NEWS AS A FORM OF KNOWLEDGE: A CHAPTER IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

ROBERT E. PARK

ABSTRACT

Following James's categories, "knowledge about" is formal knowledge; "acquaintance with" is unsystematic, intuitive knowledge or "common sense." When the above are regarded as being points on a continuum, news also has a point characteristic of its transient and ephemeral quality. The extent to which news circulates determines the extent to which the members of a society participate in its political action. News is "something that will make people talk," tends to have the character of a public document, and is characteristically limited to events that bring about sudden and decisive changes. Exclusive attention to some things inhibits responses to others resulting in a limitation of the range and character of the news to which a society will respond collectively or individually. The function of news is to orient man and society in an actual world.

I

There are, as William James and certain others have observed, two fundamental types of knowledge, namely, (1) "acquaintance with" and (2) "knowledge about." The distinction suggested seems fairly obvious. Nevertheless, in seeking to make it a little more explicit, I am doubtless doing injustice to the sense of the original. In that case, in interpreting the distinction, I am merely making it my own. James's statement is, in part, as follows:

There are two kinds of knowledge broadly and practically distinguishable: we may call them respectively knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge-about. . . . . In minds able to speak at all there is, it is true, some knowledge about everything. Things can at least be classed, and the times of their appearance told. But in general, the less we analyze a thing, and the fewer of its relations we perceive, the less we know about it and the more our familiarity with it is of the acquaintance-type. The two kinds of knowledge are, therefore, as the human mind practically exerts them, relative terms. That is, the same thought of a thing may be called knowledge-about it in comparison with a simpler thought, or acquaintance with it in comparison with a thought of it that is more articulate and explicit still.¹

At any rate, "acquaintance with," as I should like to use the expression, is the sort of knowledge one inevitably acquires in the

course of one's personal and firsthand encounters with the world about him. It is the knowledge which comes with use and won't rather than through any sort of formal or systematic investigation. Under such circumstances we come finally to know things not merely through the medium of our special senses but through the responses of our whole organism. We know them in the latter case as we know things to which we are accustomed, in a world to which we are adjusted. Such knowledge may, in fact, be conceived as a form of organic adjustment or adaptation, representing an accumulation and, so to speak, a funding of a long series of experiences. It is this sort of personal and individual knowledge which makes each of us at home in the world in which he elects or is condemned to live.

It is notorious that human beings, who are otherwise the most mobile of living creatures, tend nevertheless to become rooted, like plants, in the places and in the associations to which they are accustomed. If this accommodation of the individual to his habitat is to be regarded as knowledge at all, it is probably included in what we call tact or common sense. These are characters which individuals acquire in informal and unconscious ways; but, once acquired, they tend to become private and personal possessions. One might go so far as to describe them as personality traits—something, at any rate, which cannot well be formulated or communicated from one individual to another by formal statements.

Other forms of "acquaintance with" are: (1) clinical knowledge, in so far at least as it is the product of personal experience; (2) skills and technical knowledge; and (3) anything that is learned by the undirected and unconscious experimentation such as the contact with, and handling of, objects involves.

Our knowledge of other persons and of human nature in general seems to be of this sort. We know other minds in much the same way that we know our own, that is, intuitively. Often we know other minds better than we do our own. For the mind is not the mere stream of consciousness into which each of us looks when, introspectively, he turns his attention to the movements of his own thoughts. Mind is rather the divergent tendencies to act of which each of us is more or less completely unconscious, including the ability to control and direct those tendencies in accordance with some more or less
conscious goal. Human beings have an extraordinary ability, by whatever mechanism it operates, to sense these tendencies in others as in themselves. It takes a long time, however, to become thoroughly acquainted with any human being, including ourselves, and the kind of knowledge of which this acquaintance consists is obviously not the sort of knowledge we get of human behavior by experiments in a psychological laboratory. It is rather more like the knowledge that a salesman has of his customers, a politician of his clients, or the knowledge which a psychiatrist gains of his patients in his efforts to understand and cure them. It is even more the sort of knowledge which gets embodied in habit, in custom, and, eventually—by some process of natural selection that we do not fully understand—in instinct; a kind of racial memory or habit. Knowledge of this sort, if one may call it knowledge, becomes, finally, a personal secret of the individual man or the special endowment of the race or stock that possesses it.²

