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## THE CRIME OF PRESENT DAY CRIME REPORTING

NORMAN E. ISAACS

The author is Managing Editor of *The Louisville Times*, a position which he has held for the past ten years. He previously served as Managing Editor of the *St. Louis Star-Times* and of the *Indianapolis Times*.

While commending general improvements in journalism over the past twenty-five years, Mr. Isaacs in this article rebukes American editors for the present state of crime news reporting. There is, in his opinion, a great need—and opportunity—for critical crime coverage that takes into account the sociology of crime and educates the public concerning many matters, including the racial inequities of justice and the cost and waste involved in outmoded penal systems.

This article is based upon a lecture delivered by the author at the 1961 Short Course for Newsmen in Crime News Analysis and Reporting sponsored by Northwestern University's schools of law and journalism.—EDITOR.

I broke into newspapering in the twilight days of the wild and woolly period of the late 1920's. Young reporters wore their crushed felt hats both in and out of the office. They frequented the home-brew joints. They rode in those old touring cars the police used to use—siren screaming, top down.

When news was light I can recall the city desk rounding up every one of the night's purse-snatchings, two-bit break-ins, trivial cutting scrapes, and vagrancy arrests and emerging on the street with a flaming banner-line reading: "Crime Wave Sweeps City." And if at eleven o'clock in the morning we got a decent news story the crime wave fell out of the paper and nobody ever referred to it again.

Once when one of our major public utilities threw an all-night drinking bout for the press, they ran out of liquor at three in the morning. And the vice-president of public relations had no hesitation about phoning the police chief and over came a squad car with a couple of cases of booze to help keep the party afloat.

But this kind of petty corruption wasn't limited to police or press. It was a way of life that affected judges and lawyers, as well. I can recall riding with a team of deputy election commissioners one election day, and we came across a judge running for re-election passing out shiny half-dollars in one shabby neighborhood in payment for votes. And when I said something about it in wide-eyed horror, I was chided by both veteran newsmen and veteran lawyers. "Listen," said one, "nobody would believe a word of it if you printed it—and second, if we tried to pick up every guy in this

election who's buying a vote, we'd run out of space in the pokey. Forget it."

I go into this piece of lurid and unappetizing history simply to underline a central fact of our society. It is that we have grown up a very great deal in these thirty-odd years.

Certainly, we still have crooked judges, crooked lawyers, crooked police, and a good many newspapermen who undoubtedly are for sale on any given occasion. Human nature being what it is, I suppose we must always expect to have a certain number of men who, for one reason or another, fall from the path of rectitude.

Nevertheless, I submit that the record clearly indicates a vast forward step in our ethical concepts, and it is reflected in many of our accomplishments over these past three decades.

I am personally convinced that our long step forward could have been described only as the kind of progress made possible with seven-league boots, had it not been for the degrading and retrogressive period of mccarthyism.

McCarthy and his cohorts introduced into our lives a drum-fire attack on some of our most basic civil liberties. One of the most fiendish results has been a steady erosion of the people's belief in the Bill of Rights, and some public figures have publicly expressed the conviction that if the American people had to vote today on our Bill of Rights, it might well suffer defeat.

The McCarthy era had another dismaying result. It drove many decent Americans into a kind of mole-like existence—people seeking camouflage in acquiescence and parrot-like conformity. This mad rush to prove one's self a loyal American

brought on so much of the spinelessness which today afflicts our society. In the field of the law, the traditional desire for respectability—coupled with this drive for conformity—only served to deepen the average lawyer's distaste for criminal practice. One side-result, in my view, has been that bar associations in many places have chosen to look the other way about the problems of inferior courts recklessly violating the basic rights of defendants, and lawyers in many situations have violated their oaths by not trying to make certain that every accused person be assured adequate counsel and defense.

