

REMARKS OF SENATOR HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

INTERNATIONAL CIRCULATION MANAGERS CONVENTION (NEWSPAPERS)

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I'm happy to be with you this morning. I heard that you were here to discuss trends and problems in the circulation business, and so I wanted to make a point of coming over.

I figured that since I'm 65 years old, and still in circulation, I could serve as a valuable example for you all. After all -- there aren't many newspapers that can say the same.

Actually, that's not really a joke. I've stayed in public life as long as I have because I've tried to keep up to date and adjust my thinking to meet new realities.

And if the newspaper business wants to maintain its success into the future, it too will have to adjust to new realities. That is what you have met here to discuss, and that's what I want to talk to you about today.

No matter how much we romanticize the careers of reporters and editors, and no matter how much we talk about the vital role of a free press in a free society, it all comes down to selling newspapers.

The news business is just that -- a business -- and the simple fact is that our citizens get the news because our newspapers get a profit.

Now, I don't know a great deal about the newspaper business, but it seems to me that there are only three ways to keep a newspaper economically healthy: cutting costs, increasing advertising revenue, and expanding sales.

I don't have to tell you that costs aren't going to fall in the foreseeable future. Even if it were possible or desirable to completely mechanize the production side of a newspaper operation, the cost of wood pulp is going to remain high, along with other labor costs and overhead.

Moreover, advertising revenues are increasingly uncertain. In recent years, advertising money has tended to flow away from the periodical press and into television and related markets. And that is understandable: Americans spend an alarming amount of time watching television -- far more than they spend on anything else except work.

So that leaves the problem squarely in your hands: increased circulation. And the question is: can it be done?

Within the next ten years, an enormous number of Americans -- at least 30 million of them, the largest sector of the post-war baby boom -- will be reaching the age at which adult Americans normally become regular subscribers to newspapers.

But all indications so far suggest that they will not do so with the frequency of the previous generation.

There are a number of reasons for this -- and chief among them is an increasing reliance on television for information. But equally important, it seems to me, are the quality of education and the amount of reading skills which our young people possess.

The United States prides itself on an extremely low rate of illiteracy -- less than one percent of our large and varied population. But we only include in that category those Americans who have completed fewer than six years of schooling, whether that schooling was productive or not, and whether the student retained anything of what he or she learned in that process.

Of greater concern than our truly illiterate, however, is that class of Americans who are functionally illiterate. By this term, educators mean those individuals who can write their own names and recognize words, but who are unable to get through ordinary daily activities which require the most rudimentary reading skills -- like answering a job advertisement in a newspaper.

And there is every indication that this segment of our population is growing at shocking rates.

The most recent dependable estimate, released by the Office of Education late last year, shows that one out of every five American adults is functionally illiterate. That is, they are incapable of dealing with simple instructions and computations which are necessary for survival in modern life.

In fact, the report notes that our skill levels have declined so far that one out of every seven American adults cannot even address a letter well enough so that the U.S. Postal Service can deliver it!

(And judging from some of the letters I get in my office, which have virtually nothing but "Hubert, Washington, D.C." on them, I am scared to think what the undeliverables look like.)

Now the point of my telling you this is that a citizen who cannot write a grocery list, or is only barely competent to understand a help-wanted ad, is not a very likely customer for a daily newspaper.

And yet despite the shocking results of the Office of Education report -- which shows 23 million adults are incompetent and another 40 million are only "barely competent" -- the comments by newspapers themselves on this report can only be described as complacent.

In reporting the results of the study in their editorial columns, the Washington Post said only that "the next great advance in the American high schools needs to be a sharp improvement in the minimum level of performance." And the Washington Star was even more benign -- they said only that "we are failing in providing both the discipline and the sense of grandeur that is the essence of language."

Now, if any other American industry were threatened with a massive lack of demand for their product, I would expect them to get out, research the problem, and take measures to ensure that they could make money in the future.

But the newspaper business seems remarkably untroubled by the prospect of some 63 million American adults who cannot -- and probably will not -- buy and understand a newspaper.

And they cannot reasonably put their trust in the next generation of high school graduates, either. A battery of tests recently administered to 7th and 11th-graders in the Maryland public schools revealed that fully one-third of Maryland 7th-graders had failed to master simple skills like reading cash-register tapes, understanding menus, or following the instruction on cereal-box coupons.

And I should hasten to add that Maryland is not alone in those figures -- they are representative of scores which are coming in from across the nation. Maryland is unique only in giving the test and then having the courage to publish the results.

Indeed, the decline in basic skills has become so apparent that our public schools are now taking steps to require what we all used to take for granted -- namely, that the high-school diploma should be a guarantee of minimal competence in day-to-day living, working and citizenship.

This is a commendable first step, but much more is needed. Students going to adulthood with only basic skills, would still probably not have the incentive to buy a newspaper whose front page invites the reader to take his choice between a long article on the balance of payments, a complicated Supreme Court decision, or the details of the new tax legislation.

If any more evidence is required, a recent event in California should provide it. A new state law there allows high-school students to leave high school at the age of 16 or 17 if the student can show a mastery of certain basic skills, reading among them. And I might add that there is a powerful motivation for high school students to leave school before the legal age requirement is up. And yet, of all the students who took the test in December of 1975, only 45 percent could pass it -- including many of those who planned to go on to college.

Let me cite one more disturbing fact. Every year, about a million students in the United States take the Scholastic Aptitude Tests to measure their achievement and their capability to do college work.

We have known for years that those scores have been falling steadily. And they recorded their largest one-year drop on record in 1975, when reading skills fell a full ten points. And in the same year, the number of top-scoring students dropped again, even though the number of students taking the test was larger than the year before.

Indeed, there is now scarcely a college or university in the country which does not offer a remedial reading course -- and many of them give credit for it.

It is clear that the reading situation in the United States has become a national disgrace, and that we are threatened with an increasing number of adults who will not only be unable to perform well enough to fulfill their own hopes for employment and income, but who will not become the kind of educated and informed citizens upon whom democracy depends.

But so far, at least, the public does not seem to be alarmed over the scope of the problem. In a Gallup Poll taken late last year, respondents were asked to name the ten major problems facing our public schools. The most common concerns were "lack of discipline," "integration-segregation," "busing," and lack of financial support. But only a tiny percentage of those interviewed cited the failure of our schools to impart basic reading skills to our students.

Therefore, I want to call on you to help carry the message of declining literacy to the public -- to get them engaged with the issue and ready to help do something about it.

In doing so, you will not only be doing a service to the nation and to future generations of students -- but you will also be helping to ensure that, in the years to come, there will still be a large body of people who want and will pay for what newspapers have to offer.

The education of our children is a solid investment in our Nation's future.

We need to establish a new education policy for America -- a policy to guarantee that all children and youth, without regard to circumstances of residence, family income, or race will have a full and equal opportunity to obtain a quality education.

Education means an informed citizenry -- which is the strong backbone of American democracy.

Our sense of justice and of what is required to promote the general welfare at home and peace throughout the world;

-- our commitment to government of, by, and for the people where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are regarded as unalienable rights;

-- and our hopes and aspirations for the future;

-- all of these ideals and values require the foundation of education for their fulfillment.

You can take an effective part in what must become a nationwide effort to make the education of America's children and youth the finest in the world.

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