

ABOUT NEWSPAPERS

Some Ideas by Charles A. Dana on Journalism.

Address at Cornell University

Mr Dana said there were two kinds of useful men in this age. First, the man of thought, science and invention, such as Edison. The second class of useful men, he said, were those who were endowed with the gift of amassing wealth or getting rich, against whom people were wont to declaim and against whom legislation was directed.

Among these were Ezra Cornell and Henry Sage. These men Mr. Dana said, knew how to save and to give for great public enterprises. Wealthy men were a useful and necessary part of the age and were doing good.

"The newspaper profession," continued Mr. Dana "is certainly a learned profession in one sense but at the same time there are certainly many newspapers in which learning is very sparsely and very haphazardly applied.

"On the whole, the newspaper is very much like human nature—it is right sometimes and it is wrong very often. But the newspaper is not only a necessary institution, but it is a useful and beneficial institution. Just now the business of making newspapers is going through a revolution, it is passing through changes of a very radical and remarkable nature.

"These changes are due—first, to the invention of new printing machinery, which makes it possible to publish the large editions and the large newspapers we are all accustomed to. Before these machines were invented a machine that could turn out 50 or 75 copies a day was the best that there was in the world. Now, with the most improved presses, you can turn out eight ten or twelve pages at the rate of 3000 papers in an hour.

An important question to be decided by the newspaper colonator is what kind of newspaper will you make. That question may be divided into two. Will you make a newspaper for sensible people or for fools?"

I would not be understood as meaning to intimate that there is anything unworthy in making a newspaper for fools since there is high authority for the statement that fools form a large part of the community and it is perfectly right to provide for them in newspapers. We see that this is very conscientiously performed by very able individuals and I have heard that they make money by it.

For my part I find more entertainment in making a newspaper that tries to be of the other kind. As some young gentlemen here are bound to become newspaper men they should reflect carefully which kind they like best themselves.

Now as to the education that the intending journalist should work for in the first place he should know everything that it is possible for him to know. I never knew a newspaper man who knew too much except those very few in number who know too many things that are not so.

I myself am a strict partisan of the old-fashioned classical education. The man who can read Virgil Tacitus and the Iliad, and if he can read Aristotle and Plato, all the better is the man I have in mind. But, above all he should know his own language the most beautiful and wonderful language in existence. He that is going to write the English language who is going to publish a daily manual in that language must know that language thoroughly.

Then there are a great many other sciences that the young newspaper man ought to learn. He ought to know the practical sciences above all history he should know too. About political economy I do not know so much. But it is there, and it has got to be attended to. All the other discussions about the arts and science of making newspapers have dwelt always on getting news. That is always very desirable, but fortunately that is provided for by the news associations. The editor of the paper is left to attend to his more important duties. The same system prevails with respect to the news of the whole country.

There is one point which I want to impress plainly upon you young gentlemen and that is that all newspaper men while they require the literary and scientific education that I have been speaking of require also a business education. It is only by being put through the mill of business that a man acquires the ability of dealing with the questions of this world. It is very desirable indeed that the newspaper man who has got to deal with the practical affairs of this world should know them personally and it is also desirable that he should have that knowledge of human nature which can only be acquired so far as my experience goes in a wholesale and retail store. I consider the six years that I spent in a Buffalo dry goods store as more beneficial than any other six years of my life.

One of the most interesting things that an editor and newspaper man has to deal with is literature of the day and this includes not merely the books and papers but that part of the literature which appears in newspaper and magazine fiction and poetry. The newspaper man ought to be well up to these things. He ought to cultivate the sense of art and beauty.

The Sunday newspaper Mr. Dana thought was a good institution. If it was wrong to make it it was wrong to repeal it and the American people had stamped it with their approval because the circulation of the Sunday newspaper was double that of the daily. As long as the people buy them he said they will be made.

People complained because occasionally there were of noxious things in newspapers but there would always be. The newspaper was the mirror of the days events and had to chronicle the good things and the bad and as the bad predominated naturally something noxious would have to be chronicle.

If one paper did not print a certain item people would take another that did. If a libelous libelous was permitted such things to occur surely we must be permitted to tell the facts to each other.

The value of the free press is not now sufficiently appreciated in this country continued Mr. Dana. "It is only some particular circumstance, some particular occurrence which can show it before the eyes of all. I do not know that I can state it, but the great value of the press is that it stands between the people and the injustice of parties. And now let me lay down one or two maxims which seem to me of great importance especially to the conductors of newspapers.

First—Never be in a hurry. Second—All the goodness of a bad press cannot make up for the badness of a bad one. This seems to me one of the profoundest things but perhaps it may not be so. Third—Stand by the stars and stripes and stand what ever happens, stand for liberty. Fourth—Don't fear to say, in any circumstances that you have been mistaken. There is a tradition in newspapers of the old school that you must never say you are wrong. That is bad advice and a bad principle. If a man has not the moral courage which enables him to say 'Yes I was wrong' he had better retire from business and never make another newspaper."