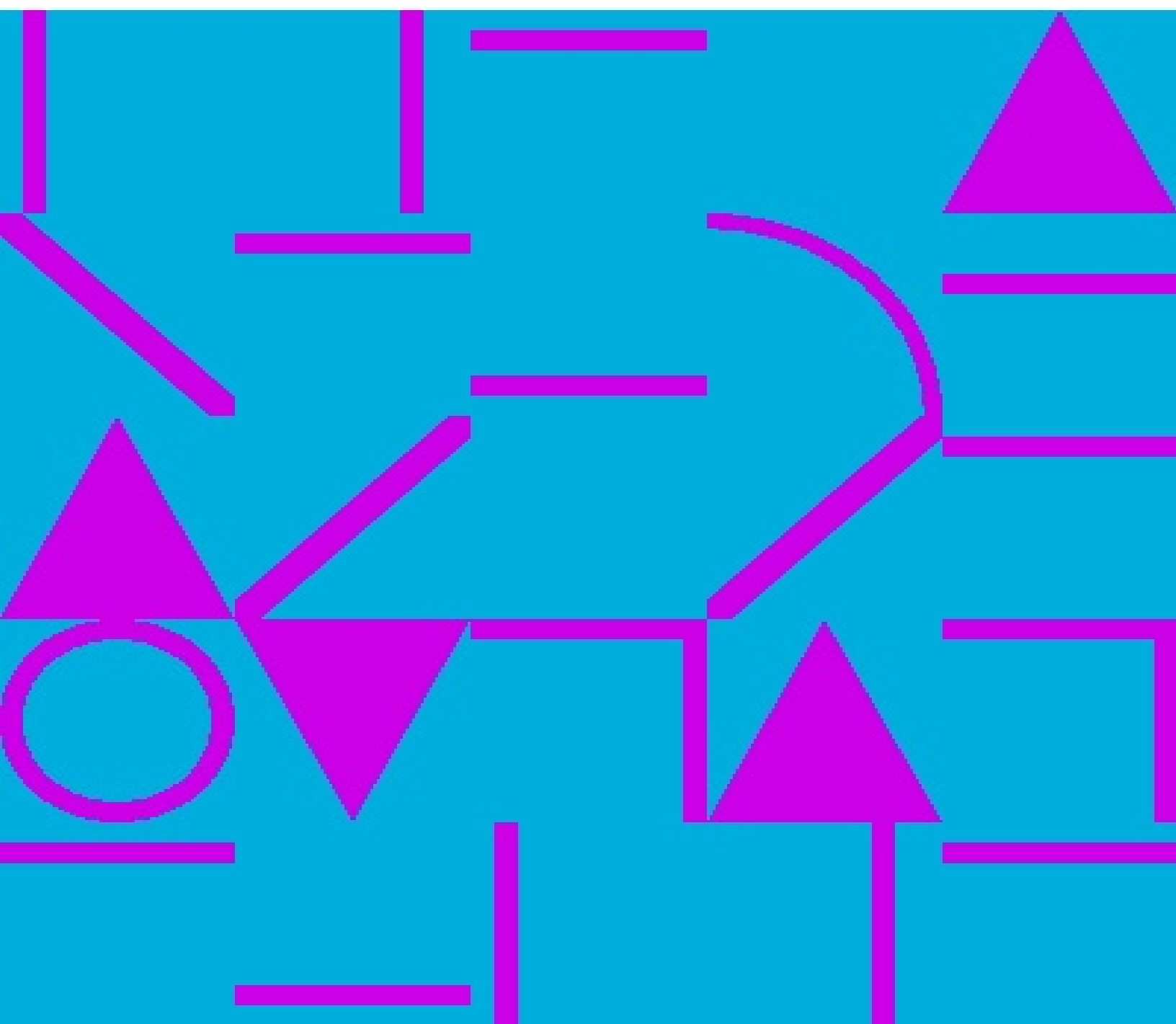


The American Newspaper

Charles Dudley Warner



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AMERICAN NEWSPAPER ***

Produced by David Widger

THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

By Charles Dudley Warner

Our theme for the hour is the American Newspaper. It is a subject in which everybody is interested, and about which it is not polite to say that anybody is not well informed; for, although there are scattered through the land many persons, I am sorry to say, unable to pay for a newspaper, I have never yet heard of anybody unable to edit one.

The topic has many points of view, and invites various study and comment. In our limited time we must select one only. We have heard a great deal about the power, the opportunity, the duty, the "mission," of the press. The time has come for a more philosophical treatment of it, for an inquiry into its relations to our complex civilization, for some ethical account of it as one of the developments of our day, and for some discussion of the effect it is producing, and likely to produce, on the education of the people. Has the time come, or is it near at hand, when we can point to a person who is alert, superficial, ready and shallow, self-confident and half-informed, and say, "There is a product of the American newspaper"? The newspaper is not a willful creation, nor an isolated phenomenon, but the

legitimate outcome of our age, as much as our system of popular education. And I trust that some competent observer will make, perhaps for this association, a philosophical study of it. My task here is a much humbler one. I have thought that it may not be unprofitable to treat the newspaper from a practical and even somewhat mechanical point of view.

