

# Follow the Reader?

There was a time when "consumer preference" was called "public opinion." Newspapers often shaped it—sometimes arrogantly, often to their own ends. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer whipped the nation into a frenzy for war with Spain, you'll recall, and invented yellow journalism and million-copy sales in the process.

But the crusty editor of yore and fable was no yellow journalist. He was a fellow whose very being was blazed with a fervor for the public's right to know. His paper was beholden to no individual, party, or department store, and he wrote with forthrightness and vigor. In return, the paper was revered—and prospered. The *Times* of London—"The Thunderer"—was the model.

Abraham Lincoln once said that nothing in the world was more powerful than the *Times*, "except perhaps the Mississippi." Under the editorships of Thomas Barnes and John Delane, a period of 60 years dating from 1817, the *Times* routinely afflicted the comfortable. Napoleon Bonaparte once was so enraged at the paper that he considered suing it for libel. Queen Victoria wanted its journalists banned from polite society. Anthony Trollope compared it to a self-ordained pope—"a Pope whom, if you cannot obey him, I would advise you to disobey as silently as possible." The proof of its independence, in the words of historian Piers Brendon, was that "no one could depend on it."

Nonetheless, everyone wooed it. Disraeli, Aberdeen, Gladstone—every stripe of British gentry—invited editor Delane to dinner or sherry. Even Lord Palmerston, a cabinet minister whose morning ritual included tossing the *Times* into the fire, sought Delane's ear. Palmerston, according to editor and author B. Kingsley Martin, "was probably the first English statesman who deliberately ingratiated himself with papers of all shades of opinion."

The *Times*'s shade of opinion was inevitably that of the burgeoning middle class, which was transforming England into the fabled nation of shopkeepers. In 1852, the paper's circulation was 40,000; its nearest rival's was 7,000. Its influence was equally overwhelming, but



Delane was to learn that the paper's global clout was rooted in his ability to stay in step with the shopkeepers.

England in the late 1840s was enjoying a generation of prosperity, 30 years after Waterloo, and the public's attitude toward foreign affairs was decidedly indifferent. Against this insularity rose Palmerston. His more daring and jingoistic foreign policy appealed to the young, who had never been to battle and were easily infected with war fever.

The *Times* initially took a restrained attitude toward rising tensions between Russia and Turkey in the Crimea, basically supporting the nonpartisan tendencies of the prime minister, Lord Aberdeen. But most of its lesser rivals—like the *Morning Advertiser*, distributed in pubs and nicknamed "Gin and Gospel"—were calling for England to declare war against the czar in defense of the sultan. The pro-Palmerston *Advertiser* regularly chided the "imbecile men, the minions of Russia, constituting the Cabinet." Public opinion swayed.

"Delane was confronted with the oldest problem of democracy," wrote Martin in *The Triumph of Lord Palmerston*. "Was he to give the public 'what it wanted' or what he believed to be good for it? If the latter, was the whole influence of the *Times* to be sacrificed by the persistent advocacy of a view which the country would not accept?"

Delane began to hedge. On New Year's Eve 1853 his paper wrote: "We have not sought war, we have done all in our power to avoid it; but if it must come we trust its evils and sacrifices will be cheerfully borne, as we are sure its perils will be manfully confronted."

By March of 1854 it had jumped heart and soul on the war bandwagon and was calling on the "moral and physical resistance of all Europe to Russia's ascendancy." Circulation rose to 70,000 during the war. ■



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