

APPLIED ETHICS IN JOURNALISM

I suppose all thoughtful men are agreed upon the fact that the journalist plays a more important part for good and for evil in our community to-day than even the great business man or the successful politician; and this of course means that the journalist who does evil does more evil, and the journalist who does good does more good, than any other men are able to do.

There is no particular in which this is more evident than in the relation of the journalist to business through advertising.

Abuses grow up almost insensibly. At first they are hardly abuses at all, and they become such so gradually that the best men, of necessity, take a longer or shorter time before they wake up to the fact that the abuse has arrived. This applies equally in the business, the political, and the newspaper worlds. Twenty or thirty years ago the best citizen would have been genuinely surprised at any protest against the giving and accepting of rebates by and from railways, the giving and acceptance of campaign funds by and from corporations, and the acceptance by newspapers of advertisements of patent medicines, stocks promising extraordinary returns, and the like. In all these cases time, of necessity, elapsed before the evil was recognized. Then the leaders of sound public opinion acted, and in each case our gratitude is due to them for their action.

In advertisements there are, of course, all kinds of evil. Perhaps the evil is most marked in connection with fake financial advertisements and advertisements of patent medicines. The fake financial advertisements represent a detestable evil, and yet the great majority of daily papers still print these advertisements just as they print the equally detestable medical advertisements. There are papers—with some of which I totally and radically disagree, even from the standpoint of morality, in so far as their editorial policy is concerned—which refuse to print either kind of advertisement, and which therefore deserve in this respect high credit; but most newspapers, including, I regret to say, most of those of the largest circulation, are still conspicuous offenders in this regard, and accept indifferently the advertisements of

practically any kind of financial swindle as well as of perfectly safe concerns. The latter, however, advertise very much less freely than the former.

In a recent raid made by the Post-Office Department the official estimates announced that the financial frauds closed up in the raid had taken from the public about eighty million dollars. The experts in the advertising world to whom I have spoken say that about one-third of the net receipts of these financial swindles are spent in advertising in the newspapers. This would mean that, as to the swindlers put out of business by the Post-Office Department through its recent action, one-third of the money, or twenty-five million dollars, which the swindlers had taken from unsophisticated people, and usually very poor people, had gone into the hands of newspaper publishers. A prominent authority in the Post-Office Department stated recently that, as a fair estimate, he believed that between thirty and forty million dollars a year was paid in this country to newspapers of great circulation for advertising financial swindles of the worst kind.

Nobody can estimate the amount of real misery caused in the hearts of poor and unsophisticated people by these swindlers, in whose hands they have put their petty savings, and in whose good intentions they have placed their foolish faith and hope. Moreover, there is a grim irony in the fact that many of the newspapers which have been the worst offenders in this respect are the very newspapers which in their non-advertising columns howl their devotion to the poor man and attack the rich.

As has been shown by the action of the Post-Office Department, the Government can and does, even now, interfere to a certain extent with this kind of swindle; and with better and stronger laws it will interfere still more. But in addition to law there must be an informed body of public opinion, able to express the righteous indignation which all men should feel at this kind of mean money-making and mean wrongdoing. The worst actions of the big business corporations cannot cause more misery than can be caused by a single great daily newspaper which habitually advertises swindles of this character.

The patent medicine advertising repre-

sents as great an evil. With regard to this, there has been a great advance in public sentiment. The National Pure Food Law represented a great step in the right direction. The high-class magazines of the country, both monthly and weekly, have thrown out this class of advertising, and now no respectable magazine publishes it; but the great majority of the newspapers print it without limitation, and probably gain as much money from it as from the financial advertisements. We hear much of the influence exercised by great corporations upon the press, and unquestionably this influence has been, and is, very serious. Yet it cannot be greater than the evil influence exercised by the backers of objectionable medical and financial advertisements when they spend between thirty and forty millions a year in the daily newspaper press.

It is easy to state in general terms the distinction between those journals that have conscience in this matter and those that have not, as long as one keeps carefully to the abstract. Just to avoid this easy and normally not very useful type of generalization, I wish to call attention, first, to two specific instances of the evils in journalistic advertising, and then to two specific instances of real service.

In 1907 Mr. Stimson, then United States District Attorney in New York City, secured a verdict against Mr. Bennett, the proprietor of the New York "Herald," and forced him to pay a fine of about thirty thousand dollars for circulating through the mails the obscene matter contained in the "Personal" columns of the New York "Herald." In this case, by the way, many of the newspapers which are ordinarily of reasonable virtue so hid the facts as to prevent any effective understanding by the public of the real reason for the animosity very naturally shown by Mr. Bennett through his papers ever since toward all the public officials who were in any way connected with bringing him to justice for his crime.

The second instance is that of another New York daily newspaper. As I write, I have before me the issue of the New York "World" for January 1, 1911, and of the "World Almanac" for 1911, and it is simply appalling to see the number of medical advertisements scattered broad-

cast through the newspaper and through the "Almanac." A peculiarly objectionable feature of these medical advertisements, exactly as with the financial advertisements, is that it is the poorest class, the most helpless class, of people that are most hurt by them. I believe that legislation could be framed to forbid such advertisements. In default of such legislation there is at least need that we should discriminate in the sharpest way between newspapers which war against this evil and newspapers which encourage it.

Of the two instances of real public service, one is that of the Boston "Transcript." This newspaper has consistently refused to print either fake financial advertisements or advertisements of patent medicines.

The other instance of real public service is that which has been rendered by "Collier's Weekly." Its campaign, begun five years ago, hit the patent medicine concerns very hard and greatly reduced the amount they spent in advertising; but they have recently begun to get back their courage and to increase the advertising of patent medicines and of those medical practitioners whom reputable doctors regard as quacks and swindlers. "Collier's" service has been rendered not only by the stand it has taken as regards advertising, but by the way it has made courage back up virtue in applying that stand. The experience of "Collier's" with the Postum Cereal Company illustrates this. In 1905 "Collier's" announced that it would accept no advertisements of certain classes, among which were those "making claims to medicinal effect." The attention of "Collier's" was thereupon called to an advertisement of Grape Nuts which was published in that same issue. Being persuaded that the advertisement did lay claim to medicinal effects, "Collier's" excluded the advertisement from its pages. A year and a half later "Collier's" printed an editorial criticising the advertisements of Grape Nuts on these grounds. Upon this Mr. Post, the proprietor of the article in question, published an advertisement in several hundred newspapers in which he said that "Collier's" had tried to force him to advertise in that paper. Thereupon "Collier's" promptly sued him for libel, and obtained the unprecedented

verdict of fifty thousand dollars. An amusing feature of the case, and one which shows the influence of advertisements upon the daily press, is that very few papers gave any publicity to this noteworthy verdict, and when mentioned it was usually in the most inconspicuous fashion.

We owe hearty respect to the public servant who, like ex-District Attorney Stimson, fearlessly does his duty in bringing to justice a great newspaper that goes wrong, although he knows that his action will be of harm to himself personally; and we are bound to pay a tribute of deserved respect to a paper like "Collier's," when in a matter so vital to the public well-being it wages so fearless, aggressive, and efficient a fight for honesty and decency.

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