One may, perhaps, venture this statement since the type of intuitive or instinctive knowledge here described seems to arise out of processes substantially like the accommodations and adaptations which, by some kind of natural selection, have produced the different racial varieties of mankind as well as the plant and animal species. One may object that what one means by knowledge is just what is not inherited and not heritable. On the other hand, it is certain that some things are learned much more easily than others. What one inherits therefore is, perhaps, not anything that could properly be called knowledge. It is rather the inherited ability to acquire those specific forms of knowledge we call habits. There seems to be a very great difference in individuals, families, and genetic groups as to their ability to learn specific things. Native intelligence is probably not the standardized thing that the intelligence tests might lead one to believe. In so far as this is true studies of intel-

²“The biologist ordinarily thinks of development as something very different from such modification of behavior by experience, but from time to time the idea that the basis of heredity and development is fundamentally similar to memory has been advanced. . . . Viewed in this way the whole course of development is a process of physiological learning, beginning with the simple experience of differential exposure to an external factor, and undergoing one modification after another, as new experiences in the life of the organism or of its parts in relation to each other occur” (C. M. Child, *Physiological Foundations of Behavior*, pp. 248–49; quoted by W. I. Thomas in *Primitive Behavior* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937], p. 25).
ligence in the future are, I suspect, more likely to be concerned with in the idiosyncrasies of intelligence and the curious individual ways in which individual minds achieve essentially the same results than in measuring and standardizing these achievements.

It is obvious that this "synthetic" (i.e., the knowledge that gets itself embodied in habit and custom, as opposed to analytic and formal knowledge) is not likely to be articulate and communicable. If it gets itself communicated at all, it will be in the form of practical maxims and wise saws rather than in the form of scientific hypotheses. Nevertheless, a wide and intimate acquaintance with men and things is likely to be the bulwark of most sound judgment in practical matters as well as the source of those hunches upon which experts depend in perplexing situations and of those sudden insights which, in the evolution of science, are so frequently the prelude to important discoveries.

In contrast with this is the kind of knowledge that James describes as "knowledge about." Such knowledge is formal, rational, and systematic. It is based on observation and fact but on fact that has been checked, tagged, regimented, and finally ranged in this and that perspective, according to the purpose and point of view of the investigator.

"Knowledge about" is formal knowledge; that is to say, knowledge which has achieved some degree of exactness and precision by the substitution of ideas for concrete reality and of words for things. Not only do ideas constitute the logical framework of all systematic knowledge but they enter into the very nature of the things themselves with which science—natural as distinguished from the historical science—is concerned. As a matter of fact, there seem to be three fundamental types of scientific knowledge: (1) philosophy and logic, which are concerned primarily with ideas; (2) history, which is concerned primarily with events; and (3) the natural or classifying sciences, which are concerned primarily with things.

Concepts and logical artifacts, like the number system, are not involved in the general flux of events and things. For precisely that reason they serve admirably the purpose of tags and counters with which to identify, to describe, and, eventually, to measure things. The ultimate purpose of natural science seems to be to substitute for the flux of events and the changing character of things a logical
formula in which the general character of things and the direction of change may be described with logical and mathematical precision.

The advantage of substituting words, concepts, and a logical order for the actual course of events is that the conceptual order makes the actual order intelligible, and, so far as the hypothetic formulations we call laws conform to the actual course of events, it becomes possible to predict from a present a future condition of things. It permits us to speculate with some assurance how, and to what extent, any specific intervention or interference in a present situation may determine the situation that is predestined to succeed it.

