

Modern Journalism---Its Tendencies and Aspirations

(By Lukin Johnston).

Time was when the printer's art was a subject of interest to the public, when the printed book was a curiosity, the daily paper a novelty. Even today the average schoolboy can tell you in some detail the methods introduced into England from Flanders by Caxton towards the end of the 15th century. The average man's knowledge of printing methods in vogue nearly five centuries ago is greater than his knowledge of the multifarious processes which enable him day by day to keep in touch with the news of the world condensed into the comparatively small space of a modern daily news sheet. Familiarity has bred—if not contempt—at least, indifference.

Day by day those engaged in the production of newspapers have impressed on them the abysmal ignorance of the public as to the most elementary principles of the newspaper business. No day passes in the history of any great daily newspaper without impossibilities being asked of those in charge, without some member of the public trying to teach the trained newspaperman his business or wildly criticizing newspapers in general for what he considers mechanical or professional defects in production.

Yet through the centuries since William Caxton first set up his printing press in the Almonry at Westminster, no branch of mechanical science has shown greater development; no modern accomplishment represents more concentrated human energy and brain-power than the complicated organization required to produce the modern daily newspaper.

From the earliest introduction of printing down to the middle of the last century, progress was comparatively slow. Until that time only a small section of the community was possessed of sufficient education to read and digest the contents of a newspaper. The tremendous taxes placed upon newspapers, not finally abolished until 1855, show that the newspaper was considered a luxury. Its influence, therefore, while very great, was not widely diffused. It appealed to a limited circle of scholars and men of letters. The success of a journal depended largely on the literary distinction which characterized its columns. The growing power of the press in the middle of the 19th century, when such journalistic giants as Deane of the Times and Eyre Crowe of the Daily News (who, by the way, succeeded Charles Dickens as editor, the latter proving a complete failure in that capacity) were at the zenith of their careers, will not be denied. But it was an aristocratic press—vastly different from that of today. The modern newspaper owner has learned that with too much literary brilliancy usually there is associated too little money.

Modern journalism is essentially democratic. To be successful a daily newspaper must appeal to all classes. It may hold strong and decided views in matters of public policy, but in the end its success or failure will depend on its news columns. By the multiplication of journals, made possible by the development of the art of printing and the science of telegraphy, the power of the press in moulding public opinion may have been lessened. By the ease with which news may now be transmitted, some of the power belonging of old to the editorial columns has been shifted to the news columns. But today, while it may be that the editorial columns of the newspaper have lost some of their power, the press still is the most potent force in existence in shaping the destinies of the human race.

Propaganda—the art of moulding public opinion—reached its highest development during the Great War. It was no new thing. Julius Caesar's "De Bellico Gallico" is an early example of ancient propaganda. Apart from the historical

value of his record, Caesar published his work on his wars to incline public opinion to his side, contrasting his accomplishments in the field with the luxurious living of the senatorial party in Rome. Propaganda was as successful then as it was in 1915-18. And still it is an art little understood. A plain statement of facts published simultaneously in two different papers, both stories being scrupulously correct and truthful, may be made to convey to the mind of the reader very different impressions. Gradually the functions of the news columns and of the editorial columns of the modern journal have become interwoven, until today, a journal, the editorial columns of which may take no strong line of policy, may, through its news columns, exercise a very potent influence in the formation of the opinions of its readers.

Under modern conditions, when propaganda has become a highly developed art; when newspapers number their readers by the million and when the hurry and rush of commercial competition prevent the average man from studying closely the questions of the day and makes him dependent on his newspaper for his views and opinions, the responsibility placed upon those who control or who contribute to the news columns of the press is increased an hundredfold.

The day has gone by, perhaps, when the ownership of a newspaper was to be regarded as a public trust. The commercialization of journalism within the last thirty years has had the effect of lowering, to some extent at least, the high dignity of the profession until today a newspaper is scarcely different from any other property to be bought and sold; it represents so much money and so much power. But a newspaper today still is a public utility which, by its very nature and to preserve that 'freedom of the press' which has become traditional with our race, cannot be owned or controlled by the government.

Under these conditions, surely it is in the best interests of the public that the highest standard of skill and integrity should be maintained among members of the journalistic profession. Today the greed of gold has taken hold of a large section of the press of this continent to such an extent that education almost may be deemed a disadvantage rather than an asset to the journalist, its place being taken by motherwit with a turn for ready word-spinning.

The enormous growth in the number of journals, (daily, weekly and monthly), has thrown open wide, to all and sundry, the doors of what should be the most closely guarded of professions. Of lawyers, architects, physicians and school teachers the highest qualifications are demanded by the public. Of those whose influence on the conduct of the country's affairs is ten times more potent and more widely diffused, no standard is demanded by the public. While among the journalistic fraternity of this country there are thousands of men of lofty principles and of a high order of scholarship and ability, the profession of the journalist has been allowed to fall below the standard of dignity and educational attainment which should be maintained for the good of the people.

Of the 'cub reporter' no term of apprenticeship is asked. It may happen conceivably that his first 'assignment' is to report the utterances of some public man, the correct or incorrect version of whose speech, as published the following morning, may mean the difference of peace or war between nations. Yet no standard is set by which the reporter's fitness may be judged.

It is for this reason (that there is no standard of admission to the profession of journalism and no means of disciplining the newspaperman who violates the ethics of the profession) that newspaperdom is apt to attract to its ranks

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