

News Is a Commodity

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PEOPLES SPEAKING TO PEOPLES. By Llewellyn White and Robert D. Leigh. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1946. ix + 122 pp. Paper \$1.50, cloth \$2.50.

SEVERAL years ago the American Society of Newspaper Editors asked the late William Allen White of Emporia, Kansas, to head a committee on journalistic standards. Mr. White reported back to the editors in convention that his committee could not report because it had "no idea what the ethics of this business is."

"I return for further instructions," he added.

For all practical purposes, the committee is still out. From other quarters, outside the business, serious suggestions are coming in. No sign yet guarantees that the proprietors of our press will give them anything but the customary brush-off. Whenever anybody suggests that the press might mend its ways, its custodians clutch to their bosoms the First Amendment to the Constitution and go on about their business as usual.

All right—before anybody rises in righteous wrath to protest—the First Amendment is a fine thing; under it our press is the best there is; its accusers can be unrealistic, unfair, and as biased as those they accuse. Let's grant all that, and get on with Mr. White's unfinished business before we adjourn.

Two years ago Henry Luce's *Time*, Inc. gave the University of Chicago \$200,000 to set up a learned commission to survey the freedom, functions, and responsibilities of the major agencies of mass communication in our time—radio, press, and films.

This month the first of six projected reports by this Freedom of the Press Commission appears. It is called "Peoples Speaking to Peoples" and was written by Llewellyn White, a newspaperman of twenty-nine years' experience, and Dr. Robert D. Leigh, political scientist and educator.

"It has become a truism that the scientists who unlocked the secret of

atomic power confronted our society with a choice between integration and disintegration," they write. "Fortunately for us all, science has also given us a timely clue to the secret of survival. Modern airplanes and wireless transmission of facsimile have made literature published anywhere in the world a potential instrument of global understanding. International voice broadcasting and television have made it possible for



the remotest areas to share in the actual writing of history. The very oceans have become the 'back fence' of a world community in which all men are neighbors. What is urgently required is to insure that these new tools are used boldly and constructively to link mankind harmoniously."

The barriers, they report, are formidable—barriers of language, of religion, of social custom, of literacy and of governmental restrictions at national borders; "official" domestic news agencies, denial to correspondents of access to official government sources, censorship.

In America, we have left the job of telling the world about ourselves and of telling America about the rest of the world entirely to commercial news purveyors, particularly the three great news services: the Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service. On their own, they have failed adequately to promote that understanding which is a requisite to peace among men.

Sensationalism and superficiality in our news export has fed North

Americans "romantic nonsense" about South America and developed incredible misunderstanding, "not among Borneo bushmen but Western Europeans who had seen dozens of Hollywood movies."

The "sins of omission and commission" of which the British and American press associations "would have to repent if they are to attain adequate goals include limited distribution, insufficient volume, unrepresentative selection of items, and an almost unconscious nationalistic bias."

Press association spokesmen insist that they send abroad the bad with the good, that they print just what our own newspapers print. That's just the trouble, the authors of "Peoples Speaking to Peoples" reply. A newspaper may distort locally but it is only one source of community knowledge. The reader may check it against his own observations, personal contacts, talk in the neighborhood, club, lodge, and church. Foreigners have no such check. Additional background and explanation must be supplied.

AND so "The Reader's Digest" policy of simply translating articles bought for the domestic edition could be more harmful than helpful . . . Domestic issues lifted out of their context and couched in the local idiom are likely to confuse and mislead the foreign reader."

"The problem is not made easier," the report comments, "by the fact that everyone knows that the so-called 'free press' countries sometimes preach more zealously than they practice."

In the import of news we have been remiss as well as in the export. Without accepting Russia's definition of freedom of the press, we must recognize that the Russians "can quote more than one recent instance of our newsmen's harmful irresponsibility" to support their thesis that Americans and British "are foolish to permit newsmen so much freedom."

What our newspapermen really

seek rather than "equal and unhampered access to all" is an equal opportunity to use their wits to create unequal access to news sources abroad. This suggests the need of "a degree of organized responsibility on the part of newsmen from which they shrink, using the excuse that freedom of the press does not permit of much self-discipline."

How could those who wish to roam the world and write (or photograph) meet the objection of irresponsibility, the report asks.

"One way might be to tighten the foreign correspondents' corps; adopt a code of professional behavior; and require all newsmen, magazine writers, radio people, authors, and photographers to join the corps and observe the code. Appeals from decisions of a government could be taken by the whole corps rather than by an individual, either to the foreign diplomatic corps or to an appropriate unit of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. A resolute move in this direction might dispose of the contradiction of newsmen asking for group protection while at the same time declining to organize group responsibility."

