

8-30-1970

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Recommended Citation

A. Kent MacDougall, *Dear Sir: You Jerk! Letters to Editor Rise, and Beleaguered Press Gives Them More Room* (1970).
Available at: <http://repository.uchastings.edu/publicity/30>

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Dear Sir: You Jerk!

Letters to Editor Rise, And Beleaguered Press Gives Them More Room

Notables and Nobodies Offer Their Views on Everything; Agnew Writes the Times

'The Scoundrel' Says 'Bah!'

WSJ mm 30 Aug '70

By A. KENT MACDOUGALL

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Mrs. Frances Gonzales is a New York housewife who is neither a fan of President Nixon nor of the New York Daily News. "The President is an imbecile," she says, "and so is the News."

Where does she say this? Why, right there in the Daily News itself.

Chuck Stone is a Trinity College professor who believes that the Washington Post is "a malicious distorter of the news" and a "smug sanctuary of white supremacy."

Where does he charge this? Why right there in the Post itself.

Mrs. Gonzales and Prof. Stone vented their spleens in letters to the editor, an old journalistic tradition that is taking on new importance in these days of widespread disenchantment with the nation's newspapers. An increasing number of Americans, from anonymous nobodies to such notables as the Vice President of the United States, are taking pen in hand to express their disappointment with the world, the nation and, especially, the press itself. And the press, increasingly sensitive to charges that it is unfair, is devoting more and more space to the letters.

Blowing Off Steam

"The flow of mail is much, much heavier," says James J. Doyle, editorial page editor of the Providence Journal and Bulletin. "People are tense about trouble in the streets, the war, and so on, and a letter is one way to vent aggression and frustration. Where you can't be heard at the statehouse or city hall, you can on the editorial page."

The New York Times last year received 37,449 letters, nearly double the 19,885 received five years earlier. But it had room to run only 2,622 of the letters it received in 1969, which is one reason the paper recently decided to double the space devoted to readers' views. The Washington Post and other papers have also given up valuable news space to run more letters.

It all makes for lively reading—and it also helps sell newspapers. Surveys have found that letters are among the best-read features of papers, and publishers have long valued them for their circulation pull.

What's more, the letters themselves sometimes make news. The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot last month turned into a page one story a letter from 12 Navy officers opposed to the war. When Spiro Agnew wrote sharp notes to both the New York Times and the Washington Post this summer, it created little stir (both recipients simply ran the letter in their regular letters columns), but when J. Edgar Hoover wrote a critical letter to the Akron Beacon Herald this month it was news around the nation.

Dogs & Women's Lib

No issue is too grand or too insignificant for a letter writer to tackle. The somber New York Times is given to running long, somber letters from experts discussing foreign policy and other matters of import. The breezy Daily News tends toward breezy letters on less vital subjects. (A sample from last Friday's edition: "Women's Liberation Movement, bah! And the hypocritical male phonies that gloat with them, bah twice! Just two bunches of phonies with phony smiles, from age 13 to 80. Bah again. (signed) The Scoundrel.") And while Cambodia and Kent State have been the major issues for letter writers this year, the Berkeley (Calif.) Gazette has rarely received as many letters as it did two years ago on a proposed dog leash ordinance.

Many letters come from obvious nuts. Jack Spalding, editor of the Atlanta Journal, says letters provide "a safety valve" for unbalanced readers. "Ramblings of obscene and evil minds" account for 25% to 30% of the Journal's mail, he says. "They're from emotionally disturbed people who don't like the world we live in and are inclined to blame us for the world's troubles—and their own." These letters never see print.

If many writers are fanatics, relatively few are fans. Generally, critical letters outnumber laudatory ones. "They come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," says Kalman Seigel, head of the six-member letters staff of the New York Times.

The men and women who cull the letters must be constantly on guard. Not only are they on the lookout for dispatches from notables, they must also be able to weed out the letters from phonies. Time magazine, which prints only one in 50 letters it receives, once printed a letter allegedly signed by four persons from India; the names actually were obscenities in Hindi. A New York Times letter criticizing Gen. Curtis LeMay, which was ostensibly from a West Point cadet, was signed "Grant Hall"—actually a dormitory at the academy.

A Libelous Letter

Further, the letters editors have to be careful what they print. The Memphis Citizens Council, a segregationist group, won a \$10,000 libel judgment from the Memphis Press-Scimitar in 1964 after the paper printed a letter accusing the council of being "Communistic-Red." (An Oklahoma judge once sued the Tulsa World for \$10,000 because it *didn't* run a letter he wrote, but he lost the case.)

Except for libelous and phony letters, though, many newspapers and magazines will run almost any letter. The San Francisco Chronicle ran a letter claiming it's a "fish wrapper" put out by a "staff of hacks," a second advocating the blowing into conch shells to ward off earthquakes, and a third proposing the San Andreas fault be filled with sea water to "stabilize" it. Time magazine occasionally runs letters from its own correspondents claiming stories they wrote were distorted by Time editors.

But the Manchester (N.H.) Union Leader won't run letters from "known Communists," an editor says. It welcomes letters from all others, but unlike most papers the overwhelming

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