

THE PUBLISHER AND HIS PUBLIC

PAPER BY

MR. JAMES J. HILL

READ AT

The Twenty-Ninth Annual Dinner of
The American Newspaper Publishers Association,
New York City,

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For more than three centuries after the discovery of printing the practical exercise of the art was subject to a censorship more or less complete. At first no government dreamed of tolerating the free publication of facts, to say nothing of opinions. The attacking liberal columns aimed only at making less rigorous and exclusive this limitation of privilege. Dr. Samuel Johnson, in his "Life of Milton", stated the case in terms whose logical clearness the years since then have brought into even stronger relief: "The danger of such unbounded liberty and the danger of bounding it have produced a problem in the science of government which human understanding seems hitherto unable to solve. If nothing may be published but what civil authority shall have previously

approved, power must always be the standard of truth ; if every dreamer of innovations may propagate his projects, there can be no settlement".

Here are set out the great dilemma and the great question in which the publishing business is still more or less embarrassed. The dilemma is this: that if there is any censorship of printing, then the enormous force of publicity is turned to unfair use by persons or parties in power, and tyranny is assured and fortified. If, on the other hand, there is no censorship, this mighty modern engine may serve the wrong just as powerfully as the right. "The same aids cause Falsehood to range just as widely as Truth". "Printed leasing and lies may speed to the world's farthest corner". The question is this: do the facts of experience warrant us in accepting the uniform conclusion of the optimists, that the general opinion of readers, their disapproval of whatever goes beyond the proper bounds of manners and morals, will always act as a sufficient restraint upon the publisher? These two consequences of the invention of the art of printing contain practically all the issues that divide the world of readers and the world of publishers today.

The first notion, that of some form of public censorship, is not so out of date as most people think. All nations suspend or censor news dispatches in time of war. In all Eastern and most of Central Europe the idea of freedom of the press, as we understand the term, is still unrealized. In France, as late as the reign of Napoleon III., the newspaper was absolutely submissive to the sovereign's will. No matter how

apparently harmless a paragraph might appear, if, in the earlier years of the empire, it was displeasing to the authorities, the publisher was first admonished, and then the publication was summarily and permanently suppressed. And in all countries this right of legal censorship remains in the statutes against the printing of matter offensive to decency. There is a certain class of publication which cannot be circulated openly in any civilized country without coming within the prohibition of the law. But, as a whole, the English-speaking peoples have adopted finally the principle that there must be no other censorship than this; and even it is now⁷ more honored in the breach than in the observance.

Practically unlimited freedom of the press being, then, guaranteed in time of peace, we have, rightly or wrongly, ended the old dilemma. The authorities in time of war must make shift as best they can to keep the correspondent outside the lines, and to prevent him from sending out material if he succeeds in stealing within. Let the matter once reach the newspaper office, and it is privileged. Personal influence may accomplish something, but the law is powerless. Aside from the unnatural and, let us hope, hereafter impossible conditions of war, the practice of entire liberty of publication in all really free countries is fixed. Society, therefore, as a protection against possible abuses, must fall back on the corrective which Lord Macaulay saw through the rosy glasses that he always put on when considering men or measures within the privileged pale of his personal approval. "The general feeling of readers" is the only forum

before which the publisher of this age can be cited. Is there such a thing? And if so, is it likely to prove an efficient governor for the print shop?

In our own country there cannot be two answers to these questions. We are under bonds to reply affirmatively, because we live under and believe in a republican form of government. "A decent regard for the opinions of men" was held up, at the very beginning of our existence, as the standard which one could not violate without being outlawed. Our government is a government by public political opinion. The republic and the unfettered press are Siamese twins. We are committed to the experiment. Only, through the unhappy divorce that we have pronounced between public and private moral codes, our unfortunate and indefensible distinction between the standard for public and that for private life, the reader who does not demand decency and fair play in his political reading matter is apt to discard them equally when he reads on other subjects. Then the general judgment is vitiated. The general fidelity to truth and hatred of falsehood and misrepresentation yield to custom and excuse. "The general feeling of readers" begins to stagger feebly around in the exercise of its control. Yet to its regulating power our whole future is irrevocably committed.

