

NiemanReports

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Now I haven't a thing against comic strips, except that few of them are funny any more. I enjoy reading some of them myself, and I know the readership of the better ones continues to be quite high. But in study after study, the same fact emerges: that what readers say they read is one thing, but what they value most is quite another. There is mounting evidence that reporting the news in greater breadth and depth is far more vital to the future of the American newspaper than making the comic strips a column wider, or even putting them in technicolor 3-D.

NEW TYPES of research can help the newspaper to solve its problems, economic and otherwise, but well-trained, well-paid personnel is even more important. For, as Dr. Charles Swanson of the Curtis Publishing Company's research department observed in the recent forecast of future trends, the knowledge gained by research is of no value "unless it is absorbed and restructured in creative, imaginative, dynamic and courageous minds, able to meet and cope with change. Research is simply a process of discovering facts; it is helpful only if we have the intelligence and judgement to use it wisely."

If newspapers are to attract and hold news and editorial workers capable of coping with the problems of a rapidly

changing world, they must choose those workers by the best possible methods; they must pay them well—at least as much as workers in the business and mechanical departments are paid; and they must maintain standards and working conditions which give the editorial employee a sense of status, independence and self-respect. This isn't an easy order to be filled, but our best papers today prove that it can be done.

ANY BUSINESS forecast today has to be limited by the possibility of a general war or a serious depression, no matter how remote. But newspapermen have a great advantage over most other business and professional groups in this respect: through sound and responsible journalism, they can make it much less probable that any such catastrophe will befall us. Certainly President Eisenhower could have had no more important group in mind when he said: "I believe that it is high time, in this great, growing, productive land of ours, to put behind us the rash of fears that for so long have haunted some among us—fear of war, fear of unemployment, fear of ourselves—fear of the future."

We must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by fear at the very threshold of what should be—and can be—the American newspaper's "finest hour"!

Adventure in Mississippi

A Negro Reporter at the Till Trial

by Simeon Booker

Millions of words were written about the recent Till murder trial, but the most dramatic and, by far, the most significant development during the hectic week in the backwoods Mississippi community remains untold. It was an incredible interracial manhunt which located three key Negro witnesses whose testimony almost changed the course of the trial. It involved the unique cooperation of Negro and white reporters, top Negro leaders and Mississippi law enforcers working together in a hard-hitting team at a time most of the U.S. thought the Dixie state was doing nothing about gaining convictions in the case.

When I came away from the trial, I was somewhat downhearted by the acquittal verdict but I was not embittered. I was proud of the law enforcers. I personally knew they had done what they could to produce the murder evidence. As a party to this manhunt—which even I as a Chicago newsman would describe as unbelievable—I had gained great respect for three white Southern newsmen, Clark Porteous

of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and W. C. Shoemaker and Jim Featherstone of the *Jackson Daily News*. Porteous, a former Nieman Fellow, served as the main liaison agent for the operation and he did so unflinchingly in an atmosphere which was charged with tension and fear.

For the group of twelve Negro newsmen who covered the trial, it was a bitter, at times frustrating experience. As soon as we arrived in Sumner, Sheriff H. C. Strider laid down the law—there was to be no mixing with white reporters—and any violation meant ejection from the courtroom and town. The day before the trial opened, our *Jet-Ebony* crew ran into a truckload of gun-bearing whites on a truck near Money, Miss., which brought it home to us that our assignment was no good neighbor get-together. The Sheriff's edict further restricted our movement. As a result, we stayed to ourselves in the far corner of the courtroom as the antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on lowrating the South.

On the first night of the trial, we had a pleasant surprise. Two white reporters (I better not mention names) defied the state's segregation laws to breeze into our town for a visit. They gave us the first report that the trial was "a fix," that the State had obtained only two witnesses (Rev. Mose Wright and his 12-year-old son, Simeon) both of whom were at the house when Till was kidnapped. Said our guests: "The trial won't last two days. The State doesn't even know where this boy was killed. They have

Simeon Booker is on the staff of *Jet Magazine*. He was a Nieman Fellow in 1951. He covered the Till trial.

no murder weapon. They have hardly circumstantial evidence of a killing."

