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THE ROLE OF THE TOWN PAPER IN THE 60'S

A Draft Speech Prepared According to the Instructions of
The Honorable Robert Dole

The attached has been prepared for the personal use of
the Member requesting it in conformance with his direc-
tions and is not intended to represent the opinion of
the author or the Legislative Reference Service.

Ruth Hunsberger
History and Government Division
June 5, 1961

THE ROLE OF THE TOWN PAPER IN THE 60'S

In 1915, almost a half century ago, the late William Allen White, editor and proprietor of the Emporia Gazette, made the following remarks about the town or country newspaper in the United States:

"....The country newspaper is the incarnation of the town spirit. The newspaper is more than the voice of the country-town spirit; the newspaper is in a measure the will of the town....

"It is therefore the country newspaper, the one that speaks for the town, that guides and cherishes the town, that embodies the distinctive spirit of the town, wherein one town differeth from another in glory--it is that country newspaper, which takes its color from a town and gives color back....that newspaper will be our vision."

More recently, John H. Casey, as professor of journalism at the University of Oklahoma, had this to say about the influence of the small-town newspaper in American life:

"Without its newspaper the small-town American community would be like a school without a teacher or a church without a pastor. In the aggregate, the country newspaper determines the outcome of more elections, exerts a greater influence for constructing community progress, is read longer by more members of the family, and constitutes, with its millions of circulation and quadrupled millions of readers, a better advertising medium than any other group of newspapers or periodical publications....

"When properly conducted, it cultivates so intensively its home news field that city dailies, farm journals, and general magazines circulating in the same territory become only secondary influences....

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"Through service to its community the country newspaper will not merely survive, it will continue to flourish as the most representative, most distinctive, most wholesome type of journalism America has produced."

I find it most encouraging that, despite the trend toward fewer and fewer large city newspapers, the population movement from city to suburb has increased the circulation of the small town newspaper, as reported at the annual convention of the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York in April. Indeed, as mechanization and centralization remove the personal touch in modern American life, the small town paper becomes the more treasured. For the community and suburban papers can and do create a focus of meaningful small group life which cannot be done by the great dailies.

I think the small town newspaper will doubtless survive because it is indispensable in its role as a main participant in the drama of grass roots of our national life. This role has two aspects, namely, the small town or suburban paper makes people of the community conscious of their oneness together, and it also serves as an ultimate bulwark of the democratic way of life. As an ethical force in the community, the town paper may well rank with the school and the church. It may serve as a welding unit for the educational, religious, political, social and economic life of the community. Though radio and television have provided effective means of informing people, the newspaper in our community remains an indispensable tool for the preservation of a free society.

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So strongly did Thomas Jefferson feel about the vital necessity of the newspaper that he once wrote to a correspondent that if he were required to make a choice between government without newspapers on the hand, and newspapers without government on the other, he would not hesitate to prefer the latter.

Local news in the town paper comes first because readers' interest is highest in things that are nearest to them. Life and death as they go on around us, the weather, the local games and amusements, accidents and crimes involving persons we know or might have known, politics and public events in which neighbors and acquaintances are involved, social happenings and business changes--all of these have an interest because they are our own and have meaning for us.

The editor of the town paper must devote time and attention and usually some space in his newspaper to every community problem. One week it may be a local industry that requires his aid; the next week, the schools, or the Community Chest, the Boy Scouts or the preservation of an historical site. Indeed the town paper is the pulse of the community.

The fact that the reader of the town paper desires more than local news, however, does not reduce the value of the home coverage. Local news stands first in demand and comes up first in supply. Virtually all American newspapers, as you well know, give more space to local news than to state, national or foreign news. This is as true in New York as it is in our Kansas towns. Indeed, many of the outstanding American dailies are famous for their coverage of their own regions. The

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Kansas City Star ranks high in this category. As the noted authority on American journalism, Frank Luther Mott, noted: "It is the duty of the American newspaper, whether city or suburban, to promote home enterprises and community betterment of various kinds, to serve their advertisers by reaching the audience of their own trading zones, and (most important of all) of keep the home people informed about their home events and home problems."