Now the most important point, it seems to me, to be urged upon a body of men like this, men as keen in judgment and enlightened in conscience as any in the business world, men for whom any question and any suggestion of mine are likely to have been already the subject of careful thought, is the fact that there

is a reciprocating motion between the publisher and the reader. And it is just as absurd to deny or to ignore one side of this reciprocal relation, one half of this constructive influence, as the other. Consider first the influence of the public on the press. Everybody is familiar to weariness with the assertion that the publisher must give his public "what they want". Within certain limits nothing could be truer. If he does not, he will soon cease to be a publisher: as countless wrecks of publishing enterprises scattered over the whole country emphatically prove. To vindicate itself, his undertaking must have a commercial basis; it must succeed. As a bankrupt he certainly cannot do any good to a clientage which he is no longer able to reach. To at least the extent of holding enough readers to pay the cost of publication and a reasonable profit on the investment, he must bend to the wishes of those readers. Therefore the publisher has been engaged from all time and is still engaged in the most doubtful, elusive and disappointing of all researches; that of trying to find out exactly what it is that the people want. If the formula for that could be discovered, the publishing business would be as simple as the compounding of a patent medicine according to its time-honored recipe.

The pursued persons taking such care to conceal themselves, the pursuer is left, to a large extent, to his own initiative. He must try a different fly if he is not catching any fish. And his crowning trouble is his knowledge that, so far as his work is concerned, the term "the public", has no definite meaning at all. For there are as many publics as there are varieties

of human nature or personal characteristics. The hidebound Republican wants matter with a strong Republican tinge, and the rock-ribbed Democrat demands a Democratic shade. So far it is plain sailing. But there is a lot of people, growing more numerous every day, who demand matter as truthfully impartial as it can be obtained and stated; who will not use the colored report at any price if they can get one transparent and flawless. Now how is the same instrument of publication to serve all three acceptably? How is it to keep them all on its subscription list? How is it to give these three types "what they want"? For the things they want are contradictory and mutually destructive.

The same confusion that interferes with a universally satisfactory treatment of political topics covers the whole field of newspaper publicity. One reader turns first to the sports page, and barely glances at the rest of the paper. Another skips that page, grumbling at the waste of so much space that might have been filled with articles to his liking. Art, music and books are indispensable to some. The latest thing in tango dancing or the moving pictures is the food of another. Most pronounced of all is this conflict where taste is more or less governed by moral principle. Sensational news, the fund of everyday scandal, the exaggeration of items based on facts, the skillful framing of a paragraph to blacken a high motive or ennoble a low attempt upon public or individual integrity, are parts of a policy without which a large reading constituency could neither be attracted nor held. On the other hand, these things are

resented intensely by those whose sense of fairness and moral code are outraged, and who believe that a newspaper of this stamp is a public enemy and should be treated as a contagious disease. This mixed demand, this absence of any uniform criterion of what the public actually wants, is the recognized and universal problem of the newspaper.

It is a natural and necessary consequence of the widening of the newspaper field and the addition of millions of readers. Many here can remember when the New York Tribune met every want of one class, the New York Sun of another, and Godey's Lady's Book left the ladies nothing to desire. But publications of these types could not remain solvent six months today. They were supported by forms of mentality that have altered with national and human growth and change. The range of demand has widened. Belief and taste are less rigid, more catholic. Above all, a change which I believe that even the most modernized publisher regrets, there has been a distinct deterioration of the moral standard. There are not only periodicals but books published today, exposed for sale, sent through the mails and to be found on the table in fashionable drawing rooms, whose issue would have cost the offender his cars less than three hundred, his liberty less than one hundred and the respect of all his fellows less than fifty years ago. Nevertheless there are some survivors or adherents of the old regime who must not be pushed too far. All of these diversities of demand are to be satisfied as far as may be, and none of them can be denied or outraged with impunity. This is a problem

as big and wide as that of democracy itself. In fact, it is hardly going too far to say that they will probably be solved together or given up together as beyond possible present human solution.

