

Responsibility of the Press.

By FRANK KOESTER.

(The power of the press has never been so great as to-day. It is the newspapers which make wars decide the destinies of nations, force governments to act and in many other ways play a leading part in the business of human regulation. So great are the powers of the press. What are its responsibilities? Mr. Koester in the following article points out the duty that the press owes to society and the abuses that sometimes arise when this duty is forgotten.)

We, the public, hear much about the liberty of the press—from the press. The sacredness of the freedom of the press is much dimmed in our ears—by the press.

But we hear little of the responsibility of the press—from the press. We hear little condemnation of the inflammatory and destructive misrepresentation practiced by the press, little criticism of false reports, flaunted ignorance, news discolored by interest, canards, it-is-alleged, and the like—from the press.

Every newspaper has an axe to grind; at least one, sometimes many. And the public must do the turning of the grindstone.

As a matter of fact what is the

Newspaper Anarchy

Whoever has the price of type and presses may issue a sheet of alleged information and sell it to the public, and it may contain anything which his self-interest dictates. If he takes the precaution not to actually libel any individual, he escapes all responsibility and the only control which is exercised over his operations is that exercised by his readers, who, if they like not his "news" or the opinions he expresses, may discontinue the purchase of his paper.

Otherwise he may print what he will, he may misrepresent facts wilfully or carelessly, he may distort and exaggerate, he may suppress, he may publish canards and inventions, he may pour out an unending stream of falsehood and deception, he may discolor the truth, play upon prejudice and poison in any way he sees fit the stream of public opinion.

All this he may do in the name of freedom of the press and none may stop him.

It may be well inquired by what virtue does such sacredness inherit in the ownership of type and printing presses? What sets apart the newspaper owner from the rest of mankind and permits him unbridled license?

The Tyranny of "Liberty"

Such grotesque perversions of liberty must finally undermine the whole structure of liberty, for when liberty is so much abused, when liberty ceases to mean not the safeguarding of proper rights, but the permission, the license to assail the helpless and pervert the public mind, an over-draastic regulation will be demanded which will in turn be subversive of liberty. Thus one extreme breeds another and the policy of absolute and unrestricted freedom to whoever puts type to paper will bring the extreme of regulation when the reaction sets in.

Regulation of the press, however, is an obnoxious procedure when those who have the power to regulate are perfectly free to exercise whatever regulation they see fit. Here again liberty becomes license, and the press suffers and with it those who are entitled to know the truth about events of concern to themselves as members of the social body, for suppression is equally as dangerous as exaggeration, both being forms of irresponsibility.

Must the Censor Come?

It is a dangerous condition when one man must decide what another man is to read or not to read and to any such censorship newspapers object with the utmost violence. Yet their editors decide every day what their readers are to read or not to read and consider themselves as acting within their proper powers. The censor is merely the editor of the editors, vested with powers of exactly the same sort as those possessed by the editor. The censor is bound to come in some form or other if the editors do not respect the freedom which has been given them.

President Roosevelt made a most determined effort to muzzle the press but that muzzling would have been as dangerous as the abuse of its present freedom by the press, since it would have been of an arbitrary and an equally irresponsible kind.

The Power of the News Distributor

The public does not realize the editor act in circulating such an obviously trouble breeding assertion? Obviously none, when the circumstances are considered. Yet the reader imagines that public opinion, as far as it is formed by newspapers, is formed by the editorial columns of the papers.

This is an entirely inadequate view. The editorials of a newspaper, in fact, have very little force in moulding public opinion, for the reason that readers in general only read editorials which are in accord with their own existing views. When editorials controvert the convictions of the reader, the reader ceases to read them and buys a paper which reflects in its editorials his own opinions.

It is in the news columns that the newspaper has its greatest power over public opinion. If it publishes as a fact, for example, the "news" that German soldiers are guilty of outrages, public opinion takes an anti-German tinge far more quickly than from any number of anti-German editorials. The fact that no such outrages have in reality occurred, is unknown to the readers. Their "public opinion" is consequently based upon the falsehood circulated as a truth. A continued policy of misrepresentation results in the formation of a more or less violently marked "public opinion" which is a great force for evil since it is acting upon false premises. The public thus acts contrary to reason and so its own ultimate disadvantage, sidetracked by editorial self-interest.

