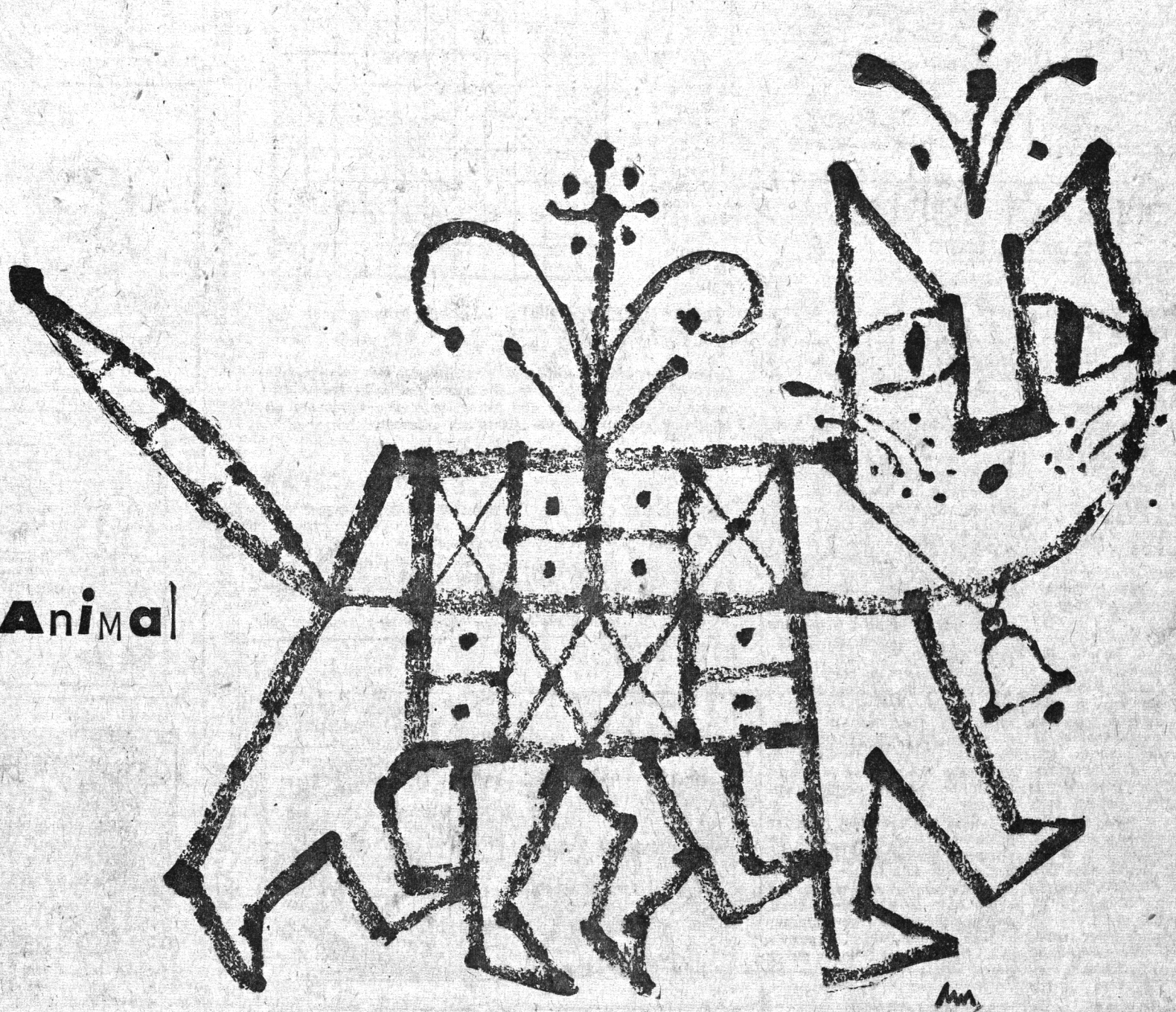


NUMBER THREE in a series on the right of the public to be informed

There's no such animal



If Lorelei and Steve Wilson will stop necking over by the copy-desk and if the other TV and movie "newshawks" will fade out of the way, maybe we can consider what newspapermen are really like.

