

Government by Journalism

W.T. Stead (*The Contemporary Review*, vol. 49, May, 1886, pp. 653-674)

[1] Government by kings went out of fashion in this country when Charles Stuart lost his head. Government by the House of Lords perished with Gaton and Old Sarum. Is it possible that government by the House of Commons may equally become out of date? Without venturing into the dim and hazardous region of prophecy, it is enough to note that the trend of events is in that direction. Government tends ever downward. Nations become more and more impatient of intermediaries between themselves and the exercise of power. The people are converting government by representatives to government by delegates. If a deputy or a member votes against the wishes of his constituents, he is denounced as a usurper, even if he be not cashiered as a traitor. Side by side with this ever-strengthening tendency may be observed a scientific development rendering possible the realization of the popular aspirations. The world has perceptibly shrunk under the touch of Stephenson and Faraday, of Hoe and of Edison. If we, like the Germans, had been in the habit of marking our milestones by time instead of distance, this would be much more easily realized. We are all next-door neighbours. If any one raise his voice, it is audible from Aberdeen to Plymouth. Hence science has realized for us in the nineteenth century the ancient Witanagemote of our early English ancestors. Our Parliaments gradually developed out of the Folkmote of the German village, in which every villager was free to speak and free to vote. In theory at least, in its early days, every freeman could attend the national Witan. It was only as the territory widened over which citizens of the commonwealth were scattered, and their numbers swelled to a multitude far beyond the area of earshot, that the system of delegation sprang up, which, as its latest development, has produced the recently elected House of Commons. In some of the more primitive Swiss cantons the ancient custom still prevails, and the whole adult democracy is summoned by sound of horn to debate and decide the affairs of the rustic commonwealth. In England we seem to be reverting to the original type of English institutions. The telegraph and the printing-press have converted Great Britain into a vast agora, or assembly of the whole community, in which the discussion of the affairs of State is carried on from day to day in the hearing of the whole people.

[2] The discussion is carried on daily, but the new Witan can only vote authoritatively once in six years. As it usually votes alternately in opposite lobbies it is obvious that the House of Commons is often out of harmony with the nation which it represents. But the repeal of the Septennial Act is no longer a plank in the Radical platform. Triennial parliaments are out of fashion. A representative assembly that has ceased to represent its constituents has lost its *raison d'être*. It is a usurpation based on fraud. Yet it is endured, and the demand that once was energetically urged for more frequent elections has died away. The reason probably is that, although the authority of a House which has ceased to represent the people is a despotism, it is a despotism tempered by the Press and the Platform. That is to say, in other words, that the absolutism of the elected assembly is controlled and governed by the direct voice of the electors themselves. The Press and the Platform, of course, do not mean the printed words of a news-sheet or the wooden planks of a platform. They are merely expressions used to indicate the organs by which the people give utterance to their will, and the growth of their power is indicative of the extent to which the nation is taking into its own hands the direct management and control of its own affairs.

[3] The secret of the power of the Press and of the Platform over the House of Commons is the secret by which the Commons controlled the Peers, and the Peers in their turn controlled the King. They are nearer the people. They are the most immediate and most unmistakable exponents of the national mind. Their direct and living contact with the people is the source of their strength. The House of Commons, elected once in six years, may easily cease to be in touch with the people.

A representative may change his mind in one direction, his constituency may change its mind in another, and they may gradually lose all points of contact with each other, beyond the subscriptions, which fail not, until they have as little in common as Mr. Parnell and the citizens of London. The member immediately after his election leaves his constituency, and plunges into a new world with different atmosphere, moral, social, and political. But an editor, on the other hand, must live among the people whose opinions he essays to express. It is true that some papers in the provinces are edited from London, and with what result? That, speaking broadly, the London-edited news-sheet is a mere news-sheet, without weight, influence, or representative character. Of all drivelling productions, commend us to the provincial "leader" written in Fleet Street. The editor must keep touch with his readers. He must interest, or he ceases to be read. He must therefore, often sorely against his will, write on topics about which he cares nothing, because if he does not, the public will desert him for his rival across the street. This, which in one sense is a degrading side of journalism, is in another a means of preservation and safety. A newspaper must "palpitate with actuality;" it must be a mirror reflecting all the ever-varying phases of life in the locality. Hence it represents a district as no member can, for, whereas he may be a stranger, selected at a crisis to say ditto to Mr. Gladstone or to Lord Salisbury on some issue five years dead and gone, the newspaper – although, as Mr. Morley says, it to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven – is a page from the book of the life of the town in which it appears, a valuable transcript of yesterday's words, thoughts, and deeds.

[4] It is constantly up to date. The day before yesterday is as the date of the deluge. Editors alone of mortals live up to the apostolic injunction, and, forgetting the things that are behind, ever press forward to those which are before. The journalist is constantly *en évidence*. Constituencies sometimes forget they have a member. If they even for one week forgot they had a paper, that paper would cease to exist. The member speaks in the name of a community by virtue of a mandate conferred on poll-days, when a majority of the electors, half of whom may have subsequently changed their minds, marked a cross opposite his name. The editor's mandate is renewed day by day, and his electors register their vote by a voluntary payment of the daily pence. There is no limitation of age or sex. Whosoever has a penny has a vote; nor is there any bribery or corruption possible in that extended constituency which casts its votes – and its coppers – every morning or every evening in the working days of the week. Nor must there be forgotten the reflex influence of the editor on his constituency. For the purpose of moulding a constituency into his own way of thinking, the editor has every advantage on his side. An M.P., even if he be loquacious, cannot make as many speeches in the session as the editor writes articles in a week. And the editor prints every word, and spreads it abroad before his vast congregation, with "never a nodder among them all," as Mr. Lowell observes in his admirable preface to the "Pious Editor's Creed"; while the member addresses half-empty benches, and his speech is mangled by unappreciative reporters. For one-third of a year Parliament is in recess. The chamber of the Press is never closed. It is in perpetual session. For Parliament is merely a part of the machinery of government. The newspaper is that, and more besides. It has become a necessity of life.