On the other hand, there is always a temptation to make a complete divorce between the logical and verbal description of an object or a situation and the empirical reality to which it refers. This seems to have been the cardinal mistake of scholasticism. Scholasticism has invariably tended to substitute logical consistency, which is a relation between ideas, for the relation of cause and effect, which is a relation between things.

An empirical and experimental science avoids a purely logical solution of its problems by checking up its calculation at some point with the actual world. A purely intellectual science is always in danger of becoming so completely out of touch with things that the symbols with which it operates cease to be anything more than mental toys. In that case science becomes a kind of dialectical game. This is a peril which the social sciences, to the extent that they have been disposed to formulate and investigate social problems in the forms in which they have been conventionally defined by some administrative agencies or governmental institution, have not always escaped. Thus investigation has invariably tended to take the form of fact-finding rather than of research. Having found the facts, the agencies were able to supply the interpretations; but they were usually interpretations which were implicit in the policies to which the agencies or institutions were already committed.

These are some of the general characteristics of systematic and scientific knowledge, "knowledge about," as contrasted with the concrete knowledge, common sense and "acquaintance with." What is, however, the unique character of scientific knowledge, as contrasted with other forms of knowledge, is that it is communicable to the extent that common sense or knowledge based on practical and
clinical experience is not. It is communicable because its problems and its solutions are stated not merely in logical and in intelligible terms but in such forms that they can be checked by experiment or by reference to the empirical reality to which these terms refer.

In order to make this possible, it is necessary to describe in detail and in every instance the source and manner in which facts and findings were originally obtained. Knowledge about, so far at least as it is scientific, becomes in this way a part of the social heritage, a body of tested and accredited fact and theory in which new increments, added to the original fund, tend to check up, affirm, or qualify, first of all, in each special science and, finally, in all the related sciences, all that has been contributed by earlier investigators.

On the other hand, acquaintance with, as I have sought to characterize it, so far as it is based on the slow accumulation of experience and the gradual accommodation of the individual to his individual and personal world, becomes, as I have said, more and more completely identical with instinct and intuition.

Knowledge about is not merely accumulated experience but the result of systematic investigation of nature. It is based on the answers given to the definite questions which we address to the world about us. It is knowledge pursued methodically with all the formal and logical apparatus which scientific research has created. I might add, parenthetically, that there is, generally speaking, no scientific method which is wholly independent of the intuition and insight which acquaintance with things and events gives us. Rather is it true that, under ordinary circumstances, the most that formal methods can do for research is to assist the investigator in obtaining facts which will make it possible to check up such insights and hunches as the investigator already had at the outset or has gained later in the course of his researches.

One of the functions of this methodical procedure is to protect the investigator from the perils of an interpretation to which a too ardent pursuit of knowledge is likely to lead him. There is, on the other hand, no methodical procedure that is a substitute for insight.

II

What is here described as "acquaintance with" and "knowledge about" are assumed to be distinct forms of knowledge—forms having
different functions in the lives of individuals and of society—rather than knowledge of the same kind but of different degrees of accuracy and validity. They are, nevertheless, not so different in character or function—since they are, after all, relative terms—that they may not be conceived as constituting together a continuum—a continuum within which all kinds and sorts of knowledge find a place. In such a continuum news has a location of its own. It is obvious that news is not systematic knowledge like that of the physical sciences. It is rather, in so far as it is concerned with events, like history. Events, because they are invariably fixed in time and located in space, are unique and cannot, therefore, be classified as is the case with things. Not only do things move about in space and change with time but, in respect to their internal organization, they are always in a condition of more or less stable equilibrium.

