

March 26, 1987

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Dear Mr. Braestrup:

I attach three memos that came to mind as I got to thinking about your media project. Please forgive these offhand glancing blows at such serious subjects but I thought it might be useful to put down a few passing ideas that you've stimulated.

There is a contemporary subject of much interest in Maine in the power of the courts to compel the testimony of newspaper reporters. We have had a half dozen cases. Currently a reporter for the Concord Monitor is awaiting trial on charges of contempt of court for refusing to appear as a prosecution witness in the case of a man he had interviewed who was under a charge of having committed a murder.

This case is not one involving confidentiality as such. The reporter declined to testify on the theory that his testimony would make him a part of the law enforcement apparatus and while not violating any confidences of the accused criminal would prejudice the ability of reporters to elicit information in subsequent interviews.

The judges declined to drop the charge. The Attorney General is in favor of continued prosecution. The newspaper and reporter are carrying the issue to the State law court.

Have you seen anything of Joshua Meyrowitz's views on the media? I thought his piece in the Kettering Review extremely interesting. I enclose a copy of the piece.

Sincerely,

James Russell Wiggins

JRW/rlc

Enclosures

The Role of the Editor

When your new media organization gets under way I hope that time will be found to examine the structure involved in the direction and control of news and editorial functions. Much has been said about them by individuals but I know of no book size treatment of the whole subject of news and editorial department direction.

There have been some notable individual contributions. The Times of London under the Astors had some stated rules about the selection of editors and the editorial prerogative. The Guardian also had some settled policies about the selection of its editors and their discretion relative to the other departments. The Sunday Times under Kemsley had some standards that had been set up by management. I think The Edinburgh Review laid out some principles by which it proposed to be governed.

In the United States the Scripps Howard newspapers have more or less standardized their notions of editorial authority. The Washington Star had a very explicit prescription for the responsibilities of the editors vis-a-vis the publisher and business offices. Eugene Meyer made a start towards setting up some rules at The Washington Post but they were later dropped.

It is a singular thing that an institution so important to the dissemination of news and opinion has not evolved into a more or less accepted standard of some kind by which individual institutions could frame their own accepted procedures. It must be very confusing to persons outside the industry to see how irregular and inconsistent have been the assignment of function to the different titles used in the profession. The word "editor" seems to mean very different things to different news establishments. And the word "publisher" seems to mean very different things. The Louisville Courier Journal is an example of how the prerogatives of the different titles have fluctuated. The Bingham I believe generally carried the title of editor with various editors arrayed under the editor. The title clung to the editor long after he had ceased to pay much attention to the editorial function. The Bangor Daily News presently mingles the title of editor and publisher.

A mere recitation of how different publications have dealt with this might clarify it somewhat but I think that discussion and seminar groups could help shape the way it ought to be.

This is a problem that not only exists in the printed media but it also exists of course in the television and radio field. I am sure that no two persons know exactly what is involved in the title of Editor of the Evening News on CBS.

The delineation of the editor's role and the extent of his authority becomes even more interesting and important with the rise of the chains. One of the first chains of which I had any knowledge was the Sifton chain in Canada. Their Editor of the Winnepeg Free Press was John Dafoe. There is no doubt but that John Dafoe was the operating, acting and undisputed head of the news and editorial department although he had no part in the ownership and the Siftons occupied all positions of legal authority on the newspaper. I doubt that over the period of his direction of the Winnepeg Free Press the paper ever took a position inconsistent with one preferred by John W. Dafoe. I know that in the later years of his reign the owners sometimes differed with his political decisions. To my knowledge they never overruled them. When Dafoe left and George W. Ferguson became the editor of the Winnepeg Free Press they endeavored to institute a sort of editorial committee in which control was shared by other editors of their chain and by the Siftons themselves. This did not work very long before Ferguson left and went to Montreal.

Ownership and editorship went together on The Guardian over many generations. On one occasion I was told by a Guardian editor that Thompson had come to them and indicated his wish to remove the editor of the Edinburgh paper. When they demurred a little bit he said "Haven't I the right to remove an editor if I wish?" Lawrence Scott is supposed to have told him that he indeed had that right but he did not have the power to make the readers of the Review pay any attention to what the editorial page said. The Thompson papers thereafter eschewed any control over the editorial content of their newspapers.

The editorial discretion of the various editors of the Knight Ryder papers is a mystery to me. I do not know how they function. I'm not sure I understand the role of the individual editors in the Gannett system - either the Gannett system in Maine or the Gannett system nationally. The relationship of the editor to the rest of the publication is not clear in the Newhouse chain either. There certainly have been intervals in which the separate papers have pursued contradictory policies. There is of course a clash now over this issue in the Newhouse ownership of The New Yorker.

When Harry Ashmore was at the Little Rock paper he became famous for the opinion that editors should work with their hats on - ready to leave at the instructions of the publisher.

The seminar group might have a very interesting time trying to construct an ideal relationship.

Perhaps the best way to do so would be to resurrect relationships that existed on some papers historically. Even this may be very difficult to do. The Times of London at one time had what was widely regarded in the profession as an ideal relationship but it proved to be less than ideal when the editor in the period preceding World War II pursued a policy that was not acceptable to the publishers and owners.