[5] But the importance of the newspaper as a substitute for the House of Commons is but partially due to the utterances of its editor. Its reports are often more valuable than its leaders. Lord Salisbury proclaimed seven years ago that the special correspondent was superseding the editor, chiefly because he was nearer to the things which people wished to see. The Press is at once the eye and the ear and the tongue of the people. It is the visible speech if not the voice of the democracy. It is the phonograph of the world. On its columns are printed the spoken words of yesterday, and it is constantly becoming more and more obvious that the importance of a spoken word depends chiefly upon the certainty of its getting itself printed. Mr. Gladstone's Midlothian speeches of 1879-80 would have fallen comparatively powerless if they had only been addressed to the people of Penicuik and West Calder. A great speech is now delivered in the hearing of all the nation. The orator ostensibly addresses a couple of thousand, who cheer and hear. He is in reality speaking to the millions who will read his speech next morning at breakfast. The growth of the power of the

Platform is largely the creation of the Press. If a statesman now wants to impress the nation, the last place in the world where he will make his speech is in Parliament, because in no place will it be worse reported. Epoch-making speeches are nowadays all delivered on the stump. The public only cares for what it hears. No one knows what goes on after twelve o'clock in Parliament, and no one cares. Why? Because the newspapers do not report late sittings. Debates between twelve and three might be conversations in a Government department for anything that the country knows about them. If questions were taken at the end of the sitting they would dwindle. The House is chiefly useful because it secures the reporting of both sides of debates, which otherwise would not be reported, unless the debaters were men of front rank. For the Press has a closure of its own, which it mercilessly enforces, and few there be that escape from it.

[6] In one respect it must be obvious even to the most careless observer that the Press has become to the Commons what the Commons were to the Lords. The Press has become the Chamber of Initiative. No measure ever gets itself into shape, as a rule, before being debated many times as a project in the columns of the newspapers. All changes need to pass as a preliminary through this first tribunal of popular opinion. Not until it has been pretty well threshed out in the Press does a proposal of reform come to be read a first time in the House of Commons. This power of initiation it has secured by natural right. For in its free and open halls the voice of the poorest and humblest can be heard. If so be that a man can think a thought, and frame that thought in intelligible English with sufficient brevity to escape the Rhadamanthus in whose eyes excessive length is a vice going before to judgment, justifying summary execution without benefit of clergy, he can make himself heard, if not in one paper, then in another. There is no such democratic debating-place as the columns of the Press: provided, of course, the debater does not too rudely assail the great unwritten conventions which govern respectable journalism. For journalism in the possession of superstitions also is not unlike Parliament.

[7] There are of course papers and papers. There are papers of business, papers of advertisement, papers of sport, papers of opinion, and papers of power. It takes all sorts to make up a world, and there is as much diversity in journalists as in members of Parliament. But all of them go together to make the Fourth Estate, which is becoming more powerful than all the other estates of the realm. Great is the power of the printed word. This, as Victor Hugo's hero says in "Notre Dame," pointing first to the printed page and then to the soaring towers of the great cathedral:-- "This will destroy that." Notre Dame has survived Caxton for many centuries, and Parliament will continue to meet in the midst of a newspaper' age, but it will be subordinate. The wielders of real power will be those who are nearest the people.

[8] Statesmanship among Parliament men is becoming every day more and more what Mr. Matthew Arnold described eighteen years ago as the mere cult of the jumping cat. Even the duty of twisting the tail of that influential dictator of our destinies is regarded as superfluous. Leadership, in the sense of the science of leading, is reduced to a mere striking of the average. Mr. Gladstone, who might have been a leader in the better sense, has laid it down as a political maxim, that "the most important duty of a leader is to ascertain the average opinions of his party, and largely to give effect to them." That is opportunism reduced to a system, in which the leaders are the led, and the rulers the servants of the ruled. It is the new and unexpected rendering of the old text -- "If any one would be chief among you, let him be the servant of all." But how will the cat jump? That is a problem inscrutable as the decrees of Fate.

[9] If the British householder only knew his own mind, the task might be possible; but when that wielder of the sceptre is himself befogged, how then? Then the Parliament man, straining his eyes through the murky darkness, anxiously interrogating the vague forms which loom through the mist, turns eagerly to the journalists for light and guidance. They are often but blind guides. To them also the oracles are often dumb; but they are at least nearer the Delphic cave whence issue the fateful

words of fortune or of doom; and none but those behind the scenes can realize the weight which newspapers sometimes possess in deciding issues of vital import. To the devout worshipper of opinion a newspaper article is often accepted as decisive, as was the flight of birds at an auspicious moment by an ancient augur. But it must be at the auspicious moment. The same article, or a hundred such, a week earlier or a week later, would pass unheeded.

[10] The importance which the Press possesses as a gauge of public opinion might be enormously increased. But even now it is immense. Mr. Trevelyan's description of the British station-master as a being who feared nothing under heaven save the daily Press, may be applied literally to some of our most prominent and self-opinionated statesmen. It is a guide to their path and a lamp to their feet, and some who profess the greatest contempt for its utterances cower most abjectly under its lash. This springs from the position in which they are placed. What is there to guide a prudent politician as to the depth of water under his keel? Bye-elections, if there are enough of them and if they are studied comparatively with due regard to the antecedents of the constituency, are undoubtedly the best help in taking political soundings. Some day, if Parliament regains its authority so far as to make the democracy anxious to keep it in tune with the constituencies, a series of periodical bye-elections will be arranged for at stated intervals, in order to enable representatives to test the rising; or the falling of political feeling in the country. But bye-elections at present only occur at haphazard, and members perversely refuse to die just when a few test elections would be most useful. Private letters from constituents are a most untrustworthy test. Those who need them most are least likely to receive them, and members have often pointed to their empty letter-bag as a proof that there was "no feeling on the subject," within a few weeks of such a manifestation of the reality of the feeling on the subject as to deprive them of their seats. It was so with the publican revolt in 1874, and with the anti-Turkish revolt in 1876-80, and it was so at the late election on the questions of Fair Trade and Disestablishment.