News is not history, however, and its facts are not historical facts. News is not history because, for one thing among others, it deals, on the whole, with isolated events and does not seek to relate them to one another either in the form of causal or in the form of teleological sequences. History not only describes events but seeks to put them in their proper place in the historical succession, and, by doing so, to discover the underlying tendencies and forces which find expression in them. In fact, one would not be far wrong in assuming that history is quite as much concerned with the connections of events—the relation between the incidents that precede and those that follow—as it is with the events themselves. On the other hand, a reporter, as distinguished from a historian, seeks merely to record each single event as it occurs and is concerned with the past and future only in so far as these throw light on what is actual and present.

The relation of an event to the past remains the task of the historian, while its significance as a factor determining the future may perhaps be left to the science of politics—what Freeman calls "comparative politics"—that is to say, to sociology or to some other division of the social sciences, which, by comparative studies, seeks to arrive at statements sufficiently general to support a hypothesis or a prediction.3

3 Edward A. Freeman, Comparative Politics (London, 1873).
4 The sociological point of view makes its appearance in historical investigation as soon as the historian turns from the study of "periods" to the study of institutions. The
News, as a form of knowledge, is not primarily concerned either with the past or with the future but rather with the present—what has been described by psychologists as "the specious present." News may be said to exist only in such a present. What is meant here by the "specious present" is suggested by the fact that news, as the publishers of the commercial press know, is a very perishable commodity. News remains news only until it has reached the persons for whom it has "news interest." Once published and its significance recognized, what was news becomes history.

This transient and ephemeral quality is of the very essence of news and is intimately connected with every other character that it exhibits. Different types of news have a different time span. In its most elementary form a news report is a mere "flash," announcing that an event has happened. If the event proves of real importance, interest in it will lead to further inquiry and to a more complete acquaintance with the attendant circumstances. An event ceases to be news, however, as soon as the tension it aroused has ceased and public attention has been directed to some other aspect of the habitat or to some other incident sufficiently novel, exciting, or important to hold its attention.

The reason that news comes to us, under ordinary circumstances, not in the form of a continued story but as a series of independent incidents becomes clear when one takes account of the fact that we are here concerned with the public mind—or with what is called the public mind. In its most elementary form knowledge reaches the public not, as it does the individual, in the form of a perception but in the form of a communication, that is to say, news. Public attention, however, under normal conditions is wavering, unsteady, and easily distracted. When the public mind wanders, the rapport, grapevine telegraph, or whatever else it is that insures the transmission of news within the limits of the public ceases to function, tension is relaxed, communication broken off, and what was live news becomes cold fact.

history of institutions—that is to say, the family, the church, economic institutions, political institutions, etc.—leads inevitably to comparison, classification, the formation of class names or concepts, and eventually to the formulation of law. In the process history becomes natural history, and natural history passes over into natural science. In short, history becomes sociology (R. E. Park and E. W. Burgess, Introduction to the Science of Sociology [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921], p. 16).
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A news item, as every newspaperman knows, is read in inverse ratio to its length. The ordinary reader will read a column and a half of two- or three-line items about men and things in the home town before he will read a column article, no matter how advertised in the headlines, unless it turns out to be not merely news but a story, i.e., something that has what is called technically "human interest."

News comes in the form of small, independent communications that can be easily and rapidly comprehended. In fact, news performs somewhat the same functions for the public that perception does for the individual man; that is to say, it does not so much inform as orient the public, giving each and all notice as to what is going on. It does this without any effort of the reporter to interpret the events he reports, except in so far as to make them comprehensible and interesting.

The first typical reaction of an individual to the news is likely to be a desire to repeat it to someone. This makes conversation, arouses further comment, and perhaps starts a discussion. But the singular thing about it is that, once discussion has been started, the event under discussion soon ceases to be news, and, as interpretations of an event differ, discussions turn from the news to the issues it raises. The clash of opinions and sentiments which discussion invariably evokes usually terminates in some sort of consensus or collective opinion—what we call public opinion. It is upon the interpretation of present events, i.e., news, that public opinion rests.

