

THE AMERICAN PRESS
AND THE PUBLIC

A Study and Recommendations

An Address by

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Six years ago almost to the day I talked to you in Louisville on *Public Relations Problems of the American Press*. A survey I made among newspaper publishers and leaders showed widespread criticism and disapproval of the press, with exceptions of course. My respondents urged newspapers to conform more closely to the professional standards in news presentation, independence and crusading set by 19th Century newspaper tycoons Adolph Ochs, Joseph Pulitzer and Thomas Gibson — still the classic criteria. Twelve newspapers were chosen as best representing these high standards: *New York Times*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Louisville Courier Journal*, *Kansas City Star*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Milwaukee Journal*, *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

You asked me this year to update my findings. I thought six years too short a time to find measurable difference. Therefore, we picked a new subject — a public relations program for the American press.

I inquired of your members and other communications experts what were the public relations problems of the press and their solutions. We analyzed thousands of words, hundreds of viewpoints and ideas. This material, with my own interpretations and additions, serves as the base for this talk. Time, regrettably, does not permit naming all my correspondents, whose contributions I deeply appreciate.

I come to you not as a criticizer. I have emphasized the criticisms

given me, because it is these criticisms you have to answer to solve your problems. My own opinion, to be concise, is that the American press is the best press in the world.

Your main concern is with problems, problems covering your relations with society, readers, advertisers, personnel and government.

RELATIONS WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC

As to social responsibility, our respondents recognize newspapers must by conduct and example convince the public that the newspaper is essential, that without independent, informative and crusading newspapers a free society cannot survive. Hoodlums and dictators cringe only before the free American press. Under social responsibility, our respondents list public relations problems that arise in connection with freedom of the press, monopoly, publishing adequate information, independence and crusading.

Freedom of the press is defined by Constitutional amendment as the people's right to know. It implies this right should not be abused by invasion of privacy, sensationalizing of news and scandal. This is in the newspaper's own interest.

The second problem in this area is how to deal with accusations of monopoly against newspapers in one-newspaper towns. Critics said monopoly is dangerous to the public interest.

The newspaper's obligation to inform the public adequately presents another problem. One magazine publisher wrote, "The majority of our dailies have become completely nonessential trash. Many newspapers carry a minimum of important news and bury significant international news." The press is charged with superficiality, overwriting, sensationalizing, glamorizing of unworthy people, inadequacy in news coverage, despite a change for the better in press objectivity and reporting since 1900.

Some criticize the press for a lack of independence. Accusations range from calling it a one-party press, "big business," to suppressed or biased news carriers.

The press is criticized for not crusading more. One correspondent said, ". . . our country's history has been changed repeatedly because of . . . crusades. Demagogues have been toppled, crooks exposed, administrations cleaned out and crime rings broken. . . . (But today) Crusades are often undertaken to impose conformity rather than to fight it. Powerful pressure groups often lay down the lines that serve as crusades . . . whatever crusading is done is being done by a handful of big newspapers. In the smaller cities, the tendency seems to be to keep the applecarts from being upset, and the business department content."

One correspondent told me few newspapers encourage a crusading reporter or editor, perhaps because he might eventually come too close to the publisher's home.

READER RELATIONS

Reader relations trouble you. Circulation and advertising depend on reader support. Television and radio, news magazines, even hobbies and do-it-yourself compete for your readers' time and attention. You ascribe present day distrust or apathy of readers to numerous causes — publishers' complacency, inadequate newspaper content, other media that compete with the newspaper, changing youth attitudes, poor community relations, increased newspaper price.

Readers, you say, have changed with the changing world and George Gallup confirms your thoughts in a recent reader interest study, listing in order of importance: (1) medical science and practice, (2) education, (3) religion, (4) people's finance, (5) what people

think (just as important and interesting as what people do), (6) people in the news.

Public distrust and apathy to newspapers exist today. Readers still appear to believe that news in newspapers is more frequently slanted, more frequently inaccurate than on radio or television, even though news in the three media comes largely from the same sources. The public, you say, takes newspapers for granted along with light bulbs and running water. It gives little thought to the capital, manpower, management and brains involved; doesn't understand the newspaper's real function — to inform, explain and enlighten, awaken and entertain.

You deplore newspapers' complacency, demonstrated by a lack of dynamic newspaper promotion. They seem to live in the world of yesterday, with an old-fashioned image of themselves. Newspapers hide their light under a bushel. You say many papers are run as a kind of public utility by men who conceive of themselves as unelected public officials. I counted 40 different ways in which you told me this.

