Notes on Journalism

By H. L. Mencken.

THE general success of the tabloid papers, the oldest of which is only seven years old, still seems to puzzle the majority of newspaper men. When they admit it at all, they commonly credit it to the looseness and imbecility of the newcomers, when are described as given over wholly to crime and scandal. But this is plainly a prejudiced and highly inaccurate view of them. In the whole country there are not more than three that actually specialize in such matters. The rest, at worst, are no worse than the usual run of yellows. And at best they are very good newspapers, intelligently edited and carefully printed.

What makes them popular, I believe, is far less their contents than their form. They are made for reading in crowds, and it is in crowds that they are mainly read. A great advertising boom now rages in the United States, and all the old line papers run to an immense bulkiness. Some of the more prosperous of them, on the days that advertisers favor, come out in two or three sections and weigh a pound or more. To go through such a paper in a jammed street car is quite impossible. The man who attempts it gets only a beating for his pains. But he can manage a tabloid without making his neighbors yell, and so he reads it.

The lightness of the little papers gives them another advantage: they can be distributed much more quickly than the larger papers. A boy on a motorcycle can carry a hundred copies of even the bulkiest of them to a remote junction in ten or twenty minutes, but the old style papers have to go by truck, which is slower. Not so many can be printed in an hour. Not so many can be carried by a single newsboy. These advantages count up. The majority of readers, when there is news afloat that interests them seriously, look for it in the larger papers, which can give it in full. But these same readers also buy the tabloids for the first bulletins. Thus there is much duplication of circulation. The tabloids take a certain amount of circulation away from the larger papers, but not enough to be disastrous.

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They would be even more successful than they are, I believe, if their editors could resist the temptation to improve them. That temptation, of course, is easy to understand. Every newspaper man worthy of the name dreams of making his paper better than it is, and those who run the tabloids are stimulated further by the general professional opinion that their papers are somehow low. So every tabloid, as soon as it gets into safe waters, begins to grow intellectual. The bald, gaudy devices that launched it are abandoned and it takes on decorum. Already there are tabloids with opinions on the French debt, the Philippine question, and the music of Stravinsky. I know at least two that are actually liberal.

This, I fear, is a false form of progress. The tabloid, so lifted by its boot straps, becomes simply a little newspaper, and it must inevitably be inferior to the big ones. If I were a tabloid magnate I'd head in the other direction. That is to say, I'd try to produce a paper interesting and instructive to the uncounted thousands who now read no newspaper at all. That such persons exist may seem incredible, but it is nevertheless a fact. They swarm in every large American city. They include the vast class of illiterates, which is everywhere larger than the statistics show. And they include the even larger class of near-illiterates—that is, those who are able to spell out enough words to get them through the ordinary business of life, but find reading so laborious and painful that they avoid it as much as possible.

Many of them, as the psychologist, Dr. Eleanor Wembridge, has demonstrated, are congenitally incapable of mastering it. They understand only such words as are comprehensible to a child of, say, ten. The rest is simply a fog to them. An ordinary newspaper article, even in a tabloid, is thus mainly unintelligible to them. Half the words in it are beyond them. Even when, by dint of hard sweating, they spell their way through it, the impression it leaves upon them is very vague and unsatisfactory. They may grasp its main propositions, but all its details are lost upon them.

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It is my belief that a newspaper aimed at such readers would make a great success in any large American city, and especially in Chicago or New York. It should be printed throughout, as First Readers are printed, in words of one syllable. It should avoid every idea that is beyond the understanding of a boy of ten. It should print no news about anything that morons are not interested in. And its illustrations, instead of being mere decorations, should really illustrate, as the pictures in a First Reader illustrate.

I don't think it would be difficult to get together a staff for such a paper. If journalism itself failed to produce the necessary talent, recourse might be had to pedagogy. There are schoolma'ams, male and female, all over this great land who are professionally adept at explaining things to children. They have perfected technical devices that do the trick quickly and effectively, and those devices could be adapted to journalism without the slightest difficulty. Journalists themselves, after a little training, would greatly improve them, for journalists as a class are much more intelligent than pedagogues. In the end there would be a new English (or American) for the submerged, and reading would spread to a vast class that now gets all its news by listening.

To that class, as to children, much of what now passes for news, and is dished up in endless columns every morning, is wholly uninteresting. Its members, despite the alarms of bank directors and other such naive fellows, are not Socialists; they are, indeed, quite incapable of comprehending politics save as a combat between two men, A and B. In the strict sense, all ideas are beyond them. They can grasp only events. Are they interested only in crime? I don't think so. What they are interested in is drama. The thing presented to them must take the form of a combat, and it must be a very simple combat, with one side clearly right and the other clearly wrong. They can no more imagine neutrality than they can imagine the fourth dimension. And when they see drama they want to see it moving.

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Soon or late some sagacious journalist will set up a paper made to the tastes and limitations of this immense horde of God's children, and his rewards will descend upon him like a deluge. The earliest movie magnates tapped that colossal till with great skill, and so lifted the movies to the third (or is it second?) place among the country's industries. They did not start out with Balzac, Joseph Conrad, and Dostoievski; they started out with "The Perils of Pauline" and filmizations of serials out of the Fireside Companion.

But once they got rich, they began to develop, in the immemorial human way, a yearning to be respectable, and even intellectual. That is, they began to turn their backs upon their original clients, who had poured all their wealth into their coffers, and to reach out for customers of a higher sophistication. Thus, the 10 cent movie house passed into the shadows and in its place appeared the blazing hell showing pictures at $2—pictures full of artistic and even literary pretension. Fortunately for the movie magnates, this pretension was mainly buncombe. They lacked the skill and culture necessary to make the movies genuinely intelligent, and so they escaped bankruptcy. But even so, they converted a business whose profits were as certain as those of a bootlegger into a business full of hazards and calamities.

They will come to a safe harbor again when they return to the Fireside Companion level. No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has any one ever lost public office thereby. The mistake that is made always runs the other way. Because the plain people are able to speak and understand, and even, in many cases, to read and write, it is assumed that they have ideas in their heads, and an appetite for more. This assumption is a folly. They dislike ideas, for ideas make them uncomfortable. The tabloids, seeking to force such things upon them, will inevitably alarm them and lose their trade. The journalism of the future—that is, the mob journalism—will move in the direction that I have indicated.