But speaking of progress, the most amazing steps have taken place in American journalism. From the excesses of "yellow journalism" at the turn of the century and the subsequent circulation wars and thoroughly irresponsible reporting and writing, we have virtually plummeted into a kind of new age—a desire for responsibility and accuracy and sound public service.

The other day there was a story out of New York when Vivien Leigh—quite properly—walked out of a brief interview in a huff when a young ship-news-reporter asked her what role she had played in "Gone With The Wind." Once upon a time, almost every person of note was subjected to this kind of experience. It is so unusual today that we carry a story on it—and the story does *not* protect the reporter.

Thirty years ago we were graduating copy boys without high school diplomas into the ranks of reporters. That so many of them made not only good reporters but good editors is a tribute to their own natural abilities, their willingness to work hard, and their desires to gain an education outside formal schooling. Some of these men wound up better educated than many college professors. But it would be an absurdity to claim this for more than a handful. The truth is that most of the copy boys-turned-reporters were hacks who never learned to write very well. They were known primarily as leg-men.

Today, it is the rare newspaper which will take a young man without a college degree. A great many have degrees from graduate schools of journalism. And with the salary levels what they are on most large and middle-sized newspapers today, a reporter of skill and competence not only has a preferred status in his community, but he ranks on the salary level with a full professor, and some of them equal deans in income.

Moreover, American newspapers have swept into the era of specialization. We have reporters who concentrate on science, on medicine, on education, on religion, on public utilities, on civic affairs, on politics, which is actually the science of government.

There is no inherent virtue in monopoly, and I would not defend it for a moment as such. Yet, the facts of life are that the unhappy trend away from competitive journalism to monopoly has played a very large role in the improvement of American newspapers.

With the pressure of circulation competition gone, the newspaperman in monopoly situations has become free to devote himself to higher standards in communication, toward more community responsibility, toward developing greater writing skills, toward more intelligent interpretation of vital news. Most important, our newspapers in some communities have become responsible mirrors of the world in which we live. Our newspapers are coming closer toward fulfilling their basic educational function—of informing the citizenry of what is transpiring, of some of the reasons behind the action, of what it portends.

Yet for all this, we in American newspapering are largely guilty of one great crime. Aside from a very, very few papers, none of us has done anything about the coverage of crime news. The crime of present-day crime reporting is that it is basically the same kind of job we were doing twenty-five and thirty years ago—and it was a rotten job then. We pandered then to the lowest common denominator—the very human desire for gossip and slander, and the more salacious the better—and to a large extent this is still the normal newspaper measurement of the public's news interest.

Countless editors who make the luncheon-club circuit point with pride to the down-play of crime news in their newspapers. Oh sure, no longer is every stabbing a page one story. It's on page seventeen. The fact that we have a smaller head on the story and let the makeup editor place it on an inside page is treated as some great journalistic advance. But the truth is that in most instances we haven't changed anything except the placement of the story.

Many of these same hacks who were once unlettered copy boys are now unlettered police

reporters. And many of them wouldn't understand what a good city editor meant if he wanted some significant police reporting.

Bright as they are and perceptive as they are, American newspaper editors have paid so little attention to the problem of crime news—and crime costs the nation something like twenty-two billion dollars annually—that they reflect a fascinating ambivalence toward the whole subject.

Just for example, let us take newspaper treatment of the policeman. One day, he may be portrayed as a brutal grafter, afflicted with all the vices and vicious attitudes which society deplors. Another day, however, and the newspaper is depicting the American police officer as the noblest Roman of them all, an underpaid idealist sticking on the job in the face of adversity to protect little children and old ladies from the onslaughts of a savage society.

I suppose it is in the latter mood that our newspapers tend to take the reports of policemen at face value. In many situations, if a man is arrested and the police report him guilty of a crime, the report is published in such a manner as to cast little doubt on its accuracy. There is almost an assumption that there is little need for a trial, that the judicial process is some kind of superfluous formality.