[11] Public meetings, it will be said, are superior even to newspapers as exponents of public feeling. It is true, because a public meeting is the direct utterance of the voice of Demos without any intermediary. There is nothing in England so powerful as a series of public meetings. But public meetings cannot always be sitting. Their effect, although enormous and immediate, is evanescent. It is only when the popular mind is very excited that spontaneous meetings can be held, and hitherto the attempt to get up meetings by wire-pullers at Birmingham and elsewhere has not been a conspicuous success. Equally untrustworthy is the caucus as a test of the opinion of the constituency. The caucus represents, as a rule, the fighting men-at-arms of the party. It is probably elected by a fraction of its own party, and it is always of necessity more political and more partisan than the body in whose name it speaks.

[12] Hence members anxious to know how public feeling is going are driven back upon the newspapers. But what newspapers? That depends upon the member. Each chooses his own oracle. As a rule, the Liberals look to the provincial, the Conservatives to the metropolitan Press. But the odd thing is that while members are frequently swayed from side to side by the utterances of the provincial Press, it is a rare exception for any of them to study that Press intelligently. They are dependent for the most part upon the more or less fragmentary excerpts from the rural oracles which the London papers dignify with the title of "Epitome of Opinion." The swing of the Ministerial pendulum has been frequently decided by those extracts, which in times of crisis are much more influential with both parties, but especially with the Liberals, than any London editorials. Yet although politicians will lavish thousands in order to carry a single seat, the comparative study of the signs on which a dozen seats may depend is left to haphazard, or the arbitrary selection of a vehement opponent of the Ministerial policy. Another curious thing is the way in which prominent men are encouraged or depressed by seeing in print praise or abuse of schemes which they have in hand. A Minister who has some little social reform which he wants to push gets a friend to button-hole a few journalists, and to induce them to insert paragraphs or articles in favour of his proposal.

If he succeeds, and the notice appears, the Minister will pick up new courage, and renew his efforts to pass the Bill, declaring in all honesty that he is encouraged to do so by the fact that “public opinion has spoken in its favour.” All the while he is perfectly well aware that the so-called public opinion was nothing but the printed reproduction of his own words transmitted through a friend to an obliging human phonograph. The echo of human voice imparted a confidence nothing else was able to secure.

[13] I remember on one occasion being confidentially approached by a permanent official who holds a high place in an important department. He was a personal friend, and he spoke freely. He wanted me to write an article praising a certain Act connected with his department, against which some interested clamour was being raised. “Why just now?” I asked. “To stiffen the back of my chief,” he replied. “He does not want to surrender, but he needs backing up, and if you could see your way to publish a rouser, he would pluck up courage enough to put his foot down.” As I wanted him to put his foot down, I wrote the “rouser,” and soon afterwards had the satisfaction of knowing that it had had the desired effect. The Minister knew nothing of the communication that had been made to me, but without that communication, and the action which followed, he would have given way, and mischief, which he regarded even more seriously than I did, would have ensued, specially affecting the department for which he was answerable. Every newspaper man of any standing will probably be able to cap this story by others of the same kind, in which a newspaper has, as it were, the casting-vote in the decision of State business.

[14] Although Ministers fear the Press and obey the Press, even when they most abuse it, it has hardly dawned upon the Ministerial intelligence that it is worth while to tune the organ to whose piping they have so often to dance. Queen Elizabeth, wiser in her day and generation, took care to tune her pulpits. Instead of denouncing a “temporizing press,” statesmen would find it more convenient to take its conductors into their confidence, so far at least as the imparting of confidential information necessary to enable them to criticize intelligently a policy which, without such guidance, they might, on the facts open to them, believe they were bound to oppose.

[15] They are constantly telling us that without public opinion they can do nothing; but they forget that public opinion is the product of public education, and that the first duty of a statesman is not to wait on public opinion, but to make it. It is not only that there is no communication, but that often the information given is absolutely misleading, and Ministerial journalists painfully persist in advocating policies and putting forward hypotheses which are utterly incompatible with the line which Ministers have determined to take. Without going so far as to maintain that the Prime Minister, who has to communicate every day what passes in Parliament to her Majesty, should be equally communicative to those who wield a power in the State immeasurably greater than that which still clings round the phantom of monarchy, it would, from the point of view of self-interest, be good policy for a Minister in an important crisis, when public speech is impossible, to see to it that public opinion is not led astray from sheer lack of knowledge of the vital facts which govern the situation.

[16] Of course there are journals which sometimes receive information more or less surreptitiously, and these communications are sometimes regarded as bribes. Item, so many “tips;” per contra, so much support. The average Ministerial conception of the service which organs of public opinion should render to their party is the exact antithesis to the service which a newspaper can render. The soundly Liberal newspaper that merits Ministerial favour is held to be the newspaper which most servilely says ditto to every Ministerial dictum. The Minister utters the word: great in his opinion should be the company of those who publish it. The result is that some journalists, reputed to have brains and the reflective and critical appendages thereof, never exercise them except on matters concerning which Ministers have made no *ex cathedra* deliverance, and their comments, every one knows beforehand, will be nothing more than a long drawn-out note of admiration and approval.

That is party journalism in its most dangerous and most worthless sense. The Swiss peasant, who at selected spots in Alpine valleys sounds a lusty note upon his Alpine horn, with a keen eye to the copper of some passing tourist, wakes the echoes of his native hills in much the same fashion that Mr. Gladstone or Lord Salisbury rouses the responses of these obedient editors from Land's End to John o' Groat's. But the shepherd of the hills knows that the reverberation which rolls from crag to crag, and leaps from peak to peak, is but the prolonged echo of his own blast. It is reserved for English statesmen to palm off upon themselves and upon the public the journalistic echoes of their own voice, sent back by the party claque, as the utterances of an independent judgment happily coinciding with their own. A fatal Nemesis attends this subservient journalism. Its anxiety to fawn deprives its idol of the advantage of friendly but independent criticism; and a Minister presiding over a divided Cabinet sees with dismay that over-anxious loyalty to himself often leads his zealous sycophants to exalt into a stereotyped article of party faith a compromise to which he had most reluctantly consented to tide over a temporary crisis in the hope of speedily reverting to truer path.

