

Editor
News-Post
Frederick, Md. 21701

10/1/86

Dear Editor,

It is like pushing buttons - and such fun! First there is criticism of Roy Meachum to which he cannot respond and then there is another of his pontifications about journalism in which he seeks to associate himself with the great ones and in which he pretends he is patiently tolerant of us yokels and bumpkins and that we simply do not understand. In his sophomoric mishmash of immature generalities and his typical departures ~~from~~ from fact, "On Reading Columnists," he does, for once, admit to "a certain murkiness in my mind." Without so intending, this column does prove him right on that murkiness of mind.

Forget about those straw men for his own sick ego and small clique ("Only the most self-deluded columnists write with the hope their view will prevail; I know some, former Washington colleagues, who brook no questioning." And, columnists, read Meachum, "form the future hope of this Republic."). How mature is Meachum, gray beard and all?

"Lethargy poses the greatest threat to the democratic process." Did your in-house genius never hear of Hitler, Stalin, Pinochet and all the world's many other tyrants?

Possibly visualizing himself in that exalted company he pronounces that "their very lack of ~~objectivity~~ any pretense of objectivity gives columnists their reason for being." All flaunt his lack of objectivity? Like Walter Lippman, perhaps? And their "reason for being" has nothing to do with informing people?

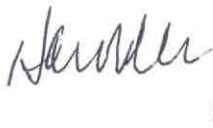
According to his eminence, today's "readers are usually rewarded with stories better written than in my youth, and always (sic) longer." In all of this latest display of Meachum's shallowness and his generalities about the press he somehow manages never to use the word, "reporting." Only "stories" and expressions of opinion exist in his journalism. One of his four daily papers is the Washington Post. Its longer stories are reserved for its more numerous entertainment sections, like Show and Style, and its hard news reporting is ~~never~~ whether written than in Meachum's youth and ~~they~~ most assuredly ~~are not~~ "always longer." Has he seen the Baltimore Sun lately? Its main news stories not only are not "always longer," they are always fewer. And almost always shorter.

Unless Meachum's youth is more recent than his gray beard indicates, he ought remember, among columnists, Lippman, Heywood Broun, Damon Runyan and O.O. MacIntire, among many others, and among many great reporters the likes of Ernie Pyle and a full range to the Paul Y. Andersons. (Anderson broke the Teapot Dome scandal.) Who, Meachum, writes better today?

I don't, really, believe that Meachum is the intellectual pygmy his columns portray. Rather is it, I think, that sick and soaring ego which drives him to so much output he does not take time for thinking. His, of course, does not address his opinions, like that virulent racism he indulges. But even the truly great among real columnists were careful not to average three a week. And most of them had superb intellects and infinitely more maturity and wisdom.

Meachum captioned this silliness "on reading columnists." He really meant, "on reading Meachum."

Sincerely,
Harold Weisberg
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Roy Meachum



On reading columnists

10/1/86

Four daily newspapers land reasonably near my front door. By week's end I have nodding acquaintance with the views expressed by 40 to 50 men and women who pass their lives in a fashion similar to mine. By all accounts, I belong to what can be called "a growth industry."

At this instant, huddled over typewriters and word processors, there may be thousands practicing the columnist's trade. Their proliferation can be directly traced to the rise of the one-eyed "monster." Television forced publishers to seek various means to recapture the public's attention.

Color and gimmicks and giveaways all failed, along with many newspapers. The survivors generally enjoyed a healthy rise in both circulation and revenue; however, they — and their advertisers — faced the fact that the next generation, when polled, showed little inclination to rely on the printed word; they are growing up in a climate which relegates newspapers to a cursory role.

In part, the remaining publishers can blame their own success. My four daily papers and I were all much leaner 30 years ago. Extracting the news from their pages demands considerable time spent plowing through their many sections.

For their efforts, readers are usually rewarded with stories better written than in my youth, and always longer. With TV news words restricted severely by time, print enjoys the advantage of being able to roll out "all the facts." This enables good newspaper writers to strut their style, and that's a plus. Of course, it also allows insecure reporters to spread their uncertainties about.

As far as the public is concerned, good or bad writing aside, longer stories add to the general perception that we live in an information glut. No one can possibly assimilate, never mind understand, the news volume pumped out each day by the media. As a result, it seems, many Americans don't try; television becomes their escape from the glut.

Called columnists or commentators, there has developed in recent years a new corps of journalists; they pose their thoughts and positions on subjects they deem important, amusing, neglected,

worthy of further advocacy — there is no single standard. Their very lack of any pretense to objectivity gives columnists their reason for being. They furnish to men and women a human link to the plethora of facts that bombard Americans every day.

Only the most self-deluded columnists write with the hope their view will prevail; I know some, former Washington colleagues, who brook no questioning. For most, however, their objective is realized when readers are nudged to think. In this regard, whether called columnists or commentators, they form the future hope for this Republic.

Lethargy poses the greatest threat to the democratic process; the willingness

of most men and women to let politicians do their thinking for them.

By politicians I mean not only elected officials but those who work the system: lobbyists and special-interest groups or individuals. In a society which brain numbs homes with a profusion of self-serving arguments amidst a deluge of factual detail, those who vote form a diminishing minority. This opens the way for thought control, the manipulation of indifferent masses by the few. Columnists are an antidote, not a cure.

Anyone who adopts a single writer's opinions, or viewpoint, simply swaps one form of tyranny for another. In the best of relationships, disagreements provide a necessary spice. Total accord leads to a consuming boredom.

Furthermore, human beings wax healthiest under an abundance of influences. This is why democracy — with all its imperfections — constitutes the ideal form of government "for children and all other living things," to borrow a phrase. People and their differences provide the renewable relevancy that give democracy its capability to remain strong.

In my reading of those four daily newspapers, my opinions alter; sometimes they are changed by new facts. Frequently, another columnist illuminates a subject that had existed before with a certain murkiness in my mind. On occasion, an unknown colleague can trot out an opinion which strikes me as so outrageous that it causes me to re-examine my own thoughts under an adversarial pressure.

The worst days come when I arise from my reading chair to trudge to this machine feeling untouched by anything found in those four daily newspapers. On some days, I know the fault lies with

me. The most depressing mornings arise when no story or writer — including columnists — has aroused a strong emotion. My mind is left to sorting out a cluttering of facts.

Happily, those worst days come seldom.

Always, they are softened by the remembrance of other mornings in my life when the only views I received derived from "official" positions. Getting American and European publications was at best chancey; sometimes they failed to arrive because they contained "wrong" stories. Television was not the only one-eyed monster, when it came to news. Columnists competed with each other solely in their efforts to display their loyalty to the regime.

This memory endows my four daily newspapers with a blessing for their diversity. It lends an affection to my regard for those 40 to 50 men and women who pass their lives huddled over similar machines, fixing thoughts and ideas into sentences and paragraphs that can be accepted or disputed. And it doesn't matter which.