DO NEWSPAPERS NOW GIVE THE NEWS?

WHEN Dr. Benjamin Rush died, in 1813, he bequeathed his books with a considerable endowment to the Philadelphia Library, upon condition that no part of the fund should ever be expended in the purchase of newspapers, because he was convinced that newspapers were "teachers of disjointed thinking." When Charles Dickens was in America in 1842, that superfluously aggressive critic thought an appropriate name for the typical American newspaper would be "The Daily Sewer." The other day, Mr. William C. Todd, of Atkinson, New Hampshire, gave fifty thousand dollars to the Boston Public Library and directed that the income from this fund should be spent to buy newspapers to be kept in a suitable apartment in the building where all citizens and strangers can "enter freely and read." Mr. Todd had previously given ten thousand dollars to the library in Newburyport, Massachusetts, persuaded that it was better to provide newspapers for people to read than books, many of which remained on the library shelves for generations with their leaves uncut. About a month ago I heard a lawyer of note say that with the exception of one journal there was not a single daily paper in New York fit to go into a gentleman's house; and he was quick to add, "and that is so unamiable and quarrelsome that its influence cannot be of the right kind."

Now, what do these incidents imply? Were the newspapers very bad in Dr. Rush's time? Were they even worse in 1842 when Dickens paid his first visit to America? Are they so much improved now that they are worthy of special study in public libraries? Are they in their improved condition so filled with scandals and gossip and accounts of crime that they are unworthy to enter a gentleman's house?

In Dr. Rush's day, the newspapers certainly did not amount to much and were incomparably less amusing, entertaining, enterprising and instructive than they are to-day; but probably they were not more conducive of "disjointed thinking." In 1842, when they horrified Dickens with their license, they were not very different from

the newspapers Rush knew. For forty years after Dickens's visit—that is, until about 1882—the American newspapers expanded, gradually becoming broader in tone and generally more comprehensive. During this forty years there were no marked eras in the gradual process of evolution from the purely provincial press of the earlier days of the Republic; but since 1881 or 1882 the change has been very great and rapid. This change has been mainly due to a cheapening process, to an idea which originated with the former managers of the "New York Times." This newspaper was very prosperous and was justly held in great esteem on account of its public service in prosecuting to justice the criminal combination known as "the Tweed ring." The price of the paper was three cents; its reduction to two cents seriously curtailed its income without materially increasing the circulation. This proved that there was really no public demand for the reduction in price and that it was a mistake merely from a business point of view. Nevertheless, other papers quickly followed the example of the "Times" in this reduction of price, and the experience of all was, I believe, the same—a material reduction of income, with no compensating advantage. Then began another cheapening process to cut down expenses. The effect of this was plainly observable in all the papers.

About this time the "New York World" became the property of a prominent Western newspaper-man whose innovations, both as to giving a larger quantity of reading-matter and illustrating the text with pictures, were copied sooner or later by all his contemporaries, with the result that the papers of to-day are anywhere from three to five times as large as they were before.

Suppose we examine representative New York newspapers of twelve years ago and compare them with the same papers of this year. For example, we will take the "Sun," the "World," "Times" and "Tribune," of Sunday, April 17, 1881, and compare them with the same papers of Sunday, April 16, 1893. I wish to remark here that I selected this date in April merely by chance and not because I was aware of anything in the papers of that day making them at all extraordinary. Indeed, it may be they were more commonplace than usual, for it happened that the day before there were no "carnivals of crime" or "bloody butcheries" anywhere within telegraphic reach. The Sunday "Sun" and "World" of the date given in 1881 were each eight-page, seven-column papers. The "Tribune" had twelve pages of six columns each, and the "Times" sixteen pages of seven

columns each. Men remarked twelve years ago that these were very large papers; but on the corresponding Sunday of 1893 the "Tribune" was just twice as large, having twenty-four pages of six columns each; the "Times" had twenty pages with seven columns each; the "Sun" had twenty-eight pages of seven columns each, and the "World" forty-four pages of eight columns each. This was expansion in earnest. But if the quality of the reading-matter had not suffered by this expansion and if it were not bad before the expansion began, then probably no one has the right to complain.

For the purpose of comparing the various kinds of subjects treated in the papers of the different dates, I have made the following table—

COLUMNS OF READING-MATTER IN NEW YORK NEWSPAPERS, APRIL 17, 1881, AND APRIL 16, 1893.

