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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE NATURE OF OPINION

Opinion is a working hypothesis applicable to any object of thought or feeling, a provisional interpretation with a definite bias to be held as a conviction until it is overthrown by the discovery of new facts or new conditions. All opinion should be tentative. Opinion is good in proportion to the extent that it is founded upon facts and reason: it is less valuable if prejudice and passion enter materially into its composition. But sound opinion, which is flexible and critical, is to be distinguished from dogma which is rigid — a sort of petrified emotion.

Public opinion is the general thought of a group of people in relation to a particular set of facts or events: it is a composite view of the ideas of various individuals on any given subject. It may be a transient impression or it may be an abiding conviction: it may affect a mere handful of people or its scope may reach to the ends of the earth. Opinion varies according to the interests and character of the public. Among uncivilized peoples the law of custom is founded upon public opinion, and public opinion is likewise the controlling force in the most elaborate systems of jurisprudence. As old as the association of mankind, it is as new as direct legislation. Since it is based upon a mixture of sense,

sentiment, and prejudice, it may be responsible alike for hysterical movements or unreasoning conservatism.

NEWSPAPERS AND PUBLIC OPINION

There is no more potent factor in the formation of public opinion than the newspapers. Before the advent of the telegraph, the Associated Press, and publicity agents, editors deliberately undertook to guide public opinion. Editorial comment occupied the most prominent place in the paper — even the news was tinged with the editor's viewpoint. The scarcity of news does not fully explain the failure to separate statements of fact from opinion. Indeed, the popularity and success of a paper depended chiefly upon its editorial policy. And, judging from the prevalent usage, prejudice, partisanship, and vituperation were commonly mistaken for decision, loyalty, and vigor — qualities of character which the people in those days esteemed as highly in journalists as in statesmen.

The standards of journalism have changed since the "fabulous forties". James Bryce observed nearly thirty-six years ago that American newspapers partook more of the nature of weathercocks than of guide-posts. They have become mainly the chronicles of current events and the mirrors of coeval ideas, while only rarely or incidentally do they advocate anything. Editorials have become mere vestigial appurtenances. There are few jour-

nalists of the old school, like George D. Perkins, who, on account of their reputation for sound judgment, keen insight, absolute integrity, and able exposition, exert a profound influence upon public opinion through their editorial comment. The public is left very much to its own conclusions in regard to the events reported. The press is now primarily a vehicle of information.

Is journalism, like the professions of law and medicine, affected with a public interest? Has a newspaper any obligation of service to society in the way of guiding opinion? There is little evidence that any such function is acknowledged by the press, and yet democracy expects to operate on the meager, propagandist information that the press provides. Perhaps it is not the fault of the newspapers. They are equipped to supply only glimpses of incidents, like the news pictures at the cinema, when the whole drama of human conduct and institutions is needed. The principal defect of democracy is the failure of society to organize the machinery of knowledge so that people may transcend their own casual experience and prejudice and govern themselves understandingly. But it is doubtful whether the avid news-reading American public would pay for the dull but illuminating truth if the cost were not concealed like the tariff in the price of clothing and food — the wares of the advertisers.

J. E. B.