II

[17] Great as is the power of journalism in its present undeveloped and rudimentary stage, it may yet become a much greater power in the State. Whether it will take advantage of its opportunities or not cannot at present be seen. The future of journalism depends almost entirely upon the journalist, and at present the outlook is not very hopeful. The very conception of journalism as an instrument of government is foreign to the mind of most journalists. Yet, if they could but think of it, the editorial pen is a sceptre of power, compared with which the sceptre of many a monarch is but a gilded lath. In a democratic age, in the midst of a population which is able to read, no position is comparable for permanent influence and far-reaching power to that of an editor who understands his vocation. In him are vested almost all the attributes of real sovereignty. He has almost exclusive rights of initiative; he retains a permanent right of direction; and, above all, he better than any man is able to generate that steam, known as public opinion, which is the greatest force of politics. In the realm of political dynamics he has only one rival: the Platform is more powerful than the Press partly because by its reports the Press is a great sounding-board for the Platform, and also because more men with faith – which after all is the only real force – go upon the Platform than upon the Press. Over the Platform the Press has great and arbitrary powers. It is within the uncontrolled discretion of every editor whether any speech delivered in the previous twenty-four hours shall or shall not come to the knowledge of his readers. No censor in France under the Empire, or in Russia to-day, exercises more absolute authority than English journalists. They decide what their readers shall know, or what they shall not know. This power of closure is enormous. One man is a favourite with the press, and his speeches are reported in the first person. Another man has offended the reporters or the editor, and his remarks are cut down to a paragraph. Sometimes considerations of discipline are held to justify this boycotting; at other times – not, I am glad to say, to any considerable extent – it is decreed on grounds of personal spite or party vindictiveness. Every editor is familiar with the efforts made to induce him to give speakers or meetings good reports, and the degree of importance attached to it by those who wish to be reported is a fair measure of the power wielded by the editorial Procrustes.

[18] But a journalist can not only exercise an almost absolute power of closure both upon individuals and upon causes, he has also the power of declaring urgency for subjects on which he is interested. He can excite interest, or allay it; he can provoke public impatience, or convince people that no one need worry themselves about the matter. Every day he can administer either a stimulant or a narcotic to the minds of his readers; and if he is up to his work and is sufficiently earnest himself, he can force questions to the front which, but for his timely aid, would have lain dormant for many a year. Of course, no journalist is omnipotent, and even the most powerful journalist cannot influence those who do not read his paper. But within the range of his circulation – and readers, of course, are much more numerous than subscribers – he may be more potent than any

other man. The damnable iteration day after day of earnest conviction wears like the dropping of water upon the stone. No other voice sounds daily in their ears, "This is the way, walk ye in it." And it is not in one man's ears, but in his neighbour's and his neighbour's, until the whisper of the printed word seems to fill the very air. Even though they dissent, they have to reckon with it. They know the man in the train or on the omnibus, or in the restaurant, has been listening to that unspoken voice. The very arguments which you reject, and the illustrations which seem to you misleading, are a bond of union between you and him – so much common ground upon which you meet, even though you meet to differ.

[19] Not only can he generate driving force to force measures, and force them through obstacles otherwise insuperable – the journalist can also decide upon the priority of those measures. The editorial Hercules is always besought by so many mud-stuck waggoners to help them out of the slough of official opposition and public indifference, that he has abundant opportunity of selection. Of course, there are some causes dead as Queen Anne, which all the king's horses and all the king's men could not bring to life again. But, other things being equal, or nearly equal, it is the voice of the Press which usually decides which should be taken first. I am not sure but that this prerogative is one of the most important attributes of the journalistic power, although it is one which is perhaps least appreciated among journalists themselves. As a profession, our ideal is deplorably low. Every one is familiar with Thackeray's famous picture of the multifarious activities of a great newspaper, one of whose emissaries is pricing cabbages in Covent Garden while another is interviewing Sovereigns at foreign capitals. The pricing of cabbages is a useful and indispensable although humble department of journalistic activity; but, judging from the editorials of many newspapers, the man who prices the cabbage seems to have been employed to direct the policy of the State. In every profession to which has been entrusted the spiritual guidance of mankind, there have ever been some mutton-loving shepherds who cared for the fleece and the flesh rather than the welfare of the flock which they tended. But a church must indeed have gone rotten before its leading ministers publicly avowed so degrading an ideal of their high vocation. Yet journalists who frankly avow what is called the bread-and-butter theory of their craft are unfortunately but too common, and from such of course nothing can be expected. Water cannot rise beyond its own level, and the highest journalism is never above the high-water mark of the faith and intellect of the individual journalist.

[20] It has been openly asserted not so long ago that a journalist is neither a missionary nor an apostle. Knowing as I do that it is given to journalists to write the only printed matter on which the eyes of the majority of Englishmen ever rest from Monday morning till Saturday night, I cannot accept any such belittling limitation of the duties of a journalist. We have to write afresh from day to day the only Bible which millions read. Poor and inadequate though our printed pages may be, they are for the mass of men the only substitute that "the progress of civilization" has provided for the morning and evening service with which a believing age began and ended the labours of the day. The newspaper – too often the newspaper alone – lifts the minds of men, wearied with daily toil and dulled by carking care, into a higher sphere of thought and action than the routine of the yard-stick or the slavery of the ploughshare. The journalist may regard himself as but the keeper of a peep-show, through which men may catch glimpses of the great drama of contemporary life and history; but he is more than that, or rather there are before him possibilities of much higher things than that. If, as sometimes happens, the editor is one who lives not merely in the past and present, but also in the future, to whom nothing is so real or so vivid or so constantly present to his mind as his high ideal of "an earth unwithered by the foot of wrong, a race revering its own soul sublime;" then upon him surely there is compulsion laid to speak of that in whose presence he dwells, and ever and anon, in the midst of the whirl of politics and the crash of war, to give his readers those "golden glimpses of To Be" which in every age have revived the failing energies and cheered the fainting hearts of mortal men. If that is being a missionary and an apostle, then a journalist must sometimes be both missionary and apostle, although to my thinking his vocation is more analogous to that of those

ancient prophets whose leaders on the current politics of Judaea and Samaria three millenniums ago are still appointed to be read in our churches – it is to be feared too often to but little purpose.

