

from
WHATEVER IS, IS WRONG

----- *E. W. Scripps* -----

Edward Wyllis Scripps (1854–1926) created a newspaper empire that included 15 daily newspapers at his death in 1926. Scripps launched his newspaper empire at a time when “muckracking” journalism was at its height. In this excerpt, Scripps outlines his views on the role of a newspaper as a defender of the public good.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

What do you think the role of the media should be in the areas of social reform, labor, or politics? Should there be limits to the power of the press?

I cannot pretend that I went into journalism because I had a call to serve humanity. No idea came to me in my early days as a newspaperman that I owed the public a duty. I cannot even now recall the time when the idea first dawned upon me that I was working for others than myself. However, I learned, as every editor of a successful newspaper does learn very soon, that an editor has an extraordinarily great influence on the public, and that the influence may be for good or ill....

I do not think that I ever became thoroughly entrenched in the habit of altruism, until I had learned by experience that even if honesty was not the best policy, it was a policy by which at least a newspaper editor could not only enjoy business success but something still more valuable—the confidence and respect and even the affection of a large part of the public....

Preachers of the gospel and editors of successful papers both must preach good moral doctrine. It is one of my guiding principles as a journalist that great wealth is not a blessing either to the nation or to an individual. Capital is a danger; large capital is never acquired by individuals as a result of perfectly fair play.

Capitalists must exist, but the danger of their existence can be minimized by constant attacks and public ill will. Keep the capitalist busy defending what he has got, and the very activity enforced upon him makes him a better citizen and more considerate neighbor and employer. Capitalists resting secure behind the fortifications of ancient and obsolete, or modern, corruptly obtained laws, become vicious, arrogant and harmful alike to themselves and the community....

The possession of wealth, no matter how much, whether it be greater than a competency or only a competency, whether it consists of land and goods, of money in the bank, or paid up or partially paid up insurance policies, weakens every man that has such possessions, makes him a more selfish man, a more timid man.

As a newspaper owner I believe that a newspaper's income should not only be great enough to pay its going expenses, including the wages and other compensations necessary to secure and retain the employment of men of considerable ability, but they should be great enough to guarantee a profit, in ordinary times, of such dimensions as will rapidly make a reserve fund.

A newspaper fairly and honestly conducted in the interests of the great masses of the public must at all times antagonize the selfish interests of that very class which furnishes the larger part of a newspaper's income. It must occasionally so antagonize this class as to cause it not only to cease patronage, to a greater or lesser extent, but to make actually offensive warfare against the newspaper....

I do not "stand for men"—all men—as Henry George is said to have done. I have been an uncompromising partisan of that great majority of our people who are strong only in numbers....

In fact I have not a whole series of journalistic principles. I have only one principle, and that is represented by an effort to make it harder for the rich to grow richer and easier for the poor to keep from growing poorer....

Lately I have talked much with my sons about the future of my concern. I have said to them:

What is the fundamental principle and spirit of one of my newspapers? It is everything that is human. It is nothing that is remarkable. This principle, this spark of vitality and vigor, is a moral principle. As a whole body, my newspaper concern is as full of corruption, of weakness and immorality, as is any human being.

But, despite the existence of all these elements, there also exists the moral principle of protest....

Against what has this spirit and activity of protest been directed?

It has been directed against all that is in social organization.

As against the old thesis that "Whatever is, is right," I have set up the antithesis that "Whatever is, is wrong" and must be changed.

Otherwise there can be no human progress; otherwise there can be only stagnation, inertia and perhaps retrogression.

I have protested against the governmental system that had to be wrong because it was old and had originated under conditions of society, of material development or lack of development, and of ignorance of the science of today.

I have protested against undemocratic government carried on under the false name of democracy.

I have protested against too great usurpation of power on the part of the rich

and the intellectual that is used to oppress the less fortunate.

I have protested against the inequality of opportunity.

I have protested against outworn theology and superstition, against old creeds that were almost universally repeated and proclaimed hypocritically by nonbelievers.

I have protested against all sorts of authority, save that exercised by a man for the sole purpose of benefiting mankind—against all authority that was not based upon the immediate and voluntary and present desire and wish of those who submitted to the same.

I have protested against all sorts of legislatures whose members obtained position by corrupt practices, by chicanery, by false pretenses.

I have protested most especially against the rule of the lawyer and the usurpation and oppressive use of the power of the courts.

I have protested against the claims of the court to the sacredness of their office.

All of the things I have protested against socialism protests against. Perhaps because there has been no occasion for protest, I have not protested against most of the claims of socialism....

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THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that the media play an important role in influencing social reform, labor relations, and politics. Some students may agree with Scripps's belief that newspapers must antagonize the interests of the wealthy and powerful, citing his own examples of how his newspapers have protested social conditions and forces. These students might note that the wealthy can gain great influence over government agencies and that the media are needed to check this influence. Other students may argue that the media should not take sides on issues, and they may cite Scripps's explicit biases against certain social interests as evidence for their argument. These students might argue that because the media are so powerful, they need to present the news in a fair and objective manner.