In recognizing the exceedingly difficult nature of this task of "giving the public what it wants", in granting credit where credit is due to those honestly engaged in its performance, the other side of the case, the power of the publisher to change popular standards and create a different public demand, is too often passed over in silence or boldly denied. A good many of those who pretend to be anxious only to give the public what it wants are actually engaged in the deliberate corruption of the people's modes of thinking and the active perversion of the people's taste. Unhappily, the man of decent instincts is more long-suffering than his less particular neighbor. He will continue to take and read a publication containing much that he disapproves and some things that he abhors long after the man who demands this stuff has ceased to buy the paper if it does not give it to him. Since the commercial side of the publishing business demands the largest possible total of readers, there follows a little more encroachment on the patience of the particular, a little further deviation in the direction that will attract minds of a lower moral order. Hence the spread of "sensationalism", which has made such inroads of late years. And the worst of it is that, in pandering to the least worthy element among readers, that element is steadily increased by the food given to it and by the education, of others in a more or less depraved taste. "Evil communications corrupt good manners".

It is not without profound truth that a certain class of stories are called "suggestive". Medical science knows that results which would formerly have appeared miraculous, even changes in character itself, can be brought about by the mere repeated suggestion of certain ideas to the mind. That the moral tone of a community can be lowered, that vice can be increased and scandal made to overflow and putrefy life by continued statement and suggestion through the press is just as certain as that land will run to weeds instead of grain if you sow them broadcast. A great deal of what is excused as "giving the public what it wants" is really making the public want what you give. To habituate the clean-minded reader to stories of crime, of sexual irregularity, of alleged but unproved wrongdoing in high places, to make him suspect eventually that these things are actually the woof of life and not mere blemishes on the fabric, is much easier than to make the vicious-minded man love righteousness and hate iniquity. So the publisher who is seeking only the largest possible subscription list sees an easy and prosperous way, if he is willing to splash along it through puddles of filth. There are so many brilliant exceptions to the sway of this policy, so many who repudiate it and its rewards with scorn, that the mere statement of the case would seem ungracious did not all of you perceive and most of you deplore the changes that, in this respect, the last forty years have seen accomplished in the moral order of the publishing business.

One exercise of the admitted influence of the newspaper upon public opinion, foreshadowed by current events, seems worthy of mention here. No one accus-

tomed to read the signs of the times can fail to see that a determined effort will be made to give the tariff the leading place in the next national campaign. I refer, of course, not to any readjustment of particular items which experience may have shown to be out of proportion to the rest or unsuited to existing business conditions, but to an effort to secure another general revision on an ascending scale of rates. A number of political leaders adhere to the old belief once stated frankly in the words, "There is one more president in the tariff". And of course all who believe that they would be beneficiaries of changes to be made are promoting the movement. Upon the attitude of the newspapers, which are now being felt out, will depend its fate. Is it not the province of you gentlemen to consider this matter dispassionately before you follow the dictum of any leader?

What share, if any, of the business difficulties of the country is due to recent changes in the tariff cannot be determined. We know, on the other hand, that unfavorable effects have been produced by legislative attempts to hamper business, and by the economic and financial revolution due to war abroad. We cannot, without more time and more light, assign effects to their true causes and in correct proportion. That the country can live and thrive under the existing tariff is clear to all. Aside from its purely political aspect, which no truly patriotic man ought to approve, a re-opening of the whole tariff" question with a view to the restoration of practices that brought disaster can look only toward an increase of prices and be justified only by a promised increase in wages. But are these things really desirable, at the cost at which they must be obtained?

The public certainly does not want higher prices. And the increase in wages, which is a benefit only so long as it is economically justified, turns to the injury of labor as well as capital when it passes the point where it can be sustained by general industrial conditions. For instance, great public improvements in New York City have been lately held in suspense because the high rate of wages made it impracticable to carry them on, and the rule that only citizens could be employed was imposed. The whole power of the state had to be exercised in favor of the repeal of that provision. Was the deadlock a benefit to anybody? The question is pertinent because it must now be answered in all our industries; and if it is proposed to make wages higher, a large number of them must curtail or suspend operations.

