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SENTINEL UNDER SIEGE

The Triumphs and Troubles of America’s Free Press

STANLEY E. FLINK
The Critics

One of the problems is that when the founders arranged freedom of the press, it was a really vile press—lying, vituperative. On the other hand, they were not all on the same side. Every faction had its press. And now the press has a monolithic quality to its opinions that I think is troublesome in a way the old press was not. All the same, I don’t know what to do about that because if you start censoring for bias, you’re probably in a much worse situation than you are putting up with the bias.

—Judge Robert Bork, former circuit judge for District of Columbia Court of Appeals; John M. Olin Scholar in Legal Studies, American Enterprise Institute

The recognition of crucial public roles to be performed by the press and the responsibilities that evolved from this understanding had been developing in the minds of serious editors and publishers for many years. Self-awareness grew in part because of the rapidly rising industrial prosperity following World War I, but more urgently because of the depression in the early 1930s, the demagogic voices of fascism rumbling out of Europe, and the first signals of Japanese expansionism in the Far East. The news weeklies, picture magazines, wire services, and radio were coalescing into a mass communications ethos that was not yet prepared for television. News reached the marketplace of ideas primarily in the form of printed words. Despite the absence of the instantaneous “real time” coverage that the networks and CNN would bring to the world in the latter part of the century, the influence of mass communications was already being blamed for immorality, election results, violent crime, and political corruption.

It is said that when Tallyrand was told that the Russian ambassador to Paris had died, the renowned French diplomat mused, “I wonder what his motive could have been?” Politicians have long wondered in the same skeptical fashion about the media wherever it has been independent and about its manipulation wherever it has not. For the citizens of a free society, the media, whatever else it could do and despite its hubris and its mistakes, became central to that “delicate balance” between government authority and individual liberty.

The critics saw themselves as the answer to those who asked: “If the press is our watchdog, who watches the watchdog?” There have been, as this chapter suggests, many savants who took on the task of watching the watchdog. A few among them, however, contributed more enduringly than others to the literature and substance of useful media criticism. It was logical that the important theoretical work would appear in the 1920s and 1930s because it was in those decades that the power of the printed press—for better or worse—was reaching its peak. The abuse of that power seemed palpable. Scholars noted the judgment Jefferson and Madison made regarding religion. The only safeguard for freedom of religion, the two Virginians agreed, was pluralism, and that condition could be achieved only if the state and religion were independent of each other. Just so, it appeared, was the case for a free press—many voices, no prior restraint. Though the Bill of Rights had not originally linked the religion clauses with free expression, it was not illogical that they be combined. Free speech in the pulpit had ranged far beyond ecclesiastical matters. The churches were, in fact, a primary source of public education in the early decades of the United States. In any event, the diverse media and its capacity to enlarge public information was bound to inspire equally diverse critics.

Among the most notable in the first half of the twentieth century was George Seldes, who began his career as a critic in 1929 with an indictment of the European press for its distortion of the news after World War I. In 1935, Seldes produced Freedom of the Press, a study of the pernicious influence advertising and business management were exerting on the independence of news operations. One remedial measure he advocated was adding courses in journalistic ethics to the required training for newspaper reporters. Freedom of the Press was a widely admired work and sold well, but Seldes’s next book, Lords of the Press, established his gift for outrage and muckraking and made him famous. Retrospective scholarship credits Seldes with making critical analysis of press performance “popular and important.” He accused specific newspapers of publishing stories that were inaccurate, craven, or deliberately slanted—a practice he continued in his newsletter about press inquiries called In Fact, which was published from 1940 to 1950. Journalism scholar Edmund Lambeth asserts that “despite a twenty year fall from grace as the result of a brief period of Communist infiltration of his newsletter, Seldes’s contributions have had lasting significance.” Seldes was given special (and rare) recognition by the Association for Education in Journalism (1980) and a citation from the George Polk Awards (1982) for excellence in media criticism. Though his books made the best-seller lists, Seldes did not receive a
uniformly laudatory reception. Some reviewers objected to his hyperbole, others found his research imprecise, and newspaper proprietors accused him of turning on the business that had given him his start. He had covered World War I in Europe for the Chicago Tribune, becoming chief correspondent, but predictably, he quarreled with Colonel McCormick over matters of policy and quit to write his books.