Edward R. Murrow focused the television spotlight on just such a shortcoming within recent months. The newspapers' performance in New York in that case was so shabby that one fellow newsman told me he sat through the Murrow show in dismay and embarrassment over being a part of a profession that can stoop so low.

I might add that lawyers might also shudder over the manner in which the prosecution was conducted, and police officers over the shoddy police work.

Murrow's show centered on the case of fifteen-year-old Peter Manceri. He was charged with the murder of an old man in Central Park. The old man was attacked and stamped to death. The old man gave a statement to police before he died, but it was suppressed by both the police and the District Attorney. The statement alone should have been enough to give the law enforcement officials pause as to whether they had the right young man.

The press knew nothing of this statement; nevertheless, the handling of the story by the majority of New York newspapers reflects nothing

so much as the old-fashioned, irresponsible baying for a villain, with no checking visible anywhere.

Headlines referred to the boy as a "young hoodlum" and as a "young killer." Any check of the boy's record would have disclosed that never before had he been arrested. His school record was a clear one. He denied any involvement in the killing, but of the six newspapers put under study by Murrow, only three bothered to carry his denial.

In a preliminary hearing, the boy was released on \$5,000 bail, and one newspaper promptly attacked the judge editorially for releasing "this vicious killer." Under such pressure, the bail was revoked and the boy returned to jail.

The drumfire of news coverage was concentrated on what the District Attorney had to say. There was no evidence of any attempt by the newspaper reporters to seek out balancing comment. The Manceri family was the target of a steady stream of crank letters and crank telephone calls. But in the newspapers not a word of this. Fifteen-year-old Peter Manceri was still a "vicious killer." No attempt was made to talk with the boy, or with his family.

The reporting during the trial covered only the sensational aspects and notably failed to bring out facts favorable to the boy. It developed that the only evidence against the boy was the testimony of the thirteen-year-old girl with whom he had been in the park on the night of the murder. In court, the girl cheerfully admitted that it had been her ambition to be the "star witness" in a big trial. The suppressed last statement of the dead man finally came out, and the man had reported that two big boys had jumped him. This was known to the District Attorney and the police all along.

The boy was quickly found not guilty. One newspaper didn't even bother to report the verdict. Three days later, an Assistant District Attorney was quoted in the press as saying he was still not convinced the Manceri boy was innocent.

In short, an insensitive and unprobing press came close to participating in what seems to have had all the earmarks of a railroading expedition. Edward Murrow's exposé of this episode will have been valuable only if it creates in the mind of newspaper editors the recognition that too much of our crime reporting is shallow and uncritical.

There are few other remaining fields of journalistic enterprise in which we fail so thoroughly to dig under the surface. Policemen are merely men

whose judgment is as fallible as the judgment of other men. It is a disservice to them, to us, and to society to expect them to act as judges and juries, and to encourage them to do so by accepting and publishing their pre-trial judgments on the guilt or innocence of people charged with crimes.

Let me illustrate what I mean by uncritical acceptance of hand-out material and the failure to do any kind of independent research.

The F.B.I. periodically issues its Uniform Crime Reports. Now, I have no objection whatever to these reports. I think them quite valuable in their way, and I am conscious, too, that they have improved steadily, thanks to F.B.I. pressures on the various police departments. There is every hope that eventually we will wind up with Uniform Crime Reports that are indeed accurate and uniform.

But let these reports hit the city desks of the various newspapers around the country, and what we usually get are uncritical rewrites of the statistics. Louisville, the story might say, has dropped from fifteenth to eighteenth in car thefts. And Louisville is better than Cincinnati in armed robberies. And so on.

There are stories that can only be labeled as cops-and-robbers nonsense. That's too mild. They are idiotic. In no other kind of reporting would we accept such malarky.

The important thing for Louisville is not where it rates in the national table. The important thing is how many automobile thefts were there this year, as compared to last, and to the year before that.

