

CHAPTER 18

INFORMATION PLUS NEWS QUALITY

IT IS commonly understood that the primary purpose of journalism is to inform. Of course, it may seek to entertain and to do various other things, but these other functions are largely subsidiary. To bring information together and publish it is the chief business of journalism.

That holds true of any newspaper which seeks to serve its readers, be it a county weekly, small daily, or a great city daily. But it is especially true of the publications of the technical fields and fields of special interests: farm journals, women's magazines, garden magazines, engineering periodicals, trade and class papers and many others of their kind.

The time was when newspapers confined themselves almost wholly to the publication of the kind of information we call news; that is, information about recent happenings. Names of first newspapers indicated that: *Acta Diurna*, *Publick Occurrences*. On the other hand, magazines and other journals in special fields have concerned themselves mainly with information of importance, but not especially because of any news quality in it. However, the content of each of these two general types of publications has changed until at present newspapers are taking on more and more the characteristics of magazines, and magazines are more and more concerned with news and information with a distinct news quality.

While technical journals are still primarily concerned with information, they treat that information as news and, more and more, their writers cast their articles in news form to give them the force that is inherent in news.

The change in newspapers: An examination of almost any larger newspaper of today reveals that often as much as half of the material in it may be classed as information rather than spot news. It may include half a dozen signed features by correspondents

and commentators, or "columns" by local staff members; or illustrated articles on foods, house furnishings, home management, child welfare, clothing, beauty, health; or automobiles, recreation, travel; or commercial and industrial projects and developments; or engineering enterprises, or mining; or farming, gardening, and rural life; or progress in science.

Much of this kind of information appears in the daily every day of the week, with a larger portion on Sunday. Some larger newspapers maintain a "magazine section" in their Sunday issues, or include a syndicated magazine printed in regular magazine form.

Several factors have helped to bring about this development. Desire for larger and larger circulation is one of them. To get more and more readers, the ambitious newspaper reaches out in this direction and that to bring into its pages material that will appeal to readers of many diverse interests in wider fields. Spot news does not quite have that interest, and so magazine or information features are added. Moreover, a newspaper published in Chicago cannot be printed and distributed rapidly enough to give readers in distant Wisconsin or Iowa news while it has all of its news quality, so these various other features of more enduring quality are added. Probably, too, the great growth of national advertising, of automobiles, for example, or foods, has helped to bring about the publication of much related material.

This development is not limited to larger newspapers, but extends through the entire field to county weeklies. However, although they have encroached upon the field of the magazines and other journals, they adhere to the news style of presenting the information.

But if newspapers have gone to the periodical field for copy, the magazines of today have gone to the newspapers for writing style and method, and also they have stressed news quality in the material they use.

Evolution of magazine content: There was a time a generation ago when the farm, engineering, and scientific journals and, to a lesser degree, the women's magazines, were staid, dry, "informational," and impersonal. Their articles had little of the variety, the interest, and the entertainment qualities—the popular-

ization—which we now think of as characteristic of the magazine feature article.

This information was presented quite baldly. After a study of his field the editor decided what his readers ought to know and do, and then pursued a policy of telling them what they ought to know and do, much in the manner of a preacher and with a full quota of thou shalt's and thou shalt not's. From first page to last, the journal was a sea of advice with almost no balmy isles or verdant shore lines of human interest or entertainment to make the voyage from cover to cover more interesting. Pills in earlier days were not sugar coated; neither was magazine advice.

But the present day journals proceed somewhat differently. Apparently there is a feeling among them that plain preachment is not the most effective way of publishing advice and information. They are still presenting both advice and information, because that is a necessary part of their business, but they are putting them in the guise of news. There is abundant reason to believe that in this guise, advice and information are more widely read and that the method is fully justified.

The influences that brought about these changes were various, and some of them go back a long ways. Perhaps the most important among them was the influence of the daily press, especially the so-called "yellow" press. To more than any other one editor, the credit for discovering "people," human interest, as a source of news material must go to James Gordon Bennett, who in 1835 founded the *New York Herald*, a blithe little scandal sheet which was the grandfather of yellow journalism. The *Herald* was personal, intimate, confidential; in other words it had in high degree those qualities to which newspaper men have given the general term human interest. The *Herald* liberated daily journalism from the bone-dry, long-winded dullness of its predecessors. Its contemporaries and successors, such papers as the *Sun*, the *World*, the Hearst papers, the tabloids, have elaborated upon Bennett's methods.

It took time for magazines to realize that they could learn something from the *Herald* and the *Sun* about appealing to wide,

popular interest. But they did slowly come around to the use of that informality, intimacy, humor, unconventionality, which give "pull" to reading matter and above all, to recognize that "people" quality in both news and pictures attracts hosts of readers they had never been able to interest before.

