

President's trip was for his own personal gain. The papers "played up" the fact that President Wilson was the first president to leave the country while in office and as a result of this public sentiment was against his going to Europe. The newspapers had created a mob mind, a condition which has frequently threatened democracy within our country. Take for example strikes, are they not vitiated public opinion? Are not the newspapers to blame for being radical sentimentalists either on the side of labor or capitalism? Such policies tend to demoralize democracy and substitute a mob mind in place of a deliberate thinking mind.

Careless reporting may be classed as one of the great weaknesses of journalism. Most of this inaccuracy comes from "faking" with results that are often disastrous. Sometimes it is due to a misunderstanding of situations on the part of the reporter. If a young uneducated reporter is sent to "cover" some lecture or political meeting in which the subject is far too deep for him there is sure to be a misunderstanding on his part and the result will be a misquotation of the speaker. This is one reason why city editors should be careful in selecting reporters to "cover" stories. It is in such a case as this that the university graduate has the advantage because of his wide knowledge of things.

The reporter should remember that the persons who play a part in his stories are human beings with feelings and to quote them or hold them up before thousands of readers in a ridiculous

attacks upon public men, and now that we have equal suffrage or distorted situation may cause them much suffering. However, it is most likely that women will come in for their share of ever, inaccuracy due to carelessness or failure to verify facts is less reprehensible because it is not deliberate, but nevertheless it is a form of misrepresentation. If the reporter makes an error in the initials or spelling of the name of a person charged with crime he has often injured an innocent man or woman whose name happens to be the same as the incorrect form of the real criminal's name. In a case such as this the reporter should be sure of the facts and not rely on the copyreader for correcting. The best place to begin accuracy is in reporting and if well established here, will cling to the newspaper man in his rise up the journalistic ladder.

We have another kind of news called "tainted" news, a very good name indeed.

we have indefensible attacks upon men coupled with shocking invasion of privacy of both public and private individuals. We have newspapers today which will unearth "the family skeleton" or even steal pictures of persons to make a sensational story.

The tendency in news today prevails in fixing the attention upon the evils of society, of exploiting crime, vices and scandal. It is often said the publicity is a cure for social evils and to a certain extent this is true; but publicity can

be made, and is often made, a most effective means of propagating vice and crime. Politics has served ^{as} a chief source for

attacks upon public men, and now that we have equal suffrage it is most likely that women will come in for their share of attacks. Men and women threatened with exposure or disgrace will plead with editor or reporter to spare them and their families by suppressing certain news items. Many times poor unfortunate victims are obliged to pay editors for this "protection".

Wemmay argue that as long as news is not absolutely important to the public why should it be brought before them, but different newspapers have vast ways of presenting the dark side of life. It may be presented in a way that it is instructive or monitory, or in a way that is suggestive and demoralizing. The great mistake is that it is too much "played up". "Such news" according to Frank L. Blanchard, editor of "The Editor and Publisher" "should not be given a place out of proportion to its real importance".

Then why should editors fasten such a strong gaze upon the evils that men do and take such a pessimistic view of human character and conduct? The world could be educated to hold the popular judgment firmly to the truth that character and manhood and not money and popularity, are the central values of human existence, and we shall leave it to the editors to do.

We have with us today a type of journalism which "plays up" the unimportant news by giving it large ~~large~~ headlines in colored type and by showing just how the event happened by means of an illustration and dotted lines. This brand of journalism is best per-

trayed by the Hearst publications. In fact William Randolph Hearst has been classed with Joseph Pulitzer as the inventor of the "yellow press".

The two prime requisites of an ideal "yellow" newspaper are best put forth by Arthur Brisbane, "prince of yellow editors," and they are, "sport for the men and love for the women," and this is the foundation of the circulation of the Hearst papers.

Let us look at some of the results of this type of journalism. In many cases there is deliberate falsification of the articles contained in "yellow journals! We have distorted views of life which have anything but a good moral effect upon humanity. We have a deterioration in reporting where truth gives way to sensationalism.

But who is to blame for this type of journalism, the publisher? No, not wholly, the people who buy these papers are just as much at fault and we know from statistics that "yellow journalism" is very remunerative. Mencken says, "you must give a good show to get a crowd and a good show means one with slaughter in it." This seems to be the policy of the "yellow" press.

Man is very responsive to emotional suggestion, especially when it is violently made, and it is to this weakness that the newspapers address their endeavors. As Mencken has said, "it is hard for the plain people to think about a thing, but it is easy for them to feel."

Charles V. Stansell bitterly attacks "yellow journalism" saying, "the press is fast becoming no more than an open sewer

contaminating our very atmosphere with its airing of putrid "news" which should be allowed to flow underground to the sea of quick oblivion." But someone has said that the public is a big baby that swallows everything and as long as the public remains a baby it will have many things to swallow.

Like common carriers, such as railroads, the newspapers have a common function as well as the private one of making money, and that public duty is to furnish news, the commodity in which they deal, in a complete and accurate form. The press can find reformation in college men who should be taught to publish things that are honest and get away from the appeal to man's lower nature.

The great public influence of the editor is realized and for this one reason alone, the time has come for him to establish a code of ethics, through which he can serve the public to the best of his ability.

I know of no other system of editorial ethics as complete and to the point as those put forth as the guiding principles of the Philadelphia Public Ledger, which are as follows:

" Always deal fairly and frankly with the public.

" A newspaper to be trusted and respected must give trustworthy information and counsel. It is a serious thing to mislead the people.

" Understate your case rather than overstate it.

" Have a sure voucher for every statement, especially a censure.

" There is a wide gap between accusation of crime and actual guilt.

" Deal gently with weak and helpless offenders.

" Before making up judgment take care to understand both sides, and remember there are at least two sides. If you attempt to decide you are bound to know both.

" Do not say you know when you have only heard.

" Never proceed on mere hearsay. Rumor is only an index to be followed by inquiry.

" Take care to be right. Better be right than quickest with 'the news' which is often false. It is bad to be late, but worse to be wrong.

" Go to first hands and original sources for information; if you cannot then get as near as you can.

" It is the reporter's office to chronicle events, to collect facts; comments on the facts are reserved for the editor.

" Let the facts and reasoning tell the story rather than rhetorical flourish.

" Don't be too positive. Remember always it is possible you may err.

" All persons have equal rights in the court of conscience as well as in courts of law.

" Never add fuel to the fire of popular excitement.

" There is nothing more demoralizing in public affairs than habitual disregard of law.

" Uphold the authorities in maintaining public order, rectify wrongs done through the law. If the law is defective, better mend than break it.

" Nearly always there is law enough. It is the failure to enforce it that makes most mischief.

" There is no need, and therefore no excuse, for mob law in American communities.

" Numerous as bad men may be, remember they are but few compared with the millions of people.

" The public welfare has higher claims than any party cry.

" Grace and purity of style are always desirable, but never allow rhetoric to displace clear, direct, forcible expression.

" Plain words are essential for unlearned people, and these are just as plain to the most accomplished."

The above principles would serve admirably for a "ten Commandments" for any newspaper man and if they were impressed upon AND carried out by journalists, ethical standards of the fourth estate would be unimpeachable.