The white reporters also gave us some tips on conduct in the courtroom. Said they: "Take it easy. Don't get excited. They're waiting for just one incident so they can pitch out all of you."

After the pair left, we got a spine-tingling phone call from Dr. T. R. M. Howard, Mound Bayou surgeon and perhaps Mississippi's foremost Negro civil rights leader. His information: two Negro workers had vanished on a Milam-owned plantation. One was reported to have knowledge of the crime. What it was no one knew.

The next day we heard reports that other Negroes were being "jailed" or whisked away from area plantations. Why this sudden exit, we still didn't know but we had ideas. But it was not only difficult, it was dangerous to try to track down some of the stories, the section being so hostile to intruders. We continued attending the trial and awaiting further word from Dr. Howard.

Finally, on the day that the State presented its first witness, aging Rev. Mose Wright, things began to happen. A Negro plantation worker, on the pretense of going to church, made his way to Dr. Howard and told him a hair-raising account. He knew of the whereabouts of a group of Negroes who not only had seen Till being carried on a truck into a barn, but later had heard some one beaten and cry for mercy.

Immediately, Dr. Howard met with the Negro reporters and NAACP officials to plot a course of action. This was the hottest story of the trial. It would give the State just the evidence it needed. But there were major problems. There was a vast wall between the races. There were the barriers of mistrust and lack of confidence. One group argued that in the event we continued to withhold this valuable information we would be obstructing justice. But others contended that hasty action would be dangerous. There were lives at stake. In any event, the Negroes had to be taken away from their homes for their safety.

After working out plans to evacuate these potential witnesses, we agreed to call in the most reliable and sympathetic daily paper reporters covering the trial. In return for sharing this headline story, the white reporters would be asked to make the first contact with the law enforcers and prosecution. They would notify them of the new evidence. As our part of the bargain, we would then produce the witnesses.

On our original list of newsmen to be summoned were several topnotch reporters covering the trial. But Dr. Howard refused to accept the full list. He had confidence in one man—Clark Porteous, a fair and square Southerner. When he called Porteous, however, Dr. Howard didn't make this clear and Porteous (probably for company) brought along two Jackson *Daily News* reporters, James Featherstone and W. C. Shoemaker. Thus, these newsmen

became the only whites who actually knew of the behind-the-scene activity and since they were involved they modestly have refrained from disclosing their roles in later stories.

At the initial meeting, Dr. Howard, in his excitement at the turn of events, forgot to tell the white delegation that his uncovering of the "surprise witnesses" was to be kept secret until they were brought from the plantation. When notified of this, Featherstone balked and stated that he would run the story the next day. Porteous intervened and finally got Featherstone to hold up the story on condition that no other reporter would be tipped off. We agreed on these terms: the whites would have the law enforcers in the town at 8 o'clock the next evening when we would produce the witnesses.

The tight ring of reporters also included Jimmy Hicks of the *Afro-American*, Clotye Murdock and David Jackson of the *Ebony-Jet* team, and L. Alex Wilson of the *Defender*.

While excitement increased, we could hardly believe the true impact of our project until Judge Curtis Swango the next day allowed the State to delay its case for a half day. The reason: to find our new witnesses.

But our well laid plans for the 8 p.m. meeting didn't work out. The Sheriffs of two counties showed up but not the witnesses. We discovered that "some white men" had visited the plantations in question in the morning and by the time our party reached there, the witnesses had vanished, frightened to death. Later, we learned that the visitors were law enforcers who somehow had been given advance information and had probably become restless. So we had new problems—and only some twelve hours to locate our people.

Sheriff George Smith of Leflore County, fair man that he is, promptly routed the pessimism. Said he: "These witnesses have a story to tell. We've got to find them if it takes all night. We'll stop court until we find them."

Some of the law enforcers got on the phone and began calling up plantation owners warning them to produce such witnesses or face legal action.