For honestly, the people who put out your newspapers aren't like the fictional characters at all. Or at least, not very much.

The "typical" newspaperman? There's no such animal — at least not the fictional variety: press card in hat-band, blonde suspect on arm.

A newspaper, after all, is a living part of the community. And in the same way, the men who put out your newspaper are, as individuals, representative of their community. A more complete melting pot would be hard to find.

Toronto newspapermen have included Rhodes scholars — and men who never finished high school. The son of one of Canada's richest men — and people whose families were on relief two decades ago.

In the single newsroom where I work are sons of ministers, the son of a high school principal, the son of a uniformed policeman, the children of a service station operator, a farmer, a Northern Ontario hotel-keeper.

At one time or another, various of us have been a teacher, a fisherman, a hospital orderly, a law student, a drill press operator, a shipyard worker.

Four men are officers in the reserve services. One reporter is an officer of his parish's Holy Name society, another is an usher in his Anglican church. Most have families — one has 12 children, others have adopted sons and daughters. There are members of ratepayers' groups and of home and school clubs, devout church-goers and agnostics, men who think they are intellectuals and men who are and men who don't want to be, "characters" and sober sides, the odd drunk and a great many teetotalers...

The "typical" newspaperman is simply a member of society. And because society is made up of all kinds of people, it "takes all kinds" to put out a newspaper. But if, in private, newspapermen differ in interests and viewpoints, they share certain common feelings and ideas...

One is curiosity. People in general are interested in other people and in the world in which we live. As veteran reporter Greg Clark commented recently in a television interview: "To write an interesting story, the reporter must be interested." Most newspapermen are interested in the same things in which their neighbors are interested...

There's the realization, intuitive or conscious, that the newspaperman is really the representative of his readers. A reporter who was a cub a decade ago remembers the words of a veteran: "Maybe you were attracted by the 'glamor' of this job. Well, you may get to talk to important people, go to exciting places. But remember, the premier isn't really talking to you, you don't get into the press box because it's you."

"He talks to you, and you're there, because of the thousands of readers who can't be there themselves..."

There's the pride of his craft, conceived by most newspapermen to be that of informing, the presentation of news fairly, so the reader can judge fairly. A Canadian reporter remembers covering the trial, in a small Mississippi town, of two southern whites accused of murdering a 14-year-old Chicago Negro. The atmosphere was racially inflamed. In conversation, off-duty, the reporter for a small southern daily revealed himself to be, personally, a "moderate segregationist." But, in a region where white Citizens' Councils reign, his accounts of the trial were models of factual reporting. At the Canadian newspaperman's compliment, the southern reporter looked surprised, said: "Why, that's my job..."

There's the belief that the freedom to criticize is healthy. Recently I was talking to an exchange student from a Mediterranean country, now attending a U.S. university. "I've been startled," he said, "by the freedom of the North American press. The things the press has said about the U.S. rocket failure — I don't know whether they should be allowed." Is he right — or are we better served by a press which can cite examples like W. L. Mackenzie, 100 years ago, writing of a political opponent that he had some good points and "would even be a reformer if it paid well enough," down to the famous pipeline debate, when newspapers regardless of party feelings could stand on principle?

Random thoughts, expressed fumblingly, as newspapermen usually fumble when talking of their profession. Wrapped up, what is the reason a newspaperman takes pride in his profession as a means to help further the ends of the community? Perhaps because the press makes operative the public's right to know.

The New York Times phrased it this way in a recent editorial: "The test of freedom of the press is not of course wholly one of freedom to publish facts. Even more important is freedom to criticize. Finally, we cannot too often remind ourselves that freedom of the press is not intended for the convenience of those who publish newspapers, control radio or television stations, or in other ways disseminate news and ideas. Freedom of the press is for the public, the whole public, and it is inextricably connected with all the other freedoms." No matter what his paper, the newspaperman says Amen.

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John Brehl is a specialist in the field of politics, and a leading feature writer. Many people regard his coverage of the U.S. race segregation crisis to be an outstanding example of factual, unbiased reporting.