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A First Report of the National Press Council?



By **Houstoun Waring**

Some things cannot be reversed without a revolution. If Communists gain control of a government, the people have no options at the polling booth. If, in a democracy, the ruling men don't conduct honest elections, the "outs" may never peacefully win an equal voice again. Such an irreversible situation may be developing almost unnoticed in communications. A handful of men may soon control the thinking of America. This will be a throw-back to the situation in Japan prior to World War II when "thought control" was the admitted practice of the dominant class.

The reasons that communications have become one-sided are not understood by the general public. Indeed, the public is not aware that the lights are being dimmed.

A modern democracy cannot long function unless our conditions prevail in communications: (1) there must be diversity of opinion and information, (2) each medium must be as nearly independent as possible, (3) better techniques must be used for sending and receiving messages without misunderstanding, and (4) the editor or manager of the medium must possess a broad educational background for his hourly decision-making.

Let us consider only the first requirement today; that is diversity. There is not much diversity today in three commercial networks. This is a problem that Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, and the foundations must quickly solve.

A more pressing problem is the rapidity with which conglomerate corporations are buying up the communications media. Defense industries, food manufacturers, liquor distillers now own the great

book publishing houses, magazines, television and radio stations, newspapers, and firms which make documentary films. Anyone with experience in journalism will recognize the multiple hazards of such ownership and the control that goes with it, no matter how ethical the owner may try to be.

The conglomerate poses a more serious, irreversible threat to the nation than does monopoly control in certain cities or the chain ownership of half our dailies, serious as these situations are.

The time is approaching when 80 to 90 per cent of the impact on American thought is directed by two-dozen like-minded men heading up the conglomerates. These men, conscientious though they may be, will no doubt more often reflect the ideas of the military-industrial-political complex than the consumer, the minority citizen, or the American home.

How do we focus public attention on the networks, the local monopolists, or the giant conglomerates while we can still reach the people?

This can be done only by the weight of an independent body making annual pronouncements on what might be called *The State of Communications in America*. Twenty-seven years ago Robert M. Hutchins put together such a body which was known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press. With grants totalling \$215,000, the commission published volumes on the state of the press, the broadcasting business, and the movies.

Because of the reputations of commission members, America discussed the findings for several years when the reports became available after the second World War. One of the suggestions was that a similar critical commission continue to point up the strengths, weaknesses, handicaps, and omissions of the mass media on an annual basis. Men like Robert Hutchins, Harry Ashmore and Ben Bagdikian are aware of the necessity for such a new commission, and they may find the funds for its financing.

Who then, can be counted upon to appoint the commission and see that it is staffed with new blood as the years pass by? On the original Hutchins com-

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mission were Robert M. Hutchins, Arthur Schlesinger Sr., Zechariah Chafee, William E. Hocking, Beardsley Ruml, Archibald MacLeish, Reinhold Neibuhr, George Shuster, Charles E. Merriam, Robert Redfield, John Dickinson, John M. Clark and Harold D. Laswell. It would be difficult to find 13 men their equal today.

Dr. Hutchins cannot assume this continuing role of appointing new commissioners. Neither can any other individual, corporation, foundation or governmental agency. No single university could properly assume such power. *The finger, therefore, points to the Association for Education in Journalism (AEJ) which has a unique position in American life for this task.* It has the prestige and the confidence that are required, and its members have the wisdom to choose a method for re-staffing the commission on a staggered-term basis over a long period of time.

The AEJ is debating the question and has toyed with it for 23 years. Journalism Quarterly, the AEJ publication, has dealt with the idea from time to time. In the Spring issue of 1968, the quarterly printed a symposium that included the writings of James W. Markham, H. Eugene Goodwin, Edmund W. Midura and J. Edward Gerald. Prof. Markham of the University of Iowa provided the keynote for the dialogue by quoting the AEJ Constitution. Article 6, Sec. 4 reads as follows, he reported: "The

elected Standing Committee on Professional Freedom and Responsibility shall be particularly concerned with conditions affecting the freedom of journalists to report without favor."

This is the mandate.

Once AEJ agreed to operate such a commission, funds would be sought for its staff and the commissioners' out-of-pocket expenses. This may run \$200,000 a year, suggesting a permanent endowment of \$5 million.