Yet, important as the role of the town paper is as a main participant in the drama of the grass roots of American democratic life, the town paper has an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute toward a fuller understanding on the part of its readers of problems beyond the town, problems that reach out to the national and international arenas of life. Confronted as we are in the 60's with grave problems, solutions to which must depend upon an informed and enlightened public opinion, the town paper is indeed the grassroots instrument for shaping an informed public opinion.

Today, as never before, the people of our nation are called upon to make decisions--and to make their decisions known and felt--fast and unmistakable. And each decision must be based upon increasingly wide foundations of accurate, understandable information. If we are to cope successfully with the change taking place all about us in the coming decade, all of us need to go back to the root of the problem as Jefferson saw it; that you cannot have a government of the people unless the people are informed. This dictum, which has never been disputed in our history, even in time of war, has always and will always present to every newspaper publisher and editor, whether of

local weekly or large city daily, a challenging and never--ending responsibility to come to a better understanding of the relationship between journalism and public opinion. What is the essential role of journalism in the molding and ultimately in the expressing of public opinion?

Philosophers and political scientists are constantly trying to learn what molds public opinion, what influences and what changes it, and the poll takers notwithstanding, the psychology of public opinion remains still largely unknown.

Yet, we do know a few things about public opinion. One of the most important findings of the pollsters over the last twenty years is that public attitudes are rarely changed by mere exhortation without all the facts on both sides to provide the context and to assure the reader that he agrees or disagrees. We know that the reader of your papers here in Kansas does not want to be pushed into a opinion. He wants to work through to his own opinion. The concept of mobilizing public opinion by a campaign or hortatory slogans has been proven fallacious. As you are aware, or you would undoubtedly not be in the business you are, your readers resist being told what to do or think. They want to know all the facts and then make up their own minds about the virtues or faults of the opinions of others and of suggested courses of action.

I am convinced that opinion can never be mobilized in the State of Kansas or in the nation, unless there is and continues to be prompt and clear reporting of events as they happen. This has been proven throughout our history; in the response to the British march on

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Concord, in the seige of Fort Sumter, in the attack on Pearl Harbor. I am sure that we all are aware how in a democracy, we live at the mercy, so to speak, of a population capable of mobilization often only after the impact of a disaster. The extremely important decisions the American people are going to be called upon to make in the coming decade requires a constant flow of information to our people. Explosive action is so often based upon inadequately known and imperfectly understood events leading up to the action. We know that prompt, thorough and clear reporting does work.

In the Fall of 1956, every form of journalism in the United States--press, radio and television--reported fully on the Hungarian revolt. Before this revolt, a Roper survey of a cross section of American adults found that 72 per cent of them opposed any immigration allowance beyond the fixed quota. After the revolt, after the immediate emotional reaction had died down, 72 per cent were in favor of lifting the immigrant restriction.

Also in the fall of 1956, notwithstanding American preoccupation with a Presidential election, the Suez crisis was fully and effectively reported to the American people through all news media. In a survey before Suez, less than a third of the American people were unqualifiedly in support of a United Nations police force in the troubles areas. After the Suez crisis, 57 per cent of the American people, in a similar survey, were unqualifiedly in support of a United Nations police force--including its use of American soldiers.

In March 1957, a survey showed 60 per cent of the American people in favor of cutting the 72 billion budget submitted to Congress.

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After the dramatic and effective reporting of the flight of the Sputniks, another survey showed that 65 per cent of the American people were in favor of increasing the budget.

The basic issues involved in all three instances had been the subject of arguments, orations and exhortations for years. Yet, when the American people were given full and complete information on the events relating to these issues, a mobilization of opinion was achieved which years of persuasion and argument had failed even to start. In other words, exhortation does not move without facts. This is not to belittle the role of the editorial which is of vital importance to an informed opinion. But, I am sure you will agree that editorialization without the context of objective factual reporting is personal opinionating in a vacuum. I believe that unless the American people have confidence that they have all the facts without bias, they will tend to dismiss the editorial.

Thus, it seems to me, the role of the town paper in the 60's is a crucial one. By being true to its primary purpose of serving the local community, it can at the same time be a measure of what William Allen White termed "the will of the town." And it is upon the will of the town that the will of our nation is based.



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