The newspaper is a private enterprise. Its object is to make money for its owner. Whatever motive may be given out for starting a newspaper, expectation of profit by it is the real one, whether the newspaper is religious, political, scientific, or literary. The exceptional cases of newspapers devoted to ideas or "causes" without regard to profit are so few as not to affect the rule. Commonly, the cause, the sect, the party, the trade, the delusion, the idea, gets its newspaper, its organ, its advocate, only when some individual thinks he can see a pecuniary return in establishing it.

This motive is not lower than that which leads people into any other occupation or profession. To make a living, and to have a career, is the original incentive in all cases. Even in purely philanthropical enterprises the driving-wheel that keeps them in motion for any length of time is the salary paid the working members. So powerful is this incentive that sometimes the wheel will continue to turn round when there is no grist to grind. It sometimes happens that the friction of the philanthropic machinery is so great that but very little power is transmitted to the object for which the machinery was made. I knew a devoted agent of the American Colonization Society, who, for several years, collected in Connecticut just enough, for the cause, to buy his clothes, and pay his board at a good hotel.

It is scarcely necessary to say, except to prevent a possible misapprehension, that the editor who has no high ideals, no intention of benefiting his fellow-men by his newspaper, and uses it unscrupulously as a means of money-making only, sinks to the level of the physician and the lawyer who have no higher conception of their callings than that they offer opportunities for getting money by appeals to credulity, and by assisting in evasions of the law.

If the excellence of a newspaper is not always measured by its profitableness, it is generally true that, if it does not pay its owner, it is valueless to the public. Not all newspapers which make money are good, for some succeed by catering to the lowest tastes of respectable people, and to the prejudice, ignorance, and passion of the lowest class; but, as a rule, the successful journal pecuniarily is the best journal. The reasons for this are on the surface. The impecunious newspaper cannot give its readers promptly the news, nor able discussion of the news, and, still worse, it cannot be independent. The political journal that relies for support upon drippings of party favor or patronage, the general newspaper that finds it necessary to existence to manipulate stock reports, the religious weekly that draws precarious support from puffing doubtful enterprises, the literary paper that depends upon the approval of publishers, are poor affairs, and, in the long run or short run, come to grief. Some newspapers do succeed by sensationalism, as some preachers do; by a kind of quackery, as some doctors do; by trimming and shifting to any momentary popular prejudice, as some politicians do; by becoming the paid advocate of a personal ambition or a corporate enterprise, as some lawyers do: but the newspaper only becomes a real power when it is able, on the basis of pecuniary independence, to free itself from all such entanglements. An editor who stands with hat in hand has the respect accorded to any other beggar.

The recognition of the fact that the newspaper is a private and purely business enterprise will help to define the mutual relations of the editor and the public. His claim upon the public is exactly that of

any manufacturer or dealer. It is that of the man who makes cloth, or the grocer who opens a shop—neither has a right to complain if the public does not buy of him. If the buyer does not like a cloth half shoddy, or coffee half-chicory, he will go elsewhere. If the subscriber does not like one newspaper, he takes another, or none. The appeal for newspaper support on the ground that such a journal ought to be sustained by an enlightened community, or on any other ground than that it is a good article that people want,—or would want if they knew its value,—is purely childish in this age of the world. If any person wants to start a periodical devoted to decorated teapots, with the noble view of inducing the people to live up to his idea of a teapot, very good; but he has no right to complain if he fails.

On the other hand, the public has no rights in the newspaper except what it pays for; even the "old subscriber" has none, except to drop the paper if it ceases to please him. The notion that the subscriber has a right to interfere in the conduct of the paper, or the reader to direct its opinions, is based on a misconception of what the newspaper is. The claim of the public to have its communications printed in the paper is equally baseless. Whether they shall be printed or not rests in the discretion of the editor, having reference to his own private interest, and to his apprehension of the public good. Nor is he bound to give any reason for his refusal. It is purely in his discretion whether he will admit a reply to any thing that has appeared in his columns. No one has a right to demand it. Courtesy and policy may grant it; but the right to it does not exist. If any one is injured, he may seek his remedy at law; and I should like to see the law of libel such and so administered that any person injured by a libel in the newspaper, as well as by slander out of it, could be sure of prompt redress. While the subscriber acquires no right to dictate to the newspaper, we can imagine an extreme case when he should have his money back which had been paid in advance, if the newspaper totally changed its character. If he had contracted with a dealer to supply him with hard coal during the winter, he might have a remedy if the dealer delivered only charcoal in the coldest weather; and so if he paid for a Roman Catholic journal which suddenly became an organ of the spiritists.