In any case, I think this a fertile field for cultivation, society or at least the leaders in a profession, ought to be able to devise a system widely regarded as favorable to the development of strong editorial direction. It would be interesting to see what a group of experienced people turned out as a model that ought to govern the relationship of publishers and owners to those burdened with responsibilities of editing publications or editing the news for radio and television.

March 23, 1987

The Printed Word

I would like to see an interdisciplinary group examine the consequences of the eclipse of the oral tradition by the printed word.

Before the invention of printing - or even before the invention of a written language - there were quite sophisticated societies whose laws and customs and traditions were handed down orally. The responsibilities of preserving these oral traditions were imposed on all citizens and a great deal of attention was given to the development of human memory. Intellectual facility was recognized as a consequence of two major attributes of the human mind. One was the ability to remember. The other was the ability to associate the facts entombed in the memory.

Contributions to this facility were made by a great deal of oral drill. A list of things that a knowledgeable citizen was required to remember was a very long list. He remembered an infinite variety of customs and traditions and practices that were handed down orally and remembered rules of workmanship that were communicated orally. Whatever teaching arrangements were made rested heavily upon sheer repetition of a great deal of material.

The thinking process of an oral society differs a great deal from that of a literate society depending upon the printed word. Has the resort to the printed word as a storage place for essential facts altered the capacity of the human mind to retain and to recall things put into the mind orally?

I have never seen any serious discussion of this but it must be a matter of great concern to anyone who really worries about the future of the human race. Has the printed word diminished the mental capacity of the generations who have no oral tradition? The process of "thinking" differs a great deal in a man who can summon up facts from his own memory and a man who remembers very little but remembers where to find out the information he cannot recall. We are accustomed to the fact that exercise develops the athletic facility of a human being. Maybe we ought to wonder whether the exercise of the memory cannot be atrophied over generations by the slight call that we are making upon it in a modern society which rushes to its books to find out anything that happened day before yesterday.

On the edge of the same question is a question of how much the ability of a people to govern themselves may be diminished by the contributions of a media that does so much thinking for them. Here again thinking about the processes of government and the fundamental issues of mankind is an operation that is performed by the average person with greater facility the more thinking that he does. But if the daily newspapers, the periodicals, and the evening news on television present the individual citizen with prefabricated conclusions and profound thought upon all contemporary subjects how much exercise does the citizen get in wrestling with the problems of society?

I think I've never seen any very complete discussion of these considerations. We are so proud of our invention of writing and printing that no society of which I have any knowledge has paused to consider whether or not this facility might not diminish the brains of the species. It seems to me it must inevitably diminish over millions of years the extraordinary facility of the oral tradition in keeping in the air at any given instant the whole intellectual resource of the individual's memory. Most of us nowadays are no more able to put into the air at once a half dozen different ideas than we would be able to put a juggler's billiard balls in the air simultaneously. But it is just possible that the exercise of logic requires this kind of simultaneous contemplation which is somewhat distinguished from the act of looking up facts in printed documents. It could be interesting to see what students from several different intellectual disciplines turned up in this area if they ever put these considerations under scrutiny.

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Typography and Cold Type

The effects of offset printing on typography have never been adequately explored in any trade publications that I know of except in the most superficial way.

In the years before cold type organizations like the Grolier Society and many independent typographers had succeeded in laying out some standards of typographic excellence to which the profession generally adhered. Papers like The London Times devoted a great deal of attention to their typography. The last time The Times was fully redressed by Stanley Morrison they abandoned the full stop after the flag and accepted the text type design of the celebrated Times Roman. Other newspapers similarly studied their typography.

Authorities like Luckeish and Moss in their excellent book "Reading as a Visual Task" develop very sophisticated standards for measuring the readability of type texts and of headlines. Offset printing and cold type gave publishers a great deal more flexibility. Not every use of that flexibility has resulted in an improvement in the readability or artistic suitability of the typefaces employed in contemporary literature. At the close of the era of the hot type there was almost universal agreement that one should not go more than 18 ems for 8 point on 9. There was general acceptance of the fact that space between the lines could be too great as well as too small. There was also a widespread acknowledgment that the difference between a 6 point type and a 64 point type ideally was a great deal greater than the mere size of the line. The old typographers designed each size of a given face to produce the most suitable type for that size. Cold type tended to rely upon photographic enlargements of a face often without reference to the necessity of altering the proportions of the same face for different type sizes.

This whole subject needs to be surveyed again with facsimile and offset reproduction in mind so as to restore some standards of acceptable practice in composing rooms. The old letterpress printers who reached a position to design type pages had years of experience. Now pages are being laid out with novices who have barely learned how to use a pair of scissors. In the competition for reader attention this is going to be a very important consideration.

Luckeish and Moss had found a very sophisticated way of measuring the readability of type by counting the pulse beats of readers as they perused columns under different type sizes and under different degrees of lighting. We need a renewed inquiry into the subject utilizing the greater ease of varying type sizes that we now have with cold type.

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