Other influences also had their effect. Following the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876, some magazines awakened to the fact that the American readers were interested in other lands and what happened there, in geography, science, just as much as they were in weighty discussions of other matters. Early in the present century the *Saturday Evening Post* discovered that readers wanted to know about business and people in business. From 1904 to 1909 came the so-called muck-raking era of magazines, in which corrupt politics, misdeeds of large corporations, patent medicine evils, need of pure food and drug laws, and other similar matters were set forth in sensational manner. In that period the magazines learned that by doing an expert job of reporting to get at hidden facts, they could secure news of great interest and at the same time render a public service.

So there emerged the magazines of national circulation such as the *American*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Liberty*. Following them have come other national publications as *Time*, the transformed *Life*.

Farm papers have changed: The farm papers were slow in taking a hint from the newspapers and popular magazines, although there were some pioneers in putting news quality into their pages, notably the *Breeder's Gazette*, as an examination of the files from say 1905 to 1910 will show. But on the whole, farm papers were more serious, with a restricted audience vitally interested in agricultural subject matter. Their circulation was not large, their scope of material was limited, their information applicable mainly to a state or section of the country.

A turning point in farm paper history came when the Curtis Publishing Company acquired *Country Gentleman* in 1911 and began to make a rural magazine along editorial lines that had been successful with the *Saturday Evening Post*. The idea was that articles on farming and farm life could be interesting, even entertaining,

as well as informational; also that interest in agriculture is nationwide and sometimes world-wide, rather than confined within state boundaries or to one section of the country. Articles were gathered and written on this premise. Its articles were based on news happenings and upon people, and shot through with human interest. This method was applied also to articles about farm women and the home, so that the household pages became more interesting.

With these changes came the building of larger circulation, national in scope but especially centered in the best agricultural areas. National advertising was developed along with circulation.

In the years since about 1912, farm papers generally have changed in pattern to become more interesting, more entertaining, and broader in their appeal.

The growing competition which they had to face played a large part. They had to compete with each other, for circulation and for national advertising. They had to compete with general magazines for part of the advertising patronage. They had, to some degree, to compete with newspapers for advertising, and more recently for reader interest.

The national farm magazines that have survived this competitive process are of large circulation, with several around or above 2,000,000 copies each month. Examine a current issue of *Farm Journal*, *Successful Farming*, *Capper's Farmer*, and *Country Gentleman*. You will find that each one is different from the others. Yet all of them are filled with articles of news, of news quality, of well-written material and illustrated with photographs and drawings.

A very large factor in the evolution in the content of farm journals has been the development of many new sources of information, as suggested through the preceding chapters of this text in the discussion of agricultural news, its gathering and its writing.

Agricultural colleges and their extension services, their specialists, county agents, and home demonstration agents have made available a vast amount of information of a news quality and concrete, practical nature that did not exist before. Later came the project work of 4-H Clubs, and the vocational schools of agriculture and home economics.

Concurrently came a very great expansion in agricultural re-

search by the United States Department of Agriculture and the state experiment stations, as well as by private industrial laboratories. Together they have given rise to a mass of information such as the earlier editors hardly dreamed of, and entirely new agricultural sciences, such as plant pathology, dairy bacteriology, and genetics, have come into being.

The achievements of workers in the extension field, in campaigns for the elimination or control of animal and plant pests and diseases, in more profitable production of crops and livestock, in the up-building of cooperative enterprises in marketing and in community development, in the establishment of club work among boys and girls, in enlivening farm organizations and their programs—all these results have furnished a type of news feature material that old-time farm journals never presented.

A new world of farming has sprung up to widen the scope of agricultural information: irrigation in the Intermountain country, in the southwest, and lately, well irrigation in the Great Plains; the extensive growing of vegetables in favored areas; the development of large centers of specialized production of citrus fruits, apples, potatoes, and tomatoes; flower, vegetable, grass, and forage crop seeds, and so on, almost endlessly.

With all this change, there have been important shifts in types and methods of farming, especially in relation to livestock. Once feeder cattle were produced almost wholly on the western ranges and then fed out in the Corn Belt. But in recent years the Corn Belt has been producing more and more of its own feeders. Through the South, farming has been changing from a cotton one-crop practice to livestock and diversified farming. Cattle are being fed in the irrigated valleys of the Intermountain region. The Great Plains is turning many of its ranges into cultivated farms and farm production of livestock. The meat packing industry is moving away from Chicago into many new packing centers, and central livestock markets have declined as smaller markets have grown.