The extent to which news circulates, within a political unit or a political society, determines the extent to which the members of such a society may be said to participate, not in its collective life—which is the more inclusive term—but in its political acts. Political action and political power, as one ordinarily understands these terms, are obviously based not merely on such concert and consensus as may exist in a herd or in a crowd. It rests ultimately, it seems, on the ability of a political society, aside from whatever of military or material resources it possesses, to act not only concertedly but consistently in accordance with some considered purpose and in furtherance of some rational end. The world of politics, it seems, is based, as Schopenhauener has said of the world in general, on the organic relation of will and idea. Other and more material sources of political power are obviously merely instrumental.
Freeman, the historian, has said that history is past politics and politics is present history. This puts a great deal of truth into a few words, even if the statement in practice needs some enlargement and some qualification. News, though intimately related to both, is neither history nor politics. It is, nevertheless, the stuff which makes political action, as distinguished from other forms of collective behavior, possible.

Among other kinds of collective behavior are the recognized and conventional forms of ceremonial and religious expression—etiquette and religious ritual—which, in so far as they create unanimity and maintain morale, play directly and indirectly an important role in politics and in political action. But religion has no such intimate connection as politics with the news. News is a purely secular phenomenon.

III

There is a proverbial saying to the effect that it is the unexpected that happens. Since what happens makes news, it follows, or seems to, that news is always or mainly concerned with the unusual and the unexpected. Even the most trivial happening, it seems, provided it represents a departure from the customary ritual and routine of daily life, is likely to be reported in the press. This conception of news has been confirmed by those editors who, in the competition for circulation and for advertising, have sought to make their papers smart and interesting, where they could not be invariably either informing or thrilling. In their efforts to instil into the minds of reporters and correspondents the importance of looking everywhere and always for something that would excite, amuse, or shock its readers, news editors have put into circulation some interesting examples of what the Germans, borrowing an expression from Homer, have called geflügelte Wörter, “winged words.” The epigram describing news which has winged its way over more territory and is repeated more often than any other is this: “Dog bites man”—that is not news. But “Man bites dog”—that is. Nota bene! It is not the intrinsic importance of an event that makes it newsworthy. It is rather the fact that the event is so unusual that if published it will either startle, amuse, or otherwise excite the reader so that it will be remembered and repeated. For news is always finally, what Charles
A. Dana described it to be, "something that will make people talk," even when it does not make them act.

The fact that news ordinarily circulates spontaneously and without any adventitious aids—as well as freely without inhibitions or censorship—seems to be responsible for another character which attaches to it, distinguishing it from related but less authentic types of knowledge—namely, rumor and gossip. In order that a report of events current may have the quality of news, it should not merely circulate—possibly in circuitous underground channels—but should be published, if need be by the town crier or the public press. Such publication tends to give news something of the character of a public document. News is more or less authenticated by the fact that it has been exposed to the critical examination of the public to which it is addressed and with whose interests it is concerned.

The public which thus, by common consent or failure to protest, puts the stamp of its approval on a published report does not give to its interpretation the authority of statement that has been subjected to expert historical criticism. Every public has its local prejudices and its own limitations. A more searching examination of the facts would quite possibly reveal to a more critical and enlightened mind the naïve credulity and bias of an unsophisticated public opinion. In fact, the naïveté and credulity thus revealed may become an important historical or sociological datum. This, however, is merely another and further illustration of the fact that every public has its own universe of discourse and that, humanly speaking, a fact is only a fact in some universe of discourse.5

An interesting light is thrown on the nature of news by a consideration of the changes which take place in information that gets into circulation without the sanction which publicity gives to it. In such case a report, emanating from some source not disclosed and traveling to a destination that is unknown, invariably accumulates

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5 A universe of discourse is, as the term is ordinarily used, no more than a special vocabulary which is well understood and appropriate to specific situations. It may, however, in the case of some special science include a body of more precisely defined terms or concepts, which in that case will tend to have a more or less systematic character. History, for example, employs no, or almost no, special concepts. On the other hand, sociology, and every science that attempts to be systematic, does. As concepts assume this systematic character, they tend to constitute a "frame of reference."
details from the innocent but mainly illicit contributions of those who assist it on its travel. Under these circumstances what was at first mere rumor tends to assume, in time, the character of a legend, that is, something which everyone repeats but no one believes.