What our newspapers somehow seem to have overlooked is that there is no really uniform system of reporting crimes. For instance, one city may report as "aggravated assault" something that a neighboring city chooses to list as "domestic disputes." Some of the cities do not include joy riding as an actual car theft. Some do.

And if you are going to compare uniform crime statistics, it seems to me essential that you also compare the size of the police forces and the territory covered. Some cities may have 1.5 policemen for every square mile of coverage, another may have 2.6. Obviously, it makes a whale of a difference when you start to measure. Many of our newspapers, though, are just blandly diggins; so-called stories out of the F.B.I. reports without ever a thought to what might really be happening in their communities.

Further, to add still another drop of venom, let me point out that there is always a strong suspicion that some cities have long cheated on their reporting methods.

There is a lot more to reporting on how a police department is operating than a mere recital of arrest and traffic figures. How long since your own newspaper has figured out the police department's budget per capita, the police manpower per work week, the maximum and minimum salaries, the square-mile area covered? And have you ever had a reporter study how police manpower has shrunk in ratio to every population increase about which your editorials have boasted so much?

Too many American editors—and I plead guilty to having been among the number—have for years paid entirely too much attention to the problem of getting cameras into courtrooms and not enough to the whole massive problem of crime and delinquency.

I am still for opening up courtrooms to intelligent use of the camera, but I believe that there are other things in our society equally important. If we were to give equal attention to the problems of probation and parole, to the handling of juvenile offenders, to the problems of rehabilitation, to the whole general headache of keeping our police departments modernized and getting pay scales up to the point where we could attract a higher caliber of police officer, we would be doing even more of a public service than shedding tears over some judge's refusal to let a photographer walk into his courtroom.

Let us not forget that it was the press which practically forced Canon 35 into being. The Hauptmann trial circus was a disgusting spectacle of a press operating with license instead of liberty. And we compound our journalistic felonies every time a juicy trial pops into view—like the Shepard case or the repeated difficulties of Carole Tregoff and Dr. Finch. We have been spared the drivel of the first two Tregoff-Finch trials merely because the sob-sisters for the out-house school of American journalism finally ran out of gas on this particular case.

All this is bad enough. What is worse, however, is that in this glorification of a lot of tramps and mediocrities, we have missed the crucial point that crime is a very common and very important kind of human behavior for which there are causes and from which there are effects.

To understand this behavior requires at least

some crude understanding of the sociology of America. And it requires some understanding of the mores of American cities.

The American body politic, for one thing, has never adequately understood the immense financial loss assumed by the average citizen. A criminal is captured. He is tried and convicted. He is sent to a state reformatory. At this point, on top of all the costs that have gone before, we now have the cost of incarceration. The convict's family is forced to go on state aid. At one time, I figured that the lack of a proper probation and parole system was costing the State of Kentucky a minimum of a million dollars a year, and I believe that to have been a modest figure.

The American people have never really understood that our state reformatories and prisons are not much more than revolving-door jails where men live much of their lives in useless idleness, learning only how to do the next safe-cracking more skillfully. We compound the evil by sending youngsters who need reformation into these breeding pits of more and more and more crime. The waste of time and money is fantastic; the waste of men's lives beyond estimate.

The federal prison system has been a model in training and education, yet the pattern has been largely ignored by the states.

The basic information is available if only the newspapers of this country would go after it. Education of the public can only lead to public pressure for action by the state legislators. And billions can be saved in this country if only some intelligent state system of reformation in the institutions, of separate educational institutions for first-offenders, of proper probation and parole techniques can be brought into widespread use.

My mention of the mores of American cities was not a passing note. Let me illustrate by using the South as just one example. Do you gentlemen realize the extent of the double-standard of justice which prevails all through the South? In most of the South, a Negro killing is a relatively trivial incident, a white killing a major crime.

I believe the court records of almost every major Southern city will reveal two- and three-year sentences in the vast majority of Negro murder cases, and life sentences or death sentences in the vast majority of white murder cases. This same double-standard seems to apply all the way down the line so that we have a situation in which the police, the prosecutors, and the courts, aided and

abetted by the press, in effect scoff at the seriousness of crimes of violence against American Negroes.

