

Proper Tending of the Fourth Estate

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By Lester Markel

More and more there is news about news: The Government blasts the press, charging that it is slanted and irresponsible; the press blasts the Government, accusing it of violating the First Amendment; lawyers' tactics and politicians' ploys are daily front-page fare—the land is pockmarked with credibility gaps.

At a time of the blackest headlines, as at present, the reader-listener is aroused to an interest in the news. But at other times he is likely to dismiss it: "This is remote stuff, it doesn't concern me." He is wrong, periously wrong. Effective democracy depends on sound public opinion, and sound opinion in turn depends on two essential ingredients: good information and the voters' use of that information.

Yet, generally the ingredients are missing; information is inadequate and the public lethargic or skeptical. A recent poll is revealing; those interviewed were asked: "Can you recall offhand where the right of the free press in this country comes from? That is, on what is it based?"

Forty-five per cent said the Constitution, 3 per cent the Declaration of Independence, and 52 per cent gave other sources, or had no opinion. The

pollsters then asked whether respondents agreed that "newspapers are not careful about getting their facts straight." Only 26 per cent agreed (although 41 per cent partly agreed), and only 9 per cent disagreed.

Editors go through a cycle: lethargy, excitement, lethargy. Recently, sensitized by the credibility crisis, they have made feeble attempts at self-examination; they have been trying new approaches. Not so long ago there were fireworks about "the new journalism"—that is, the application of fiction techniques to fact. But soon "the new journalism" was revealed to be neither new nor journalism and, except for the name, it was assigned to limbo. Then came "advocacy journalism," in which the reporter indicated clearly where his sympathies lay, but it was soon discovered to be a formula for dispensing opinion or gossip or hearsay. So it, too, was consigned to the ashcan.

Now comes another trend strongly, "investigative reporting." There is nothing new about this kind of reporting, which is a combination of crusading and sleuthing. In the raucous days of the mid-nineteenth century it made up most of Page 1 and in its roughest forms it was known as muckraking. Then came the Nixonian double-crossword puzzle and the brilliant job

done by The Washington Post in opening wide the "Watergates." And the flood was on. Newspapers throughout the land set up "investigative squads," sought out reporters who were amalgams of Sherlock Holmes, Edgar Allan Poe and Plutarch and hailed them as the supermen of the Fourth Estate.

The Washington Post's coverage was not investigative reporting in the real sense because the original facts were dug up by others. But, nevertheless, The Post did a prize-winning job of follow-up. Another reason editors and publishers turned to this kind of reporting so eagerly was that they felt it was a vindication of the press in the face of the various attacks upon it, especially by an Administration that was now on a super-hot griddle. But these are not the main issues, which are these: Without detracting from the value of "investigative reporting," the movement carries within it a potential hazard and a clear moral.

The hazard arises out of the editors' love for scoops, even though the readers' interest in them may be scant. Hence, the breathless pursuit of exclusive stories may result in heavy overlengths, thus using up news space that is required to do an adequate job of covering other more important news. And the moral? It is implied in this

question: If this is "investigative reporting," what is other reporting? "Noninvestigative reporting"? Obviously not. All good reporting is investigative. If "investigative reporting" is put in a special category and unique to a special staff, the technique that makes for a real newspaper is likely to be dissipated.

The real reporter tracks the story down with all the detail he can discover; he especially provides the reason for the happening and he writes so that it is fully understandable. Inquiry, imagination, ingenuity, clarity—these are the tools with which a good story is fashioned. This applies to all news, not only to the newly discovered "investigative" variety.

Now that the editors have discovered the value of this kind of digging, the hope is that they will apply the same kind of intensity and thoroughness to all stories, especially to the news of increasing complexity. Only if ingenious reporting and imaginative editing, with full regard for interpretation, are applied much more freely will the press make the contribution to a sound public opinion that is its very reason for being.

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