The advertiser acquires no more rights in the newspaper than the subscriber. He is entitled to use the space for which he pays by the insertion of such material as is approved by the editor. He gains no interest in any other part of the paper, and has no more claim to any space in the editorial columns, than any other one of the public. To give him such space would be unbusiness-like, and the extension of a preference which would be unjust to the rest of the public. Nothing more quickly destroys the character of a journal, begets distrust of it, and so reduces its value, than the well-founded suspicion that its editorial columns are the property of advertisers. Even a religious journal will, after a while, be injured by this.

Yet it must be confessed that here is one of the greatest difficulties of modern journalism. The newspaper must be cheap. It is, considering the immense cost to produce it, the cheapest product ever offered to man. Most newspapers cost more than they sell for; they could not live by subscriptions; for any profits, they certainly depend upon advertisements. The advertisements depend upon the circulation; the circulation is likely to dwindle if too much space is occupied by advertisements, or if it is evident that the paper belongs to its favored advertisers. The counting-room desires to conciliate the advertisers; the editor looks to making a paper satisfactory to his readers. Between this see-saw of the necessary subscriber and the necessary advertiser, a good many newspapers go down. This difficulty would be measurably removed by the admission of the truth that the newspaper is a strictly business enterprise, depending for success upon a 'quid pro quo' between all parties connected with it, and upon integrity in its management.

Akin to the false notion that the newspaper is a sort of open channel that the public may use as it chooses, is the conception of it as a charitable institution. The newspaper, which is the property of a private person as much as a drug-shop is, is expected to perform for nothing services which would be asked of no other private person. There is scarcely a charitable enterprise to which it is not asked to contribute of its space, which is money, ten times more than other persons in the community, who are ten times as able as the owner of the newspaper, contribute. The journal is considered "mean" if it will not surrender its columns freely to notices and announcements of this sort. If a manager has a new hen-coop or a new singer he wishes to introduce to the public, he comes to the newspaper, expecting to have his enterprise extolled for nothing, and probably never thinks that it would be just as proper for him to go to one of the regular advertisers in the paper and ask him to give up his space. Anything, from a church picnic to a brass-band concert for the benefit of the widow of the triangles, asks the newspaper to contribute. The party in politics, whose principles the editor advocates, has no doubt of its rightful claim upon him, not only upon the editorial columns, but upon the whole newspaper. It asks without hesitation that the newspaper should take up its valuable space by printing hundreds and often thousands of dollars' worth of political announcements in the course of a protracted campaign, when it never would think of getting its halls, its speakers, and its brass bands, free of expense. Churches, as well as parties, expect this sort of charity. I have known rich churches, to whose members it was a convenience to have their Sunday and other services announced, withdraw the announcements when the editor declined any longer to contribute a weekly fifty-cents' worth of space. No private persons contribute so much to charity, in proportion to ability, as the newspaper. Perhaps it will get credit for this in the next world: it certainly never does in this.

The chief function of the newspaper is to collect and print the news. Upon the kind of news that should be gathered and published, we shall remark farther on. The second function is to elucidate the news, and comment on it, and show its relations. A third function is to furnish reading-matter to the general public.

Nothing is so difficult for the manager as to know what news is: the instinct for it is a sort of sixth sense. To discern out of the mass of materials collected not only what is most likely to interest the public, but what phase and aspect of it will attract most attention, and the relative importance of it; to tell the day before or at midnight what the world will be talking about in the morning, and what it will want the fullest details of, and to meet that want in advance,—requires a peculiar talent. There is always some topic on which the public wants instant information. It is easy enough when the news is developed, and everybody is discussing it, for the editor to fall in; but the success of the news printed depends upon a pre-apprehension of all this. Some papers, which nevertheless print all the news, are always a day behind, do not appreciate the popular drift till it has gone to something else, and err as much by clinging to a subject after it is dead as by not taking it up before it was fairly born. The public craves eagerly for only one thing at a time, and soon wearies of that; and it is to the newspaper's profit to seize the exact point of a debate, the thrilling moment of an accident, the pith of an important discourse; to throw itself into it as if life depended on it, and for the hour to flood the popular curiosity with it as an engine deluges a fire.

Scarcely less important than promptly seizing and printing the news is the attractive arrangement of it, its effective presentation to the eye. Two papers may have exactly the same important intelligence, identically the same despatches: the one will be called bright, attractive, "newsy"; the other, dull and stupid.

We have said nothing yet about that, which, to most people, is the most important aspect of the newspaper,—the editor's responsibility to the public for its contents. It is sufficient briefly to say here, that it is exactly the responsibility of every other person in society,—the full responsibility of his opportunity. He has voluntarily taken a position in which he can do a great deal of good or a great deal of evil, and he, should be held and judged by his opportunity: it is greater than that of the preacher, the teacher, the congressman, the physician. He occupies the loftiest pulpit; he is in his teacher's desk seven days in the week; his voice can be heard farther than that of the most lusty fog-horn politician; and often, I am sorry to say, his columns outshine the shelves of the druggist in display of proprietary medicines. Nothing else ever invented has the public attention as the newspaper has, or is an influence so constant and universal. It is this large opportunity that has given the impression that the newspaper is a public rather than a private enterprise.