The sociology of crime has many implications in public policy. One of the principal rationalizations for slum clearance and low-cost public housing projects has been that slums breed crime and that decent housing inhibits crime. It may be true to a large extent, yet I think the police records in almost all cities will show a staggering incidence of crime among the residents of public housing developments.

This is not intended to be an argument against public housing. I am a firm believer in it. But I submit that society is wrong when it thinks that merely by ripping down a slum and replacing it with a low-cost housing project it has discharged its responsibilities and, ergo, solved all of its problems.

And I submit, further, that American newspapers have misled the public when they have, by editorial arguments, suggested such an eventuality. Not only has our reporting been of a sorry order, our editorializing has been fatuous and vapid.

In short, the crime of present-day crime reporting is that it hasn't been reporting at all.

When good reporting has been attempted, the results have been spectacular: prison reform, the impeachment of judges, the introduction of modern parole systems, exposures of tax frauds. Even on straight features, good reporting has been spectacular. One that comes to mind immediately, of course, is the late Meyer Berger's magnificent eight-column account of the mass murders in East Camden by Howard B. Unruh. It won a Pulitzer Prize for that distinguished reporter.

Very early in these remarks, I commented about the unwillingness of the average American lawyer to handle criminal cases. This legal trait has fostered in most American cities a particularly vicious racket affecting the "little men" of our society. I refer to the system by which arrested men are made the victims of a conspiracy existing between police, bondsmen, shyster lawyers, and inferior courts.

The failure of the American press to focus properly on this evil has brought about a public attitude toward the lower courts which reflects on the whole of the judicial system and upon the legal system itself.

The time has come when we must bring our coverage of crime and all its aspects up to the

levels we have been seeking in other kinds of news information. It is no secret in journalism that the majority of American dailies have been relying for their police coverage on the same kind of police reporter immortalized by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur in *The Front Page*. They are fine, hustling leg-men, but coverage of the sociology of crime is a complicated assignment that requires some of the top talent we have on our newspapers.

It is no secret in journalism that much of the exaggerated emphasis on lurid crime reporting stems from the preoccupation of the sensation-seeking segment of the New York press. This often results in an overloading on crime by the wire services, both in pictures and in text. A complicating factor has been the surrender of the local editing function by so many small and middle-sized dailies which have installed teletypesetter operations.

I believe it to be of the most profound ethical significance that the newspapers normally referred to by newspapermen as being the great newspapers of the country are those which have tried to recognize these things which I have been stressing. Unhappily, the list of great newspapers in this, or any other, country is never a long one.

But the list can certainly be longer than it is if more newspapermen recognize their function for what it is—the extension of the educational process of the reading public through constantly better communications.

Unlike the situation in so many foreign countries, the American journalist holds a preferred position in our society. He wields an influence greater than that of almost any other public servant.

The newspaperman's audience is today a whole city—and often a region. The minister speaks to a few hundred. The teacher speaks to even fewer. The growth of television has been phenomenal, and it is a most useful and dynamic medium, but it has not lessened the importance of the daily newspaper; rather it has enhanced it, because television has whetted the appetites and interests for more, for better, for deeper penetration of the issues which confront all citizens.

Few national issues are greater than the vast one of crime and its ramifications. Only now, for example, are we coming to realize the immense importance of police philosophy, police training, and police action in the whole aggravated field of race relations. This is a story that needs responsible and sober treatment, rather than the easy oversimplifications of a cops-and-robbers view of the world.

If we are going to serve our cities intelligently, as well as our states and the nation, we are going to have to devote ourselves to it with all the seasoned skills we possess, with detachment, and yet with the passion necessary to do our jobs fully and completely.

If the American editor has indeed grown up, this is one subject on which he can prove it.