It is not only, however, in actual falsehoods that newspapers pollute public opinion, but in importance and tone given to the published matter.

The Influence of the Headline Artist

This is accomplished by means of headlines of a sensational and misleading character, by the use of different sizes of type, and in the relative prominence and location on the pages of the paper of the various items.

The manipulation of these devices, though unconscionable enough before the war, has become so flagrant since that even the editors themselves appear to sicken of it. The public, nevertheless, having its avenues to the truth largely closed, cherishes its views founded on falsehood and lives in its little newspaper created fool's paradise of misinformation.

A few examples of the "news" and lack of news that is being given to the public of this country through the press which regards in own freedom with such awe, will serve to demonstrate how little respect the press has for truth and how ready it is to deceive its own readers.

The publishing of misinformation does not stop at news alone, but also includes the publication of fake photographs as will be noted.

Lurid misrepresentation of a sensational character makes particularly welcome matter to certain newspapers. An example of this was seen in "The Kissing of the Sword." Under this headline it was stated that high-voiced women of title were chattering over their tea cups in the smartest hotel in Munich, when into their midst swaggered the Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, with his sabre newly sharpened and his abdomen girt for war. His wife is represented as running to him, kissing his sabre and shouting, "Bring it back to me covered with blood—that I may kiss it again." And other high-voiced women flocked to kiss the sword.

This dime novelism only needs to be mentioned to have it's absurdity made evident. The idea of a crown princess of Bavaria meeting her husband in a hotel is ridiculous to begin with. For her to kiss his sword in public is a performance impossible outside of a moving picture, and the "news" column of the press, and by its obvious improbability the story confounds itself.

Yet the public's haste does not stop to criticize such matter. Doubtless millions of Americans still allow themselves to believe that this luridly described affair really took place.

An Example of American Journalism

Its absolute falsity is demonstrated when the fact is recalled that the wife of Crown Prince Rupprecht died in October, 1912. Vance Thompson was the "noted writer" from whose fertile brain this atrocity of "news" emanated. How much credence is to be placed in his work after such a performance? No doubt, however, he will continue to favor the public with sundry sensational fabrications as long as the present editorial policy of the papers publishing his material continues.

This writer, in order to show that Germany had been preparing for the war for a long time, asserted that the Asiatic conscripts had been retained when their term of service expired in May. The truth is that no German soldier is ever discharged until late in the fall after camp service and maneuvers have given this military education the final polish.

Lies of this kind, whether deliberate or based upon complete ignorance of conditions, prepare the mind of the public for the more sinister suggestions of another class of writers who deliberately attempt to create bad feeling and to provoke hostile activities between friendly nations. For example, the following appeared in an evening paper not long since:

"The American relations of Count von Bernstorff are watched with the closest attention. It is believed that Germans will seek an excuse for friction on the slightest provocation."

How the English Press Moulds Opinion

During the Russo-Japanese war the British system of press misinformation "fed up" the newspapers of the United States pro-Japanese.

We were consequently admiring our "little brown brothers," an admiration which was sensibly cooled since the truth of the relations of the United States and the Japanese had dawned upon the public.

Now that Russia is an ally of England, Dr. Eliot is trying to have us believe that in the brief time since the massacres of Kishinev, Russian civilization has been so greatly improved that Russia may to-day be considered the torch-bearer of enlightenment.

Early in the present war this country was flooded with reports of mistreatment alleged to have been suffered by Americans in Germany. When the truth came through, these reports were completely discredited. Together with the reports of alleged atrocities in Belgium it is now realized by the American public that they were direct lies.

Irvins S. Coble writes in the Saturday Evening Post: "Some time back, I wrote in an article of the Saturday Evening Post that I had been able to find in Belgium no direct proof of the mutilation, the torturing and other barbarities which were charged against the Germans by the Belgians, though fully a dozen journalists both English and American have agreed with me saying that their experience in this regard has been the same as mine."