When, on the other hand, reports of current events are published with the names, dates, and places which make it possible for anyone concerned to check them, the atmosphere of legend which gathers about and clothes with fantastic detail the news as originally reported is presently dispelled, and what is fact, or what will pass for fact, until corrected by further and later news reports, is reduced to something more prosaic than legend and more authentic than news, i.e., historical fact.

If it is the unexpected that happens, it is the not wholly unexpected that gets into the news. The events that have made news in the past, as in the present, are actually the expected things. They are characteristically simple and commonplace matters, like births and deaths, weddings and funerals, the conditions of the crops and of business, war, politics, and the weather. These are the expected things, but they are at the same time the unpredictable things. They are the incidents and the chances that turn up in the game of life.

The fact is that the thing that makes news is news interest, and that, as every city editor knows, is a variable quantity—one that has to be reckoned with from the time the city editor sits down at his desk in the morning until the night editor locks up the last form at night. The reason for this is that the news value is relative, and an event that comes later may, and often does, diminish the value of an event that turned up earlier. In that case the less important item has to give way to the later and more important.

The anecdotes and "believe it or nots" which turn up in the news are valuable to the editor because they can always be lifted out of the printer's form to make way for something hotter and more urgent. In any case it is, on the whole, the accidents and incidents that the public is prepared for; the victories and defeats on the ball field or on the battlefield; the things that one fears and things that one hopes for—that make the news. It is difficult to understand, nevertheless, considering the number of people who are killed and maimed annually by automobile accidents (the number killed in 1938 was 32,600) that these great losses of life rarely make the front page. The
difference seems to be that the automobile has come to be accepted as one of the permanent features of civilized life and war has not.

News, therefore, at least in the strict sense of the term, is not a story or an anecdote. It is something that has for the person who hears or reads it an interest that is pragmatic rather than appreciative. News is characteristically, if not always, limited to events that bring about sudden and decisive changes. It may be an incident like that of the colored family in Philadelphia, Frances and Ben Mason, who won a fortune in the Irish sweepstakes recently. It may be a tragic incident like the battle off the coast of Uruguay which resulted in the destruction of the German battleship, the "Graf Spee," and the suicide of its captain. These events were not only news—that is, something that brought a sudden decisive change in the previously existing situation—but, as they were related in the newspapers and as we reflected upon them, they tended to assume a new and ideal significance: the one a story of genuine human interest, the other that of tragedy, something, to use Aristotle's phrase, to inspire "pity and terror." Events such as these tend to be remembered. Eventually they may become legends or be recorded in popular ballads. Legends and ballads need no date line or the names of persons or places to authenticate them. They live and survive in our memories and in that of the public because of their human interest. As events they have ceased to exist. They survive as a sort of ghostly symbol of something of universal and perennial interest, an ideal representation of what is true of life and of human nature everywhere.

Thus it seems that news, as a form of knowledge, contributes from its record of events not only to history and to sociology but to folklore and literature; it contributes something not merely to the social sciences but to the humanities.

IV

The sociological horizon has recently taken on new dimensions. Social anthropology, no longer interested in primitive society merely, has begun to study not only the history but the natural history and function of institutions. In doing so it has appropriated more and more the field of sociological interest and research. Psychiatry,

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6 See *Time*, December 25, 1939, p. 12.
likewise, has discovered that neuroses and psychoses are diseases of a personality which is itself a product of a social milieu created by the interaction of personalities. Meanwhile there has grown up in the United States and in Europe a sociology of law which conceives as natural products the norms which the courts are seeking to rationalize, systematize, and apply in specific cases. Finally, there have been some interesting recent attempts to bring the subject of knowledge itself within the limits of a sociological discipline.

