

Address by

EUGENE CERVI

Editor and Publisher of

Cervi's Rocky Mountain Journal, Denver

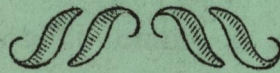
before the 70th Annual Conference

of

the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, Inc.

Hotel Chinook, Yakima, Washington

Saturday, noon, September 14, 1957



Address by
EUGENE CERVI

Editor and Publisher of
Cervi's Rocky Mountain Journal, Denver
before the 70th Annual Conference
of
the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, Inc.
Hotel Chinook, Yakima, Washington
Saturday, noon, September 14, 1957

"The American Press Is As Free As It Wants To Be"

People will always want to know -- but not too much. That's why there will always be communications varying in degree and quality with the ability of the people to demand and absorb enlightenment. This does not mean there will always be newspapers as we know them today.

From the days of fire signals to electronics, the people have found ways and means to transmit news and ideas without allowing techniques and mechanics to divert or deter them from their honest desire to inform and express themselves.

In coming to Yakima to address the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, I have come not to chant a requiem over the American press, but rather to rejoice in a slowly emergency reformation and to predict drastic alteration for the glamour stars of the communications industry -- the metropolitan dailies -- the pace setters of the industry.

Among the waste, inefficiency, recklessness and failure of American dailies are thrilling opportunities for the bold, the brave and the

venturesome. It's because the American press is as bad as I shall say it is, that these exciting and challenging prospects exist.

Communications in a fresh selection of items is upon us. But let me emphasize that it is the word, the message, the idea and the aspiration itself that is most important. The instrument or trumpet thru which it is blown or transmitted is relatively unimportant.

In an age when change is swift and fantastic, it is ominous for newspapers that they are changing at a pace fatally behind the dramatic changes they are supposed to be reporting daily.

The press of America is many things and many people, extending as it does to wherever men can lay their hands on type and paper. It is intriguing to examine the fact that huge dailies, even in monopoly situations, can be regulated, disciplined, reformed, restrained and upgraded by other free media and means when and where the will exists to do so.

It is appropriate, therefore, that these remarks should be directed in particular to owners and editors of weeklies because, in my opinion, weeklies offer a vast area in which it may be proved that the American press is as free as it wants to be and that good ideas sprout their own wings to carry them into glorious acceptance.

American dailies and entrenched non-competitive weeklies as we know them today are hastening their own funeral thru their inability to halt inward deterioration brought on by past excesses and abuses. The power of the press has corrupted many newspapers to a point where only drastic design change can save them. Of this I shall speak in a moment.

Time has become so meaningful even to the masses, and the interests of mankind generally have so broadened that newspapers are going unread

and unheeded as new methods of communications and expanded views of the facts are developed to meet specific and specialized needs.

The newspaper ideas of William Randolph Hearst and E. W. Scripps died when they died. 'Twas ever thus. But there will be latter day giants of journalism and their instruments will reflect their personalities. It will always be this way.

The average American daily -- and most of them are sadly alike -- is old and withering at a noticeable rate -- the victim of the sharp changes and reversals in city dwelling and the flight to suburbia.

Its replacement is taking curious and frightening forms. One of them is Ed Murrow and Mike Wallace. The public shall judge the new forms of communications -- assuming that the qualifications for discrimination are available.

New economic and social elements have come to plague newspapers as we knew them before World War II.

At the heart of any form of communication is the diligent researcher and the seeker of truth turned reporter. And it is a shame-faced fact that this indispensable person isn't attracted to journalism as in other years.

Today the graduate goes into science and social arts apart from journalism because the outlook and promise of creative action is more inviting. Suddenly, the American press is the oaf of the social sciences in this astonishing atomic age.

Futhermore, the housewife lost much of her affection for the daily newspaper when the garbage disposal was installed. And something tells me that printing the news on aluminum foil isn't going to win her back. The super-market stores already thought of that.

Let's face it. A daily newspaper or a weekly for that matter is important in the average home. But it is not as important as a bar of soap, an automatic dishwasher or the family car.

We come to the harsh fact that the average American newspaper exists today largely to carry messages into the home for General Electric, General Motors, General Mills and General Eisenhower.

Except that Eisenhower comes to you thru the courtesy of Robert Montgomery and Johnson's Wax.

