

IS THE PRESS CORRUPT?

BY GEORGE SELDES

To commemorate the 16th anniversary in July of the born again North Coast Times Eagle, which was resurrected from a crypt the same day 10 years earlier human beings first walked on the Moon, and to pay homage to the 100th birthday this year of the cartoon character The Yellow Kid, who gave his name to sensationalist journalism, we offer a critique of the American press by George Seldes. Now 103, he is one of the premier journalists of the 20th century, reporting on World War 1, the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism, and the Spanish Civil War. His honesty and independence got him into trouble but also led him to publish from 1940 to 1950 the first American magazine of media criticism, *IN FACT*, which inspired the famous and trenchantly independent I. F. STONE'S WEEKLY. The following is an excerpt from Seldes' self-published book, "The Facts Are...", which appears in a recent collection of his writings.

~MPMc

What is the most powerful force in America today?

Answer: Public opinion.

What makes public opinion?

Answer: The main force is the press.

Can you trust the press?

Answer: The baseball scores are always correct (except for a typographical error now and then). The stock market tables are correct (within the same limitation). But when it comes to news which will affect you, your daily life, your job, your relation to other people, your thinking on economic and social problems, and, more important today, your going to war and risking your life for a great ideal, then you cannot trust about 98% (or perhaps 99 1/2%) of the big newspaper and big magazine press of America.

But why can't you trust the press?

Answer: Because it has become big business. The big city press and the big magazines have become commercialized, or big business organizations, run with no other motive than profit for owner or stockholder (although hypocritically still maintaining the old American tradition of guiding and enlightening the people). The big press cannot exist a day without advertising. Advertising means money from big business.

I have written several books on the press and I am publishing a weekly newsletter devoted largely to criticizing the big city newspapers (the public opinion-making newspapers) and exposing their corruption, because I still believe that the press is the greatest force in the world and can be used for good or evil. And I believe that the American press by its control of public opinion can either fool all the people into restoring a world in which one-third of the nation will again live in economic slavery without sufficient food, clothing and shelter, or it can, if it wants to, bring out of this united effort against native as well as foreign fascism a world approaching the Jeffersonian ideal.

In 1787 Jefferson declared that "the basis of our government is the opinion of the people." Given the choice of "a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government," he would prefer the latter. Think of it! Jefferson



GERALD MOSS

was willing to let the press itself rule the country instead of merely creating the public opinion that rules.

But Jefferson did not foresee that the American press which creates opinion and which rules indirectly would become almost exclusively a millionaire's press, or a corporation influenced press, or the medium of big business via its advertising, and therefor the corrupt press which serves private interests rather

than the public interest. If America is to be bossed by the public opinion created by its press, if it is to fight and win this war, if it is to make a great peace, then it should know the power of the most powerful force which is abroad in this land.

The press which attacked George Washington, which denounced him as everything from a traitor to a drunkard, was not a corrupt press. It was in fact a free press. But the press which from 1922 (or thereabouts) to the present day attacks New Deal F.D. Roosevelt, the same press which tried to suppress the old Teapot Dome scandal and the doings of Harding's Ohio gang, while sniping at every governmental action for the general welfare of the American people, is a corrupt press.

Why has the press become corrupt?

So long as it was possible for an itinerant printer or any tiny minority possessing a few hundred dollars to set up shop and issue a newspaper, there was no monopoly of public opinion. And there was no corrupt press. In Boston, in New York, in colonial days, and later in Washington, and in every city and town in the wake of the pioneers marching westward, wandering printers kept alive the free press and produced the most picturesque era in the nation's journalism. It was still possible toward the end of the 19th century to get out a newspaper without being a millionaire in a big city, or a company with a soul mortgaged to the banker in a small town.

But, as William Allen White — the man always chosen to prove the publishers' claim that the press still has integrity — now confesses, it takes a comparatively large bankroll to start a paper anywhere — his own *Emporia Gazette* is worth \$70,000, and if a man with another viewpoint wanted to start an opposition sheet in Emporia it would involve a much greater sum. In Chicago or New York it would mean the risk of a million dollars a year for many years.

Mr. White does not disagree with Frank Munsey, the great newspaper wrecker whom he saved from oblivion with the famous phrase: He turned a great profession into an 8% investment. The fact is now accepted that the newspaper is big business. Whether it is therefore ipso facto corrupt because big business is corrupt is still being debated.

There is only one viewpoint which the entire press of the nation expresses, respects, represents and works for: the viewpoint of business, money, wealth and power represented by what is generally known as the God of Things As They Are, or the Status Quo. The press has been united almost to a paper in defending existing conditions and opposing not only some radical plan for change but even all those mild reforms which friends of big money and the status quo, the latest of whom is Franklin Delano Roosevelt, have initiated for the double purpose of helping the Have-Nots and saving and preserving the system of the Haves.

The change that has come over America is this: that beneath the uproar the press made in our early history, the motivation was not money, it was not commercial. Today the press is motivated almost entirely by the motive of profit for itself and its backers. This profit motive not only affects the handling of all the news about labor, "defense" strikes, wage increases, the whole problem of taxation, a large part of the legislation of state and nation, but it also affects the news of world events.

It is my claim that the press, which could be the most powerful force in making this country over into an industrial democracy in which poverty would be unknown, wealth equitably distributed, every person certain of the minimum requirements of decent living (as well as the four freedoms), has, on the contrary, become the most powerful force against the general welfare of the majority of the people."



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I AM

I am
Ocean waves, sandy beaches, and horses.
I like trail rides deep in nature and laying
out in the sun.
Honesty, compassion, and fun are important to me.
I find peace within myself.
I can be fooled by the cover people
put themselves under.
But I keep trusting and finding the people
underneath.
I try to live life to its fullest.
I have strong feelings when a child
is thrown into a terrible life of abuse.
I am able to keep walking down
the path of life even when trouble arises.
This is me. I am!

~JAIME LINTON
(Age 15)



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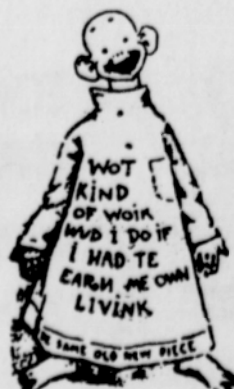
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