The number of available jobs depends on the rate of wages. There is always work for a larger number of men if they could be obtained at a lower figure. And the ranks of the unemployed, unhappily so swollen of late, are filled not only by those who have been discharged, but by men laid off temporarily or indefinitely. These latter can charge their misfortune largely to a wage rate maintained above what would be the normal figure under the free play of the law of the market. If a man can find work only 150 days in the year—a common condition just now—at a wage of \$2.50 per day, his total income is \$375 for the year. But if he could obtain work for 300 days in the year at \$2.00 per day, it would bring him in \$600. The cash gain is great, to say nothing of the demoralization that forced idleness induces. It does not seem that

anything could be more against the interests of working people than a plan to raise wages still further in a period of depression.

This country must either remain in the ranks of those competing for the world's trade in the world's markets, or it must get out. But it has now no choice. Under the stimulus applied through many years by tariff subsidies, the manufacturing interest has been built up to a point where, as a rule, the home demand cannot absorb more than two-thirds of its product. Whether this is a good or a bad thing does not matter now. We are concerned only with the fact and its implications? What is to be done with the extra one-third? It is a question to which the dwindling of all markets under the pressure of war has given a keener edge.

It is as clear as a geometrical demonstration that there are but two alternatives. Either we must curtail production by one-third, or we must find customers for that surplus third. The first course will have few advocates. Aside from the reversal of a policy that engages national pride, a production lessened by one-third would mean so much less work and wages for labor, and so much less profit for capital. It would intensify the very evils which we are most anxious to reduce or avoid. If we are to sell that extra third anywhere, at home or abroad, it can be done only by enlarging the market through reduced prices. But prices cannot be reduced without lower wages as well as lower profits. And it would be folly to stimulate still more the artificial increase of a surplus product which cannot, on account of the tremendous effect of

war on the demand and the purchasing power of our principal customers, be disposed of abroad for many years to come at prices that we could afford to accept. These are facts to be faced. You can create jobs or raise wages by statute, but you cannot make capital pay the wages if this involves a loss. Sooner or later the throwing of that burden upon helpless industries or upon the state must end. Industry is bound to come eventually to a state of stable equilibrium, fixed by fundamental economic forces as surely as water finds its level.

Now this country has reached a point in its development where these elementary facts must be recognized and dealt with as the basis of both our working life and our laws. It is time to get out of the fool's paradise of believing that wealth and prosperity are created by legislation, or that labor can prosper permanently at the expense of capital. Experience has shown that every general reconstruction of the tariff, whether for better or for worse, means at least two years of doubt, hesitation, bad business. The eternal see-saw of tariff ups and downs costs the country much more than it would to live quietly even under a had tariff system. Some day, perhaps, the idea of taking the tariff out of politics, and confiding its regulation to a commission of experts, will be realized. In the meantime, while there may be some mistakes to rectify and some items to be re-written in the light of stupendous trade changes that have occurred, agitation for any wholesale tariff overturning must be bad for everybody, and for labor worst of all. The reason for expressing these views here is that, if the

newspapers of the country make it plain that they will disapprove such a movement, which can have only a political motive and only unfortunate industrial consequences, the attempt will not be made. It seems to me that here lies an opportunity for you to perform a great public service, and to rise still further above the bog of blind subservience to party which has been the bane of the press of every country and of every age.

The perplexities which you meet and the evils which you have to overcome in a work that deals with the whole of life, and with millions of differing individualities, are great enough in themselves. They are almost overwhelming when united with the vast responsibilities that you must carry. The changes of recent years have multiplied this responsibility a hundredfold. If a publishers' association had met fifty or sixty years ago, a member of it who had any direct control of the editorial conduct of a newspaper would have been a curiosity. The editor of those days was captain. That conspicuous and noble figure has almost disappeared. Today, in the vast majority of large newspaper offices, the sanctum and the counting room are merged. The publisher exercises, directly or indirectly, editorial as well as business management. On him, therefore, rests the whole of a once divided responsibility. The questions here discussed are, I hope, germane to the occasion, because, for the most part, it is by you that they must and will be settled.

I should not dream of reading a lecture or offering professional advice to men so expert in a highly specialized occupation as those who make up this

audience. But some ideas, perhaps not entirely inappropriate or Utopian, suggest themselves to men in the thick of other business struggles; men who are also readers in what leisure they may have; and are sincerely interested in the working out of our institutions and the future of our country. It is not an unprecedented event for some one in the publishing business to express with considerable confidence conclusions and suggestions as to the management of the railroads and other industries of the country. Possibly some similar co-operation from the outside may be at least as helpful to publishers who, like the rest of us, are seeking for light. In any event it will be entirely sincere, and offered with a desire to help rather than to irritate or hamper by unintelligent criticism.

