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Book Review: The Press

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE PRESS. BY A. J. LIEBLING. New York: Ballantine Books. 1961.
Pp. 284. 75¢

For a number of years A. J. Liebling, the able political analyst and reporter for the *New Yorker* magazine, has provided the best recurring review of the nation's newspapers¹—their foibles, their deceptions, very occasionally their virtues. Now he has drawn together a number of these essays, plus a few that were published elsewhere, revised them slightly (frequently with too little care), and placed them at common disposal (in a paperback that is so cheaply-produced that it is comparatively expensive even at seventy-five cents). Substantively the product is a pungent and altogether devastating critique of the press, as well as social commentary of immense value. And from the literary standpoint the result is the equivalent of a writer literally assaulting and annihilating his subject; to Liebling words are weapons, and he uses them in a skillful, devastating manner. Indeed the victim in this case is so colorless, so inept for the most part, that one almost has the feeling Liebling has pounced on a hapless foe after the full count has been taken. There is the urge to yell, "Lay off: you've made your point," after not more than half the volume has been consumed. But, of course, this is not the place for pity; the subject is too important, or as the author puts it: "I take a grave view of the plight of the press. It is the weak slat under the bed of democracy. . . . A man is not free if he cannot see where he is going. . . ."²

Liebling carries the attack here almost exclusively to the daily papers, those 1,750 and some odd purveyors of advertisements for everything from corsets to cars, with a little (and a declining portion of) news added for a change of scenery.³ While the rest of the mass media escape with only a glancing blow, it is perfectly clear that in his view the weekly newsmagazines, radio, and the home picture box are pretty bad, too, coming nowhere near filling the awful void left

¹ He has few competitors, for the newspapers (which provide us with daily criticism of the broadcast fare) have been subjected to surprisingly little scrutiny by the other media. Only the weekly newsmagazines, along with the *Saturday Review*, devote a section to the press on any regular basis, and it is typically only a grab-bag of news items rather than a true appraisal. For the broadcast media only the CBS television outlet in New York City takes even a once-a-week look at the papers, and this is sporadic. Perhaps the new *Columbia* (University) *Journalism Review* will fill part of the void.

² Page 71.

³ In 1940 newspapers gave 40% of their space to advertising. Now advertising gets 60%. Moreover, much of what is counted as "news" consists of prepackaged feature material, with the result that "real news occupies an average of only 38 per cent of non-advertising space in big city dailies, or 15 per cent of the whole paper. In some papers hard news is only one page in 24." Bagdikian, *Why Dailies Die*, The New Republic, April 16, 1962, p. 17, 23.

by the failure of the papers to search out and report the news comprehensively and with reasonable objectivity. In so placing his emphasis he is probably right, though I think he tends to underestimate the importance of the other media to the many people for whom the local paper(s) has become little more than a ragbag collection of headlines, in dire need of supplementation. In the vast, intellectually-arid regions of this country those who want to be informed are compelled to turn to the other media—the news-magazines, for instance, which at least bring some information from the few productive papers, though admittedly covering it with a lot of frosting and savoring it with a not occasional bit of deception. Hence the quality of the other media possesses great importance, and any complete consideration of the problem would also require their dissection.

It is the daily paper, however, upon which we must ultimately rely for the detailed, current news coverage that makes the democratic way viable. And it is the daily papers that Liebling condemns so effectively. He reviews many illustrations of their weaknesses, in sarcastic, if not venomous tones; but essentially this is his catalog of newspaper wrongs: failure to get the news, carelessness in checking on information received and in resolving inconsistencies, a propensity to substitute speculation for reporting, an unwillingness to acknowledge ignorance, and considerable distortion—deliberate or otherwise. To establish his case he presents a collection of his original accounts of the press' handling of a number of events, such as the Hiss trials, the Long Island Railroad strike of 1960 (with the papers here ruling, as is their big-business custom, and "as if they were a panel of arbitrators appointed by a Higher Power," that "labor is wrongheaded"—with management getting its usual gold-star), Stalin's illness and demise (where the papers, having little or no real news to report, proceeded to rely on their "experts" for meandering speculation, leading Liebling to comment: "I had an ungenerous feeling, while paddling through all this virtually identical speculation, that I was watching a small boy pull a cud of chewing gum out to the longest possible string before it broke."),⁴ the U-2 story (where the papers got off easy, with Liebling giving them a "not bad" rating), and a 1947 piece on one newspaper's treatment of the ever-present relief "scandal." These, and his other examples, are good for the most part (I think he devotes far too much space to the late Colonel McCormick and the *Chicago Tribune*: what he says is colorful, immensely humorous, but not very productive), and amply

⁴ Page 235.

document his principal contentions. However, I think in damning so profusely Liebling actually has weakened his case—neglecting to acknowledge explicitly the merit of a few of our papers and also failing to emphasize the vast gulf that separates these elite from the rest of the pack, with the latter, significantly I think, heavily concentrated outside of the northeastern states and hence largely free from the moderate constraining influence of the better journals. Yet even with all of the qualifications inserted the daily papers still merit a very low grade, and this is another of the cases where the exceptions should not be allowed to obscure the sorry performance of the vast preponderance.