[21] But it is not of the prophetic aspect of journalism that I would speak at present: not of the journalist as the preacher, so much as of the journalist as ruler. To rule – the very idea begets derision from those whose one idea of their high office is to grind out so much copy, to be only paid for according to quantity, like sausages or rope-yarn. Bunyan’s man with the muck-rake has many a prototype on the press. To dress contemporary controversy day by day in the jacket of party, to serve up with fresh sauce of current events the hackneyed commonplaces of politics – that in their eyes is journalism; but to rule! – Yet an editor is the uncrowned king of an educated democracy. The range of his power is limited only by the extent of his knowledge, the quality rather than the quantity of his circulation, and the faculty and force which he can bring to the work of government.

[22] I am but a comparatively young journalist, but I have seen Cabinets upset, Ministers driven into retirement, laws repealed, great social reforms initiated, Bills transformed, estimates remodelled, programmes modified, Acts passed, generals nominated, governors appointed, armies sent hither and thither, war proclaimed and war averted, by the agency of newspapers. There were of course other agencies at work; but the dominant impulse, the original initiative, and the directing spirit in all these cases must be sought in the editorial sanctum rather than in Downing Street. “Take care of that *Pall Mall Gazette*,” said Mr. Gladstone in 1874, jokingly, to a Conservative Minister. “It upset me; take care lest it does not upset you.” And what Mr. Gladstone said in-joke of the influence wielded by Mr. Greenwood, other Ministers have said in bitter earnest of other editors.

[23] Of course, one great secret of the power of the Press is that it brings its influence to bear upon divided Cabinets and distracted Ministers. When a Cabinet is all at sixes and sevens, without seeing any way of harmonizing the antagonistic sections, a clear and decided stand taken by a powerful journal outside is often able to turn the balance in its own direction. The journalist who is able thus to throw the sword of Brennus into the scale necessarily exercises more real influence than anyone outside the Cabinet, and oftener than many a Minister inside that mystic circle. So well is this recognized that occasions are not rare in which Cabinet Ministers have more or less openly allied themselves with an editor, relying upon the accession of force thus gained outside the Cabinet, to enable them to operate with greater power within. Only those who have been within that mystic circle know how little opportunity is afforded any Cabinet Minister, except the Premier and one or two more, of expressing any opinion on subjects outside his own department. On any question of the first magnitude every Minister of course has a voice, even if he has nothing more; but upon any other question he has hardly even that. Any man with the instinct of government in him, and a wide general interest in all departments of the State, will find – unless, of course, he can rise to be Prime Minister, or next to Prime Minister – much more scope for his ambition in the chair of a first-class journal, than at the desk of a second- or a third-rate Cabinet Minister. And even, as compared with the office that is highest of all, that of the Prime Minister, such an editor would have to think twice, and even thrice, before changing places with its occupant. He has two great advantages over the Premier. He does not go out of power every five years, and he is free from all the troublesome trumpery of State routine and of subordinate patronage which constitute such a tax upon the time and patience of the Minister. He is less concerned with the serving of tables, and can devote himself more exclusively to those social and political questions for the solution of which Governments exist.

[24] Whatever may be thought of the comparison between an editor and a Minister of the Crown, there can be no doubt that the influence of the Press upon the decision of Cabinets is much greater than that wielded by the House of Commons. The House of Commons holds in its hands the power of life or death. But the House of Commons’ authority is always exercised after the event. When a policy is in the making, the House is dumb. Cabinets regard Parliaments as judges who may condemn them to capital punishment, but not as guides to direct their steps. At a time when a debate

might be useful it is gagged, because no papers can be laid before it; and when the papers are produced, it is told that it is no use crying over spilt milk. In questions of peace or war Parliament reserves little save the power of cashiering after the event those who have made a dishonourable peace or plunged into a criminal war.

[25] Far otherwise is it with the Press. It is never so busy or so influential as when a policy is in the making. It is most active when Parliament is most inert. Its criticism is not postponed until after the fateful decision has been taken, and the critics are wise with the wisdom that comes after the event. The discussion in the Cabinet goes on *pari passu* with the editorial polemic, and is therefore of necessity more influenced by it than by the *ex post facto* judgments which are delivered six weeks after by the House of Commons.

[26] The enormous advantage of being up to date, of discussing subjects that are, in the slang phrase, "on the nail," is undoubtedly the chief source of the inferiority of the influence of Parliament to that of newspapers. But the Press has many other advantages. It has freer access to experts. Let any question – say the annexation of Burmah – come up, and within a week an energetic editor can have sucked the brains of every living authority in England or in Europe, and printed their opinions in his columns. Parliament can listen to no expert unless he is a British subject in the first place; in the second place, he must have persuaded a majority of householders in some constituency to send him to St. Stephen's; and in the third place, the subject must be brought on in some debate in which he can catch the Speaker's eye. Failing any one of these essentials, the expert's voice is dumb so far as Parliament is concerned, and of course, as for five months of the year, when the question has come up for settlement, Parliament itself is not sitting, he cannot be heard. The parliament of the Press has no such arbitrary limitations. It has no recess, but is ever open a public forum in which every one who is qualified to speak is freely heard.