Everette E. Dennis and Claude-Jean Bertrand, in their 1981 article “Seldes at Ninety: They Don’t Give Pulitzer for That Kind of Criticism,” reported that the New York Times and the New York Herald Tribune had refused to run ads for Lords of the Press, but it sold 150,000 copies nonetheless. Seldes wrote eighteen books in all, scores of articles, and edited his newsletter for ten years. At its peak In Fact attracted 100,000 subscribers. When Seldes learned that an associate had accepted a small amount of funding from the Communist Party, he vigorously denied that he was ever influenced by the party in his opinions or his writing, and there was no evidence to the contrary. The charge of venality, nonetheless, became a blemish on a crusading career. He had pioneered press criticism of the highest levels, naming owners and publishers who were selling out to advertising and financial interests while neglecting public issues and reasonable standards of responsibility. He used specific examples to demonstrate the influence on the press of powerful corporate groups such as the utilities and oil producers, and he documented the control that a few families had over major papers. Seldes shaped many of the ideas critics, in subsequent years, would embrace. Ferdinand Lundberg, for example, enlarged on several Seldes themes—among them the concentration of media power in the hands of a few. He maintained that the possibility of a real threat to a free press “from the right” was more serious than interference from the government. Despite the flaws in his work, Seldes was the first major critic to be read by a large audience over an extended period. His exhortations for better-educated, higher-paid reporters and editors and for a greater emphasis on institutional responsibility in the public interest became increasingly credible to the people who cared about the integrity of the news and more respected by those who controlled the means of providing it.

Though many other writers subsequently examined the morality or the effectiveness—adverse or positive—of the large-circulation newspapers and magazines, there were two who left particularly influential bodies of work—A. J. Liebling and Walter Lippmann. Liebling wrote elegant, acerbic pieces (most of them for the New Yorker) that were gathered into book form and given a second life. Lippmann, who was a distinguished newspaper editor and columnist, wrote several profound books that analyzed political thought and the organization of public opinion. Lippmann’s concern for the press and its importance to democratic governance earned him the highest regard of scholars and journalists—even when some of his political predictions went wrong. In his understanding and description of the dynamics that shape public opinion, and therefore politics, he provided insights that were instructive in their time and that have gained in value despite the vast growth and change in the nature of the press. Lippmann laid out his most provocative theoretical ideas in the context of printed information, but his knowledge of historical and psychological factors and the standards he advocated apply to electronic reporting with equal force.

Liebling, in contrast, rarely attended to cosmic issues, overarching principles, or psychological aspects. In eighty-two of his ninety-six contributions to the New Yorker called “The Wayward Press”—appearing from May 19, 1945, through April 13, 1963—his preoccupation was the skill of talented reporters and their need for independence from managerial bias. The perceived antilabor views of the establishment press was a condition Liebling decried, along with concentrated ownership and an unqualified desire for profits. He was a roving public editor sensitive to excess in style or language. Many of his columns were literary tour de forces—pithy, erudite, mordant, and unforgiving when he encountered irresponsible or sloppy reporting. Liebling alerted intelligent readers to the inadequacies of day-to-day journalism and urged his newspaper constituency to include more context and interpretation in their writing. He was an uncompromising exemplar of his most persistent recommendation—more intramural criticism—but in his time there was very little, if any, reporting on the press by the press. When Liebling died in 1963, the New York Times commented editorially: “He was, by his own description, a chronic, incurable, recidivist reporter and his admiration for skill in reporting was boundless. His death stills a pen that could inspire as well as wound. The press will be duller for the loss of his barbs.”