It was a nebulous but suggestive remark that the newspaper occupies the borderland between literature and common sense. Literature it certainly is not, and in the popular apprehension it seems often too erratic and variable to be credited with the balance-wheel of sense; but it must have something of the charm of the one, and the steadiness and sagacity of the other, or it will fail to please. The model editor, I believe, has yet to appear. Notwithstanding the traditional reputation of certain editors in the past, they could not be called great editors by our standards; for the elements of modern journalism did not exist in their time. The old newspaper was a broadside of stale news, with a moral essay attached. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin, with our facilities, would have been very near the ideal editor. There was nothing he did not wish to know; and no one excelled him in the ability to communicate what he found out to the average mind. He came as near as anybody ever did to marrying common sense to literature: he had it in him to make it sufficient for journalistic purposes. He was what somebody said Carlyle was, and what the American editor ought to be,—a vernacular man.

The assertion has been made recently, publicly, and with evidence adduced, that the American newspaper is the best in the world. It is like the assertion that the American government is the best in the world; no doubt it is, for the American people.

Judged by broad standards, it may safely be admitted that the American newspaper is susceptible of some improvement, and that it has something to learn from the journals of other nations. We shall be better employed in correcting its weaknesses than in complacently contemplating its excellences.

Let us examine it in its three departments already named,—its news, editorials, and miscellaneous reading-matter.

In particularity and comprehensiveness of news-collecting, it may be admitted that the American newspapers for a time led the world. I mean in the picking-up of local intelligence, and the use of the telegraph to make it general. And with this arose the odd notion that news is made important by the mere fact of its rapid transmission over the wire. The English journals followed, speedily overtook, and some of the wealthier ones perhaps surpassed, the American in the use of the telegraph, and in the presentation of some sorts of local news; not of casualties, and small city and neighborhood events, and social gossip (until very recently), but certainly in the business of the law courts, and the crimes and mishaps that come within police and legal supervision. The leading papers of the German press, though strong in correspondence and in discussion of affairs, are far less comprehensive in their news than the American or the English. The French journals, we are accustomed to say, are not newspapers at all. And this is true as we use the word. Until recently, nothing has been of importance to the

Frenchman except himself; and what happened outside of France, not directly affecting his glory, his profit, or his pleasure, did not interest him: hence, one could nowhere so securely intrench himself against the news of the world as behind the barricade of the Paris journals. But let us not make a mistake in this matter. We may have more to learn from the Paris journals than from any others. If they do not give what we call news—local news, events, casualties, the happenings of the day,—they do give ideas, opinions; they do discuss politics, the social drift; they give the intellectual ferment of Paris; they supply the material that Paris likes to talk over, the badinage of the boulevard, the wit of the salon, the sensation of the stage, the new movement in literature and in politics. This may be important, or it may be trivial: it is commonly more interesting than much of that which we call news.

Our very facility and enterprise in news-gathering have overwhelmed our newspapers, and it may be remarked that editorial discrimination has not kept pace with the facilities. We are overpowered with a mass of undigested intelligence, collected for the most part without regard to value. The force of the newspaper is expended in extending these facilities, with little regard to discriminating selection. The burden is already too heavy for the newspaper, and wearisome to the public.

The publication of the news is the most important function of the paper. How is it gathered? We must confess that it is gathered very much by chance. A drag-net is thrown out, and whatever comes is taken. An examination into the process of collecting shows what sort of news we are likely to get, and that nine-tenths of that printed is collected without much intelligence exercised in selection. The alliance of the associated press with the telegraph company is a fruitful source of news of an inferior quality. Of course, it is for the interest of the telegraph company to swell the volume to be transmitted. It is impossible for the associated press to have an agent in every place to which the telegraph penetrates: therefore the telegraphic operators often act as its purveyors. It is for their interest to send something; and their judgment of what is important is not only biased, but is formed by purely local standards. Our news, therefore, is largely set in motion by telegraphic operators, by agents trained to regard only the accidental, the startling, the abnormal, as news; it is picked up by sharp prowlers about town, whose pay depends upon finding something, who are looking for something spicy and sensational, or which may be dressed up and exaggerated to satisfy an appetite for novelty and high flavor, and who regard casualties as the chief news. Our newspapers every day are loaded with accidents, casualties, and crimes concerning people of whom we never heard before and never shall hear again, the reading of which is of no earthly use to any human being.

What is news? What is it that an intelligent public should care to hear of and talk about? Run your eye down the columns of your journal. There was a drunken squabble last night in a New York groggery; there is a petty but carefully elaborated village scandal about a foolish girl; a woman accidentally dropped her baby out of a fourth-story window in Maine; in Connecticut, a wife, by mistake, got into the same railway train with another woman's husband; a child fell into a well in New Jersey; there is a column about a peripatetic horse-race, which exhibits, like a circus, from city to city; a laborer in a remote town in Pennsylvania had a sunstroke; there is an edifying dying speech of a murderer, the love-letter of a suicide, the set-to of a couple of congressmen; and there are columns about a gigantic war of half a dozen politicians over the appointment of a sugar-gauger. Granted that this pabulum is desired by the reader, why not save the expense of transmission by having several columns of it stereotyped, to be reproduced at proper intervals? With the date changed, it would always, have its original value, and perfectly satisfy the demand, if a demand exists, for this sort of news.