Engineers and their development of power farming in all its phases have added to the shifts and changes. They have brought electricity to rural communities, they have shortened hours of farm labor, they have given impetus to farming on a larger scale. They

have shown how erosion may be robbed of most of its evil. Government alphabetical agencies such as the AAA, SCS, FSA, and REA have all come into the picture recently and are making news.

Almost bewildering are the changes. The accompanying change in the farm journal field was inevitable. There came changes both in content of successful publications, and in the manner of presentation, as news.

However, one other change came—a sharp decline in the number of farm journals. This began with the collapse of farm prices in the winter of 1920–21 and the subsequent depression in agriculture. Paper after paper ceased publication or was combined with some other. The great reason was that these papers were overcome by economic forces over which they had no control.

But it is perhaps also true that some of these publications were hastened to their end because their editors and publishers did not recognize that agriculture was being made over, that it had become a national matter, and not a state or regional affair. They did not recognize that the modern farmer wants news and news quality, not advice nor staid exposition.

Part of the older function of the farm paper, that of conveying information, was gradually taken over by extension services and experiment stations. Bulletins and circulars from these and from business sources brought more complete information than a farm paper could hope to furnish. Farmers had direct help and service from their county agents and from the fieldmen of the implement manufacturer, the canning factory, the sugar-beet company or the rural power line. He got his market news from the city daily and later from the radio. He got informational reading matter that applied to his own community from his local weekly or daily paper.

The farm journals which came successfully through difficult years to face the future with confidence are those which adjusted themselves to fit new conditions. They are reporting the news of what is happening. They are getting news quality, people, human interest, sprightly writing, illustrations into their columns. These values are the distinguishing mark of the leading journals in the farm field today.

Magazines for women: In general, magazines published for women have been progressive, ever since the day of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Their purpose, apart from supplying fiction, has been to supply women with information dealing with matters of special interest to women, girls, and the home. While these publications are practically all of large circulation, and so cannot usually deal with material of immediate news value, as can some of the farm papers with a circulation limited to a state or region, yet they have for years infused many of their articles with news quality and human interest. All this applies also to those magazines which deal with home and garden and appeal to all members of the family.

In recent years this has been more than ever true. If a home economics student were to analyze the articles in any current issue of one of the national women's or home and garden magazines, she would discover that many of the articles are based on current news events or that the articles have news quality in that they are about actual people, their lives, their homes, their way of living, their experiences. A goodly number of the articles will be news feature articles exactly of the same character as those in the large general magazines and in many daily newspapers.

Engineering and technical magazines: The history of these journals during the past twenty-five years will show that they have gone through a development quite similar to that of the farm papers. While engineering and other technical journals have always carried a certain amount of spot news, this has been increased in recent years.

But articles of informational value once were mainly rather solid, academic, or technical discussions. At the present time, there are articles of this type still published, but there are many more articles based on news—on the actual happenings in the field of the magazine.

Examination of a recent issue of *Engineering News-Record*, for example, shows that it contains articles of feature length based upon the annual meeting of the National Council of State Boards of Engineering Examiners, upon the annual conference of the American Public Works Association, and upon the annual meeting of the Engineers' Council for Professional Development. There is

also a lengthy article dealing with the extension of the Wilbur Cross Parkway in Connecticut and filled with technical details about spacing of expansion joints, sizes of crushed trap rock used for the concrete aggregate, the concrete mix formula, and the like. Another story gives technical details of the building of a new type steel-plate dome structure recently erected in Chicago. All these are articles of technical information, yet they also have specific news quality. They are neither advice nor academic discussions.

In the fields of engineering, industry, and the sciences, there has been a development of new sources of material for articles that exactly parallels that in agriculture. Engineering experiment stations have greatly increased their scope of work. Technical and scientific laboratories have been created, both government and private. Formal extension work in these fields has not been carried on to anything like the extent that it has in agriculture and home economics, yet some of it has been done.

As was pointed out in earlier chapters, under discussion of news, there has been a revolution of world-wide significance in the past twenty-five years in engineering, industry, business, and the sciences. Correspondingly, there has developed such a multiplicity of news events in the fields of construction, transportation, mining, metallurgy, industrial chemistry, corporations, sales efforts, research in such fields as physics and chemistry, and more recently war and defense activities and materials in their technical aspects.

Trade and class magazines: In this field of important and useful publications, precisely the same development has taken place. The essential quality of these periodicals is news itself and news interpretation, in a majority of their articles.

News quality in technical information is important: Students in technical journalism classes who up to this time have been writing "straight news," sometimes have difficulty in getting the next point—that information can be told in terms of articles which have news quality. While this will be amplified in later chapters, it may be worth while to illustrate just what is meant, by a specific example.