Strangely, Liebling had little love for columnists and apparently did not wish to include the news magazines in his purview. When William Randolph Hearst’s obituaries were published in August 1951, Liebling summarized on how the press covered the departure of one of its most flamboyant and controversial titans. His New Yorker account neglected any mention of Time and Life despite the fact that a Life magazine reporter was the only press witness at Marion Davies’s home in Beverly Hills when Hearst’s body was rushed out to a small delivery truck and taken to a mortuary. That same reporter, later in the day, conducted an exclusive interview with the former film star who had been Hearst’s companion for nearly a third of a century. “He was mine for thirty-two years,” Marion Davies told him tearfully, “and whoosh—they took him away from me.”

She had been sedated by her doctor when Hearst died that morning, and while she slept the publisher and all his clothes and personal possessions were removed. The Associated Press reportedly held a meeting not long thereafter to determine how two weekly magazines could hold on to a story
the daily press was unable to fully report. The official news release from the Hearst Corporation made no reference to Marion Davies. *Time* was the first to report the facts, and *Life* ran a cover story and a substantial photo essay on Hearst's career. The closing shot was a full-page photograph of the bed on which Hearst had died, now neatly made with a white silk spread on which a sharp-eyed dachshund sat staring at the camera's lens. Dachshunds had always been Hearst's favorite breed, and he had once owned dozens. The dog on the bed, named Helena, was the last of them. Next to the bed, on a small table, was a photograph in a mother-of-pearl frame of Marion Davies. Scrawled across one corner of the picture was an inscription—"My love is as boundless as the sea." The words were from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the three-letter signature at the bottom was well known in the newspaper business—W.R.H. When Liebling was asked how he could have omitted such colorful information from his magazine report, he grunted, "I was only interested in newspapers."8

Liebling would mourn the collapse of any newspaper and fretted caustically about one-newspaper towns where the absence of competition crimped news coverage and denied reporters the option of an alternative job if they resisted editorial censorship. Any alien incursion into the reporter's territory aroused Liebling—even nomenclature. As a case in point, he was openly suspicious of academic courses that used the word *communication*. In one of his columns Liebling wrote,

Communication means simply getting any idea across and has no intrinsic relation to the truth. It is neutral. It can be a peddler's tool or the weapon of a political knave, or the medium of a new religion . . .

Q: What do you do for a living?
A: I am a communicator.


Walter Lippmann's interests were not limited to newspapers, but his free-ranging curiosity about the relationship between news and politics produced a great many perceptions and judgments that became important resources for media criticism—internal and external. Lippmann's concerns were less topical than Liebling's, and less parochial. The tidal movements in public affairs engaged his curiosity. He had studied philosophy at Harvard, helped start the *New Republic*, and written the books that made him a permanent voice in the intellectual examination of the press of twentieth-century America. In that process he formulated a core concept regarding the consent of the governed in a viable democracy. The people, he postulated, could cope with complex issues provided they were given the facts clearly and objectively by the only independent method of mass communication—the press. The converse of objectivity was a dishonest use of the press to propagate lies. Lippmann recognized the necessary inclination during a war to shape the news, but the distortion of truth-telling in time of peace, he warned, would be self-defeating. "All that the sharpest critics of democracy have alleged is true," he wrote in *Liberty and the News*, "if there is no steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news. Incompetence and aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty, panic and ultimate disaster, must come to any people which is denied an assured access to the facts."10

Lippmann spoke of the "higher law" and of the "truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy, the careful, accurate "ordering of news." Such theological language was not an affectation. There was an almost holy writ in Lippmann's view of the role newspapers (today he might say media) must play: "For the newspaper is in all literalness, the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct. It is the only serious book most people read. It is the only book they read every day."11