This is not, as you see, a description of your journal: it is a description of only one portion of it. It is a

complex and wonderful creation. Every morning it is a mirror of the world, more or less distorted and imperfect, but such a mirror as it never had held up to it before. But consider how much space is taken up with mere trivialities and vulgarities under the name of news. And this evil is likely to continue and increase until news-gatherers learn that more important than the reports of accidents and casualties is the intelligence of opinions and thoughts, the moral and intellectual movements of modern life. A horrible assassination in India is instantly telegraphed; but the progress of such a vast movement as that of the Wahabee revival in Islam, which may change the destiny of great provinces, never gets itself put upon the wires. We hear promptly of a landslide in Switzerland, but only very slowly of a political agitation that is changing the constitution of the republic. It should be said, however, that the daily newspaper is not alone responsible for this: it is what the age and the community where it is published make it. So far as I have observed, the majority of the readers in America peruses eagerly three columns about a mill between an English and a naturalized American prize-fighter, but will only glance at a column report of a debate in the English parliament which involves a radical change in the whole policy of England; and devours a page about the Chantilly races, while it ignores a paragraph concerning the suppression of the Jesuit schools.

Our newspapers are overwhelmed with material that is of no importance. The obvious remedy for this would be more intelligent direction in the collection of news, and more careful sifting and supervision of it when gathered. It becomes every day more apparent to every manager that such discrimination is more necessary. There is no limit to the various intelligence and gossip that our complex life offers—no paper is big enough to contain it; no reader has time enough to read it. And the journal must cease to be a sort of waste-basket at the end of a telegraph wire, into which any reporter, telegraph operator, or gossip-monger can dump whatever he pleases. We must get rid of the superstition that value is given to an unimportant "item" by sending it a thousand miles over a wire.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the American newspaper, especially of the country weekly, is its enormous development of local and neighborhood news. It is of recent date. Horace Greeley used to advise the country editors to give small space to the general news of the world, but to cultivate assiduously the home field, to glean every possible detail of private life in the circuit of the county, and print it. The advice was shrewd for a metropolitan editor, and it was not without its profit to the country editor. It was founded on a deep knowledge of human nature; namely, upon the fact that people read most eagerly that which they already know, if it is about themselves or their neighbors, if it is a report of something they have been concerned in, a lecture they have heard, a fair, or festival, or wedding, or funeral, or barn-raising they have attended. The result is column after column of short paragraphs of gossip and trivialities, chips, chips, chips. Mr. Sales is contemplating erecting a new counter in his store; his rival opposite has a new sign; Miss Bumps of Gath is visiting her cousin, Miss Smith of Bozrah; the sheriff has painted his fence; Farmer Brown has lost his cow; the eminent member from Neopolis has put an ell on one end of his mansion, and a mortgage on the other.

On the face of it nothing is so vapid and profitless as column after column of this reading. These "items" have very little interest, except to those who already know the facts; but those concerned like to see them in print, and take the newspaper on that account. This sort of inanity takes the place of reading-matter that might be of benefit, and its effect must be to belittle and contract the mind. But this is not the most serious objection to the publication of these worthless details. It cultivates self-consciousness in the community, and love of notoriety; it develops vanity and self-importance, and elevates the trivial in life above the essential.

And this brings me to speak of the mania in this age, and especially in America, for notoriety in social life as well as in politics. The newspapers are the vehicle of it, sometimes the occasion, but not the cause. The newspaper may have fostered—it has not created—this hunger for publicity. Almost everybody talks about the violation of decency and the sanctity of private life by the newspaper in the publication of personalities and the gossip of society; and the very people who make these strictures are often those who regard the paper as without enterprise and dull, if it does not report in detail their weddings, their balls and parties, the distinguished persons present, the dress of the ladies, the sumptuousness of the entertainment, if it does not celebrate their church services and festivities, their social meetings, their new house, their distinguished arrivals at this or that watering-place. I believe every newspaper manager will bear me out in saying that there is a constant pressure on him to print much more of such private matter than his judgment and taste permit or approve, and that the gossip which is brought to his notice, with the hope that he will violate the sensitiveness of social life by printing it, is far away larger in amount than all that he publishes.