The enormous effect on public opinion of such lies cannot be estimated. The misrepresentation is furthered by the dishonesty of our daily press, the greater part of which publishes all the lies which emanate from London, and even goes so far as to discount in lengthy editorials upon the "news" topics so published.

For the most part this is an exhibition of stupidity, as most of the editors swallow what comes through

the cables without investigation, as long as it is sensational enough.

When, however, the truth transpires, such news if printed at all is given some obscure position on an inside page in small type, while the original report of which it is the correction appeared under bold headlines on the front page. The editors credit the public thus with a lack of intelligence by placing commentary, indeed, they place the public on a plane of stupidity even beneath their own.

Such reports and inspired editorials, however, cannot be of but temporary injury to Germans and German-Americans who are inferentially included in the blemishing process.

Eventually, the papers which circulate such matter will be discredited. The reputation of the British nation, so long known to history as "Perfidious Albion," will attach to its scoundrels in this country, and the newspapers which report and often deliberately amplify and elaborate upon the false information supplied will come to be known, if they are not already known, as the subsidized organs of the British government.

American Press Prejudices Public Against Germany

During the twelve years of my residence in this country, I have noticed and have often heard it remarked upon by my fellow German-Americans, like myself naturalized citizens of this country and certainly having the interests of America as much at heart as the hostile press of London, that most Americans, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon descent, not only do not care to know the truth about German affairs, but usually dislike if they do not positively refuse to be convinced of Germany's progress. It seems to me that this is due to the fact that the tremendous influence of the British press and its connections set up anti-German prejudices. I am convinced that but for this baleful influence the true extent of Germany's power, both intellectual and physical, would have been known and appreciated, and that if it had been, a restraining influence would have been exerted by this country, which would have caused the Allies to hesitate and which might even have prevented the war. England, self-centered and selfish, has refused to recognize the progressiveness and accomplishments of Germany, and the press of the United States, as well as of other countries, has underestimated Germany in every way and has consequently been in a false position before its readers which it still seeks to justify by fanning anti-German prejudice. At the crisis, Germany was not understood and only now is the press awakening to the true state of conditions and realizing the error of trusting so blindly a country so cynical and destructive as England.

The American newspaper holds the public in contempt. It is without fear, except of the advertiser, but full of favor, to various influences.

The German Public and Its Press

For this the public is in a measure to blame. In Germany false statements soon discredit a paper, the public withdrawing their support.

Here the public "stand for it" probably because it finds no models to turn to of what a newspaper should be.

The formation of public opinion in the United States as well as throughout the rest of the world by means of inventions disseminated by the British government through the English press and news agencies with their cable system is well understood by thinking people in this country, to whom such underhanded methods are naturally repellent.

For instance, George Moore in the San Francisco Examiner writes:

"Europe knows America and we misunderstand Europe through news bearing the London date. Negro burning, the Camorra, bull fights, the Dreyfus case, Russian Jew slayings, pass to and fro as 'news' through London."

Since the establishment of the Triple Entente London remade the French character for the world. On

the date of the Entente's beginning, the myth of French decadence became the miracle of French renaissance. From the same moment the bear that walks like a man' was transformed by Dr. Dillon and a host of lesser English into a simple Christian hero.

"Every one remembers the English-told story of the Japanese-Russian war, that story drove us mad with admiration for the Japanese, England's allies: it made us forget the great unselfish friendship of Russia in the time of our own great war.

From London the news poured into our newspapers, always for Japan till we served as England's tool to help humiliate Russia by a disastrous peace and hated the Japanese since the next day after the treaty was signed."

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Jesse Hogue, a 18-year-old

young man from Wisconsin, heard the stories of German atrocities in Belgium and decided to go to the scene of the crime himself.

He found that the stories were true and that the German soldiers had been

responsible for the massacre. He then went to the German Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

The German Consul told him that he could not get a visa because he was not a citizen of the United States.

He then went to the American Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

The American Consul told him that he could not get a visa because he was not a citizen of the United States.

He then went to the Canadian Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

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He then went to the French Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

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He then went to the Spanish Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

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He then went to the Dutch Consulate in New York and asked for a visa to travel to Belgium.

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