Fundamentally the problem with the press is that it doesn't get the news, and is thus forced either to remain silent (rare) or to guess, speculate, and pontificate. Why? Liebling puts his finger on what appears to be the principal reason:

The American press makes me think of a gigantic, supermodern fish cannery, a hundred floors high, capitalized at eleven billion dollars, and with tens of thousands of workers standing ready at the canning machines, but relying for its raw material on an inadequate number of handline fishermen in leaky rowboats. At the point of contact with the news, the vast newsgathering organizations are usually represented either by a couple of their own harried reporters, averaging, perhaps, twenty-two years and eleven months old, or by a not too perceptive reporter on a small-town paper whose version of an event, written up for his employer, may or may not be passed on to the wire services by someone in the office.⁵

For confirmation of the Cannery Principle we need only recall last year's events in the Congo, especially those dealing with the Katanga truce negotiations in which the United Nations Secretary General was to have participated. A page one story in the *New York Times* of September 18 (duplicated in many papers all over the country) carried an Associated Press story reporting that Mr. Hammarskjöld had safely arrived in Ndola, Northern Rhodesia, and had participated in negotiations on September 17. However, as we were soon to learn, he had never arrived at all in Ndola, perishing on his ill-fated journey from Leopoldville. This is a striking example, and it serves to depict what is the weakest area of news coverage, the foreign scene—particularly that outside Western Europe. And, in all fairness, it must be noted that the *Times'* foreign (and domestic) coverage generally excels that of its rivals.

Consider another case. In its original May 17, 1961, article dealing with the Cuban tractor deal the *Times* carried an AP story which

⁵ Page 139.

said that Premier Castro had offered, as in fact he had, to exchange his prisoners for "500 bulldozers"; note that the word is "bulldozers," not "tractors." Yet in later news accounts the terms were switched, so that within a month the general understanding, in and out of the press, was that the bearded-one had upped his terms in an effort to slick the Yankee traders out of heavy-tracked tread tractors rather than the plain old farm variety. This inept handling of the matter is especially disturbing because it shows how easily the handling of the news can complicate the problems of government generally, and of foreign policy in particular. Revelation of the details of the tractor episode we owe to Elmo Roper,⁶ but it is in the Liebling mold, and can well be added to his long and sordid list of illustrations. And is there a reader who cannot add his own examples?

In the face of all the evidence that Liebling places before us, there can be no denying that, with rare exception, the newspapers have failed to live up to their social responsibility of getting the news and presenting it fully and fairly. But so what? What can we do about it? It is here where the substantive quality of Liebling's presentation sags noticeably. In his view the explanation of the ugly condition he finds lies almost exclusively in the decline of newspaper competition.⁷ Today, there are only sixty-two cities in this country that have independent, contesting daily papers.⁸ Just in the last few years several large cities, New Orleans for one, have been placed at the mercy of a single publisher; and even in the biggest communities, specifically Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago, there are now only two rival owners. In this trend Liebling discerns the culprit; he argues that with more competition (and by that he means more papers operating in a given local area), the quality of news collection and dissemination would improve substantially: "In the mind of the average publisher, [news] . . . is a costly and uneconomical frill, like the free lunch that saloons used to furnish to induce customers to buy beer. If the quality of the free lunch fell off, the customers would go next door"—but if there is no other

⁶ Saturday Review, Aug. 12, 1961, p. 44.

⁷ Most of his Part I, at 3-67, is devoted to a description of the decline in newspaper competition.

⁸ The sixty-two cities in the United States with more than one daily newspaper publisher (a recent and rare addition to this category is Phoenix) represent only about 3% of all the cities that have a daily paper; the comparable figure in 1910 was 43%. Accompanying the decline in the number of competitive cities has been the disappearance of more than 800 dailies during the past fifty years, attributable mostly to consolidations. Ernst, *The First Freedom* 279, 282-84 (1946). See generally Mott, *American Journalism: A History 1690-1960* (3d ed. 1962).

available newspaper, then just as if there was no "next door," the publisher has no economic compulsion to dig for the news.⁹