Let's take some sugar news—for practically everybody is interested in sugar, one way or another.

Formerly, practically all sugar-beet seed sown in the United

States came from abroad. After the advent of the Second World War, which began in 1939, this foreign supply was cut off. That was news—straight news.

Previously, however, investigators of the United States Department of Agriculture and of state agricultural experiment stations, through research, found a way to grow sugar-beet seed in New Mexico, Arizona, and elsewhere. By the time foreign supplies were threatened in 1939, a good share of the domestic needs were being produced in this country. By 1941 it had been demonstrated on a large scale that sugar-beet seed could be grown in Oregon, Utah, and elsewhere. So all together, this meant that regardless of war and world conditions, the United States was producing its own supply of this important seed. All this made news, suitable for daily newspapers or any other publication interested in any angle of sugar, from its use in cooking to the manufacture of products made from it, or to feeding of beet pulp to cattle.

But men specifically interested in sugar-beet seed had to have much additional information. Farmer growers had to know exactly how to grow, harvest, and thresh the crop. Implement manufacturers were concerned with special types of machinery necessary. Sugar-beet companies and farmers who grew sugar beets had a direct interest in it all.

But the important angle was the production of the seed. However, nobody knew how to go about it, neither the authorities nor the farmers. So it had to be found out by trial and error, and the experimenting done had to be mainly on the farms of the growers, rather than at experiment stations. The growers, the research men, the seedsmen, and the sugar-beet companies all had to work together at finding out.

It was soon learned that to prevent shattering of seed, the seed plants had to be cut in early morning, while dew was still on the plants. The beet plants are large, heavy, and grow in a tangled mass. It took a large force of men to do the cutting by hand.

Then some farmers made the discovery that by bolting a sheet of thin steel to one side of a farm tractor and using a special type of heavy cutter-bar, it was possible to do the cutting with a tractor. This made technical news, of particular interest to the growers.

Other growers not only wanted to know this much, but they needed to know about type and power of tractor, the size and kind of steel plate, how and where to fasten it on, the details of the heavy cutter bar. This was further technical news. It also was information.

Growers began experimenting with the use of combine harvesters. Ordinary types would not work. So with help of implement men, a special type was built after three or four years of work to develop a special machine that would do the job. By 1941 a good share of the crop in Arizona was being cut with these special machines. A machine would cut the beet plants but deposited them in windrows on the ground. It did not do the threshing at the same time as would a wheat combine, but it did gather, save, and sack such seed as was shattered in the cutting. This made it possible to run the machines day and night, as compared with working only in the morning. One machine and ten men could do as much work as 150 by hand. Likewise, another special type of machine was developed for threshing in the field.

All this was news, technical news. It was also technical information. The best article to be written that would give this information to other growers and others interested would not be one of advice. It would be one telling how it was being done by those Arizona growers, with sufficient details, and with pictures, so that Oregon growers could do likewise or make such modifications in the method as might be necessary to fit their own conditions.

The article written might be published as a leaflet to be given to growers. It might be published in a farm paper, and it could be told again in periodicals read by the seed trade, by the sugar-beet industry, and by farm implement manufacturers. Wherever published, it would be carrying technical information by means of news; infusing news quality into information.

That illustrates the present-day method most widely used in conveying technical information of whatever sort to readers. It is the way in which the beginning writer and the college student of technical journalism will soonest reach success in writing. It holds true, regardless of the particular technical field in which a writer or a student may be interested.

Three types of information writing: We conclude this chapter by naming the three types of informational writing that are commonly used by both newspapers and magazines: One is the *short informational* or *news-experience article*. A second is the *brief* or *paragraph* method of writing. The third is the longer informational article, usually designated as the *feature story* or *feature article*.

Each type will be discussed in chapters immediately following.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. If files are available of various types of magazines of twenty-five or more years ago, make a comparison of typical issues of that period with issues of the same magazines of today or others in the same field. Write an article of about 500 words, based on this study. Cite specific examples of how the same general topic was handled then and handled today.

2. Make a brief report on informational material to be found in a week's files of a current daily newspaper of medium to large circulation. Clip and turn in examples of information which could be termed technical, of interest to three different classes of readers. Do the same with a weekly newspaper.

3. Analyze one issue of one of the following and report on how many long and short informational articles have news quality and how many are information only: *Country Gentleman*, *Successful Farming*, *Farm Journal*, *Copper's Farmer*, *Poultry Tribune*, *Hoard's Dairyman*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *McCall's Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's Weekly*, *Engineering and Mining Journal*, *Iron Age*, *Steel*, *The Lumberman*, *Seed World*, *American Nurseryman*, *Scientific Monthly*—or other equivalent periodicals.