

CHAPTER III

CONTACT AND OPPORTUNITY

While censorship and privacy intercept much information at its source, a very much larger body of fact never reaches the whole public at all, or only very slowly. For there are very distinct limits upon the circulation of ideas.

A rough estimate of the effort it takes to reach "everybody" can be had by considering the Government's propaganda during the war. Remembering that the war had run over two years and a half before America entered it, that millions upon millions of printed pages had been circulated and untold speeches had been delivered, let us turn to Mr. Creel's account of his fight "for the minds of men, for the conquest of their convictions" in order that "the gospel of Americanism might be carried to every corner of the globe."¹

Mr. Creel had to assemble machinery which included a Division of News that issued, he tells us, more than six thousand releases, had to enlist seventy-five thousand Four Minute Men who delivered at least seven hundred and fifty-five thousand, one hundred and ninety speeches to an aggregate of over three hundred million people. Boy scouts delivered annotated copies of President Wilson's addresses to the householders of America. Fortnightly periodicals were sent to six hundred thousand teachers. Two hundred thousand lantern slides were furnished for illustrated lectures. Fourteen hundred and thirty-eight different designs were turned out for posters, window cards, newspaper advertisements, cartoons, seals and buttons. The chambers of commerce, the churches, fraternal societies, schools, were used as channels of distribution. Yet Mr. Creel's effort, to which I have not begun to do justice, did not include Mr. McAdoo's stupendous organization for the Liberty Loans, nor Mr. Hoover's far reaching propaganda about food, nor the campaigns of the Red Cross, the Y. M. C. A., Salvation Army, Knights of Columbus, Jewish Welfare Board, not to mention the independent work of patriotic societies, like the League to Enforce Peace, the League of Free Nations Association, the National Security League, nor the activity of the publicity bureaus of the Allies and of the submerged nationalities.

Probably this is the largest and the most intensive effort to carry quickly a fairly uniform set of ideas to all the people of a nation. The older proselyting worked more slowly, perhaps more surely, but never so inclusively. Now if it required such extreme measures to reach everybody in time of crisis, how open are the more normal channels to men's minds? The Administration was trying, and while the war continued it very largely succeeded, I believe, in creating something that might almost be called one public opinion all over America. But think of the dogged work, the complicated ingenuity, the money and the personnel that were required. Nothing like that exists in time of peace, and as a corollary there are whole sections, there are vast groups, ghettos, enclaves and classes that hear only vaguely about much that is going on.

They live in grooves, are shut in among their own affairs, barred out of larger affairs, meet few people not of their own sort, read little. Travel and trade, the mails, the wires, and radio, railroads, highways, ships, motor cars, and in the coming generation aeroplanes, are, of course, of the utmost influence on the circulation of ideas. Each of these affects the supply and the quality of information and opinion in a most intricate way. Each is itself affected by technical, by economic, by political conditions. Every time a government relaxes the

passport ceremonies or the customs inspection, every time a new railway or a new port is opened, a new shipping line established, every time rates go up or down, the mails move faster or more slowly, the cables are uncensored and made less expensive, highways built, or widened, or improved, the circulation of ideas is influenced. Tariff schedules and subsidies affect the direction of commercial enterprise, and therefore the nature of human contracts. And so it may well happen, as it did for example in the case of Salem, Massachusetts, that a change in the art of shipbuilding will reduce a whole city from a center where international influences converge to a genteel provincial town. All the immediate effects of more rapid transit are not necessarily good. It would be difficult to say, for example, that the railroad system of France, so highly centralized upon Paris, has been an unmingled blessing to the French people.

It is certainly true that problems arising out of the means of communication are of the utmost importance, and one of the most constructive features of the program of the League of Nations has been the study given to railroad transit and access to the sea. The monopolizing of cables, of ports, fuel stations, mountain passes, canals, straits, river courses, terminals, market places means a good deal more than the enrichment of a group of business men, or the prestige of a government. It means a barrier upon the exchange of news and opinion. But monopoly is not the only barrier. Cost and available supply are even greater ones, for if the cost of travelling or trading is prohibitive, if the demand for facilities exceeds the supply, the barriers exist even without monopoly.