The limitations of the press were not ignored in Lippmann's canon. He realized that editors were not omniscient, not even knowledgeable on a firsthand basis regarding events and issues taking place beyond their own experience, and often in distant, unfamiliar territories. Censorship, propaganda, even patriotism, could mislead, confuse, and prevent "realistic thinking." The most formidable enemy in Lippmann's universe was ignorance. Freedom, liberty, democracy, however they were defined and sustained, required a well-informed, consenting citizenry. These were not new ideas. Lippmann appropriately used an excerpt from Plato's *Republic* as a frontispiece for his book *Public Opinion*. The excerpt was from Book 7, describing those enigmatic prisoners in an underground den who can see little more than shadows "which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave." It was the play of those shadows taken for reality that Lippmann feared. Suppositions, rumors, gossip, deliberate fabrication, jingoism—such were the shadows in journalism that could obscure the truth. Only independently gathered and factual information could serve the public interest. For that task, Lippmann urged the recruitment of the brightest and the best. He wanted to "bring into journalism a generation of men who will, by sheer superiority, drive the incompetents out of business."12

The vision of intelligent, motivated journalists pursuing truth with scientific thoroughness led Lippmann to the writing of *Public Opinion*—probably his best-known book—in 1922. The notion that masses of people could read raw information and decide what was wise had not materialized. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann emphasized the importance of "publicists" and political scientists as organizers of reliable information that reporters and editors could turn to for help. He thought of political scientists as informed insiders who could frame the issues for the people; the press could then report those positions objectively so that the people could make a final judgment. That, too, was a flawed idealism, as time would teach. Objective reporting of official or public utterances made it possible for demagogues and
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charlatans—more than dispassionate, informed insiders—to get their views amplified and disseminated until they so poisoned the atmosphere that reason and discourse could not hold their ground. It was a bitter but inescapable truth that the modern sophists, the zealots, and the hater-mongers, given objective coverage (i.e., simple replication of what they said in public or shouted at rallies or insinuated at press conferences), were able to falsify the democratic process.

Despite the dampening of his belief in "the power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected...a power unlike any that has been exercised since the Pope lost his hold on the secular mind," Lippmann had articulated and continued to analyze the elements of journalistic practice that would best serve the body politic in a democracy. He opted, early on, for the use of bylines and mastheads to indicate who was responsible for what. He recommended corrections and retractions when errors were made, and he conceived of open forums where readers could question editors and reporters regarding selection of facts, inaccuracy, or misrepresentation. He dwelt on the power of words taken separately or in phrases as the tools of both truthful eloquence and deceptive innuendo or falsehood. Above all, he stressed the vital importance of reliable reporting to serve the common good.13

In Public Opinion several of Lippmann's most sophisticated formulations were expressed in terms that were to be examined often and admiringly wherever journalism was studied or reflected upon thereafter. He began with his essay "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads" (mentioned earlier). He argued that because the "real environment" is too big and diverse to be effectively rendered as a simpler rendering of a picture that we can understand: "The analyst of public opinion must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of the scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action. It is like a play suggested to the actors by their own experience, in which the plot is transacted in the real lives of the actors, not merely in their stage parts."14

Lippmann perceived that the world we have to deal with politically is for most people "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind." Someone else must explore it and report on it, so that we can focus a picture in our head. If that information is provided by the press, truthfully and comprehensively, then we might actually create a "trustworthy picture" inside our heads and, in due course, act upon that image.

Lippmann came to the conclusion that the enormous complexity of gathering reliable news and the economic concerns of private newspapers required that the press have considerable outside help. No one newspaper—or a chain of them, for that matter—could afford the staff (assuming qualified people could be found) to deal with all the issues and all the debatable positions taken by public figures. In this regard he identified the most reliable sources of outside assistance: first, the political scientists; second, and perhaps less favored, the "publicists" or "press agents." It should be noted that even so learned and experienced a scholar-journalist as Walter Lippmann had not envisioned the development of the fine arts of "lobbying" and "spin" that soon made so murky the clear, factual waters in which the political scientists and nonpartisan publicist-experts were meant to swim.

