

Thesis

The Press.

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Undoubtedly the most powerful factor in the civilization of the world has been the influence of the Press. The history of those nations that endeavored to shackle the thoughts of men is indeed the story of a slow progress and even a description of retrogression. The liberty of thought has ever been the watchword of progress and civilization. We are often caused to wonder why it was the world progressed so slowly in those ages when the printing-press was unknown. Perhaps one reason for this slow march among men was due to the absence of that vehicle of thought - the Press.

We shall consider the Press principally as meaning the newspaper and periodical literature. And furthermore we shall confine ourselves for the most part to the modern aspect of the subject.

From the beginning, the newspaper became a prominent factor of everyday life in the social world; and, crude as were the first

journals, we have every reason to believe they were held as valuable acquisitions to the literature of that day and were regarded as the exponents of progressive thought. So rapid and varied has been the evolution of the Press that today we have journals of every kind, representing all industries and professions.

But of all journals, the newspaper is perhaps the most important and far-reaching. The modern newspaper is one of the greatest powers in the land. In comparison every other individual influence dwindles into insignificance; and to be the fountain head of this power is the goal of many a man's ambition. But let us now notice the reasons for this power back of the newspaper press.

The greatest mark of the newspaper is the publication of news. This function belongs alone to the newspaper press. And in the furnishing of news the work has be-

come of such far-reaching importance that the American people will not do without their daily and weekly papers.

But every day we hear our papers severely criticised because of the manner in which the news is presented. It is deemed proper to say just here that much of the criticism of the newspaper press is due to a misconception of the exact condition of affairs. The mistake is often made of judging the entire newspaper field by its worst examples and of denouncing all because of the evils found in the few. These same critics maintain that the newspapers are everywhere regarded as debasing and untruthful. Now, we wish to reply to such critics that they are either very much misinformed in regard to the actual state of affairs or deluded by their own prejudices. Generally speaking, the newspapers are gladly welcomed into the

homes of our land and are considered the source of much reliable information.

But in thus defending the newspaper press we would not imply that it is perfect, that it has no evils associated with it, or that even all newspapers are fit to lie on the reading table. We only insist that critics of the Press should use judicious and thoughtful discrimination. But we are ready to admit, that the newspaper province contains in it such journals as ought never to find their way into society. Perhaps you ask why such a bold statement is made. Well, we have in mind the manner in which the news is published in some of our daily papers. The story of crime is not told in plain facts; but in the most revolting of language the horrible details of crime are printed in bold-faced letters in the

most conspicuous part of the journal. All the brutalities of human nature are depicted in the most sensational of words and sent broadcast over our land. Many a young man stands behind the Griston bars who is ready to tell you his journey to ruin began by reading the sensational descriptions of crime as found in the daily newspaper. How much better off society would be if such occurrences were never made known! I grant that most of the happenings of the world ^{ought} to be made known, is it not possible to narrate them in such language as will not fire the mind of the young with a passion for crime and adventure? The answer emphatically in the affirmative. But perhaps some will reply that as long as there are those in society that demand sensationalism in the newspaper so long will editors pander to the low tastes in

man-kind. Furthermore, some hold that a newspaper cannot rise above its social environment. In answer to such arguments we simply say that the modern editor ought to be independent enough to hold himself aloof from the degrading influences of lower strata of society. And editors can, if they will, create a public sentiment that will do away with that element in society which demands a sensational press. If all our journalists would endeavor to publish the news without a touch of sensationalism or vulgarity the prison cells and gallows would have a far less number of victims. Facts that are undeniable prove the truth of this statement.

Let us now consider the Press in its relation to public opinion. Apart from its work of gathering news, the function of the Press is to reflect the thoughts

of the people and express its own sentiments upon questions of the day. The progressive journalist of today is a careful student of the times; he watches with keen interest the ever changing scenes upon the great stage of life. And, as he becomes a student he has opinions of his own and is fearless in their expression. The duty of the Press is the exposition of vital questions of the day. But here again we are confronted by the critics who maintain that the newspapers in their attempts to mould public opinion are too much the organs of political organizations. They, the critics, insist that the editor ought to keep politics out of his journal. But such criticism is not at all justified or even logical. Since our government is a free one and is always dominated by the party in power it is no

more than forger that the newspapers should take sides with these political organizations. For it is only by such means that men can present views and arguments the judgment of which views and arguments becomes the privilege of the entire people. And we must always bear in mind that newspapers can be political and still not of necessity have undesirable qualities. As regards the Press in its voicing of political opinions, Garfield said in an address before the editorial association of Ohio in 1875: "It is fair to presume that every intelligent man has convictions upon leading public questions. If there be a journalist without convictions he might be a successful compiler of news; possibly he might fairly represent the current phrases of public opinion; but he could

