

*Most newspapers fall  
short of modern standards*

## Race In The News

September 1949

**T**HE past ten years have seen a marked improvement in the coverage of racial news by Southern newspapers. The people of the region, through the news and editorial columns of their hometown papers, have been made immensely more concerned with all aspects of the so-called "Negro problem."

Ten years ago, it could be charged with some justice that most newspapers ignored the Negro, except for his crimes. Today that charge no longer holds. Successive court decisions affecting the Negro's status in politics and education; the President's appeal for a civil rights program and the controversy it has brought about; the impact on the national conscience of Negroes segregated in military service; the national and international publicity given lynchings and other racial incidents which used to be of exclusively sectional concern; the spectacular achievements of individual Negroes like Ralph Bunche and Alice Coachman—these trends and events have been news in the fullest sense of the word. No newspaper *could* ignore them and still pretend to be a newspaper.

It should be said also that most Southern newspapers have reported the big events, the larger issues, in a fashion reasonably consistent with the best traditions of American journalism. News stories have been played straight. Editorials have been increasingly honest and calm in tone, if not always well-reasoned. When the newspapers have failed to give their readers the truth, it has been more often through omission than commission. It is a rare thing today to find among conventional newspapers of general circulation the kind of inflammatory writing that editors once thought to be in order at every moment of crisis between the races.

Yet, in many ways, the newspaper still discriminates against the Negro in the news. Most newspapers have felt it necessary to segregate the news of the two races. But newspapers have done no better at providing "separate but equal" treatment of Negroes than any other Southern institutions. As any reader will recognize after a moment's reflection, Negroes in the news are almost always identified by race; whites, except for the sake of clarity or to avoid the risk of libel, are not. Human interest stories about the Negro usually present him as a comic figure without dignity. Hardly ever does "Mr.," "Miss," or "Mrs." precede the name of a Negro in the regular news columns. In line with the South's traditional double-standard, a Negro is considered bigger news when he commits a crime than when a crime is committed against him. There are notable and laudable exceptions, but in general Southern newspapers constitute the greatest single force in perpetuating the popular stereotype of the Negro. One can only agree with the nine Nieman fellows who observed in *Your Newspaper: Blueprint*

*for a Better Press*: "As pictured in many newspapers, the Negro is either an entertaining fool, a dangerous animal, or (on the comparatively rare occasions when a Negro's achievements are applauded) a prodigy of astonishing attainments, considering his race."

These faults are by no means peculiar to newspapers. The press is partly a product, as well as a creator, of public opinion. It should be remembered that criticism of the Southern press is necessarily a criticism also of the Southern society. The working editor is plagued every day by a question he rarely answers to his own satisfaction. The question is, whether to give readers what he thinks they want, or to give them when he thinks they ought to have. Not to give them what they want may mean reduced circulation, curtailed advertising, possible bankruptcy. Not to give them what he thinks they ought to have means a forfeiture of the editor's historic responsibility for leadership.

It is the editor's desire to give readers what he thinks they want that accounts for most of the daily acts of discrimination against the Negro in the news. For the average white editor believes, rightly or wrongly, that readers want little mention of the Negro which does not fit in with their own concept of colored persons. Reasoning thus, the editor can rationalize the big play he gives crimes committed by Negroes against whites. He can also cite the newspaper principle of "reader interest." Conflict makes news, he tells himself. And what, to the average Southern reader, can be more exciting in conflict than an act of violence by a black man against a white?

By and large any less discriminatory treatment of Negroes in the news columns should come from the individual editor's sense of public responsibility. For it is the editor who determines policy, and it is he in most instances who must take the initiative; a memo to the staff can affect the operation of the whole newspaper. At the same time, the staff must share this sense of responsibility if it is to be reflected at the working level.

Few editors today will deny that that responsibility exists. They know that the Atlanta race riots of 1906 can be traced directly to the inflammatory headlines and stories in the old *Atlanta News*. They strongly suspect that the 1946 riot in Columbia, Tennessee, and the 1949 lynching in Wilkinson County, Georgia, would never have happened had editors there showed either more courage or less prejudice.

Markedly lacking in timidity, a few newspapers in the South have all but liberated themselves of the editorial compulsion to regard Negro news by discriminatory standards. Among the foremost of these are the *Chattanooga Times* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. These two papers do not headline Negroes in crime stories. Except where identification by color is necessary to an understanding of the story, race is rarely introduced at all. Courtesy titles are used with Negro names when appropriate, as they are with whites. Both run, without any display of condescension or patronage. Negro photographs, achievement stories, background stories on Negro institutions, and interviews with prominent Negro personalities.

In their positive efforts to improve race relations, other papers have gone considerably beyond what conservative newspapermen might think their readers would stand for. At least one such newspaper can be found in virtually every

Southern state. What the editors of these papers are doing is significant, because it shows what other Southern editors can do, even in areas where racial tensions are at their worst.

The responsible editor, hoping to improve race relations in the South, need not indulge in special pleading for the Negro. He need merely apply the same news values to Negro events that he does to all events. He simply handles stories about Negroes with the same respect for accuracy, the same sense of fair play and good taste, that good journalism demands in all stories.

He refuses to capitalize on the race issue; refuses to appeal to the prejudices of his readers in a short-sighted bid for circulation, because he knows that improved race relations are imperative for the progress of his region. And he knows that proper handling of Negro news is helping in that progress by (1) giving white readers a better, fuller understanding of Negro life and Negro aspirations; and (2) encouraging Negroes, by crediting their achievements, to make constructive use of their growing opportunities.

*Editors find that good journalism  
and good racial policies coincide*

## A Progress Report On The Press

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**N**EGROES are coming into their own in the columns of Southern newspapers.

The trend is not new. The movement for fairer handling of racial news has been growing for at least a decade. But the pace has quickened remarkably. In recent months, scores of Southern papers have made constructive changes in their policies.

The Southern Regional Council has watched these improvements with particular interest, since it has played some part in securing them. The pamphlet *Race in the News*, issued by the Council last October, first described the problem in detail and set up desirable standards. The booklet was sent to every white daily in the South by the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, and has since been mailed by SRC state divisions to the county weeklies in every state in the region. It has gone also to Council members and, in quantity, to various church and civic organizations.

It is not possible to take any statistical measure of the Southern press in this field. That would require an elaborate study of newspaper practices, past and