It seems, then, to the outside observer, that many of the difficulties and shortcomings of the newspapers of today rise from the effort to cover too much ground at once. Take up a daily and observe the number and variety of the tastes which it attempts to satisfy. Take one of the big Sunday issues and notice that it aims to be a newspaper, an athletic club, a library, a kindergarten, a scientific institute and a cabaret show all at once. That, like the dancing bear, its success is remarkable considering the nature of the task, is not to be denied. But is not the scheme itself contrary to the whole modern trend of things? Is it not trying to make evolution walk backward? Evolution develops separate organs to perform different offices, and makes them as unlike as possible. It does so because that is the most economical way to get all necessary tasks done with the highest efficiency. Modern industry divides and specializes. The same capital

may be employed in making car wheels and velvet carpets: but not out of the same material or with the same machinery. Nor does anybody try to get customers for car wheels by insisting that the buyer must also take a roll of carpet, and including- the cost of both in the bill rendered.

The infinity of material desires is satisfied by many agencies, each devoted to one thing and doing that as well and as cheaply as possible. Is the infinity of mental desire, of moral outlook, of inquiry along all the lines that interest and engage human activity to be satisfied fully and permanently in any other way? Will not this activity be balked, stunted, perhaps transformed into some evil or malignant growth by insisting upon a solidarity that finds no counterpart elsewhere in the conduct of life? This is one question which I would have you consider practically, no matter what it may cost that just pride which you feel in the immense and successful organs of publicity that you have built up by painstaking and conscientious effort. The megatherium and other quadrupeds of his day were wonderful organisms, and could apparently defy the future. But life demanded something more delicately adjusted, more responsive to its impalpable current?. Life sought something more diversified, more highly organized, above all more highly specialized. One went and the other came.

Let at be granted that there is a large class of persons in a country like this who must be educated into the habit of reading anything; and that to induce them to begin there must be crude tales and lots of color. But there are also many with maturer judg-

merit and better taste. We do not interweave matter and pictures from hooks for the infant class in those intended for use in the high school or the university. It is impossible to cater to all kinds of needs at once. In a word, such a thing as the universal newspaper, which appears to be the generally accepted model, because of a desire to make the circulation list as corpulent as possible, is an impossibility. The attempt to make it results often in a sort of hodge-podge where all tastes are more or less disappointed and denied; in a uniform grayness, instead of artistic lights and harmonious combinations of color; in dulness where serious thought is desired, cheap vulgarity where human interest is called for, mechanical mixtures instead of chemical combinations.

It is at least possible to conceive of an orderly division of the publishing business; such as must probably come about eventually through the operation of natural law, but might be greatly promoted by intelligent direction. The highest form of newspaper would consist of a very concise summary of all the daily news of the world, dictated solely by absolute accuracy in fact and statement. It would deal only with happenings of really general bearing on the common life, which seems to be a fair working definition of that scapegoat word, "news". It might be small in size, easy to run over in fifteen or twenty minutes by the busy man, with just such comment as should carry the necessary explanation and connection of the current event with historic fact, past or present. For such a newspaper there is a large

waiting public; select, not running into the millions, but certain to be retained year after year. Next would come a paper of larger size, more detail and description, containing in addition the less important happenings of the day's life. Then, for the mental beginners, something more in the line of what is now known as the "sensational" paper, but with a closer regard for truth and a higher standard of decency. Experience would soon correct and define this loose grouping, made for the mere purpose of intelligible statement. But some such practical classification of material to be published, according to the public to which it is directed, must ultimately bring order out of present chaos in the more or less groping minds of both readers and publishers. To the former it would bring exactly "what the public wants"; to the latter it would bring emancipation from a thousand perplexities and hateful compromises.