To return for a moment to the subject of general news. The characteristic of our modern civilization is sensitiveness, or, as the doctors say, nervousness. Perhaps the philanthropist would term it sympathy. No doubt an exciting cause of it is the adaptation of electricity to the transmission of facts and ideas. The telegraph, we say, has put us in sympathy with all the world. And we reckon this enlargement of nerve contact somehow a gain. Our bared nerves are played upon by a thousand wires. Nature, no doubt, has a method of hardening or deadening them to these shocks; but nevertheless, every person who reads is a focus for the excitements, the ills, the troubles, of all the world. In addition to his local pleasures and annoyances, he is in a manner compelled to be a sharer in the universal uneasiness. It might be worth while to inquire what effect this exciting accumulation of the news of the world upon an individual or a community has upon happiness and upon character. Is the New England man any better able to bear or deal with his extraordinary climate by the daily knowledge of the weather all over the globe? Is a man happier, or improved in character, by the woful tale of a world's distress and apprehension that greets him every morning at breakfast? Knowledge, we know, increases sorrow; but I suppose the offset to that is, that strength only comes through suffering. But this is a digression.

Not second in importance to any department of the journal is the reporting; that is, the special reporting as distinguished from the more general news-gathering. I mean the reports of proceedings in Congress, in conventions, assemblies, and conferences, public conversations, lectures, sermons, investigations, law trials, and occurrences of all sorts that rise into general importance. These reports are the basis of our knowledge and opinions. If they are false or exaggerated, we are ignorant of what is taking place, and misled. It is of infinitely more importance that they should be absolutely trustworthy than that the editorial comments should be sound and wise. If the reports on affairs can be depended on, the public can form its own opinion, and act intelligently. And; if the public has a right to demand anything of a newspaper, it is that its reports of what occurs shall be faithfully accurate, unprejudiced, and colorless. They ought not, to be editorials, or the vehicles of personal opinion and feeling. The interpretation of, the facts they give should be left to the editor and the public. There should be a sharp line drawn between the report and the editorial.

I am inclined to think that the reporting department is the weakest in the American newspaper, and that there is just ground for the admitted public distrust of it. Too often, if a person would know what has taken place in a given case, he must read the reports in half a dozen journals, then strike a general average of probabilities, allowing for the personal equation, and then—suspend his judgment. Of course, there is much excellent reporting, and there are many able men engaged in it who reflect the

highest honor upon their occupation. And the press of no other country shows more occasional brilliant feats in reporting than ours: these are on occasions when the newspapers make special efforts. Take the last two national party conventions. The fullness, the accuracy, the vividness, with which their proceedings were reported in the leading journals, were marvelous triumphs of knowledge, skill, and expense. The conventions were so photographed by hundreds of pens, that the public outside saw them almost as distinctly as the crowd in attendance. This result was attained because the editors determined that it should be, sent able men to report, and demanded the best work. But take an opposite and a daily illustration of reporting, that of the debates and proceedings in Congress. I do not refer to the specials of various journals which are good, bad, or indifferent, as the case may be, and commonly colored by partisan considerations, but the regular synopsis sent to the country at large. Now, for some years it has been inadequate, frequently unintelligible, often grossly misleading, failing wholly to give the real spirit and meaning of the most important discussions; and it is as dry as chips besides. To be both stupid and inaccurate is the unpardonable sin in journalism. Contrast these reports with the lively and faithful pictures of the French Assembly which are served to the Paris papers.

Before speaking of the reasons for the public distrust in reports, it is proper to put in one qualification. The public itself, and not the newspapers, is the great factory of baseless rumors and untruths. Although the newspaper unavoidably gives currency to some of these, it is the great corrector of popular rumors. Concerning any event, a hundred different versions and conflicting accounts are instantly set afloat. These would run on, and become settled but unfounded beliefs, as private whispered scandals do run, if the newspaper did not intervene. It is the business of the newspaper, on every occurrence of moment, to chase down the rumors, and to find out the facts and print them, and set the public mind at rest. The newspaper publishes them under a sense of responsibility for its statements. It is not by any means always correct; but I know that it is the aim of most newspapers to discharge this important public function faithfully. When this country had few newspapers it was ten times more the prey of false reports and delusions than it is now.

Reporting requires as high ability as editorial writing; perhaps of a different kind, though in the history of American journalism the best reporters have often become the best editors. Talent of this kind must be adequately paid; and it happens that in America the reporting field is so vast that few journals can afford to make the reporting department correspond in ability to the editorial, and I doubt if the importance of doing so is yet fully realized. An intelligent and representative synopsis of a lecture or other public performance is rare. The ability to grasp a speaker's meaning, or to follow a long discourse, and reproduce either in spirit, and fairly, in a short space, is not common. When the public which has been present reads the inaccurate report, it loses confidence in the newspaper.

Its confidence is again undermined when it learns that an "interview" which it has read with interest was manufactured; that the report of the movements and sayings of a distinguished stranger was a pure piece of ingenious invention; that a thrilling adventure alongshore, or in a balloon, or in a horse-car, was what is called a sensational article, concocted by some brilliant genius, and spun out by the yard according to his necessities. These reports are entertaining, and often more readable than anything else in the newspaper; and, if they were put into a department with an appropriate heading, the public would be less suspicious that all the news in the journal was colored and heightened by a lively imagination.

Intelligent and honest reporting of whatever interests the public is the sound basis of all journalism.

