

# Nieman Reports

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## WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE NEWSPAPER READER

BY WILLIAM J. MILLER

Whenever two or more newspapermen get together the talk sooner or later turns to the sad state of the nation's press, and what should be done about it. That was true of every one of the nine groups of Nieman Fellows so far. A majority in nearly every group felt that the press generally was doing an inadequate, and too often a biased and venal, job. Like the weather, everybody talked about it endlessly but found no solution for it.

Many reasons have been advanced for the publishers' cussed persistence in continuing to publish newspapers that are far from being as honest, as fearless or as outspoken as most of their writers would wish them to be. One possible reason is perhaps too simple to have merited much discussion, and that is that the general public may not want a better press. I have come to the conclusion that the people get about as good a press as they deserve.

By the same logic, I persuaded myself that India did not deserve independence. "Look," I would say to friends who argued that India should be free day after tomorrow, "when we Americans wanted freedom, we damned well took it. It wasn't something we asked somebody to give to us. About the Indians: there are 400,000,000 of them, and only 40,000,000 Englishmen. We have just finished a war in which, for a good solid year, England was uncertain whether she could succeed in hanging on to her own little island, let alone India. During that time, if there had been as many as 5,000,000 Indians who could have agreed on the kind of freedom they wanted, you couldn't persuade me they couldn't have taken it."

The trouble with the Indians was that they couldn't stop fighting among themselves long enough to unite against the English. The trouble with the American newspaper reader, however, is, I believe, that he does not like to read anything that forces him to think. That, and that alone

could account for the fact that all through the war the American newspaper with the yargest circulation, the New York Daily News, was the one which consistently filled its columns with Nazi propaganda. The propaganda evidently did not have any effect, for the Daily News' readers went on about their business of winning a war, but the fact that they continued to read the News instead of dancing up and down and tearing it to pieces is an indication that they read it mostly because its contents were short, simple, and quickly and easily read with no cerebation whatever.

If you will make a careful study of newspaper readers on street cars, subways, busses, or elsewhere, you will quickly note that the moods which conflict with the always tepid desire to be informed are almost as varied as the scenery. At the time when most people read papers, either going to work or going home from it, they tend to be absorbed in day dreams, either planning the triumph they are going to put over, or else thinking up logical excuses for the rebuff they have just suffered.

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There are not many newspapers interesting enough to compete with a man's own mind, where the world's most fascinating character stages a continuous and unbelievably skilful performance for an audience of one. When the dream has fully sway, the paper falls and the reader nods until a sudden stop jolts him back into the present.

As you watch the various newspaper readers, they sort themselves out into types. One man is torn between a desire to read and a desire to look at girls' legs. This forces him to keep jerking the paper sideways. Usually he settles on a particular girl and thereafter maneuvers his paper in such a way that he can pretend to read it and at the same time watch her.

Then there are the two readers who habitually ride together. As one talks, the other unfolds his paper and hastily scans the headlines. When he replies, the other takes a fugitive glance at his. When their discussion reaches an animated stage they roll up the papers and rap the seat with them for emphasis.

There is another type who goes through the whole paper as if he is looking for something he lost. He scans one column up and the next one down so rapidly he appears to be nodding his head. One seldom knows the object of his search, but it is a safe bet that he is looking for his own name.

I once shared an apartment in Cleveland with a photographer who, every night before retiring made it a ritual to go out and buy the bulldog edition of the Plain Dealer. When he returned, he laid the paper on a table and went to bed. This had become such a matter of his life that I doubt he could have slept if he had not done it.

It was also in Cleveland that I encountered the most discerning newspaper critic I have ever met. He was an elderly gentleman of moderate wealth. When his son told him I was with the Cleveland Press, he said he had always preferred the Plain Dealer. "When we are through with our paper," he said, "we use it to wrap the garbage in, and to spread on the kitchen linoleum when we mop. I don't know whether it is because you use a poorer

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William J. Miller, of the staff of Newsweek, was long a crack reporter, rewrite man, and finally a war correspondent for the Cleveland Press. He was a Nieman Fellow in 1940-41.

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grade of paper, or what, but the Press simply does not have the staying qualities of the Plain Dealer."

But to return to my thesis: the majority of American newspaper readers do not like to read anything which forces them to think. That is why PM has made such a miserable showing. Even the most faithful of its 150-odd thousands read PM with something of the same emotions with which they take castor oil. They believe it will be good for them but they are not sure they are going to like it. PM has been plugging along for seven years with the notion that so long as your heart is on the side of the angels, your news does not have to be either fresh or interesting.

