

After 2 Years of Watergate Disclosures, Many Newspaper

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Readers Are Found Bored With the Subject

Nearly two years after the original Watergate disclosures—which much of the American press thought marked its finest hour—many readers are becoming bored with the subject and angry with the press for having raised the subject in the first place.

This is the finding of a random sampling of newspaper editors. One of them, Maxwell McCrohom, managing editor of The Chicago Tribune, put it this way: "Many readers are still trying to blame the messenger for the bad news."

Still, most of the editors found that the strongest reaction was simple boredom, although the recent threat by Secretary of State Kissinger to resign revitalized, momentarily at least, the anger of some readers.

"It was sort of a momentary glimmer—sort of raw—now you're going to get him, too—aimed at the press," Mr. McCrohom said.

With the sudden emergence of a new "big name," such as Mr. Kissinger's, there is a "spurt of interest" by readers in the Watergate story generally, according to Dick Leonard, editor of The Milwaukee Journal.

There was great pride in the press two years ago when the Watergate scandals were first disclosed, mainly by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of The Washington Post, whose efforts led to a Pulitzer prize. The pride stemmed from the fact that the disclosures had been made through investigative reporting, and not official action.

Somehow Wrong

The pride remains, of course. But now large sectors of the American press are disturbed by the knowledge that, in the words of Robert B. Semple Jr., deputy national editor of The New York Times, "even some very intelligent people don't seem to understand our role."

That is, he says, many people seem to feel that all the investigative reporting that led to Watergate was somehow "wrong, just nastiness on our part."

The idea that people are bored with Watergate, and in many cases angry with the press for keeping the subject alive, is, of course, inferential, since the only gauge that editors normally have are letters from their readers, and it is generally accepted as fact that people who are against something—in this case reading about Watergate—are more likely to write a newspaper than are people who favor something.

Still, the inference is supported somewhat by the experience with television news programs. The television industry reported, for instance, that during the first five months of this year, there was a decline of more than 2 per cent in the number of persons watching television network news over the like five months in 1973. Many network officials believe that weariness with the Watergate story was the reason for the decline.

The television-newspaper comparison can not be too strong, however, because television has program rating systems that compute the number of persons listening to a particular program. Newspapers can depend only on their circulation figures, and a reader can purchase a newspaper and not read about Watergate, while with television news programs, the only way the listener may avoid the subject is to turn off the set.

'Get Rid of Watergate'

George Gill, managing editor of The Louisville Courier, said, "By mail, by conversation, in the telephone calls we receive, the line from most people is just get rid of Watergate, get onto something else."

"The press was certainly on the leading edge of the story a year ago, and now the bulk of the material in the newspapers is what's happening on Watergate in an official way," Mr. Gill said. "There are two or three Federal courts involved now, and I think the public doesn't understand all this machinery of justice."

"But we have to cover it, and the reaction seems to be, 'Why the hell don't you get Watergate out of the paper?'"

Dick Reid, assistant managing editor of The Minneapolis Tribune, said that that paper had received "little reaction from the Kissinger resignation threat, but there's lots of criticism over the heavy emphasis on Watergate, both from pro-Nixon people and people just sick of reading about the subject."

"It's the old story about the bearer of bad tidings being unwelcome," Mr. Reid said. "Any time a paper appears to be wallowing in something—people who draw that conclusion get irritated."

He said that part of the problem of reader boredom was that the Watergate story had "become very complicated, with action in various courts and committees, and it's hard to follow."

"This requires a lot of time and effort to stay abreast of developments, on the part of the paper and on the part of the reader, and so we go into a lot of explanation and background and analytical pieces," he said.

But despite the boredom of some readers, Mr. Reid reflected the view of many other

ship which is interested, and we are more or less just going to go ahead and cover the developments as completely as we can," he added.

Mr. McCrohom said, "The readers are maybe tired and disgusted, but we're not trying to make a conscious effort to get away from Watergate, but we are trying to tell them something else of interest."

The comments by Mr. Reid and Mr. McCrohom raise several other important questions. Have the news media's commitment to the Watergate story led them to neglect other stories? Has the Watergate story sapped the resources and manpower of the news media?

The answers are not simple

ones: Most journalists believe that many legitimate news stories in Washington are going uncovered as the Washington bureaus of various news-gathering organizations commit more manpower to the ever-widening Watergate developments.

On the other hand, many journalists believe that the Government has ceased to generate many news stories because of the Government's own preoccupation with Watergate. And, finally, it is often the case that if a story is not covered, then it ceases to be a story—in much the same way that a falling tree in the forest makes no noise if there are no ears to hear it.

A. M. Rosenthal, managing editor of The New York Times, believes that perhaps some Washington stories are going uncovered, but he said that as far as The Times is concerned, no news space has been taken away from metropolitan, national or foreign news reports to cover Watergate. "What we have been doing is increasing our news hole [space]," he said.

In 1973, for instance, The Times printed 500 more columns of news than in 1972, and this extra space went largely to news about Watergate, the resignation of Vice President Agnew and the United States' changing role in Vietnam.

This year, as of May 25, The Times has printed 193 columns of news over the paper's nor-

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mal, pre-Watergate quota, but this has largely been used for textual material growing out of Watergate rather than for news stories.

By and large, other newspapers report making similar adjustments.

Dick Leonard, editor of The Milwaukee Journal, said that from letters received by the paper it appeared "that interest in the Watergate story is wearing out."

"I really couldn't say that people are angrier with the press than they were two years ago," he said. "The Watergate situation improved our image with many people, when events showed there was substance to the investigative work."

He said, however, that Mr.

Kissinger did succeed in making some of The Journal's readers angry with the press. "The reaction here was this guy's performing miracles, ending wars, and here's the press trying to tear him down," he said.

He and Mr. McCrohom agreed, however, that that reaction died down quickly.

There is no hard and fast way to determine readership anger with a newspaper or to determine the esteem or lack of esteem in which the press in general is held.

However, a Harris poll in 1973 showed that 30 per cent of the people had "a great deal" of confidence in the press as an institution. (The press

That year—1973—was a year in which much of what the

press had been reporting about Watergate proved to be true. In 1972, the year the press first disclosed Watergate, only 18 per cent of the people had similar confidence in the press, according to the Harris poll.

A Gallup poll taken in July, 1973, ranked the press fifth as an institution in which people had confidence, but reported that 39 per cent of the people had a "great deal" of confidence in it, and 58 per cent had "some," "very little" or "none." Neither polling organization has taken a poll on the subject since, and Gallup had never taken one previously.

Despite growing restiveness about continued heavy Watergate coverage in the press, there is no doubt that the Wa-

tergate disclosures have had a substantial impact on President Nixon's popularity. The President's approval rating in the Gallup Poll, for instance, dropped from 60 per cent the week of the break-in to a low of 25 per cent from February through May of this year. It rose to 28 per cent in early June.

Gordon Pates, managing editor of The San Francisco Chronicle, said that all he could say with assurance was that "many are bored with Watergate, but those who supported President Nixon are angry—somehow they believe we made it all up rather than conveyed it—and others, who opposed the President strongly, can't get enough of it."