be in no sense a leader of public thought, let the journalist defend the doctrines of the party which he approves; let him criticise and condemn the party which he does not approve, reserving always his right to applaud his opponents or censure his friends, as the truth may require, and he will be independent enough for a free country." So long^{as} the Press continues to send forth its opinions on questions of the day so long will the people have at least one safeguard against the secret workings of corruption. It was due to a New York newspaper more than to any other one influence that the Tweed Ring with all its corruption was finally overthrown. Many other cases might be cited in which society has rid itself of political demagogues by the

vigorous campaigns carried on by the Press.

Now let us briefly consider the relation that the Press ought to bear to the question of Ethics. Some hold that the newspapers and periodicals are placing too much stress upon the matter of Morals. Yet we cannot see how these critics could be consistent if they would remember that the growth of our moral nature is one of the safeguards of the nation. Indeed, the Press is grandly fulfilling its mission when it comes forward and demands a hearing on the question of ethics. When we say that it is the duty of the Press to demand the best of morals we are greeted with approval by the best representatives of American journalism. If the morals of a city are low there can be no more powerful

factor against such a state of affairs than a newspaper which uses all its energy in exposing the dens of vice and denouncing fearlessly the evils attending such a condition of society. We have ^{hundreds} of examples in our ^{large} cities every year that go to prove that the newspaper can be the most effectual power against the growth of vice and sin.

Let us next consider the Press as an educator. As American institutions, the Press and the cause of education have walked shoulder to shoulder in the great march of civilization and progress. They have always encouraged one another and worked together in the great cause of truth and enlightenment. The first educators during colonial days found a true friend in

the Press; and ever since it has been a potent factor in the education of the masses. Still the Press and the cause of education are very much interdependent. Without a general diffusion of education the Press could not be much of an influence. Likewise, without the aid of the Press the progress of education would hardly be possible - at least it would be at a slow rate. Stimulate the growth of education and you are a benefactor of the Press. Again, the power of the Press like that of education, is noticeable wherever you find American civilization. Its field is broad; and freedom of speech being guaranteed, the Press is in communication with the millions all over our land. Shackle the Press and you invite ignorance and tyranny into the land. Deprive the people of

The right to read newspapers and periodicals and you cause a cloud of despair to hover above men which will shut out the sunlight of knowledge. The Press stimulates the minds of men to great intellectual and industrial attainments. The Press is as one writer says the "most remarkable phenomenon of modern times, vitally affecting society in all its relations and forming one of the political elements of modern free nations which the ancients had not even in embryo".

So far we have considered chiefly the newspaper press. But there is in the United States an immense amount of periodical literature outside of the newspaper. The present is a period of magazines of every description and of journals devoted to every industry and profession among

men.

As regards the magazine it is a typical representative of all periodical literature outside of newspaperdom; and any remarks upon the magazine press will apply in general to all journals except newspapers. It has been said that the newspaper of a century ago was much like the magazine is today. The modern improvements such as the railroad service, the telegraph and telephone lines have doubtless been the most potent factors in bringing about this change. And now instead of our newspaper containing long essays and treatises the magazine has arisen and become a medium for the expression of philosophical thought and comprehensive investigation. Again, while not many years ago the magazine was only to be found in the homes of the

wealthy and well-to-do it is to-day published at such a low cost that nearly every family can afford one or two of the best.

Little adverse criticism is heard about our magazine press. And it is a matter of no surprise that critics as a general rule do not attack our magazine literature. The fact is that the magazine press, generally speaking, sustains an enviable reputation and has few of the immoral tendencies peculiar to the newspaper press.

What we have said in regard to the relation the newspaper press bears to progress and civilization is largely true of the magazine. Like the newspaper, the magazine is a powerful factor in the world's thought. It is a co-worker with educational institutions in the

diffusion of knowledge, The ceaseless toil ^{of} our very best thinkers has made the magazine what it is today - a store-house of information and a high type of literature.

The closing years of the nineteenth century will see the ^{most} triumphant victories of all past ages. The greatest of these triumphs will be that of an unbettered Press marching shoulder to shoulder with all those who are endeavoring to promote peace and good-will among men. Thus will the Press meet the day when the commandments of God shall be written on the hearts of men nevermore to be effaced. When the Press has accomplished its mission war will be no more. As the day draws near in which the Press shall have fully realized the responsibilities of

the hour, and when all men
shall heed its warnings,
then will light come where
now is darkness and Love
will hold the scepter of the
world.

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