

Today's Press is "Freer" Than Greeley's

SET off by that impressive report, A Free and Responsible Press, which was issued by an imposing group described as the Commission on Freedom of the Press, we have been meditating considerably—not so much on freedom of the press as on the curious ideas a lot of people have on that important subject. For example, this commission, which includes such eminent students of affairs as Chancellor Hutchins, of the University of Chicago, Archibald MacLeish, Zechariah Chafee, Jr., and Beardsley Rumel, appears to accept the common assumption that there was a time when anybody who had an idea could get it printed. "Our ancestors were justified in thinking that if they could prevent the government from interfering with the freedom of the press, that freedom could be effectively exercised." No pressures, no advertising, no prohibitive investment.

Nowadays, according to the commission, all this is changed. It costs so much to buy a newspaper that millions of people have to leave the nation in ignorance of their ideas. Pressures by political groups, advertisers and the people the publisher's wife meets at the country club cramp the editor's style. Therefore, concludes the commission, "the freedom of the press can remain a right of those who publish only if it incorporates into itself the right of the citizen and the public interest."

That, of course, is plain enough, and the nation is strewn with the wrecks of publishing enterprises which didn't recognize the essential truth of that somewhat sententious statement. Nevertheless, it is a little upsetting to find a Commission on Freedom of the Press so concerned with implied restrictions on the press. The truth is that, once you start talking about the "social responsibility" which editors must assume, you are no longer talk-

ing about freedom of the press, but about the press as an instrument for "public good," which isn't necessarily the same thing.

This notion that freedom of the press was perfect before the days of "press lords," great syndicates, advertising and huge circulations gives any journalist over forty a big laugh. He may not have been told, as a friend of ours was in his cub days, that "This paper is Republican from the weather report on Page One to the last classified ad," but he certainly remembers when few newspapers were strong enough to put up a holler when the politicians or the biggest department store in town wanted a favor. Reminded that Tom Paine got a hearing, he observes that so does Henry Wallace—without the efforts at suppression which greeted Tom. Bigness has its difficulties, but so did—and so does—littleness.

Just the other day we received a letter from the editor of a little country paper far from here.

"Right now court is on," he wrote. "The ex-county treasurer has falsified, disfigured, altered and jammed up the county records. Not a word in the Bugle. . . . The county commissioner's son, a returned combat serviceman, has got into a hell of a jam. His father is rich, important and influential. Not a word goes in about his outlaw son. Hell of a note. This has happened before and it happens right along. . . . If you expose and write up the deficiencies and irregularities of the merchant, banker and lawyer's son, you lose thousands of dollars in revenue and patronage and incur enmities that last forever. It is all right enough to show up renegades, morons and unimportant strangers that get into jams and difficulties."

The conclusion of our country-editor friend would be baffling to the commission. He writes: "The rural press can't be free. Only the big press, im-

portant enough to be above the hostility and retaliation of the individual, can be free." Perhaps so. The Valley City, N. D., Times-Record, which got into a jam with the business boys on account of its policies, was no giant of the press. Its circulation, 3800.

Certainly the owners of the "big press" have prejudices, limitations and ambitious wives. But they also have one preoccupation which tends to keep lesser impulses in check. They want to make money. When you get 1,000,000 readers instead of 25,000, you try to please your readers above everything else. In fact, the Commission on Freedom of the Press might have devoted more space than it did to readers as one of the tyrannies under which editors are forced to work. Why did such a large section of the press fudge the labor-union issue and go along with the "Russia is a democracy" nonsense? Simply because almost any publisher would rather be wrong than "reactionary."

The search for freedom is illusive for most of us. It is particularly baffling in respect to the press—especially when the search is conducted by scholars who ignore the vast improvement in news presentation and in breadth of public discussion which has accompanied the growth in power and standing of newspapers and magazines. But the search for freedom will not be rewarded by retreating to the country or to the eighteenth century, or "advancing" to government control.

Perhaps freedom wouldn't be perfect even if every man owned a printing press. As the commission somewhat plaintively admits, even if all the interests in the community could afford a newspaper or a radio station, "they could have no assurance that their publications would be read or their programs heard by the public outside their own adherents."

The defense rests.

Pay the Unemployed to Postpone Benefits

STATE unemployment-compensation laws require a man out of a job to observe a waiting period of a week or two after filing his claim for benefits. Once the waiting period is over, the unemployed worker usually feels impelled to collect all the benefits for which he may be eligible, even though he might be able to finance himself a little longer. He has no incentive to do anything else.

Is it impossible to provide such an incentive? If a claimant would agree to wait voluntarily for a week beyond the compulsory waiting period, the weekly benefit payment might be increased by some such sum as three dollars. A still greater increase could be granted if the worker could wait two additional weeks or longer—with extra benefits up to a maximum of ten dollars or twelve dollars a week. The increase in benefits would have to be substantial, for it would take several weeks of benefit payments at the increased rate to make up for what the beneficiary would have received if he had refused to defer his benefits beyond the legal limit.

This principle of voluntary election of waiting periods is new to unemployment compensation, but it has been long in use in commercial insurance. Many accident and health insurance policies provide increased benefits or reduced rates or both when the insured agrees to a long waiting period during which no benefits are payable. Similarly in automobile-collision insurance, an agreement to exclude claims for minor damages from the terms of the policy enables the customer to obtain collision insurance at a much lower rate.

The prudent unemployed worker might well prefer the assurance of, say, thirty-two dollars a week instead of twenty-two dollars a week, during a period of prolonged unemployment, by simply agreeing to

live on his own resources a short time after he might otherwise be receiving benefits. From the taxpayer's point of view, it is possible that the larger weekly payments to workers electing voluntary waiting periods might be more than balanced by the savings resulting from the nonpayment of benefits to claimants who got jobs before the voluntary waiting periods were completed. The actuarial truth that small claims of short duration add up to a tremendous total volume applies to unemployment compensation as well as to other types of casualty insurance. Lengthen the waiting periods, and an insurance fund will more easily endure the drain of larger claims.

The compulsory waiting period in unemployment compensation should not be longer than one week. Many workers of necessity live from hand to mouth. Even one week without wages or unemployment compensation benefits would force the family of a worker receiving low wages to apply for

charitable relief. Indeed, elimination of the waiting period altogether might be acceptable to employers and the public if coupled with a provision for voluntary deferment of benefits by workers able to finance themselves during two or three weeks of unemployment.

In short, the scheme sounds perfect, except for one possibility—namely, the propensity of politicians to base a campaign on paying the higher rates to everybody, whether they had agreed to a waiting period or not. That would ruin the whole scheme.

Henry Ford on Heaven

THERE are probably as many salty reminiscences of Henry Ford hidden away all over the country as there used to be Ford jokes, and since Mr. Ford's death a lot of new ones have come to light. Few are more charming than an account of a talk between Mr. Ford and James Bone, former London editor of the Manchester Guardian. Mr. Bone met Mr. Ford in 1940 at England's worst period of the war. It was natural that the talk should be about the war and about Mr. Ford's reluctant contribution to the slaughter as a manufacturer of tanks and trucks.

Finally, when the two men had exhausted that subject, Bone asked Mr. Ford something about his views on the life to come. "The only thing is," said Henry Ford, "I should like to be sure of having the same wife."

"That's the difference between you and me," his interviewer ventured to say. "I hope that my own wife will have better luck in the next world."

"There you are," said Mrs. Ford, who was sitting near. "You only think of yourself, but your friend thinks of his wife."

It's a nice point who was the winner of that contest in dialectical immaterialism. Only a wife could make the decision.

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