The size of a man's income has considerable effect on his access to the world beyond his neighborhood. With money he can overcome almost every tangible obstacle of communication, he can travel, buy books and periodicals, and bring within the range of his attention almost any known fact of the world. The income of the individual, and the income of the community determine the amount of communication that is possible. But men's ideas determine how that income shall be spent, and that in turn affects in the long run the amount of income they will have. Thus also there are limitations, none the less real, because they are often self-imposed and self-indulgent.

There are portions of the sovereign people who spend most of their spare time and spare money on motoring and comparing motor cars, on bridge-whist and post-mortems, on moving-pictures and potboilers, talking always to the same people with minute variations on the same old themes. They cannot really be said to suffer from censorship, or secrecy, the high cost or the difficulty of communication. They suffer from anemia, from lack of appetite and curiosity for the human scene. Theirs is no problem of access to the world outside. Worlds of interest are waiting for them to explore, and they do not enter.

They move, as if on a leash, within a fixed radius of acquaintances according to the law and the gospel of their social set. Among men the circle of talk in business and at the club and in the smoking car is wider than the set to which they belong. Among women the social set and the circle of talk are frequently almost identical. It is in the social set that ideas derived from reading and lectures and from the circle of talk converge, are sorted out, accepted, rejected, judged and sanctioned. There it is finally decided in each phase of a discussion which authorities and which sources of information are admissible, and which not.

Our social set consists of those who figure as people in the phrase "people are saying"; they are the people whose approval matters most intimately to us. In big cities among men and women of wide interests and with the means for moving about, the social set is not so rigidly defined. But even in big cities, there are quarters

and nests of villages containing self-sufficing social sets. In smaller communities there may exist a freer circulation, a more genuine fellowship from after breakfast to before dinner. But few people do not know, nevertheless, which set they really belong to, and which not.

Usually the distinguishing mark of a social set is the presumption that the children may intermarry. To marry outside the set involves, at the very least, a moment of doubt before the engagement can be approved. Each social set has a fairly clear picture of its relative position in the hierarchy of social sets. Between sets at the same level, association is easy, individuals are quickly accepted, hospitality is normal and unembarrassed. But in contact between sets that are "higher" or "lower," there is always reciprocal hesitation, a faint malaise, and a consciousness of difference. To be sure in a society like that of the United States, individuals move somewhat freely out of one set into another, especially where there is no racial barrier and where economic position changes so rapidly.

Economic position, however, is not measured by the amount of income. For in the first generation, at least, it is not income that determines social standing, but the character of a man's work, and it may take a generation or two before this fades out of the family tradition. Thus banking, law, medicine, public utilities, newspapers, the church, large retailing, brokerage, manufacture, are rated at a different social value from salesmanship, superintendence, expert technical work, nursing, school teaching, shop keeping; and those, in turn, are rated as differently from plumbing, being a chauffeur, dressmaking, subcontracting, or stenography, as these are from being a butler, lady's maid, a moving picture operator, or a locomotive engineer. And yet the financial return does not necessarily coincide with these gradations.

Whatever the tests of admission, the social set when formed is not a mere economic class, but something which more nearly resembles a biological clan. Membership is intimately connected with love, marriage and children, or, to speak more exactly, with the attitudes and desires that are involved. In the social set, therefore, opinions encounter the canons of Family Tradition, Respectability, Propriety, Dignity, Taste and Form, which make up the social set's picture of itself, a picture assiduously implanted in the children. In this picture a large space is tacitly given to an authorized version of what each set is called upon inwardly to accept as the social standing of the others. The more vulgar press for an outward expression of the deference due, the others are decently and sensitively silent about their own knowledge that such deference invisibly exists. But that knowledge, becoming overt when there is a marriage, a war, or a social upheaval, is the nexus of a large bundle of dispositions classified by Trotter³ under the general term instinct of the herd.