If, indeed, the shoddy performance of the press is accurately attributable to a reduction in competition, then our policy response must be based on an understanding of the reasons for the shrinkage in the number of papers. Yet at this critical juncture Liebling's analysis becomes disappointingly superficial. His argument is that there is more money in monopoly than there is in competition (indisputable), and so the wisest act for a publisher is to buy out his competitor(s)—thus bringing within his tight grasp the monopoly profit and enabling him to share its largess with the seller. Certainly the very high prices paid for newspapers in the last few years are consistent with this explanation—that just as the great oil tycoon, John D. Rockefeller, bought up his competitors, usually paying them more than the going market value for their properties, so too, have the contemporary newspaper barons conducted their affairs.¹⁰ And to this line of argument Liebling could well have added another, namely that a good many publishers have expedited the departure of a rival by engaging in a variety of unlawful exclusionary tactics, ranging from a boycott¹¹ that would do justice to Jimmy Hoffa to the more subtle mechanics of the combination-rate (in which the owner of morning and evening papers, for example, confronted with the opposition of another evening paper, refuses to accept any advertising for his morning publication unless space is also taken in *his* evening paper).¹²

But in spite of these arguments, there is much evidence to support the contention that the decline in newspaper competition is not primarily explained by sheer greed or by the use of illegal exclusionary

⁹ Page 4. "The function of the press in society is to inform, but its role is to make money. The monopoly publisher's reaction, on being told that he ought to spend money on reporting distant events, is therefore exactly that of the proprietor of a large, fat cow, who is told that he ought to enter her in a horse race." Page 7. Yet not all monopoly publishers inevitably follow the correct road to profit maximization, even where that is their unquestioned objective. Liebling himself noted this recently in commenting on William Randolph Hearst: "The most dangerous myth about him is that he was a genius, or even a good newspaperman, because it might lead to the erroneous conclusion that he ran newspapers the right way, or that the way he ran them is the way to make money. The latter delusion might be the most dangerous of all." *The New Yorker*, Oct. 14, 1961, p. 187, 193.

¹⁰ Among the papers sold in recent years are the *Detroit Times* (purchase price: \$10 million), the *New Orleans Item* (\$3.5 million), the *Chicago Daily News* (reportedly \$28 million), and, to cross the sea, the *London News Chronicle* (a Liberal organ, acquired by the Conservative *Daily Mail*, for \$4.2 million).

¹¹ See *Lorain Journal Co. v. United States*, 342 U.S. 143 (1951), for a poignant illustration of how a monopoly publisher can abusively exert his power to destroy a competitor.

¹² In two antitrust prosecutions the defendant newspapers agreed to refrain from precisely this practice. *United States v. Wichita Eagle Publishing Co.*, 1959 Trade Cas. ¶ 69400 (D. Kan.); *United States v. The Kansas City Star Co.*, 1957 Trade Cas. ¶ 68857 (W.D. Mo.). Compare the decision in *Times Picayune Publishing Co. v. United States*, 345 U.S. 594 (1953).

tactics, but rather chiefly reflects the functioning of inexorable economic forces.¹³ Clearly, the technological characteristics of the business encourage the formation of large productive units, without reference to other factors. But, in addition, the papers derive most of their revenue from advertisers who almost universally are interested in getting the most readers for their money. Under these conditions it is elementary, therefore, that a publisher interested in maximizing his return will resort to every maneuver to increase his circulation; and as he does so, his costs per unit of output do not increase, but actually decline—thus producing additional incentive to expand circulation. The result appears to be that only in a city sufficiently large to generate total daily circulation of about 300,000 can we expect two fully-integrated daily papers, *i.e.*, with their own printing, distribution, and editorial facilities, at least under prevailing economic circumstances. Admittedly some of the existing cases of newspaper monopoly do not fit this alternative hypothesis;¹⁴ but enough do so that it is extremely difficult to formulate an appropriate remedy for the distasteful condition Liebling describes so beautifully.

If, on the one hand, the decline in competition is caused by the employment of illicit exclusionary tactics, vigorous implementation of the antitrust laws should retard further spread of the disease. Likewise, if the pattern of newspaper acquisition is not simply the product of underlying technological forces that push relentlessly in the direction of monopoly, again antitrust-type intervention could be an answer—certainly so if the existing statutes were modified so as to condemn all mergers not shown to be economically advantageous to the society.

But if the economics of the situation tend to induce newspaper monopoly in all but the very largest cities, then antitrust or other preventive action will afford no adequate solution (and surely it

¹³ For an expression of this point of view in a legal, rather than in an economic setting, see *United States v. Harte-Hanks Newspapers, Inc.*, 170 F. Supp. 227, 229 (N.D. Tex. 1959). Judge Wyzanski seems to be of a similar attitude. *Union Leader Corp. v. Newspapers of New England, Inc.*, 180 F. Supp. 125, 142 (D. Mass. 1959), *aff'd as modified*, 284 F.2d 582 (1st Cir. 1960), *cert. denied*, 365 U.S. 833 (1961).