The problem of content of newspapers troubles you too. How can newspapers best give their readers what they want and should get?

You are concerned with competing communications media. You feel sight and sound make more impact on the individual than print. Newspapers are less glamorous than newer media to readers and advertisers. How to maintain your leadership as newspapers is a problem.

Television watching and radio listening by the younger generation of readers troubles you. It lacks training in reading and in appraising the real value of newspapers.

Relations with your community trouble you. Metropolitan papers have been adversely affected by the suburban growth. How can the newspaper be made a vital partner in the community, you ask.

A last problem in reader relationship is how to get the public to accept price increases of newspapers. To meet skyrocketing expenses, newspapers are being raised from a nickel to a dime. In many cases circulation went down as prices went up.

ADVERTISING RELATIONS

Your relations with advertising present a third major public relations problem. You agreed newspaper advertising relations are pretty well stabilized. The old tendency of advertising domination of the news, puffery on the one hand, suppression on the other, has been greatly reduced. But, you advised me, some problems remain: how to raise rates successfully, how to curb untrue advertisers, how to prevent taxing of advertising, how to cope with claims of competitive media — as for instance, the alleged low cost per thousand claimed for television.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Your relations with employees are not a major problem. Unions are recognized in editorial and mechanical areas. Newspapers have set up pension plans and other welfare plans. Automation, to be sure, may cause some headaches in the mechanical field in the future. But you do refer to some public relations problems — recruitment of high calibre young men to editorial and advertising work, despite the low pay scale. You want to recapture the dignity and romance of the journalism profession. And you want the promotion department of newspaper establishments to be credited with the importance it deserves.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

In your relations with government, censorship at all government levels disturbs you.

Newspapers are closely held. Stockholder relations cause you no concern. But you did, time and time again, state that ownership is behind in research and planning for the future. No major improvement in the printing process of newspapers has been made in 60 years. Newspapers as an industry are spending 7/10 of 1% of their annual take for research as compared with 7% spent by the aviation industry.

So much for your public relations problems as you outlined them to me.

PLANNING A PROGRAM

Public relations, you will agree, is not word manipulation. It is adjustment to conditions by deed and is information and persuasion. From this standpoint I shall now discuss the proposed public relations program for the press with you. I recognize that in many cases only top management can adjust, solve or resolve these problems.

First I shall discuss the state of the press today. Second, objectives of a public relations activity. Third, necessary research for an effective program. Fourth, defining strategy and themes. Fifth, organization. Sixth, planning and timing of the tactics.

If the newspaper fulfills its important function in our society, it must adjust to public need, let the public know its values, persuade the public to support it. The newspaper is faced with a challenge for the future.

According to Mark Ethridge, publisher of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the newspaper industry is contracting, rather than expanding.

The advertising revenue position is not encouraging. In 1949 news-

papers got 36.5% of the advertiser's dollar; in 1957 only 33% of the 10 billion dollar total. Television advertising was up 8.7% last year. Total newspaper revenue gained only 2%. And circulation is not too encouraging.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH

The objective of your public relations activity is to make newspapers recognize that the press must serve a vital public function and at the same time to be a successful private enterprise. This means the press must give the public adequate news, be independent and crusade for democratic purposes.

Research necessary for a sound public relations activity requires much time, effort and money. Since 1939 and 1940 no large-scale public attitude studies of the press have been made. Stanford University is now carrying on a 10-year research program. Its purpose — to develop a research tool for newspapers that will enable them to tell where they stand relative to other newspapers and what readers think of their performance. This study covers adequacy of news content, accuracy, fairness, independence from pressure, confidence of readers in newspaper leadership on political issues and candidates, moral quality of the paper, whether the newspaper meets its public's satisfaction and expectations, and other facts.

Obviously any detailed, scientifically planned public relations program must make further researches. I intend of course to give you some approaches, based on my present tentative findings.

STRATEGY AND THEMES

As to strategies and themes — what strategies to use in an activity? Should you use the strategy of blitzkrieg? Should it be a strategy of

penetration — immediate, intermediate and long-time? Should it be a strategy of attack? Without careful research, I cannot give a detailed plan. But I hope my specific recommendations will be helpful.