There are now about 15,000,000 members of labor unions, whose leaders constantly complain about the unfair treatment labor gets in the press. Any one of the four biggest unions—the Mine Workers, the Steel Workers, the Machinists or the Auto Workers—has a membership of more than 500,000. Yet PM, which has constantly leaned over backward if it has not fallen on its fanny to be fair to labor, was unable to obtain, out of the entire labor movement, the 200,000 readers necessary to keep it breaking even without ads. Any one of these unions, with a \$1 assessment per member, could raise enough money to start a daily paper which presumably could, by pristine example, put the "kept press" to shame. Yet the unions have consistently, and one is inclined to think, cannily, kept out of the daily publishing field. So long as they are unrepresented, they can continue to complain. With their own paper, they would have to make it interesting.

The organized newspapermen themselves discovered that that was not as easy as it sounds; the Guild Reporter, while it has diligently guarded the members' economic interests, has never kept anybody awake reading it from cover to cover.

For at least a decade, American writers have been complaining about the Readers Digest. They felt that there was something indecent about a magazine—which was, in the last analysis, nothing but flapdoodle and calculated corn—making such an embarrassment of riches than its owner could not give them all away. Some of them also felt that it was biased, and was a dangerous influence in its seeming inclination toward authoritarianism. Yet it was not until 1946 that some 380 writers, artists and photographers discovered that, by subscribing some \$500 to \$1,000 each, they could publish their own magazine. The result, called "47—Magazine of the Year"\* has just appeared, with a greater initial

\*Yes, the writer is a stockholder.

circulation, and certainly a greater reader interest, than LIFE Magazine had at the beginning. Whether this can be sustained, or whether, indeed, writers at their uninhibited best can be interesting to the mass, remains to be seen.

It does, however, indicate that any time a sufficient number of people become really dissatisfied with the daily newspaper they are getting, they can pool their money and roll their own. The Communists did it a long time ago, but they do not put out any better a newspaper than they did leaflets. The Mine Workers can do it any time they get ready. So can the Auto Workers, so can the Steel Workers, so can the Machinists and the Ladies Garment Workers. So can Jehovah's Witnesses. And so, for that matter, can the newspapermen who are always complaining about how bad the press is. There are now 20,000 in the Guild. If each one of them put up \$100—you see what I mean. Indeed, if 20,000 newspapermen could ever get together long enough to put up even \$10 apiece, I have no doubt that at least three or four venturesome millionaires could be found who would willingly match their money or double it. There is more venture capital afloat today than there are brave and inspiring ideas to claim it.

However, if newspapermen could own and publish their own paper, and make it as honest, free and unbiased as their various lights could agree upon, it would be a mistake for them to undertake to tell the public how to think. The public prefers not to think. It prefers to be entertained. So let the perfect newspaper be short, simple, sexy and full of pictures. Let it devote one fourth of its space to a lavish coverage of sports, including who is bribing whom, and another fourth to comics. I predict it will sell like hell. If, on top of that, it is also honest, unprejudiced, and unslanted, the public won't mind. The press the American people get today is pretty bad, and it is just what they deserve.

### Answer to Advertiser

The movie theatre manager in Laramie objected to an editorial in the paper. Failing to impress the editor he ended by threatening to withdraw his advertisement.

"You pull out your ad," rejoined the editor, "and I'll start reviewing your shows."

The advertising stayed in.

### What the Public Wants?

The following "poll" story by the UP was printed on the first page of The Boston Evening Globe, January 29:

#### Sex and Disaster News and Comics Choice of 200 Girls

By the United Press

Take it from 200 feminine high school graduates, the modern gal wants sex, disaster and L'il Abner in her newspaper.

A poll of girl students at Boston's Kathleen Dell Secretarial School revealed 40 percent selecting "Man Attacks School Girl" 'as tops in interest among a collection of sample headlines offered for their perusal.

Some were willing to take "Twenty Killed in Plane Crash" as their second choice, but a blood-tingling scare-head about the atom bomb aroused only polite interest. No one seemed worried about "Russia Balks at United States Terms."

"Tot lost in the woods" didn't get a tumble.

More than 97 percent of the student stenographers said they liked the comics best of all. In fact 33 percent read the funnies first and then "took in the sports section and worked forward through the paper, ending up with the front page."

Two tall girls with glasses said they read the editorials first.

Most of the lassies preferred home town papers, but 57 percent said they relied on a news magazine to supplement the reading. Three cents was considered enough to pay for a paper, but they said they would part with more to "get the news that interests us."

Forty-two percent said they wouldn't buy a paper without advertisements. Half the group liked the fashion ads, 22 percent preferred the classified ads and 15 percent said they "read 'em all."

World War II rated as the most important news event during the past two decades with one third of the group. The atom bomb was second. The rest of the girls said they could think of no single outstanding news event within their lifetime.

The students were almost unanimous in saying they "questioned the accuracy" of news published in papers, but more than half of them admitted their opinions were "influenced by material in newspaper columns."

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"Your City Tomorrow" by Guy Greer, MacMillan Co, N Y, published Feb 18, is a book to reinforce the editorial writer who must deal with such urgent issues as the decentralization of cities, housing, planning and the problem of local taxation.