¹⁴ My analysis suggests that a daily newspaper confronted by local competition must attain a circulation of about 150,000 if it is to survive; this appears to be the minimum optimal scale of operation, giving due consideration both to cost and demand conditions. There appears to be no "natural" compulsion for a daily paper to expand beyond this point, however, though there may be definite monopolistic advantages in doing so. Thus, where one paper buys or merges with a rival, and where both have circulations in excess of 150,000, it is reasonable to presume that the basic explanation for their amalgamation is the restriction of competition it represents. This seems to have been the case in respect to the sales in recent years of such papers as the *Washington Times-Herald* (bought by its ideological enemy, the *Post*), the *Detroit Times*, the *Chicago Daily-News*, and the *Chicago American*. Yet in each instance the government antitrust enforcement agencies declined to act. Newspapers, because of their immense political power, have been well sheltered from prosecution except where they engage in patently abusive, predatory conduct. See note 11 *supra*.

will lead to no resurrection of the many dailies that have succumbed in years past). Rather in this not improbable contingency the preservation, and instigation, of newspaper competition will require the creation of some sort of distinctive institutional arrangement for daily newspaper publication. What form this should, or will, take is not altogether clear. The best hope, however, seems to lie in the development of daily papers which derive most or all of their revenue from sources other than advertising. Not only would this tend to free their publishers from the existing compulsion to engage in a variety of practices with the principal objective of raising circulation and hence maintaining advertiser interest, without reference to the qualitative character of the appeal, but significantly it should also permit maximization of profits (if that is to remain the goal) at a lesser volume of circulation than is now the case.

To this end Liebling advances, in a meek (and thus rather strange) fashion, a suggestion (originally made by him in 1947) that political parties, labor unions, and foundations might take on the responsibility of publishing daily papers.¹⁵ Strangely, though, he fails to relate this idea adequately to the rest of his discourse, and even seems to abandon it for apparent lack of interest on the part of the named groups. In doing so, however, he may have given up too easily. Just as with the broadcasting media, it seems crucial and feasible that some way be devised to give the many citizens who want better newspaper content an opportunity to realize their desires. Certain developments in the other media suggest, moreover, that it is not mere wishful thinking to anticipate that intellectually-appealing daily papers could be financed largely from such non-advertising sources as reader subscriptions (at a cost above that now prevailing), the foundations (the Ford Foundation is already actively involved in educational TV), and maybe even government (which at the local level, under the strong claim of helping the schools, has provided substantial financial aid to local educational television). Clearly the growth of educational TV and of FM radio, both with primary appeal to a relatively limited audience and with unusual sources of revenue, and in the case of many FM radio stations actually operated by universities—just as are a few college dailies (frequently the best source of information in their respective communities)—are encouraging signs, hopefully portending significant changes in the nature of daily newspaper publication.

With the development of some such arrangements that can make available adequate daily papers to those who are interested in better

¹⁵ Pages 22-23.

news coverage, a continuing decline in the absolute number of papers should cause no great concern. In this regard I think Liebling over-emphasizes the importance of contesting local papers to the qualitative reporting of national and foreign news. Granted, they are vital to the coverage of metropolitan and regional affairs, and to this end I would much prefer more papers than now exist in most of our cities—reiterating the opinion, though, that this is most likely to be achieved only through novel approaches. But I can hardly be frightened by the very real possibility that at some date in the near future the *New York Times* (this year to appear in a daily West Coast edition), the *Herald Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the half dozen or so other papers of decent quality will be circulated nationally just as they are now in their home cities, serving as our primary sources of national and foreign news. It would then be left to the metropolitan dailies, perhaps functioning in conjunction with the national papers, to cover the parochial matters and to comment editorially on these and all other events as their owners might wish. The end result could be that in every sizable community readers would have readily at hand any of maybe six to ten nationally and internationally-oriented daily papers, along with a few other journals of primarily local perspective—with some of the latter perhaps having a financial base much different from that which is now commonly the case. The total number of dailies in the country might even be less than it is at present, yet with a much wider area of circulation for a number of the papers, the degree of competition as measured by the number of effectively rival publications would nevertheless be greatly intensified.

Obviously the problem of the press is a complex one, summoning forth no ready answer from any mortal, and so it may be unreasonable to expect that Liebling could describe the malady so well and also provide a prescription for its treatment. But the causes of the condition, along with the possible responses, must be illuminated if the subject, serious as it is to the well-being of the society, is to receive the productive discussion that it demands. While from my view Liebling devotes too little attention to finding a solution for the plight of the press, we can hope that he, and others, will turn to that aspect posthaste. Certainly, based on the incisive quality of *The Press*, we can expect more provocative thought from him—something we will not get in most of the daily papers.

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