Basic research will give you themes or appeals to your specific publics. Many themes are applicable to your problems — to readers, for instance, the theme might be that status comes with being well informed, that reading a newspaper is a profitable activity, that reading a newspaper is the obligation of the citizen, that knowledge is power.

Specific themes and strategies for any problem should stem from research at the time of the publics concerned.

ORGANIZATION

We come to an important point: how to organize a public relations activity. We recommend newspapers should engage in industry-wide aggressive promotion. Individual newspaper promotion, integrated with this promotion, benefits from the improved favorable climate of opinion. But any industry-wide effort can be only as effective as the services it projects. I agree with a correspondent who said that if every newspaper in the country did a good public relations job both in deed and projection of deed, the industry would build its own goodwill. Any united or individual effort will need a budget, but budget alone will not do the requisite job; that is dependent on top management's deeds as well.

Some of you mentioned the importance of National Newspaper Week. To me any "Week" is less than 1/52nd of any year-round activity, unless it is integrated into a long-term program.

PLANNING-TIMING-TACTICS

As to planning, timing and tactics — that is, the coordinated use

of manpower, mindpower and money on an industry-wide or individual basis — I can only *suggest* approaches for your public relations programs with the public in general, with your readers, with advertisers, with your personnel, and finally, with the government.

Assuming Social Responsibility

In terms of social responsibility, newspapers can regulate themselves industry-wise or individually by a code, as the Canons of Journalism of the American Society of Newspaper Editors did with editors. Some years ago the Commission on Freedom of the Press proposed that a committee of outstanding Americans report annually to the American public on how the press served the public. Such a committee, organized nationally or locally, might serve a useful purpose. The public may be enlisted to demand expansion of university and college centers for communications research and to improve professional schools of journalism. To ensure freedom of the press, educate the public to understand that it is the right of the newspaper to publish and the public's right to know.

Monopoly prevails in 94.1% of cities. 1,363 are one-paper cities. But there is today no such thing as monopoly of *news*. Monopoly has resulted in many cases in stronger papers which have greater social responsibility. Papers in monopoly cities not only have the obligation to be objective and fair in performance, but such performance needs continually to be dramatized to the readers.

To cope with the accusation that the news you give your readers is inadequate, you can meet it by publishing more news, more background, more interpretation. The newspaper, as one of you wrote me, is the main instrumentality of the public's knowledge of history and world economics. Maps, photos and other devices will make the news

more intelligible. Let your publics know what you are doing. Certainly the success of our great newspapers proves the validity of this approach.

Charges of non-independence can be disproved by giving equal space to both sides of a controversial issue, regardless of editorial page policy; and having bilateral news coverage of controversial issues. The Elizabeth (New Jersey) *Daily Journal*, as an instance, gives equal space every day to both political parties for four weeks prior to election. Actions and words together will prove independence. One of you said, "Remember that even a very rare deviation from fairness in news presentation is like a rare deviation from virginity — it has an effect on public opinion which is hard to correct."

Crusading, recognized yearly by the Pulitzer Awards, should be actively carried on. Forces that strengthen the public welfare should be supported by newspapers; forces that tear down our society should be resisted. I know of no other method of meeting criticism on that score.

Promotion Activity

To overcome apathy and distrust of the public and improve relations with readers is a major problem. The most important promotion of any newspaper is its daily visit to the reader's home. Reader reception will depend on the extent to which the product satisfies his needs. If the product satisfies, promotion can play an important part. That means upgrading of the promotion department and the promotion man and engaging in dynamic promotion. Use all effective media in telling your story. Let your public know the daily miracle that a newspaper is and how much more it is worth than its price. Editorials and advertising columns and other media may be used to tell the story of

how the news gets into the newspapers. Inform the public of improvements, give data about staffs. Drawing attention to your individual staff personalities, instead of the "team," will be helpful. Acquaint your reader with not only the man, but his job and stature as well. Keep influential businessmen and community leaders informed of your activities and accomplishments.

The *Milwaukee Journal* brochure, reproducing 18 full pages in "Portrait of A Newspaper," is a case in point. The *Appleton Post-Crescent* has had success with full page ads telling about employees and the job they do, running thumb-nail pictures of them. The newspaper, an inanimate object, comes to life, builds a better image, when key news and editorial men maintain personal contact with civic leaders, groups and advertisers. Speaking and community activities will help to divest people of the attitude they often have that newspapers are excessively self-satisfied and that they resent and reject criticism.