[27] For the discussing of details, for the exhaustive hammering out of a subject, for the fashioning of clauses and the shaping of Bills, Parliament no doubt has the advantage of the Press. That may be freely admitted. But that is largely departmental work, for which no one has ever claimed any special fitness in the Press. Newspapers must deal with principles, with general programmes, with plans of campaigns; they cannot undertake to superintend the wording of a provisional order, the drafting of a Bill, or the drill of a regimental company.

[28] It is easy, say some, for journalists in their armchairs to lay down, doctrinaire fashion, cut-and-dried programmes as to what ought to be done. It is the getting of it done that tests the governor; as if the getting of it done does not necessarily follow, and even govern, the decision as to what ought to be done. A journalist who is purely a doctrinaire may be an invaluable benefactor to the human race – he will not be a ruler. The journalist who makes his journal an instrument of government must consider the ways and means as carefully as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, must calculate the strength of opposing forces as diligently as a Whip, and study the line of least resistance like any opportunist; for his, after all, is the same craft as that of the Monarch or the Minister, the governance and guidance of the people; the only difference being, that while with the craftsman expediency is apt to become supreme, the Press, as the heir of a large section of the spiritual power wielded in earlier times by the clergy, must ever keep principle to the front. It represents imperfectly no doubt, but still better than any existing order, the priesthood of Comte. Its range is as wide as the wants of man, and the editorial we is among many millions the only authoritative utterance.

[29] An extraordinary idea seems to prevail with the eunuchs of the craft that leadership, guidance, governance, are alien to the calling of a journalist. These conceptions of what is a journalist's duty, if indeed they recognize that imperious word as having any bearing upon their profession, is hid in mystery. If it may be inferred from their practice, their ideal is to grind out a column of more or less

well-balanced sentences, capable of grammatical construction, conflicting with no social conventionality or party prejudice, which fills so much space in the paper, and then utterly, swiftly, and for ever vanishes from mortal mind. How can they help to make up other people's minds when they have never made up their own?

[30] The cant, that it is not for journalists to do this, that, or the other, is inconsistent with any theory of civic responsibility. Before I was an editor and a journalist I was a citizen and a man. As a member of a self-governing community I owe a duty to my country, of which the sole measure is my capacity and opportunity to serve her. How can any one, who has the power in his hands of averting a grave evil justify himself if he allows it to overwhelm his country, on the pretext that, being a journalist, it was not his duty to avert evils from the commonwealth; his duty being apparently to twaddle about chrysanthemums and spin rigmaroles about the dresses at the last Drawing-room or the fashions at Goodwood. A man's responsibility is as his might, and his might depends largely upon his insight and his foresight.

[31] The duty of a journalist is the duty of a watchman. "It the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned, if the sword come and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand." A man's duty is to do all the good he can and to prevent all the evil, and on him who seeth to do good and doeth it not, lies a heavier condemnation than it is prudent to face.

[32] A knowledge of the facts – that is the first and most indispensable of all things. Lord Beaconsfield once said that power belonged to him who was best informed; and, like many of his remarks, this contains much truth. Of course a head of a department, or an M.P., has, or ought to have, more opportunities of learning the facts than any journalist; and on many subjects, no doubt, especially those concerning which the Foreign Office keeps the public resolutely in the dark, the Minister, although not the Member, has an enormous advantage over the journalist. But this is minimized to a certain extent by the confidential communications constantly made, by those in the "swim," to journalists in their confidence, and compensated for by the absurd conventionality which often acts as a barrier between those who know the facts and the responsible depositaries of power. Hobart Pasha, before he was restored to the Navy List, could not be consulted as to the plan of campaign projected in the Black Sea last spring, and the scheme was almost projected before the man who knew more about campaigning in the Black Sea than any other sailor in Europe could be consulted, although the plan was to have been carried out, if possible, in conjunction with the fleet under Admiral Hobart's command. Another case quite as remarkable, followed by consequences more deplorable, was the neglect of the War Office to seek General Gordon's advice as to the defence of Khartoum and the defence of the Soudan before Hicks marched to his doom in the waterless deserts of Kordofan. General Gordon had commanded in the Soudan. He knew better how to defend Khartoum than any living man. But although he was in the country, he was never asked a question as to what should be done. He did not care to obtrude with his advice unasked, and he was allowed to leave the country without a single consultation on the affairs of the Soudan. Had he been consulted then, the need for his subsequent expedition would never have arisen, and that, although the necessity for sending some one was admitted, never seemed to occur to the Government until it was forced upon their attention by a newspaper interviewer. But this is all of a piece with the actions of administrations everywhere. The last men with whom Ministers consult in framing Irish measures are the most trusted representatives of the Irish people; and Scotland Yard recently only followed the traditions of Downing Street in sending a detective on a journey of nearly a thousand miles to fail in discovering what could have been learnt at once by a simple question at Northumberland Street. "The last man whom they want to see at the Colonial Office," said a leading South African bitterly, "is a colonist;" and what is true of colonists appears even more forcibly in the case of distinguished foreigners and others who lie outside the routine of officialism.

[33] A journalist is, or ought to be, a perpetual note of interrogation, which he affixes without ceremony to all sorts and conditions of men. No one is too exalted to be interviewed, no one too humble. From the king to the hangman – and I have interviewed both – they need no introduction to the sanctum, provided only that they speak of facts at first hand bearing directly upon some topic of the day. That universal accessibility, that eagerness to learn everything that can be told him by any one who knows the facts, gives the editor one great advantage; and another, perhaps as great, is the compulsion that is laid upon him to serve up the knowledge he acquired in a shape that can be read and remembered by all men. There is no such compulsion on the Minister. Contrast the newspaper precis of some important negotiation and the Blue Book – there is the difference at a glance. Often the precis is execrably done, apparently being handed over at the last moment to the odd man of the office, who does police paragraphs and such like, but there is at least an attempt to construct an intelligible narrative. In the Blue Book there is none. It is a huge and undigested mass of material, which not one in a hundred thousand ever reads, and not one in a million ever masters. To paraphrase Robert Hall's saying, the officials put so many despatches on the top of their head, they crush out their brains.

