

# Franklin Ford Collection

edited by  
Dominique Trudel &  
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edition



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# FRANKLIN FORD COLLECTION

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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# *A Newspaper Laboratory*

FRANKLIN FORD

Letter to James B. Angell sent from  
New Orleans, April 13th, 1887 (doi)

FROM FRANKLIN FORD

Central Office, New York

New Orleans, April 13, 1887

Dr James B. Angell<sup>1</sup>  
Ann Arbor, Mich.

My dear Sir:

You will recall my speaking to you on the campus during the last week in February. In a half dozen sentences I tried to tell you of the work I had undertaken. I do not think that I succeeded in conveying the point. Let me go into details a bit. You understand, of course, that I was Editor of the paper called "*Bradstreet's*," from the spring of 1880. This is the equivalent of saying that I developed the paper from its crude beginnings. To the Bradstreet Co, the newspaper *Bradstreet's* was and is an advertisement. To me it was a newspaper laboratory—a place in which I might experiment and conduct researches into the state of the publishing business. Confining myself to results, let me say that about a year ago I had fully wrought out in detail the conclusion that a far-reaching newspaper advance had become possible—this, through perceiving that we now have the resultant of the locomotive and telegraph—the elimination of distance. Distance gone, publicity becomes a commodity in the widest and fullest meaning of the term. The truth conception becomes the commercial conception at the counting-room of the daily newspaper. Journalism (if the foregoing is true, is not the word obsolete? Is it any

<sup>1</sup> [James Burrill Angell (1829–1916) was an American professor and diplomat. He was the longest-serving president of the University of Michigan, from 1871 to 1909, a period marked by a movement to democratize education and by an important development of the institution. Angell came to Michigan after leaving his position as professor of modern languages at Brown University, wartime editor of the *Providence Journal* and President of the University of Vermont. In 1880 he was appointed United States Minister to China.]

longer an ISM?) is an organism. Inquiry is organizable [*sic*]. The facts of life may be coordinated. Let me again repeat. Social inquiry in the widest and fullest sense, is commercial.

The daily newspaper becomes thus simply the vehicle for selling the results of inquiry. We are to act upon the unity, principle and the so-called "editorial" or academic page, must go. You must see that I have been studying the physics of letters. We are at the end of the physical age. We find the machine (printing-press, locomotive, telegraph) has been perfected to the point of ease. A mentality may therefore be imposed upon it, and the newspaper becomes an articulated thing. The publishing business (by this I mean both the book-house and the newspaper) is undergoing a revolution: it is being resolved into the intelligence business. The newspaper—the morning book, is becoming primary. The book (a book-binder's term) is to be secondary. You must see that we get here the conception of the Distributive University. You may be familiar with Emerson's prediction.<sup>2</sup> You will find it in the Carlyle–Emerson correspondence.

In a letter of 1844, Mr. Emerson bade his English friend be of good cheer, for the reason that he (Emerson) was able to see the rise of the Organic Letters. Again—this time from Carlyle himself. Take down "Heroes and Hero Worship," turn to the Hero as Man of Letters, and note this point: "If you ask me what were the best possible organization for the Men of Letters in modern society . . . I should beg to say that the problem far exceeded my faculty." From another place: "I think we may conclude that men of letters will not always wander like unrecognized, unregulated Ishmaelites among us." Again, more to the point: "I call this anomaly of a disorganic literary class, the heart of all other anomalies, at once product and parent; some good arrangement for that would be as the *punctum salientes* of a new vitality and just arrangement for all." So much for Emerson and Carlyle.

Now turn if you please, to the introduction to Mills's *Logic*, and note this sentence (I may not quote literally): "The key to the science and organization of life is still an open question."<sup>3</sup> Once more, you are doubtless familiar with the point in one of Coleridge's lay sermons wherein he seeks to disclose the inner fact of the social distress of the day; we now call it The Labor Question. As nearly as I can recall, Coleridge said: "Let us sweep away the surface facts that are the common property of all, and penetrate to the inner, or spiritual fact. We find that the prime difficulty lies in the overbalance of the commercial spirit with no adequate counterweights."<sup>4</sup> He named three attempted counter influences, Religion, Philosophy and the Aristocracy. This, while declaring that the desired equilibrium has not been reached. The Man of Letters is to go down into the

<sup>2</sup> [For a detailed discussion of Ford's entanglement with the work of American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), see the introductory chapter of this book.]

<sup>3</sup> [The original quote reads: "The definition of the science of life and organization is still a matter of dispute." John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858), 1.]

<sup>4</sup> [Ford refers to the work of English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), but the exact citation could not be found.]

physical region. The need is disinterested price making. Carlyle's dis-organic man must become a crop reporter. To this end I have undertaken to make a scientific—in the business sense—classification of the volume of intelligence which is the result from the organization of inquiry. This classification has regard to the two sides of the intelligence business: (1) The dynamic, or projectile side; (2) The bureau side. Conceive the circle as symbolizing the whole of Inquiry; that it is divided into two semi-circles. The lower semicircle may stand for the Bureau side of the Intelligence business. This bureau side divides artificially into three segments, as follows: (1) The individual trader; (2) The Cooperation; (3) The General Inquiry. The Bradstreet Co (and for that matter Dun & Co as well) has exploited the first segment. The remaining two segments have yet to be organized. So much for the bureau side.

The upper semicircle suggests concentric rings whose name is legion. I have detected seven primary groupings, classifications or rings. They are as follows:

1. The weekly newspaper FOOD, which is to represent all that the word FOOD calls up to the mind, regard being paid only to the price-making influences;
2. The weekly newspaper METALS;
3. The weekly newspaper TEXTILES;
4. The great morning newspaper THE NEWS BOOK;
5. The lesser daily THE TOWN;
6. THE WANT (advertising);
7. ARCHIVES, a weekly newspaper presenting the documentary history of the time.

In brief compass I have thus sought to give you a more definite idea of what I am about. I should like the advantage of a full talk with you. It is just possible that you will be in New York before long. A year ago, December, I made the first draft of a report on the state of Letters, comprising some nine thousand words, involving both the philosophy and the practice. On my return to New York I shall recast the document, carrying it out more in detail. I intend you to see this. If you have any points for us, pray write to No. 102 W 61 St, New York.

Very truly, yours,

Franklin Ford

*Should like to hear from you. You will understand of course that the above given points have yet to be made public.*