

## PAST PERFECT

## “Freedom’ of the Press?”: 100 Years of Questioning

HANNAH CARR-MURPHY

“Freedom’ of the Press?”

Richard Barry

Shortly after the beginning of the war, the Associated Press, the United Press, and the other news agencies voluntarily announced that they would send to their clients only such material as should conform to the Governmental requirements. While the attempt was made to have this appear a restriction for the purpose of preventing the circulation of any information of value to the enemy, it became in effect a political control denying circulation, through these accepted channels, of all facts which it is proper that the American public should know, but which certain agents of the Administration might not desire to have circulated.

A case in point was the method used by these agencies in recording so momentous a matter as the report of the Senate Sub-Committee on Military Affairs on aircraft conditions. This report was undoubtedly of stupendous detailed interest to the country. . . . The Associated Press sent out little more than a column, largely generalizations, and very evidently a dispatch previously submitted to official “guidance.” . . . The Christian Science Monitor, for instance, a newspaper certainly not radical in its editorial policy and unusually conservative in its news policy, was denied circulation for three days as a punishment for its publication of and comment on the aviation report. The Detroit News, for the same reason, was barred from circulation in Canada, where it usually sends 30,000 copies. . . .

Barry quoting Senator Lodge:

The order of the War Industries Board, cutting down the space to be used by newspapers, further separates the American people from their sources of information. . . . Therefore I look at this order of the War Industries Board as only another step in what is apparently a comprehensive plan to prevent the American people from learning anything about the war, or its conduct, except such information as it is desired shall be given out.

From the North American Review, November 1918, Volume 208, Issue 756, pp 702-709.

THIS ENERGETIC EDITORIAL FROM THE November 1918 issue of NAR is a reaction to the 1917 Espionage Act and its major amendment, the Sedition Act, passed in May 1918. These laws were part of a dramatic expansion of the federal government needed to make the American War Machine run, and barred critics from interfering with enlistment or war mobilization. Not only were the words written in the newspapers being censored, the very paper they were printed on was being limited—but only for column inches, not ads.

The United States had entered a new kind of war, and an overwhelming majority of legislators felt the need to guard against any sharing of information that would impede the war effort. The Sedition Act passed the House 293-1, and cleared the Senate 48-26. It was repealed in 1920, but its parent, the Espionage Act, was used to prosecute leakers as recently as the Obama administration.

One of the Sedition Act’s detractors was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who is quoted at length by Richard Barry in the editorial. Senator Lodge was a Republican and fierce opponent of then-President Woodrow Wilson, and spoke out against the legislation before and after its passage. He even had thinly veiled criticism for newspapers on the subject of complying with the government restrictions: “the attitude taken by most [small newspapers] is the easy one of preferring existence on the Government’s terms rather than the surely hazardous one of attempting to perform a difficult duty toward their readers.”

Truth itself and who can be trusted to publish it grows more slippery by the moment in this America. When calling to mind that “difficult duty toward their readers,” one must ask how

the 24-hour cable news tantric fear-gasm is working for us as a country. But a press fighting for its soul—rather than its freedom—is a much longer discussion than this.

While most newspapers went along with these actions in 1917-1918, it was the Espionage Act that was used to temporarily prevent the continuing publication of stories from the Pentagon Papers in 1971. This is where the image of the press as a lion of truth emerges and is dramatized in such films as *The Post* and *Spotlight*.

Richard Barry had different concerns in 1918 than we do today when sounding the alarm over threats to press freedom. Threats to circulation via the postal service would no longer harm a newspaper as much as throttling their online content would, which is theoretically possible now that net neutrality currently being debated.

Circulation isn’t how the press is threatened today. From a campaign that verbally abused the press corps, the electoral college has now launched a president into office whose grasp on truth and reaction to truth-telling is less than desirable. And this mouthpiece has created a new environment for newspapers and broadcast journalism to contend with, one where the truth is more slippery than ever.

On January 23, 2018 CNN reported that a young man from Michigan had been arrested the previous week for calling their offices to say he was on the way to “gun the fucking CNN cast down.” Among the racial epithets and insults he had for the journalists of CNN, he called them, “Fake news.” On the same day, our president began a tweet with these words: “Even Crazy Jim Acosta of Fake News CNN . . .” □

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