The pictures in our heads are inevitably the source of stereotypes, and to this subject Lippmann gave a great deal of attention. The "good stereotype" is based upon enough accurate, truthful data to allow what is reasonably typical to stand in for what might be a more complex truth that neither time nor resources permit us to pursue. In this the press has the responsibility of providing those useful generalities that come close to the truth, that give us a basis for making decisions, if not wisely at least not self-destructively. If experience overturns our stereotypes, our stability may be damaged or we may become ostriches with portable holes or, dare we hope, we may alter our concept of truth to accommodate the correction. John Stuart Mill, we will recall, insisted that the truth is never final. It must be disputed and tested constantly. If it stands up, we can take some comfort in our stereotypes. If it is enlarged or diminished we can exult in our ability to learn and to change. If we hide or deny or simply reject demonstrable evidence that we have the wrong stereotypes, then we will suffer the remorseless erosion of our society until truth no longer triumphs and freedom withers.

Lippmann offers the thesis of good and bad stereotypes by using vivid historical examples. Though he no less than other distinguished commentators did not confront racism directly as a deep-rooted malignancy nourished stubbornly by stereotypical assumptions, Lippmann did take an unblinking look at one of history's most spurious rationales—Aristotle's defense of slavery in Politics, written in the fourth century B.C. Lippmann states that Aristotle begins by "erecting a great barrier between himself and the facts." The most important characteristic of an unreliable stereotype is that "it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception; imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence."15 Aristotle suggested that those men who are slaves must have been intended by nature to be slaves. He avoided entirely the fatal question of whether those particular men who happened to become slaves were the particular men intended to be slaves. Slaveholders were taught to see their "chattels as natural slaves" and to observe "as confirmation of their servile character the fact that they performed servile work, and that they had the muscles to do servile work."16 It was not Aristotle's finest hour.

The perfect stereotype, Lippmann deduces, is validated when what we see corresponds with what we expect. The problems arise quickly when
that confluence is not evident. The larger problems will arise more slowly when we have been so conditioned to see only what confirms our stereotypes that we cannot acknowledge a flaw even when it is fatal. The press, in Lippmann’s cosmic view, had to take into account the fact that the images it brings to the minds of individual reader-citizens must confront the “stored up images, the preconceptions and prejudices” that have been formed in these stereotypes. Early American democracy, born in a far simpler time and in almost self-contained communities where private initiative meant survival, never “seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures inside people’s heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside.” Some critics of the press, Lippmann charged, expected the newspapers “to make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy” by providing the data necessary for each reader to “acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs.”

In Lippmann’s analysis, a large segment of the press was merely reflecting, and therefore intensifying, the ignorance and confusion that shaped public opinion. This was the case because the press was not equipped to do more. The remedy he offers is to be found in its collective form among trained, disciplined, orderly practitioners of political science. In its particularized form, the remedy must depend upon brighter, better-educated reporters, experienced editors, and organized information produced by what James Madison called the “disinterested practitioners of public service.” Said Lippmann nearly seventy-five years ago:

The methods of social science are so little perfected that in many of the serious decisions and most of the casual ones, there is yet no choice but to gamble with fate as intuition prompts . . . But we can make a belief in reason one of those intuitions. We can use our wit and our force to make footholds for reason. Behind our pictures of the world, we can try to see the vista of a larger duration of events, and wherever it is possible to escape from the urgent present, allow this longer time to control our decisions.

The truth is not what journalism can report. News and truth are not the same thing; nor are facts and truth one and the same. This Lippmann recognized, but that the press should not join in the search was contrary to everything he believed. H. L. Mencken concurred in what was, for him, a rare and sentimental incantation: “It is a fine thing to face machine guns for immortality and a medal, but isn’t it a fine thing, too, to face calumny, injustice and loneliness for the truth which makes men free?”

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FEAR AND LOATHING

The idea of objective truth is very problematical. Yes, it works at certain levels and the newspapers are accurate when they give you the ball scores. They’re not so accurate when they give you the prediction of the next day’s weather. You can’t write history based on this—ask any historian that and they’ll say they give you a sense of the temper of the times, but when you put them up against the documents and the journals and what was really taking place at the time, they’re quite far off.