Subject.	Tribune, 1881.	Tribune, 1893.	World, 1881.	World, 1893.	Times, 1881.	Times, 1893.	Sun, 1881.	Sun, 1893.
Editorial	5.00	5.00	4.75	4.00	6.00	5.00	4.00	4.00
Religious	2.00	0.00	0.75	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.50	1.00
Scientific	1.00	0.75	0.00	2.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	2.50
Political	3.00	3.75	0.00	10.50	1.00	4.00	1.00	3.50
Literary	15.00	5.00	1.00	2.00	18.00	12.00	5.75	6.00
Gossip	1.00	23.00	1.00	63.50	.50	16.75	2.00	13.00
Scandals	0.00	1.50	0.00	1.50	1.00	2.50	0.00	2.00
Sporting	1.00	6.50	2.50	16.00	3.00	10.00	0.50	17.50
Fiction	0.00	7.00	1.50	6.50	1.00	1.50	0.00	11.50
Historical	2.50	2.50	2.75	4.00	2.50	1.50	4.25	14.00
Music and Drama	2.50	4.00	1.50	11.00	4.00	7.00	0.00	3.50
Crimes and Criminals.	0.00	0.50	0.00	6.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.00
Art	1.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	0.00	0.25	1.25

The true significance of this table, of course, lies in the percentage relation of the different subjects to the total number of columns printed. Thus, while the "Times" on this particular Sunday in 1881 contained eighteen columns of literary matter, or sixteen per cent of the total space in the whole paper, the literary matter in the corresponding Sunday of this year is twelve columns, or only nine and six-tenths per cent of the total space. The "gossip" in the "Times" in twelve years increased from four-tenths of one per cent of the total space to eleven and seven-tenths per cent of the space; that is, from one-half a column it had grown during the twelve years to sixteen-and-three-quarter columns. The religious matter had dropped from one column in 1881, to nothing in 1893. Scientific matters decreased exactly in the same way, while the scandals which

filled only one column in 1881 now needed two columns and a half to hold them. The sporting news grew from three to ten columns; art criticism dropped from two columns to nothing.

In the "Sun" of 1881, on the particular Sunday alluded to, there were no scandals printed; on the corresponding Sunday of 1893 the scandals filled two columns of the paper, or about one per cent of the total space; and the gossip increased from two to thirteen columns. The literary matter in the "Sun" remained about the same, while more space was given to religious, scientific and art subjects.

The "Tribune" in 1881 had two columns of religious matter and not a line in 1893. The scandals, however, which were nothing in 1881 had increased to a column and a half, while the gossip had grown from one column to twenty-three, and so filled more than sixteen per cent of the space of the paper. Sporting, too, grew from one column to six columns and a half, while in both years editorial comments and art criticism remained the same.

The "World" in 1881 had no scandals and only a column of gossip. In 1893 the scandals filled a column and a half and the gossip sixty-three columns and a half! The music and drama in the former year required a column and a half, while eleven columns were used in 1893. It is likely that fully eight of these eleven columns devoted to the music and drama should be credited to gossip. In 1881, the "World" had no stories of crimes and criminals; in the paper of April 16, 1893, six columns were devoted to these subjects.

From this analysis of the contents of the papers of the dates mentioned, everyone can draw a plain inference as to whether the expansion of the newspaper-press of New York has been upon lines calculated to benefit the public. A great many of the things mentioned as mere gossip and spoken of as scandals would be totally unfit to reproduce. The Sunday "Sun" I happened to hit on for examination, is not at all more lurid than usual; indeed, the supplements are not enlivened with the usual pictures showing the hosiery and other underwear of women of various nations, together with dissertations on the same. But on the first page of the paper we have telegraphed to us from London an account of the trial of an English nobleman for an alleged indecent assault; then an account of how a young woman was said to have been made drunk by her lover; then the moving tale of an attack in the street by the wife of a barkeeper on the barkeeper's mistress. But the first page has still another sensation, absolutely indescribable, and about as fair and

legitimate a piece of news as might have been obtained by sending reporters to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum to interview the inmates—a nice page for a wife or daughter to scan at breakfast, before going to church. Such a story was never before, I believe, printed in any New York newspaper that made any pretence to respectability. At any rate, I have searched the files in vain for any previous report at once so objectionable and unnecessary. The "Sun" files of twelve years ago contain none such, and there is nothing approaching it between 1881 and now. The "Tribune" of April 16, 1893, printed this story. The "World" did not,—until the next day!

The new "Times" did not touch this case; but on the fifth page there is a headline in letters a quarter of an inch long, "Shock to Brooklyn Society"; and we are told that ten days before the son of a well-known man had been married in Dr. Talmage's church before the whole congregation, but that his father was not present. The shock consisted in the father's absence. The reporter evidently worked on this case with great perseverance and tells us that "what became of everybody concerned after the ceremony was over nobody is certain of"; then, naming the bride, the reporter says, who she is "or her mother or her sister, nobody seems to be certain of." This shock to Brooklyn society could not be dropped at once, so it is taken up by the Monday paper, where we learn that the bride and groom were at the house of the bride's mother and that after the wedding everybody who had any right whatever to know about the young people, knew exactly where they were all the time. The "Times," this Sunday morning, also made another effort towards distinction in the newer journalism in reporting a divorce-case in a very original way. Part of the case was heard in court, but this was not conclusive enough for the reporter, so he went out and took the evidence on the other side. The editor promptly gave judgment in the case in the headlines over the reporter's story, and of course the evidence the reporter had gathered entirely outweighed that which had been sworn to in court.

Now turn back to twelve years before. None of the papers were then considered to be over nice in their scruples about sensations, crimes, scandals or gossip. But in all four of the papers under consideration there were only *four-and-one-half* columns of gossip, and *one* column of scandal, against *one hundred and sixteen and one quarter* columns of gossip this year and *seven and a half* columns of scandal. The gossip this year usurps the place of the literary matter

printed in 1881, and articles about crimes and criminals take the places formerly occupied by religious and scientific matter.