And yet so careless have editors been of all this that a reporter has been sent to attend the sessions of a philological convention who had not the least linguistic knowledge, having always been employed on marine disasters. Another reporter, who was assigned to inform the public of the results of a difficult archeological investigation, frankly confessed his inability to understand what was going on; for his ordinary business, he said, was cattle. A story is told of a metropolitan journal, which illustrates another difficulty the public has in keeping up its confidence in newspaper infallibility. It may not be true for history, but answers for an illustration. The annual November meteors were expected on a certain night. The journal prepared an elaborate article, several columns in length, on meteoric displays in general, and on the display of that night in particular, giving in detail the appearance of the heavens from the metropolitan roofs in various parts of the city, the shooting of the meteors amid the blazing constellations, the size and times of flight of the fiery bodies; in short, a most vivid and scientific account of the lofty fireworks. Unfortunately the night was cloudy. The article was in type and ready; but the clouds would not break. The last moment for going to press arrived: there was a probability that the clouds would lift before daylight and the manager took the risk. The article that appeared was very interesting; but its scientific value was impaired by the fact that the heavens were obscured the whole night, and the meteors, if any arrived, were invisible. The reasonable excuse of the editor would be that he could not control the elements.

If the reporting department needs strengthening and reduction to order in the American journal, we may also query whether the department of correspondence sustains the boast that the American, newspaper is the best in the world. We have a good deal of excellent correspondence, both foreign and domestic; and our "specials" have won distinction, at least for liveliness and enterprise. I cannot dwell upon this feature; but I suggest a comparison with the correspondence of some of the German, and with that especially of the London journals, from the various capitals of Europe, and from the occasional seats of war. How surpassing able much of it is!

How full of information, of philosophic observation, of accurate knowledge! It appears to be written by men of trained intellect and of experience,—educated men of the world, who, by reason of their position and character, have access to the highest sources of information.

The editorials of our journals seem to me better than formerly, improved in tone, in courtesy, in self-respect,—though you may not have to go far or search long for the provincial note and the easy grace of the frontier,—and they are better written. This is because the newspaper has become more profitable, and is able to pay for talent, and has attracted to it educated young men. There is a sort of editorial ability, of facility, of force, that can only be acquired by practice and in the newspaper office: no school can ever teach it; but the young editor who has a broad basis of general education, of information in history, political economy, the classics, and polite literature, has an immense advantage over the man who has merely practical experience. For the editorial, if it is to hold its place, must be more and more the product of information, culture, and reflection, as well as of sagacity and alertness. Ignorance of foreign affairs, and of economic science, the American people have in times past winked at; but they will not always wink at it.

It is the belief of some shrewd observers that editorials, the long editorials, are not much read, except by editors themselves. A cynic says that, if you have a secret you are very anxious to keep from the female portion of the population, the safest place to put it is in an editorial. It seems to me that editorials are not conned as attentively as they once were; and I am sure they have not so much influence as formerly. People are not so easily or so visibly led; that is to say, the editorial influence is

not so dogmatic and direct. The editor does not expect to form public opinion so much by arguments and appeals as by the news he presents and his manner of presenting it, by the iteration of an idea until it becomes familiar, by the reading-matter selected, and by the quotations of opinions as news, and not professedly to influence the reader. And this influence is all the more potent because it is indirect, and not perceived-by the reader.

There is an editorial tradition—it might almost be termed a superstition—which I think will have to be abandoned. It is that a certain space in the journal must be filled with editorial, and that some of the editorials must be long, without any reference to the news or the necessity of comment on it, or the capacity of the editor at the moment to fill the space with original matter that is readable. There is the sacred space, and it must be filled. The London journals are perfect types of this custom. The result is often a wearisome page of words and rhetoric. It may be good rhetoric; but life is too short for so much of it. The necessity of filling this space causes the writer, instead of stating his idea in the shortest compass in which it can be made perspicuous and telling, to beat it out thin, and make it cover as much ground as possible. This, also, is vanity. In the economy of room, which our journals will more and more be compelled to cultivate, I venture to say that this tradition will be set aside. I think that we may fairly claim a superiority in our journals over the English dailies in our habit of making brief, pointed editorial paragraphs. They are the life of the editorial page. A cultivation of these until they are as finished and pregnant as the paragraphs of "The London Spectator" and "The New-York Nation," the printing of long editorials only when the elucidation of a subject demands length, and the use of the space thus saved for more interesting reading, is probably the line of our editorial evolution.

To continue the comparison of our journals as a class, with the English as a class, ours are more lively, also more flippant, and less restrained by a sense of responsibility or by the laws of libel. We furnish, now and again, as good editorial writing for its purpose; but it commonly lacks the dignity, the thoroughness, the wide sweep and knowledge, that characterizes the best English discussion of political and social topics.

The third department of the newspaper is that of miscellaneous reading-matter. Whether this is the survival of the period when the paper contained little else except "selections," and other printed matter was scarce, or whether it is only the beginning of a development that shall supply the public nearly all its literature, I do not know. Far as our newspapers have already gone in this direction, I am inclined to think that in their evolution they must drop this adjunct, and print simply the news of the day. Some of the leading journals of the world already do this.