Theories of knowledge have existed since the days of Parmenides. They have, however, been less interested in knowledge which is a datum than in truth or valid knowledge which is an idea and an ideal. The question with which the sociology of knowledge is concerned is not what constitutes the validity of knowledge—of a statement of principle or of fact—but what are the conditions under which different kinds of knowledge arise and what are the functions of each.

Most of the forms of knowledge that have achieved the dignity of a science are, in the long history of mankind, of very recent origin. One of the earliest and most elementary forms of knowledge is news. There was a period, and not so long ago, either, when there was neither philosophy, history, nor rational knowledge of any sort. There was only myth, legend, and magic. What we now describe as the exact sciences did not exist until the Renaissance. The social sciences have, roughly speaking, only come into existence in the last fifty years. At least they have only begun within the last half-century to achieve, with the wider use of statistics, anything like scientific precision.

News, so far as it is to be regarded as knowledge at all, is probably as old as mankind, perhaps older. The lower animals were not without a kind of communication which was not unlike news. The "cluck" of the mother hen is understood by the chicks as signifying either danger or food, and the chicks respond accordingly.

This is not to suggest that every kind of communication in a herd or flock will have the character of news. What is ordinarily communicated is merely a kind of contagious excitement—sometimes merely a sense of well-being and security in the gregarious association of the herd, at others a sense of unrest or malaise, manifested
and often intensified in the milling of the herd. It seems likely that this pervasive social excitement, which is essential to the existence of the herd as a social unit, serves, also, to facilitate the communication of news, or what corresponds to it in the herd.

There is in naval parlance an expression, "the fleet in being," which means, apparently, that the ships which constitute a fleet are in communication and sufficiently mobilized, perhaps, to be capable of some sort of concerted action. The same expression might be applied to a community, a society, or a herd. A society is "in being" when the individuals that compose it are to such an extent en rapport that, whether capable of united and collective action or not, they may be described as participating in a common or collective existence. In such a society a diffuse social excitement tends to envelope, like an atmosphere, all participants in the common life and to give a direction and tendency to their interests and attitudes. It is as if the individuals of such a society were dominated by a common mood or state of mind which determined for them the range and character of their interests and their attitudes or tendencies to act. The most obvious illustration of this obscure social tension or state of mind in a community is the persistent and pervasive influence of fashion.

At certain times and under certain conditions this collective excitement, so essential to communication if not to understanding, rises to a higher level of intensity and, as it does so, tends to limit the range of response but to increase the intensity of impulses not so inhibited. The effect of this is the same as in the case of attention in the individual. Exclusive attention to some things inhibits responses to others. This means in the case of a society a limitation of the range and character of the news to which it will either collectively or individually respond.

The rise of social tension may be observed in the most elementary form in the herd when, for some reason, the herd is restless and begins to mill. Tension mounts as restlessness increases. The effect is as if the milling produced in the herd a state of expectancy which, as it increased in intensity, increased also the certainty that presently some incident, a clap of thunder or the crackling of a twig, would plunge the herd into a stampede.

Something similar takes place in a public. As tension arises, the
limits of public interest narrows, and the range of events to which the public will respond is limited. The circulation of news is limited; discussion ceases, and the certainty of action of some sort increases. This narrowing of the focus of public attention tends to increase the influence of the dominant person or persons in the community. But the existence of this dominance depends upon the ability of the community, or its leaders, to maintain tension. It is in this way that dictators arise and maintain themselves in power. It is this that explains likewise the necessity to a dictatorship of some sort of censorship.

News circulates, it seems, only in a society where there is a certain degree of rapport and a certain degree of tension. But the effect of news from outside the circle of public interest is to disperse attention and, by so doing, to encourage individuals to act on their own initiative rather than on that of a dominant party or personality.