The commission, which could go by the title *National Press Council*, would be different from the British Press Council which largely handles complaints about individual newspapers. It would also have a function larger than the local press council, for the state of all communications would be in its province.

The *National Press Council* might well issue separate reports on individual media, but its principal force would come from its yearly statement on *The State of Communications in America*. Ideally, this would be widely circulated and contain only 500 to 800 words for readability and broad appeal.

It is well for us to envision the scope of the annual report. In 1969, it might draw the nation's attention in a statement like this:

THE STATE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN AMERICA

(A Report by The National Press Council for 1969)

Conglomerates

The most ominous trend in communications today is the purchase of media by conglomerates, such as General Tire and Rubber Co., General Electric, AVCO, RCA-NBC, Hunt Foods, and dozens of others. The media they have acquired suffer in independence, and their critical function has been impaired. We strongly urge the Department of Justice to roll back this movement, acting under Sec. 7 of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act of 1914. At the same time we commend the Department of Justice for discouraging purchase of the ABC network by International Telephone and Telegraph.

The fact that many conglomerates deal in defense, drugs, whiskey, and foods suggests that their captive media will be unable to crusade as in the past. Other conglomerates are engaged in activities that pollute the

air, threaten the public safety, or destroy natural resources. It is not likely that their books, magazines, or broadcasting stations will alert the public to tomorrow's situations as to war, radioactivity, or mental health.

Television

The Federal Communications Commission has not always acted vigorously in the public's behalf, failing to inform viewers in each state as to the identity of individuals and corporations who serve their daily diet. The most glaring recent example of FCC's failure to serve the nation was the 4-3 vote favoring the ITT-ABC merger. The FCC should recognize the obligation of television, which makes as much as 104% annually on plant investment, to provide at least one evening a week of educational, non-commercial programming on a staggered basis. Such a change could

become a vast adult education movement, but a fourth network would still be needed, operated somewhat like BBC or Canadian public broadcasting.

Radio

Our research to date does not prepare the council for recommendations in this field. Nevertheless, we are aware that radio must be revived as a public service medium.

Book Publishing

Until the mid-1960s, books were the most independent medium. Now the book publishing firms have been acquired by the conglomerates to a serious degree. New York corporation offices decide what evils are too controversial for their publishing branches to handle. Tomorrow, men like Ralph Nader may be unable to expose harm-

ful rigidities. Text books will become more sterile than in the Joseph McCarthy era.

Documentary Films

Conglomerates have interested themselves in motion pictures. Not only may feature movies carry a message, but the documentary films must be safeguarded from censorship by the few.

Magazines

Magazines, now suffering from television competition in advertising, provide a diversity of information and opinion. Up till now, they could be counted upon to delve into state and regional problems—problems that local media have not covered because

In such a manner might the National Press Council make its report each January. This would alert Congress and Washington agencies; it would draw the attention of the academic world; and the report would induce scores of magazines and newspapers to "take a stand."

of a dominant institution or for lack of staff.

Newspapers

Half of the daily newspapers are presently part of chains, which means absentee ownership and the setting of editorial policy on vital matters by someone in another city or state. The daily press has about 25,000 reporters who are outnumbered by 50,000 government workers whose full or part-time duty is to feed one-sided news or handouts to newspapers. For economic reasons, the press cannot always go beyond the handout. Weekly newspapers, possessing independence, have not reached their potential. Few of the 9,000 weekly editors display the zeal that the times demand, and not one in twenty has the background

for his post. Foreign ownership of the press is a possibility, as Lord Thomson with 60 U.S. papers demonstrates.

Journalism Training

Under the First Amendment, American journalists may enter the communications field without preparation. Since 1920, journalism schools have supplied increasing numbers of graduates who not only understand the traditions of the press and its techniques but also begin their careers with liberal arts backgrounds, especially in the behavioral sciences. Journalism professors, standing as they do between the media and the public, are the logical critics of the communications system. All groups should welcome their informed comments.

The main problem is to secure a National Press Council with acceptance by the nation both as to credibility and wisdom. If Dr. Hutchins was able to assemble such a group in 1942, the AEJ could do this now and in succeeding years. The growth of conglomerates makes action imperative while many media are yet free.