In America I am sure the papers are printing too much miscellaneous reading. The perusal of this smattering of everything, these scraps of information and snatches of literature, this infinite variety and medley, in which no subject is adequately treated, is distracting and debilitating to the mind. It prevents the reading of anything in full, and its satisfactory assimilation. It is said that the majority of Americans read nothing except the paper. If they read that thoroughly, they have time for nothing else. What is its reader to do when his journal thrusts upon him every day the amount contained in a fair-sized duodecimo volume, and on Sundays the amount of two of them? Granted that this miscellaneous hodge-podge is the cream of current literature, is it profitable to the reader? Is it a means of anything but superficial culture and fragmentary information? Besides, it stimulates an unnatural appetite, a liking for the striking, the brilliant, the sensational only; for our selections from current literature are, usually the "plums"; and plums are not a wholesome-diet for anybody. A person accustomed to this finds it difficult to sit down patiently to the mastery of a book or a subject, to the study of history, the

perusal of extended biography, or to acquire that intellectual development and strength which comes from thorough reading and reflection.

The subject has another aspect. Nobody chooses his own reading; and a whole community perusing substantially the same material tends to a mental uniformity. The editor has the more than royal power of selecting the intellectual food of a large public. It is a responsibility infinitely greater than that of the compiler of schoolbooks, great as that is. The taste of the editor, or of some assistant who uses the scissors, is in a manner forced upon thousands of people, who see little other printed matter than that which he gives them. Suppose his taste runs to murders and abnormal crimes, and to the sensational in literature: what will be the moral effect upon a community of reading this year after year?

If this excess of daily miscellany is deleterious to the public, I doubt if it will be, in the long run, profitable to the newspaper, which has a field broad enough in reporting and commenting upon the movement of the world, without attempting to absorb the whole reading field.

I should like to say a word, if time permitted, upon the form of the journal, and about advertisements. I look to see advertisements shorter, printed with less display, and more numerous. In addition to the use now made of the newspaper by the classes called "advertisers," I expect it to become the handy medium of the entire public, the means of ready communication in regard to all wants and exchanges.

Several years ago, the attention of the publishers of American newspapers was called to the convenient form of certain daily journals in South Germany, which were made up in small pages, the number of which varied from day to day, according to the pressure of news or of advertisements. The suggestion as to form has been adopted by many of our religious, literary, and special weeklies, to the great convenience of the readers, and I doubt not of the publishers also. Nothing is more unwieldy than our big blanket-sheets: they are awkward to handle, inconvenient to read, unhandy to bind and preserve. It is difficult to classify matter in them. In dull seasons they are too large; in times of brisk advertising, and in the sudden access of important news, they are too small. To enlarge them for the occasion, resort is had to a troublesome fly-sheet, or, if they are doubled, there is more space to be filled than is needed. It seems to me that the inevitable remedy is a newspaper of small pages or forms, indefinite in number, that can at any hour be increased or diminished according to necessity, to be folded, stitched, and cut by machinery.

We have thus rapidly run over a prolific field, touching only upon some of the relations of the newspaper to our civilization, and omitting many of the more important and grave. The truth is that the development of the modern journal has been so sudden and marvelous that its conductors find themselves in possession of a machine that they scarcely know how to manage or direct. The change in the newspaper caused by the telegraph, the cable, and by a public demand for news created by wars, by discoveries, and by a new outburst of the spirit of doubt and inquiry, is enormous. The public mind is confused about it, and alternately overestimates and underestimates the press, failing to see how integral and representative a part it is of modern life.

"The power of the press," as something to be feared or admired, is a favorite theme of dinner-table orators and clergymen. One would think it was some compactly wielded energy, like that of an organized religious order, with a possible danger in it to the public welfare. Discrimination is not made between the power of the printed word—which is limitless—and the influence that a newspaper, as such, exerts. The power of the press is in its facility for making public opinions and events. I should say it is a medium of force rather than force itself. I confess that I am oftener impressed with the

powerlessness of the press than otherwise, its slight influence in bringing about any reform, or in inducing the public to do what is for its own good and what it is disinclined to do. Talk about the power of the press, say, in a legislature, when once the members are suspicious that somebody is trying to influence them, and see how the press will retire, with what grace it can, before an invincible and virtuous lobby. The fear of the combination of the press for any improper purpose, or long for any proper purpose, is chimerical. Whomever the newspapers agree with, they do not agree with each other. The public itself never takes so many conflicting views of any topic or event as the ingenious rival journals are certain to discover. It is impossible, in their nature, for them to combine. I should as soon expect agreement among doctors in their empirical profession. And there is scarcely ever a cause, or an opinion, or a man, that does not get somewhere in the press a hearer and a defender. We will drop the subject with one remark for the benefit of whom it may concern. With all its faults, I believe the moral tone of the American newspaper is higher, as a rule, than that of the community in which it is published.

End of Project Gutenberg's American Newspaper, by Charles Dudley Warner

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