Under ordinary circumstances—in a time of peace rather than of war or revolution—news tends to circulate over an ever widening area, as means of communication multiply. Changes in society and its institutions under these circumstances continue to take place, but they take place piecemeal and more or less imperceptibly. Under other conditions—in war or revolution—changes take place violently and visibly but catastrophically.

The permanence of institutions under ordinary conditions is dependent upon their ability, or the ability of the community of which they are a part, to adapt themselves to technological and other less obvious changes. But these changes and their consequences manifest themselves not only directly but rather indirectly in the news. Institutions like the Catholic church or the Japanese state have been able to survive the drastic changes of time because they have been able to respond to changes in the conditions of existence, not merely those physically and obviously imposed upon them but those foreshadowed and reflected in the news.

I have indicated the role which news plays in the world of politics in so far as it provides the basis for the discussions in which public opinion is formed. The news plays quite as important a role in the world of economic relations, since the price of commodities, including
money and securities, as registered in the world-market and in every local market dependent upon it, is based on the news.

So sensitive are the exchanges to events in every part of the world that every fluctuation in fashion or the weather is likely to be reflected in the prices on the exchanges. I have said that news is a secular phenomenon. But there come times when changes are so great and so catastrophic that individuals and peoples are no longer interested in worldly affairs. In such case men, frustrated in their ambitions and their hopes, turn away from the world of secular affairs and seek refuge and consolation in a flight from the great world into the security of the little world of the family or of the church. The function of news is to orient man and society in an actual world. In so far as it succeeds it tends to preserve the sanity of the individual and the permanence of society.

Although news is an earlier and more elementary product of communication than science, news has by no means been superseded by it. On the contrary, the importance of news has grown consistently with the expansion of the means of communication and with the growth of science.

Improved means of communication have co-operated with the vast accumulations of knowledge, in libraries, in museums, and in learned societies, to make possible a more rapid, accurate, and thoroughgoing interpretation of events as they occur. The result is that persons and places, once remote and legendary, are now familiar to every reader of the daily press.

In fact, the multiplication of the means of communication has brought it about that anyone, even in the most distant part of the world, may now actually participate in events—at least as listener if not as spectator—as they actually take place in some other part of the world. We have recently listened to Mussolini address his fascist followers from a balcony of Rome; we have heard Hitler speaking over the heads of a devout congregation in the Reichstag, in Berlin, not merely to the President, but to the people, of the United States. We have even had an opportunity to hear the terms of the momentous Munich agreement ten seconds after it had been signed by the representatives of four of the leading powers in Europe and the
world. The fact that acts so momentous as these can be so quickly and so publicly consummated has suddenly and completely changed the character of international politics, so that one can no longer even guess what the future has in store for Europe and for the world.

In the modern world the role of news has assumed increased rather than diminished importance as compared with some other forms of knowledge, history, for example. The changes in recent years have been so rapid and drastic that the modern world seems to have lost its historical perspective, and we appear to be living from day to day in what I have described earlier as a "specious present." Under the circumstances history seems to be read or written mainly to enable us, by comparison of the present with the past, to understand what is going on about us rather than, as the historians have told us, to know "what actually happened."

Thus Elmer Davis in a recent article in the Saturday Review announces as "required reading" for 1939 two volumes: Hitler's Mein Kampf and Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). He recommends the history of the Peloponnesian War because, as he says, "Thucydides was not only a brilliant analyst of human behavior both individual and collective" but was at the same time "a great reporter." 7

One notes, also, as characteristic of our times, that since news, as reported in American newspapers, has tended to assume the character of literature, so fiction—after the newspaper the most popular form of literature—has assumed more and more the character of news. 8

Emile Zola's novels were essentially reports upon contemporary manners in France just as Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath has been described as an epoch-making report on the share-cropper in the United States.

Ours, it seems, is an age of news, and one of the most important events in American civilization has been the rise of the reporter.

University of Chicago

7 "Required Reading," Saturday Review of Literature, October 14, 1939.