There's the rub. Leaders of our press—as one of the more enlightened of their number, W. W. Waymack of Des Moines, has pointed out—while belaboring the thesis, especially where trade unions are concerned, that rights require responsibility, rarely recognize that what's sauce for the labor goose is sauce for the press gander.

Anguished cries from spokesmen of the press greeted the inclusion in the Freedom of the Press Commission report of recommendations for responsibility. The commission proposed organization of a correspondents' corps under a United Nations covenant and establishment of federated, non-profit, cooperative associations, with non-exclusive membership, in the communications industries.

The purpose of the associations would be to assure wide distribution abroad of the best domestic products and discourage by self-regulatory agreement the export of sub-standard products. Such proposals were opposed as "impractical," "regimentation," "devitalizing."

SO is the atom bomb devitalizing, and the commission's report makes it quite clear that it will take more than a deep commitment to laissez-faire competition to bring about the kind of understanding that will ward off use of the bomb.

How long can our press, which showed certain signs of obsolescence even before Hiroshima, go on without

clearer definitions of its freedom and its responsibilities?

Norman Cousins's "Modern Man" editorial remarked that no amount of tinkering with our institutions will be sufficient to insure survival unless man himself can make the necessary adjustments in his relationship to the world and to society.

We have been tinkering with our press for two centuries. We have not now in 1946 made the necessary adjustments in our relationship to the institution. We don't even know what kind of institution it is or what we want it to be—a public utility or a commercial enterprise, a profession, a trade, or a game.

The men who own and run our newspapers, we who write for them, and you who read them have never decided just what the press is, can be, or should be in a free democratic society.

Is journalism a profession or isn't it?

Why, yes, of course, said the publishers when it was first suggested that they submit like any other business to the provisions of the wages-and-hours laws. How can you put professional brains and creative work on a timeclock basis?

No, of course not, they cry when you suggest that the press submit to the standards and controls exercised over other callings that claim to be professions. Granting that medicine has quacks, law has shysters, education has charlatans, and the ministry has Elmer Gantrys—at least they can be unfrocked or disbarred or disqualified.

What is to stop any madman—or madwoman—who happens to have relatives in the business from putting out a newspaper? What is to prevent any facile ex-sportswriter or any cynical ex-crime reporter from setting himself up as world expert before a ready-made audience and poisoning the minds of millions with malice and misinformation? What is to keep any xenophobe who doesn't even know his own language from becoming a foreign correspondent and muddying the waters of international understanding?

This is not to say that there ought to be a law. Other professions have

found proper ways of policing their own ranks. Inside the newspaper fraternity, however, it isn't even polite to point.

WHEN the scientists realized what they had let loose by splitting the atom they left the laboratories and rushed to the law chambers and the hustings for aid in controlling the thing that might mean suicide for civilization.

While some writers do their best in their columns to counteract the warlike spirit being whipped up in a great part of the press, few of them would think of suggesting that this criminal irresponsibility be curbed somehow.

The other day one New York newspaper flexed its muscles and cried in capital letters: "This country does not fear any country at war." That kind of talk, yesterday, meant, at worst, another war. Today it invites the destruction of civilization. If they are not afraid of the very word *war*, the gentlemen are indeed mad.

No, our journalism today has no standards, either technical or ethical, by which its practitioners are obliged to abide—no credentials and no tests. It has codes, plenty of them. The American Society of Newspaper Editors has a code. The American Newspaper Guild has a code. Even the International News Service has a code. So far any one of them is little more than a code in the head. Only the individual conscience gives stature and status to the reporter, editor, and publisher.

Not that we all don't kick the gong around. We quarrel, and often quibble, about facts and opinion, about objectivity and bias, immediacy and perspective, monopoly and competition, freedom and controls, about whether to give the public what we think it wants or what we think it needs.

In the recent rupture between the press associations and the State Department—in the midst of a lot of pious talk about the fear of propaganda and the like—one editor revealed in a trade-organ symposium what was on most of their minds.

"Let the foreign sources buy the cold facts and form their own opinions," he said.

Recently Kent Cooper, general manager of the Associated Press, who has been conducting a high-minded crusade to spread the free press as we know it all over the world, commented to me, in connection with the AP's refusal to supply its news file to the government for short-wave broadcasts abroad: "I don't see U. S. Steel giving anything away."