It is easy to conceive, at least, of as many separate papers, published under the same name and by the same concern if you please, as there are separate departments in the daily newspaper. Each might be made the best of its kind at no greater expense than is now incurred in making a combination of all of them which is really inferior to any one of them. Each would appeal to and satisfy its own public. Every reader would get what and only what he wants. And if he did not know exactly what he wanted, or wanted everything, then he could be supplied with all of them at substantially the same price that he now pays for the single newspaper that tries to be uni-

versal, and fails because the thing is impossible; that makes its appeal to all ages, tastes, intelligences and interests in the lump, with the unhappy result of not fully satisfying' any of them. If, in our time, industrial organization has been carried to its highest point, it is equally true that this organization has been used for the specialization of industry to the highest degree. Such is the last demand of efficiency everywhere else, and the publishing business is not exempt from it. Already the tendency is seen in the increase of trade and technical publications which are among the most reliable and commercially successful journals in the country. The principle remains to be applied to the daily newspaper; and that application, to my mind, forms an exceedingly interesting, important and attractive future possibility of the publishing business.

This differentiation might well begin with the matter on which there is the most positive clash of opinion. The trunk of the publishing tree could divide first on the line of a closer scrutiny of material with reference to its effect on public morals. I do not mean, of course, that real news should be suppressed. That is not in question at all. I mean a stricter censorship within the publishing office over the decision whether given matter is or is not news; and the presumption that it is not if its moral tendency is debasing. Such a distinction would remove from the columns of the daily press a vast amount of matter which now appeals only to prurient curiosity. Beyond a doubt it would save many characters from soiling, and make easier the rebuilding of others. But the

principle carries further. I doubt sometimes whether open offences to decency are so serious a matter as constant appeals to passion, to prejudice, to all that is worst in man, by the publication of statements and accusations which the slightest inquiry would have shown to be either maliciously distorted or wholly untrue. It has become very difficult now to get a thorough and impartial discussion of any economic question, of the conduct of business, of the true office and limitations of legislative action, because there is so little regard for accuracy in statement. Any stone is good enough to fling. When the people make mistakes in their selection of men, in their advocacy of measures, it is almost never because they wish or intend to do a wrong thing or an unjust thing. It is almost always because they are not merely uninformed, but misinformed. They have fed upon false representations, perversions of fact, until their minds are no longer open to the truth.

If it were necessary, if a score of instances of what I mean did not flash instantly into the mind of each one of you, I should refer to the publications that caused the invention of the term "Muck-raking". That has gone a little out of fashion, because it was found to be financially unremunerative after its novelty was spent. But the same kind of thing persists. With the decline of the prestige and power of editorial opinion has come something still more regrettable; the injection of bias into the news article. It is the exception rather than the rule, taking not the great monuments to honest publicity whose representatives are here today, but all the newspapers and magazines

of the country in the mass, to find news articles on important subjects which are fashioned solely from materials found in a search for the bare fact; which are not somewhat colored by the known position of the publication. Yet it is only by impartiality, by devotion to the abstract truth, that the country can get anywhere; can do anything nobler than chase its own tail amidst paroxysms of barking. It is only along that road that the newspaper itself can reach any future worthy of its ambition, and any perpetuity that does not lead to weariness and shame.

This is not a protest against attacks on men, measures, industries, institutions, when they deserve it. It is a protest against unfair fighting. It is a protest against the illegitimate use of an honorable weapon; against a court which has announced in advance its intention to make a prejudiced decision. These things correct no evils, they beget them. One thing only can rule the world. There is but one ultimate force. It is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Our courts seek for it. Statesmen grope after it. Heroes have died gladly in the faith that they had grasped it. Religion for thousands of years has glorified it. No social life, no industrial life, no political life, no individual life without it can be permanent, or even worth while. Of that quest you, gentlemen, are the appointed leaders. As custodians of the flying truth which animates our daily life and gives meaning to today and hope to tomorrow, you can do much to obscure it and much to bring it to the light. On that the future of men and nations depends. Doubtless most of you are acquainted with that old

motto, full of the New England spirit, which first appeared at the head of the Salem Register more than one hundred years ago. Old-fashioned in form of expression, suggestive in its almost stilted phrase of knee breeches and cocked hat, it nevertheless still sums up, I think, as well as the most hopeful could in this era, the true publishers' ideal:

"Here shall the Press the People's right maintain,
Unawed by influence and unbribed by gain; Here
Patriot Truth her glorious precepts draw, Pledged
to Religion, Liberty and Law".