—Lewis Lapham, Harper’s magazine editor and columnist

In Ballyhoo, Silas Bent’s 1927 book about the sensationalist press, the failings of the yellow newspapers were vividly revealed. Ballyhoo was the descriptive term Bent attached to the editorial products of Hearst and his fellow tabloid publishers. The distortions began, in Bent’s view, with the Spanish-American War, but during World War I the cynicism of the mass circulation papers accelerated to the point that they sounded like “the circus broker” selling entertainment, sex, crime, sports, and polemics. Bent called for the increasingly familiar reforms most critics had agreed were necessary: more qualified editors and reporters, vigorous self-criticism, and published corrections. If the press didn’t accept greater responsibility for keeping government in line and the citizenry alert, Bent warned, “regulation and inspection” would soon intervene. The public, he believed, would not defend the press against supervision, because people had little respect for the casual invasion of privacy so common in yellow journalism and the generally low level of its moral standards. Looking for a villain, Bent singled out advertising as the agent of deterioration. Advertising had made independent newspapers retreat into conformity, gutless reporting, and an emphasis on amusement.

Indignation gave way by the 1930s to a more compelling campaign for higher standards. Yellow journalism was not winning the day, and though
16. Will Irwin, *The Making of a Reporter* (New York: Putnam, 1942), pp. 71-72. Irwin was prophetic, iconoclastic, and courageous. He was, of course, accused of fouling his own nest.


CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1. Robert Hutchins et al., *A Free and Responsible Press*, ed. Robert D. Leigh (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), pp. 76-78. Fuller discussion of this report can be found in Chapters 19 and 20. The Commission on Freedom of the Press was urged by Archibald MacLeish to emphasize the notion of accountability, but several commissioners argued that responsibility was a better prescription because the requirement to be accountable suggested some outside supervision, whereas striving to be responsible required personal and internal commitment.


8. Ibid.


13. Nelson A. Crawford, "The American Newspaper and the People: A Psycho-


20. The infant son of renowned airman Charles Lindbergh and his wife writer, Anne Morrow, was kidnapped in the autumn of 1932 from the Lindbergh home in New Jersey. The death of the child, the pursuit of the kidnapper, and the trial of the accused man, Bruno Hauptmann, were reported and commented on stridently, distortedly, and with reckless speculation and invasion of privacy. Said critic of the press Silas Bent: "They outdid themselves and one another in verbosity and vulgarity."

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3. Ibid., quoting Curtis MacDougall in *Qualitative Studies Division of the Association for Education in Journalism Newsletter* 7 (Fall 1980):6; also see Margaret Blanchard, *Exploring the First Amendment* (New York: Longman, 1986), pp. 81-86, 120.


7. I was the *Life* reporter who covered the death of William Randolph Hearst.

8. From my personal notes made while in the room where Hearst died.

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In finding much of the information in this chapter, Marion Tuttle Marzolf’s excellent history of journalism critics, Civilizing Voices: American Press Criticism, 1880–1950 (New York: Longman, 1991), has been particularly helpful.


3. Eric W. Allen, “Newspapers Need Criticism,” Editor and Publisher, September 8, 1923, p. 1. Allen was president of the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism.


6. Frank E. Gannett, “Sensational Newspapers Near End of Vogue Here and Abroad,” Editor and Publisher, January 17, 1931, p. 41. The end was far from “near,” and the same applies today.


13. This phrase and its implications arise frequently in the literature of press evaluation during the 1930s and 1940s. The term evolved into the concept of social responsibility, articulated by the Hutchins Commission in 1947.


16. Roy Hoopes, “When Ralph Ingersoll Paped Manhattan: The Saga of PM, a Revolutionary Newspaper,” Washington Journalism Review, December 1984, p. 25. Stone had worked for the experimental newspaper PM, started by former Time editor Ralph Ingersoll in New York City in 1940. The paper attempted to publish without advertising, political bias, or the influence of financial backers. It lasted eight years.


25. Ibid., p. 143.


27. Ibid., p. vi.

28. Ibid.

CHAPTER TWENTY