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A People's Soldier

MY THREE YEARS WITH EISENHOWER: The Personal Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, Naval Aid to General Eisenhower, 1942-1945. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1946. 911 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

THIS book is not a military biography in the tradition of Henderson and Freeman. It is not a history of our greatest campaign. It is just what its title says, and no more: the diary of a man who spent three years in close association with America's greatest captain of armies during the time when he established his right to that proud preëminence. As such, it is invaluable to the further biographer and historian who will, in the fullness of time, produce the careful, patient, reflective works which will record General Eisenhower's life and victories. And as such it is likewise invaluable to the reader of today as a faithful picture of the man to whom we all owe so much.

As we read it, we will be grateful that it was written by a first-class reporter, and that such a reporter had the unique opportunities afforded to Captain Butcher—in his intimate and constant contact with the Commander-in-Chief, in the confidence and frankness with which General Eisenhower dealt with him, his access to all documents and messages, and the semi-independent position which he enjoyed as a naval aide at an Army headquarters. We will be even more grateful for the qualities of Captain Butcher himself—his ability as a reporter, his warm friendliness and cheerful humor which endeared him alike to prime ministers and private soldiers, and the patient care with which he kept his diary complete under conditions which must have been a daily temptation to let the doggone thing go until tomorrow.

Captain Butcher does not attempt to disguise his admiration for his chief. If you are looking for the debunking and criticism which is so dear to the heart of the American iconoclast, you will not find it in this book. But if you wish to follow our great captain through the trials and perils of the greatest responsibility which our country has ever laid on the shoulders of a single commander, if you wish to understand something of the infinite complexities of war, here is your book.

Aside from its portrait of Eisenhower the man and the general, I think the book's greatest present value is in its demonstration of a fact which

most Americans do not yet fully understand: that in the making of war and in the maintenance of peace the political and military factors can never be separated. It is always, in a democracy, essential for a commander-in-chief to satisfy his political superiors that his plans are sound and that they will achieve the objectives for which the war is being fought. Sometimes these political superiors have definite military ideas of their own—Prime Minister Churchill had a good many, as this book will show, and some of them had to be resisted—but there is also constant reference to the effect of military decisions on public opinion, and vice versa. The public confidence had to be maintained—even such a matter as a decision to shift the command of an army group under the pressure of changed conditions had to be considered in the light of its effect on the headlines back home. And if civilian statesmen expressed their views on military matters with a freedom which their competence did not always justify, we find also military men expressing their views on such subjects as whether it was proper for the British Prime Minister to seek a vote of confidence in the House of Commons on the Education Bill.

Yet for both there was justification: the civilians could gauge better than the soldiers the intangibles of public reaction to success or failure, the soldiers could gauge better than the civilians the disastrous effect on the war effort of a sudden change in government of one of the Allies.

The lesson to be drawn from all this is one not only for the past but for the uncertain future. It is a lesson of particular importance to the citizens of a nation which has become, all unwillingly, the greatest military power on earth, charged by the possession of power with a responsibility such as has never come to any nation before in human history. It is the twin lesson that the military power of this republic is and must remain the possession of its people, and that those people must in future give far greater weight than ever before to military advice in time of peace, that they may so use their power as to prevent the utter calamity of another war.

If it is true that the politician does not take kindly to military advice because it does not take account of political considerations which seem to him imperative, it is also true that the soldier does not take kindly to political interference in affairs which seem to him to require decision



—Halsman

Capt. Harry C. Butcher, no debunker.

purely on military grounds. "He would be a lot happier," says Captain Butcher of his chief in North Africa, "if this was simply a military job." Probably as peace-time Chief of Staff General Eisenhower feels the same way. But it was not a purely military job he had in North Africa, and it is not a purely military job he has now. The account which Captain Butcher has given us of his daily work during the war is one which every citizen should read and ponder as we face a future in which the military power of the United States must be the foundation of freedom and of security for all the world.

This is a book which is full of quotable material—an almost irresistible temptation to the reviewer. But it is also a book for which the reviewer must feel a special responsibility not to provide in capsule form a resume of the contents for the lazy reader who skims through a detailed review and then doesn't read the book. It is a book about captains and kings, great men and little men, a pageant of history written from a viewpoint of rare opportunity, the moving panorama of that poignant and tragic drama which is war—either the last great war of our civilization, or the grim herald of its destruction.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 630)

ROBERT BROWNING:

PARACELSUS

For men begin to pass their nature's bound,
And find new hopes and cares which fast supplant
Their proper joys and griefs; they grow too great
For narrow creeds of right and wrong, which fade
Before the unmeasured thirst for good.