In this manner, Mississippi's first major interracial man-hunt began. Each sheriff agreed to take a Negro and go to a plantation home. All would be visited before morning. The Negro escort would plead with the potential witnesses to testify. There would be no warrants issued. No one would be carted out of his home. We agreed to round up our people and bring them to the State enforcement agent's office in Drew.

Three of us (Porteous, Featherstone, and myself) followed Sheriff Smith in a 70-mile-an-hour chase along dusty backwood roads to get 18-year-old Willie Reed. This youth had actually seen Till on the truck and heard the beating. During the run, we got lost and headed back to Drew where in about a half hour business began to pick up.

The first Negro rounded up was middle-aged Frank Young. He refused to talk to anyone except Dr. Howard, who hadn't yet arrived at the office. So Young was allowed to go home—to be summoned on call. An hour later, when sheriffs went after him again, he was missing. He didn't turn up at his plantation home until two days after the trial.

Throughout the night, the search continued. Each person was brought in and asked to testify. All were frightened. Finally, Dr. Howard promised to take each of those who would testify to live in Chicago. This worked with three witnesses—Willie and his 74-year-old grandfather and Mandy Bradley, who later was forced to leave her cabin in the dead of night to get away from the plantation.

When the court opened in the morning, the new wit-

nesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses—the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the State's case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt.

Later, special prosecutor Robert Smith praised the work of the reporters in gathering the new witnesses, one of whom, Willie Reed, became the trial's star witness. But the reporter whose calmness and keen judgment was responsible for the smoothness of the operation was Clark Porteous. He was the reporter Mississippi's Negro leaders had faith in because of his outstanding work in the section, and he proved it again at the Till murder trial.

What's News in the World?

Does It Tell the Story of What's Happening?

By W. McNeil Lowry

We know somewhat more than we used to about the role of the press in the flow of information among peoples. UNESCO has contributed to this knowledge. In addition, the study completed in 1953 by the International Press Institute describes in detail the nature and extent of the flow of news among ten countries—India, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Western Germany, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. As a basis for this study there was daily examination of 177 newspapers and 45 global and national news agency reports. In the roughest outlines, what picture does this study present? Let us remember that we are talking about 1953.

The prime source of foreign news is, of course, the global news agency. Dependency upon this source, rather than upon a newspaper's own correspondents, is greatest in the United States and India, among the ten countries studied. In the United States, four large news agencies bring about 80,000 words a day of foreign news. To Western Europe global and national agencies combined bring about 135,000 words a day. To India, four agencies supply together about 32,000 words each day.

In the United States, the average newspaper prints a little more than four columns a day of foreign news. In Europe and India, the *average* paper prints less, though in doing so it gives a higher proportion of its space to foreign news than does its American counterpart.

From the point of view of geographical origin, foreign news is centered heavily on a few major countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and one or two others. Ranking with any of these national

sources, however, if taken together, are the seats of the international organizations that have been established since World War II—the UN, NATO and so on—and this is the most significant shift in the pattern of foreign news of the past generation.

What subjects are dealt with in the flow of news? The International Press Institute study analyzed fourteen categories or types. Five were what might be broadly called "official" news—war, politics, foreign relations, defense and economics. Five were broadly social in interest—cultural news, educational, scientific or technical news, religious news, judicial and legal news and news of general social measures. Four represented news that is personal in interest, its foreign origin more accidental than intrinsic; these categories included "human interest" news, news of crime, news of disasters and news of sports.

In the flow of news on the agency wires, and to only a somewhat smaller extent in the newspapers themselves, "official" news—war, politics, foreign relations, defense and economics—heavily dominated. Agency foreign news to U.S. newspapers, for example, was two-thirds in these categories. News of personal interest accounted for about 22 per cent of the agency coverage; broadly social and cultural news for only about 12 per cent. Similar, though mathematically different, proportions were found in the flow of news to Western Europe or to India.

If we pause now with this purely quantitative description, we find that the press, as a medium for the flow of information among peoples, deals in relatively inadequate space with the most complex issues affecting governments and their interrelations, and only marginally with either the more lasting preoccupations of foreign peoples or their daily lives.