In next year's model, the government will be brought to you thru the courtesy of Proctor & Gamble as American Big Business rotates the coveted assignments of running the biggest show on earth.

The founding fathers of this sproutling nation would be shocked and amazed at the sins and digressions committed today in the name of the constitutional guarantee of press freedom.

Press freedom for whom? Going back to the historic English version of freedom that was brought to this country, the press gained inordinate liberty to be able to cope with excesses of the Crown against the people. But what happened?

Newspapers have been so busy making money, merging and consolidating to overcome mounting costs and to preserve prestige facades for detached, non-editing and frequently absentee owners that they have found themselves covering the wrong parade.

Their decline began in their greed to corner the power of knowledge and expression. The newspapers assumed an impossible assignment of covering and commenting on everything -- and it must be said they did a remarkably able job, from their point of view, before the age of speed and new discernment.

With their fabulous economic successes, newspapers lost their evangelistic vigilance and sense of advocacy. As monopolies or reduced competition came to more and more cities across the land, thus more easily insuring survival, the newspapers have become score keepers and collectors of human garbage. Some few consider themselves referees and umpires. But that isn't what the Constitution framers had in mind and that is not the vigilance that liberty requires.

Newspapers have abandoned their powers of creativity to snap up crumbs falling from the tables of industrial and commercial creators of more aggressive inventiveness and more daring execution.

Much of the press of this nation has sold out to the materialists without reserving the right to exercise moral judgment when the occasion to do so demands.

My indictment of the press is that it is giving up its freedom needlessly. It has elected to serve as tout and handmaiden when it can and should be explorer, champion, poet and courageous leader. We insist that journalistic virtue, if given a chance, would reward itself handsomely at the bank.

What is happening to the American house of lords is something it brought on itself. The press lords find their bored and passive subjects down in the basement with their do-it-yourself kits. They are looking at camping equipment catalogs and travel folders. They are pasting up their own trade journals. And their hero of authority is not a latter day Arthur Brisbane, but a knowledgeable Ivy Leaguer in crew cut at the sports car emporium in the geranium-lined mall of the residential shopping center. They simply aren't listening. They couldn't care less about worlds in which they have no voice when science and

technology has brought them ways and means to create their own worlds and to design living for themselves. Circulation is not synonymous with readership. This is the fever point. And this is what is scaring the big publishers today as Madison avenue begins to suspect that it may be buying less than a bargain.

The warning of all this to newspapers generally is that many no-longer-disenfranchised people suddenly have become their own researchers, reporters and editors. They do their own selecting and emphasizing and they are getting wiser to human and social values.

Let me emphasize strongly that I do not despair about the future of American journalism. It will change but it will not fade into obscurity. Commercial communications operate in an assured market. The population is growing enormously. The economy is expanding. Material prosperity is entrenched.

But there is more to life than the competitive struggle and it's in the neglected areas of humanistic studies, endeavors and purposes that far-reaching opportunities await the intelligent and sensitive editor who by the nature of things always ought to be the owner of his paper or at least the clearly unshackled captain of his course. An editor without the power of final decision isn't much of an editor -- and an editor who has the power of decision and doesn't use it isn't much better.

Corporate journalism, operated by a rule book, is no substitute for the owner-editor who lives, sings and sighs along side his readers.

What do Americans need in the way of daily and weekly news? What do they want -- and beyond that, what ought they to have? These three points: need, desire and what's good for them -- require careful study using new devices of inquiry and in these studies may be found the

pattern of tomorrow's newspaper in both the daily and weekly field.

As a tastemaker, the American press has been notoriously deficient. It has abdicated all too willingly its stimulating potential to the industrial designer, the maker of gadgets and the narrow-visioned sycophants of advertising's cult.

Very little significant change has been made in 50 years in even the simple process of mechanically producing a newspaper. Monopolies, of course, have throttled creativeness in newspapers. Non-editing owners, of course, are the scourge and parasite of the newspaper business.

Until recently, the American people had been unable to create ways and means to discipline newspapers bent on destroying their own usefulness. To pass laws restraining the excesses of newspapers would be to destroy the fundamental liberties they require to perform their good purposes and functions.

But happily, this dilemma is being slowly resolved by newly-discovered forces of competition within our technological society.

Radio, television and the evolution of the specialized trade press have caused newspapers to examine themselves and set in motion the reforms that should come from within the business itself.