Newspaper conventions should give part of their time to introspection, W. W. Waymack said to me; they should engage in tough self-criticism, spot their weaknesses toward their readers and eliminate errors of omission or commission. I agree with this.

Some minor suggestions: Make public announcement of your important contributions of money or leadership, within the bounds of good taste. Maintain meticulous accuracy; a wrong middle initial in print creates the belief that inaccuracy is the most unailing characteristic of a newspaper. Invite complaints and reports of errors.

In this connection the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* maintains a "Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play." Any reader who feels the paper has handled a news story unfairly or inaccurately is invited to register his complaint with the Bureau. A news executive mans the "bureau" and gives careful attention to all complaints. Repeated publication of a little one-column box announcing the existence of the Bureau con-

stantly reminds readers of the paper's intent to be honest and accurate in news reporting.

Content

As to content, reexamine the balance of news, interpretation, reader service and entertainment. A good newspaper is your best promotion. One man put it this way — strive to remain alert to events and to varying interests of people. Recognize those worthy of recognition. Give friendly treatment to worthwhile agencies; count all people important. I concur. The Eureka newspapers in California found that their use of ROP color, imaginative use of photos and new typography was good promotion.

Youth Interest

To enlist the interest of young people, as readers and as possible future employees, we recommend a variety of activity, such as plant tours for high school and college students, distribution of booklets on newspaper careers and aid to the editors of school newspapers, cartoon and photographic contests. The *Washington Post and Times-Herald* guides 5,000 high school and college boys and girls through their plant each year, a sizeable potential readership. Many papers from which I heard engage in effective youth programs. As an example, which I cannot recommend to all of you, the *Birmingham News* gives a calf to boy and girl winners in county stock shows and holds a talent competition for prize scholarship.

All of these activities should maintain newspaper leadership in the face of other media.

Community Relations

Community relations have been cemented in many ways. For in-

stance, the Tucson (Arizona) *Daily Citizen* found that crusades on traffic safety, against jaywalking, for compulsory rabies vaccination for all dogs, finding jobs for the physically handicapped all brought measurable results. The Rochester *Times-Union* and *Democrat & Chronicle* greet visiting dignitaries, help organize parades and other ceremonies. They sponsor soap box derbies and scholastic editors' conferences — as do most of you.

I urge you to create events which bring together people in their own interest. Sponsor civic events. Help analyze your community needs and problems and propose solutions. Some newspapers organize Boards of Community Advisors.

Assume leadership in group activities. Organize fashion shows, cooking classes and home shows, music festivals, publicity and advertising forums for voluntary agencies seeking publicity, and many other comparable activities. Top level management and personnel should be encouraged to participate in such leadership. Your newspaper will become an indispensable part of the community.

To get the public to accept a price increase needs aggressive action. Promote the fact you have improved the appearance and content of the paper. Publicize the values of the newspaper the public is unaware of. Tell people that besides getting the news, the daily paper is an aid in their social and business life and adds to their entertainment.

I have already referred to the need for more research of your public. No newspaper is too small to carry on research as a prerequisite to publishing and promotion.

Building Advertising

As for advertising, continue and expand the advertising bureau of the ANPA. Stress sales advantages of newspaper advertising: speed,

impact, acceptance of the medium, ability of the reader to refer to it a second time, economy, flexibility, efficiency. Insist on painstaking censorship of advertising to protect your readers. No dishonest advertising or advertising contrary to the public good should be accepted. Newspapers must turn down sure-cure medicines, mail order trash, bait advertising, and exaggerated and false claim advertising. But don't add to the criticism of advertising by attacking the advertising of your competitor.

Other Activity

To meet your personnel public relations problems, we recommend increased pay, improved recruitment and better in-service training with better working conditions. This holds for everybody from carrier boys up. What the Nieman Fellows have done at Harvard in advanced orientation to newspapermen might be attempted on a small scale by newspapers.

In government relations keep stressing the importance of freedom of information to the public. Fight government censorship at all levels to prevent the right of the public to know.

I have tried to outline the newspaper's problems of public relations and to give you an approach to their solutions. Your promotional effectiveness depends on readjustment of the press to the needs of our times, rather than on promotional techniques alone. Promotion in its best sense will be most effective if it interprets public needs and trends to newspaper owners and then informs the public of the new product and persuades the public to accept the new product. In this way you will be serving society, your employer and yourself. For the newspaper is an indispensable part of our society and will continue to be a powerful factor for its progress.

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