

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

A Progress Report On The Press

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NEGROES 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

present. But, without trying to be comprehensive, instances can be cited to show the nature of the trend.

What happened in one Georgia city is a heartening example. Following the publication of *Race in the News*, a committee of church women of both races called on the editors of the two daily newspapers, booklet in hand. The committee members pointed out those practices which they felt fell short of fairness; failure of the dailies to cover important events in the Negro community, failure to use the same courtesy titles for Negroes as for whites, a complete ban on pictures of Negroes, undue emphasis on crime news involving Negroes. Both editors were cooperative, and within a matter of weeks vast improvement could be seen. Now both papers frequently use news pictures of Negroes. The title "Mrs." is usually placed before the names of married Negro women. There has been a marked reduction in headline references to race in crime stories. Most important of all, newsworthy events are being reported as they happen in the Negro community—and they are being given the space and position warranted by their news value and reader interest.

Neither paper could (or probably would want to) lay claim to perfection in its handling of racial news. Eventually, one may hope, some of the remaining problems will be solved by the employment of full-time Negro reporters. But the notable thing is the conscientious spirit in which improvement has been undertaken, and the way it has been accepted by the community at large.

Until a few months ago, a South Carolina daily was publishing a special "Negro edition" once a week. It was in every way similar to that day's regular edition, except that it included a page of Negro news and circulated only in the Negro community. Subscribers were asked to express themselves on a plan to incorporate Negro news in the regular edition. A majority of those responding expressed approval. Yet, the editor hung back for fear of an adverse reaction. Finally the new practice was adopted. When the editor was asked recently if he had any complaints about the change, he answered, "Not a bit."

One Texas weekly that has been above average in its handling of racial news some months ago found it necessary to suspend its Negro news column because it had not found a competent correspondent. (This is not an uncommon problem in small towns.) Commenting on public reaction, the editor wrote: "Surprisingly enough we received more protests about leaving the column out from the white readers than from the colored. . . . Only this week the mayor of this city expressed regret that we had discontinued it." The editor went on to say that the column would be resumed as soon as a correspondent was found.

A member of the Council in Mississippi, reporting on two local papers, said of the first: "At some point, there developed a consistent use of the capital *N* in the word *Negro*. News stories featuring crimes committed by Negroes have improved in tone. Sometimes the racial identity of the individual is not in the headline. Crimes of whites against Negroes are not deliberately played down."

Of the second, the member commented: "There seems to be a greater willingness to accept news brought in by Negroes. There are frequent editorials calling attention to problems involving the Negro which must be faced squarely and honestly. Both papers have carried pictures of Negro groups featuring outstanding achievements."

A member reports from a South Carolina city that the two daily newspapers—neither of which has been known for progressive attitudes—have shown in the past few months “tangible evidence of less racial feeling in reporting this or that happening in our group. . . . The athletic programs of our Negro high schools and other events connected with Negro groups are being more favorably presented. . . . There have been pictures of farm groups and labor groups published to point up some news stories. Of course, it is to be understood that there are still areas for continued improvement, but we do think the trend has been recently in the right direction, especially when one compares the handling of such news items a year ago with current reporting.”

These are but a few examples of the kind of improvements to be found in Southern newspapers. They could be multiplied again and again with specific instances.

The gains made are both a satisfaction and a challenge to people of good will. The advantages are obvious: White newspaper readers are acquainted realistically with the activities of Negro citizens; they read about Negroes as individuals instead of stereotypes; and a new respect is born. Negroes, on the other hand, are rewarded by recognition of their accomplishments and their problems, and are encouraged in their efforts to find constructive solutions.

The challenge lies in the fact that the public as well as the press has a responsibility for better newspaper practices. Where change has come, it has usually been because there were local citizens of both races who urged and applauded it. Continued improvement will depend on increased awareness not only among editors and reporters, but also in the reading public.

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SOUTHERN newspapers are continuing to progress in their handling of news about Negroes, according to a recent article in *Editor and Publisher* by Editor Robert W. Brown of the Columbus (Ga.) *Ledger*.

Mr. Brown's conclusions are based on a survey of 34 daily papers in the Deep South. He found that more than half of the papers now use the titles “Miss” and “Mrs.” in referring to Negroes, and some use “Mr.” About a third carry special Negro news columns, six devote a daily or weekly page to the Negro community, and all but four use pictures of Negroes.

The editors reported that these innovations had brought no significant protest from white subscribers, but had a favorable effect on Negro circulation.

One of the most interesting conclusions drawn from the survey is that “a new field for Negro professionals is opening in the Deep South—that of journalism.” Ten of the 34 newspapers employ Negro reporters, and four more are considering the move.

The use of a segregated column or page is a common practice. But the case against this policy of separation was made by the editor of the *Pensacola News-Journal*, who wrote: “We refuse to print special columns or pages on the grounds that Negro news should stand on its own, according to merit. Most newspapers with special pages do not go to white subscribers. Thus whites do not know of the good activities of Negro citizens.”