The purposeful future of American newspapers rests in keeping pace with countless new interests resulting from the advances of science and technology.

This requires research into how people are spending their time, when they read, what they read where they read and how they read. There's nothing wrong then with American newspapers that a little sound reporting won't cure.

And newspapers must accept the fact that they themselves are news, that they are fair game for proper examination and investigation, preferably by each other. There must be more public self-examination of newspapers before the design for tomorrow's newspaper can emerge constructively.

We know that the average daily, with its unrewarding sameness in every city, is seriously wasteful and inefficient. The use of limited space requires constant appraisal and the judgment of those experienced in analyzing the sudden and sharp shifts in public interest. The interesting question here is: to what extent do editors lead or follow public attention in news and issues?

A convincing case could be made that newspapers have done as much social and political damage in a given community, particularly when they have no competition and are economically secure, as they have performed good in wielding their enormous power.

It is a wide open debate whether William Randolph Hearst is owed a great debt by modern American newspapers or whether he deserves a severe indictment for having influenced the course of journalism the way he did.

It will not be disputed among informed students of the American press that Hearst elevated (and that may be a most inappropriate verb to describe what he did) newspapers to the big leagues of American business. In a society in which materialism is rampant, Hearst was determined that his newspapers would not be less so. And the lust for money and power being what it is, his competitors hastened to follow suit. Certainly, the first half of the 20th century saw newspaper owners enfranchised economically along with steelmasters, soap makers and other

tycoons of industry and commerce. Professors, clergymen and scholars have hesitated about being corrupted so willingly.

What isn't effectively realized or appreciated is that a disproportionate amount of the vital economic substance required to sustain commercial communication is being drained off in community after community by radio and television of doubtful quality. For this the newspapers can blame themselves.

America would be a stronger, better and more democratic nation if the resources going into radio, restricted and repressed by the nature of any government-licensed and regulated enterprise, were diverted to eager weeklies and dailies fighting for their survival.

A case can be made for the proposition that the disappeared daily, mergers and monopolies have weakened the competitive urge and force to a serious point. Costs are high in journalism because the incentive to lower them has been eliminated by the satisfied monopolies....

To this may be added the suspicion that a tacit conspiracy exists among entrenched publishers to preserve the notion that a forbidding amount of capital is required to start a new daily. This is not always true. Money isn't the problem. We know that men sparked by ideas and ideals make newspapers.

Wastefulness in advertising has never been attacked bravely because those who would suffer by an objective examination don't want their weaknesses exposed.

I would hazard a guess that the average metropolitan daily is at least 40 per cent inefficient, uneconomical and wasteful, but the trick is to determine who and how many aren't reading what in a given paper.

The cumbersome process of chopping down a tree in the Canadian

forest so a family in Middleton, Missouri, can receive crime news and private scandals that it may or may not want is long overdue for critical inspection it hasn't been getting from those charged with finding answers to effective communications -- the publishers.

It is only by enthusiastic striving for improvement that we can upgrade newspapers and make freedom of the press meaningful in terms of the intent of the Constitution. Unhappily, the competition among American newspapers is not extensive and certainly not spirited.

As desirable and as inevitable as a new format of content is, the fact remains that fundamentally a good newspaper in the American tradition ought to regain the confidence of the public by performing courageously in social force and leadership in behalf of the lowest element of our society in order to insure that it is serving all of the people.

This is not being done in the country today and I say that the people are finding ways to gain the ends of justice outside the conventional press. As newspapermen you can't stop them or it. As moralists you may want to join the people and help them find their way.

Research will give us the answer to the size, shape, color and general format of the newspaper of tomorrow.

Costs and other economic pressures may force even the monopolistic dailies to invent new and encouraging methods of physical production.

The death of dailies and the birth of thousands of specialized magazines and journals tells the story of what is happening to the American press. This is another way of saying that the people will always find a way.

Actually, the newspaper of tomorrow already is here in widely separated segments. The segments require a genius of brokerage, assemblage,

selection and emphasis to put the pieces together in one acceptable and marketable package.

The genius himself must be a researcher, reporter, part ploughman and part poet. He must be an owner. He must be brave enough to exercise moral judgment. The American people need and want a new genius of journalism. Is there a genius in the house?

- 30 -