Twelve years ago, the people in the East very justly looked upon the papers in the more bustling Western cities with something like surprised horror. In those papers, and in the Chicago papers particularly, quantity was the first consideration and sensationalism the next. Indeed, these seemed the only considerations. But in these regards there has been so great a change in the New York papers in twelve years that they now far surpass the Chicago papers, while the Chicago papers have distinctly improved in a better direction. Particularly in discussing scandals and crimes based upon the breaking of the seventh commandment are the Chicago newspapers now much more scrupulous than their New York contemporaries. I have been told by Chicago news editors, and I have verified the statement, that lurid stories of crime and scandal sent from proofs of New York papers by telegraph to Chicago almost invariably have to be toned down before they are considered fit for publication in the Western city. That statement of fact will astonish no one who is acquainted with the newspapers of both towns, but it will seem almost incredible to those mistaken persons in the East who have believed, without knowing exactly why, that everything in Chicago was more vulgar and more coarse than anywhere else. If any one having such doubts will take two or three New York papers and two or three Chicago papers of the same date and compare them, then that person will see that this statement has been made advisedly. But it must not be understood that the claim is here made that the Chicago papers are models of propriety and good taste. In my opinion, they are nothing of the kind. They are not even so good as the New York papers of twelve years ago; but they are very much nicer and cleaner than the Chicago papers of that time or than the New York papers of to-day. So while there has been a distinct deterioration and decadence in the New York newspaper press in the last dozen years, the improvement in Chicago has been steady and noteworthy, and this notwithstanding the introduction and general adoption there of the illustrations that do not illustrate.

There is a conventional phrase—"a newspaper is the history of the world for a day"—that is more or less believed in. Nothing could be falser than this. Our newspapers do not record the really serious happenings, but only the sensations, the catastrophes of history. Said John Stuart Mill in his "Essay on Socialism"—

"Sudden effects in history are generally superficial. Causes which go deep down into the roots of future events produce the most serious parts of their effect only slowly, and have, therefore, time to become a part of the familiar order of things before general attention is called to the changes they are producing; since, when the changes do become evident, they are often not seen by cursory observers to be in any peculiar manner connected with the cause. The remoter consequences of a new political fact are seldom understood when they occur, except when they have been appreciated beforehand."

If the New York newspapers ever recorded history accurately and with any appreciation of the significance of the events occurring, they do it less now than heretofore, for now everything is so covered with the millinery of sensationalism that none but the wisest can detect the truth beneath. The depth of the headline conveys to the reader the editor's estimate of the importance and value of the news recorded; and if the editor be inspired only by the motive to amuse, entertain and excite his readers, it is readily to be seen how he leads his followers not only into the regions of disjointed thinking but into absolutely wrong thinking. And that such is the motive of the editors in New York at the present time I believe the little table I have compiled and the analysis of it will show. Though the present tendency is in the wrong direction, I do not believe it will much longer continue so. In no other field of endeavor is cheapness—a sacrifice of quality for quantity—now esteemed of the first importance. In art, in architecture, in music, in the drama, the tendency is the other way; and we may expect before very long that decent people will demand that the news be placed before them, not in sheets full of unclean things, but with the good taste and moderation characteristic of a high and pure civilization.

JNO. GILMER SPEED.

A WORD TO THE CRITICS OF NEWSPAPERS.

"I AM not in politics—I am in morals," said Charles Sumner once, in that sententious, complacent way of his. If the modern censors of the press could have their wish, the newspapers would not be in the business of printing news, but in morals. Somewhere between the Church and the political reformer, I judge, the newspaper would take its stand. Martin Luther on the one hand and Cavour on the other would be its models; but those who hold that a newspaper should always be scolding at something or somebody set up John Knox as the editor's great exemplar. It is conceded, I believe, that the Christian religion shall still be ranked as the greatest regenerating force at work in human society, but the press must come next, and not far behind. It has not yet been proposed that newspaper editors shall take orders or vows, but it is insisted that they shall have no knowledge of the ways of this wicked world, or if they have such knowledge they shall scrupulously hide it from their readers. Sin and crime will continue their ravages, of course, and the presumably righteous will now and then slip or fall, but the newspapers must look the other way. And there must be nothing trivial or frivolous in the newspaper. This is, or is supposed by the critics of the press to be, a very serious world, a sad and quite unhappy world, indeed. Therefore the newspapers should concern themselves only with large and solemn matters. A newspaper must not make mistakes. This rule is a major canon, and as mistakes are assumed to be needless, they are to be attributed to the editor's malice or to his ignorance. Finally, there must be no pictures, for pictures are an abomination in the sight of the censors, and that settles the case against them.

When in some remote era the press shall pass all the challenges of its critics, when the newspaper shall be a potent agency of righteousness, irreproachable in matter, exalted, inerrant, and unillustrated, this world will doubtless have made great millennial advancement. In the present age, however, a journal of this ideal perfection would find itself in such incongruous surroundings that