[34] I am claiming no superiority *per se* in the journalist over the Minister. Put two men mentally as identical as the two Dromios, one in the Foreign Office and the other in Printing House Square or Shoe Lane, and the exigencies of their respective offices will drive the latter to be more acquisitive of latest information from all sources than the former, for the self-interest and the conditions of the business are constant forces, whose operations drive the editor on, while the Minister is tempted to confine himself within the smooth groove of official routine.

[35] Another limitation on the efficiency of Parliament, as contrasted with the greater liberty of the Press, is the tendency of members to confine their attention to those who vote. To do nothing for nothing, to care for nobody who cannot pay for attention received in votes at the ballot-box, is one of the most odious features of modern Parliaments. But voters, even under household suffrage, are but a seventh part of the inhabitants of these islands, and barely a hundredth part of the subjects of the Queen. The constituency of the newspaper is wider. Everything that is of human interest is of interest to the Press. A newspaper, to put it brutally, must have good copy, and good copy is oftener found among the outcast and the disinherited of the earth than among the fat and well-fed citizens. Hence selfishness makes the editor more concerned about the vagabond, the landless man, and the deserted child, than the member. He has his Achilles' heel in the "advertisements," and he must not carry his allegiance to outcast humanity too far. If he wishes to plead for those whom society has ostracized not so much because they are wicked as because they are improper, then self-interest pleads the other way. Mrs. Grundy tolerates crime, but not impropriety; and it is safer to defend a murderer than a Magdalen, unless of course she belongs to the privileged orders, and is either an actress or the plaything of a prince; and even then, while it is permitted to excite any amount of curiosity about her, the moral aspect of the case must be strictly tabooed. So rigidly is this carried out that it is doubtful whether, if an edict were to be issued condemning every woman to the Lock Hospital to be vivisected at the medical schools for purposes of demonstration, the more decorous of our journals would deem the wrong scandalous enough to justify the insertion of a protest against so monstrous a violation of human rights. The medical journals of course would enthusiastically support it; the Saturday Review would empty vials of its sourest ink over the indecent Maenads and shrieking sisters who publicly denounced such an outrage on humanity and womanhood; and the great majority of the papers would avoid the subject as much as possible, in the interests of public morality and public decency. In reading some of our public journals, we begin to understand how it was that slaves were crucified nightly outside the walls of ancient Rome, without even a protest from the philosopher or a tear from the women of the empire. Not so long ago, when the Contagious Diseases Acts were in the height of their popularity, it seemed probable enough that even crucifixion in a garrison town would have been regarded as a service done to humanity and morality

by those who, in the interests of hygiene, have materialized the Inquisition, and naturalized the familiars of the Home Office as police spies in English towns.

[36] It is the fashion, among those who decry the power of the more advanced journalism of the day, to sneer at each fresh development of its power as mere sensationalism. This convenient phrase covers a wonderful lack of thinking. For, after all, is it not a simple fact that it is solely by sensations experienced by the optic nerve that we see, and that without a continual stream of ever-renewed sensations we should neither hear, nor see, nor feel, nor think. Our lives, our thought, our existence, are built up by a never-ending series of sensations, and when people object to sensations they object to the very material of life. What they mean, however, is not to object to sensations *per se*, but to sensations in unexpected quarters. It is the novel, the startling, the unexpected, that they denounce; the presentation of facts with such vividness and graphic force as to make a distinct even although temporary impact upon the mind.

“You must not pump spring water unawares
Upon a gracious public full of nerves,”

is the canon of the anti-sensationalist; and if you do, it is held by some to be so grave an offence as to justify them in saying anything, even if they deny that the water was cold which roused them into a state of indignant clamour. Now, I have not a word to say in favour of any method of journalism that can fairly be called exaggerated or untrue. Mere froth-whipping or piling up the agony, solely for purposes of harrowing the feelings of the reader, and nothing more, may be defended as ghost stories are defended; but I have nothing to say for that kind of work. That is not the sensationalism which I am prepared to defend. The sensationalism which is indispensable is sensationalism which is justifiable. Sensationalism in journalism is justifiable up to the point that it is necessary to arrest the eye of the public and compel them to admit the necessity of action.

[37] When the public is short-sighted – and on many subjects it is a blear-eyed public, short-sighted to the point of blindness – you need to print in capitals. If you print in ordinary type, it is as if you had never printed at all. If you speak to a deaf man in a whisper, you might as well have spared your breath. If his house is on fire, you are justified in roaring the fact into his ear until he hears; and it is just the same in journalism. The myriad murmurs of multitudinous tongues, all busy with “the rustic cackle of the bourg,” render it practically impossible for any one to obtain a hearing for the most important of truths, unless he raises his voice above the din. And that is sensationalism so-called. Mere shouting in itself is one of the most vulgar and least attractive of human exercises. A Cheap Jack has the lungs of a Stentor, but who listens to him? It is the thing you shout that will command attention after you have first aroused it, but you must arouse it first; and therein lies the necessity of presenting it in such a fashion as to strike the eye and compel the public at least to ask, “What is it all about?”

[38] “But if this be so, and we all take to shouting, we shall merely have increased the general hubbub, without rendering ourselves any more articulate.” In that case, should that improbable possibility be realized, the best way to attract attention would be to speak in whispers. Every one remembers the familiar story that comes to us from the Congress of Vienna – “Who is that personage? He has not a single decoration: he must be very distinguished.” And as it is with stars and decorations in the mob of kings and diplomatists, so will it be with a multitude of pseudo-sensationalists. For sensationalism is solely a means to an end. It is never an end in-itself. When it ceases to serve its turn, it must be exchanged for some other and more effective mood of rousing the sluggish mind of the general public into at least a momentary activity.

