

The Press Listens to Criticism but Remains Above Its Critics

BY RAYMOND MOLEY

The flagellants in the Middle Ages were curious people who sought salvation by whipping themselves. In the meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the press invited eminent critics to lay a few lashes upon their own bent shoulders.

One of the critics was Robert Moses, who for many years has held several jobs dedicated to the rebuilding of New York City. Adlai Stevenson came to inform the editors of their sins and omissions. Dr. Frank Stanton, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, was the third critic.

The Moses speech complained about newspaper attacks upon his administration of certain housing projects in his city. Stevenson pointed out how the opposition party might be aided by more gentle treatment.

★

Stanton invited a comparison between the press and the air waves. He also took the occasion to pay back certain scores made against his media by the press last year during the exposures of rigged quiz shows, payola and over-emphasis on violence. There had also been mentioned the excessive intrusion of commercials in entertainment programs.

The editors took all the criticism in good humor, although in the case of Stanton they might have replied that if it had not been for exposures by con-

gressional committees and newspaper criticism the networks might not have put their minds on some measures of self-reform.

But more important than these cases of unusual abuses might have been a consideration of the respective values of newspapers and radio-TV in what might be called the informing and education of the public in public affairs. Since an enlightened public is essential to the preservation of free institutions, all means of communication bear a heavy responsibility.

★

It is clear that despite the vast labors and money which radio-TV has spent on disseminating news and in presenting discussions of public issues the basic reliance of the public must be upon newspapers.

Radio and, to a greater degree, television are media whose primary function must be entertainment. In that field they have almost unlimited potentials. In the daily newspaper the presentation of news, plus interpretation and opinion, is a primary and traditional responsibility.

In the presentation of news, its interpretation and editorial comment, there is a time factor which must keep the newspapers at an advantage. What one hears and sees over the air waves is imparted momentarily and is gone. Those who hear and see are not the masters of

the time element. That must be determined by the nature of the medium.

A newspaper is in the reader's hands. If he requires considerable time to comprehend an item, he can take it. People vary in their capacity to comprehend and think. He may also choose the time of day when he is best able to read and reread if he wishes. With the increasing complexity of world and national affairs, the citizen to be well informed must chew and digest the news.

If the subject is controversial, a newspaper can state the facts in the news and then interpret and voice its opinion in its editorials. Radio and television can offer spot news, often hours ahead of the press. But I doubt whether they can ever provide an adequate exposition of interpretation and opinion. A time element is involved.

★

Also, sponsors hesitate to back programs of opinion because they want to sell their products to people of all points of view.

In a panel show presenting opposing views or loaded questions, the verdict goes to the glib and the coiner of phrases.

Reading can never be replaced by hearing and seeing. In meeting the need of democratic institutions for a thoroughly informed public, the air waves can never match the services of a free press.