[39] The “Amateur Casual” whose hunk of bread is still preserved under a glass shade at Northumberland Street as a trophy of that early triumph, was a piece of sensationalism of the best

kind. Mr. James Greenwood himself went through the experiences which he described. His narrative was carefully written up, and no pains spared to make every detail stand out in as life-like and real a fashion as was possible, and the object of its publication was the attainment of a definite improvement in the treatment of the poorest of the poor. It secured, as it deserved, a brilliant success, both social and journalistic. The man and dog fight at Hanley, which the same journalist contributed to the *Daily Telegraph*, was as perfect a specimen of bad sensationalism as his first venture was of good. It was a more or less unauthentic horror, immensely exaggerated, even if it ever occurred, and its publication could not serve, and was not intended to serve, any other end beyond the exhibition of brutality. It failed, as it deserved to fail. But the contrast between the two specimens of the handiwork of the same noted journalist is sufficient to illustrate the absurdity of imagining that the last word has been said when a newspaper or an article is dismissed as sensational.

[40] It would not be difficult to maintain that nothing can ever get itself accomplished nowadays without sensationalism. Mr. Spurgeon built up a solid church by as painstaking labour as ever man put forth, but no man was ever more soundly abused as a mere sensation-monger than the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. In politics, in social reform, it is indispensable. Without going so far back as the sensationalism of "Uncle Tom," or of the still earlier literature which abolished slavery, it was sensationalism of the most sensational kind which enabled Mr. Plimsoll, by sheer force of will, to dab a disk of paint upon the side of every merchantman that hoists the English flag. It was the sensationalism of the "Bitter Cry of Outcast London," emphasized by a journalistic sounding-board, that led to the appointment of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor. And it was sensationalism that passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Sensationalism, in fact, is not unlike the famous chapel bell whose peal Mr. Gladstone heard and obeyed in the case of the explosion that shattered Clerkenwell. Or, if I may vary the metaphor, I may compare sensationalism to the bladder full of dry peas with which it was the custom to rouse the sages of Laputa from reverie to attend to the urgent claims of life and business. The British public is not Laputan, but it often takes a deal of rousing. Even when its object-lessons have been written in characters of blood and flame, it has too often ignored their significance. For the great public the journalist must print in great capitals, or his warning is unheard. Possibly it has always been so. Every phase of sensationalism seems to have been practised by the Hebrew prophets, who, however, stand altogether condemned by the canons of our superfine age.

[41] As an instrument of culture, taking culture in Mr. Arnold's sense, as familiarity with the best thoughts expressed in the best terms by the ablest men, the Press has many and glaring faults, but for the common people it has no rival. There is often an intolerable amount of the jargon of the two great gambling hells of modern England – the Stock Exchange and the race-course – for a mere ha'porth of suggestive thoughts or luminous facts; but the ha'porth is there, and without the newspaper there would not even be that. The craze to have everything served up in snippets, the desire to be fed on seasoned or sweetened tit-bits, may be deplored; but although mincemeat may not be wholesome as a staple diet, it is better than nothing. If, as Carlyle said, the real university is the silent library, the most potent educator is the newspaper. The teacher is the ultimate governor.

[42] But I am more concerned with the direct governing functions of the Press. And foremost amongst them, unquestionably, is the Argus-eyed power of inspection which it possesses, and which, on the whole, it exercises with great prudence and good sense. I remember hearing Mr. Gladstone tell a foreign visitor that he believed that the free, unfettered Press of this country had done more to reform its Government and purify its administration than all the Parliaments, reformed or unreformed, that had ever existed. Whenever you shut off any department from the supervision of the Press, there you find abuses which would speedily perish in the light of day. The net effect of Mr. Gladstone's exordium was, that if he were called upon to prescribe any single English institution in use to improve the Government, say, of an empire like that of Russia, he would say

that a free Press would do more good than a representative assembly. The newspaper has become what the House of Commons used to be, and still is in theory, for it is the great court in which all grievances are heard, and all abuses brought to the light of open criticism. But it is much more than this. It is the great inspector, with a myriad eyes, who never sleeps, and whose daily reports are submitted, not to a functionary or a department, but to the whole people. The sphere of this inspection needs to be enlarged so as to include such official establishments as lunatic asylums, prisons, workhouses, and the like. An editor of a daily paper, or his representative, should be ex officio vested with all the right of inspection enjoyed by a visiting justice or a Home Office inspector. If the right were to be conferred only upon one newspaper at a time, but allowed to all in rotation, an honourable emulation would be set up, and a sense of responsibility stimulated, for the discovery of abuses and the suggestion of reforms. It ought not to be necessary for a journalist to have to personate a tramp to expose a casual ward, to get himself locked up as disorderly to see how the charges are treated at a police station, or to commit a misdemeanour to be able to say whether the “skilly” of prisoners is edible, or whether the reception cells are sufficiently warmed. It is not enough that an order to visit public establishments on a specified day should be given to a journalist. To be effective, inspection should ever be unforeseen. It is at such an hour as they think not that the inspector, who is really dreaded, makes his call.

[43] And as a corollary to this it should be added that the law of libel should be so modified as to permit a newspaper much greater liberty to publish the truth than the Press at present possesses. A bond-fide report of a visit of inspection might subject a newspaper to an action for libel. The greater the truth the greater the libel, is a maxim to which there ought to be large exceptions, not dependent upon the caprice or the leniency of a jury. A bond-fide report of an inspection ought to be at least as privileged as a bond-fide report of proceedings in a police court. But the necessity for liberating the Press from the disabilities which impose penalties for speaking the truth, is a wide subject, which cannot be dealt with here.

[44] Even as it now is, with all its disabilities and all its limitations, the Press is almost the most effective instrument for discharging many of the functions of government now left us. It has been, as Mr. Gladstone remarked, and still is, the most potent engine for the reform of abuses that we possess, and it has succeeded to many of the functions formerly monopolized by the House of Commons. But all that it has been is but a shadow going before of the substance which it may yet possess, when all our people have learned to read, and the Press is directed by men with the instinct and capacity of government.