Within each social set there are augurs like the van der Luydens and Mrs. Manson Mingott in "The Age of Innocence,"⁴ who are recognized as the custodians and the interpreters of its social pattern. You are made, they say, if the van der Luydens take you up. The invitations to their functions are the high sign of arrival and status. The elections to college societies, carefully graded and the gradations universally accepted, determine who is who in college. The social leaders, weighted with the ultimate eugenic responsibility, are peculiarly sensitive. Not only must they be watchfully aware of what makes for the integrity of their set, but they have to cultivate a special gift for knowing what other social sets are doing. They act as a kind of ministry of foreign affairs. Where most of the members of a set live complacently within the set, regarding it for all practical purposes as the world, the social leaders must combine an intimate knowledge of the anatomy of their own

set with a persistent sense of its place in the hierarchy of sets.

The hierarchy, in fact, is bound together by the social leaders. At any one level there is something which might almost be called a social set of the social leaders. But vertically the actual binding together of society, in so far as it is bound together at all by social contact, is accomplished by those exceptional people, frequently suspect, who like Julius Beaufort and Ellen Olenska in "The Age of Innocence" move in and out. Thus there come to be established personal channels from one set to another, through which Tarde's laws of imitation operate. But for large sections of the population there are no such channels. For them the patented accounts of society and the moving pictures of high life have to serve. They may develop a social hierarchy of their own, almost unnoticed, as have the Negroes and the "foreign element," but among that assimilated mass which always considers itself the "nation," there is in spite of the great separateness of sets, a variety of personal contacts through which a circulation of standards takes place.

Some of the sets are so placed that they become what Professor Ross has called "radiant points of conventionality."⁵ Thus the social superior is likely to be imitated by the social inferior, the holder of power is imitated by subordinates, the more successful by the less successful, the rich by the poor, the city by the country. But imitation does not stop at frontiers. The powerful, socially superior, successful, rich, urban social set is fundamentally international throughout the western hemisphere, and in many ways London is its center. It counts among its membership the most influential people in the world, containing as it does the diplomatic set, high finance, the upper circles of the army and the navy, some princes of the church, a few great newspaper proprietors, their wives and mothers and daughters who wield the scepter of invitation. It is at once a great circle of talk and a real social set. But its importance comes from the fact that here at last the distinction between public and private affairs practically disappears. The private affairs of this set are public matters, and public matters are its private, often its family affairs. The confinements of Margot Asquith like the confinements of royalty are, as the philosophers say, in much the same universe of discourse as a tariff bill or a parliamentary debate.

There are large areas of governments in which this social set is not interested, and in America, at least, it has exercised only a fluctuating control over the national government. But its power in foreign affairs is always very great, and in war time its prestige is enormously enhanced. That is natural enough because these cosmopolitans have a contact with the outer world that most people do not possess. They have dined with each other in the capitals, and their sense of national honor is no mere abstraction; it is a concrete experience of being snubbed or approved by their friends. To Dr. Kennicott of Gopher Prairie it matters mighty little what Winston thinks and a great deal what Ezra Stowbody thinks, but to Mrs. Mingott with a daughter married to the Earl of Swithin it matters a lot when she visits her daughter, or entertains Winston himself. Dr. Kennicott and Mrs. Mingott are both socially sensitive, but Mrs. Mingott is sensitive to a social set that governs the world, while Dr. Kennicott's social set governs only in Gopher Prairie. But in matters that effect the larger relationships of the Great Society, Dr. Kennicott will often be found holding what he thinks is purely his own opinion, though, as a matter of fact, it has trickled down to Gopher Prairie from High Society, transmuted on its passage through the provincial social sets.

It is no part of our inquiry to attempt an account of the social tissue. We need only fix in mind how big is the part played by the social set in our spiritual contact with the world, how it tends to fix what is admissible, and to determine how it shall be judged. Affairs within its immediate competence each set more or less

determines for itself. Above all it determines the detailed administration of the judgment. But the judgment itself is formed on patterns⁶ that may be inherited from the past, transmitted or imitated from other social sets. The highest social set consists of those who embody the leadership of the Great Society. As against almost every other social set where the bulk of the opinions are first hand only about local affairs, in this Highest Society the big decisions of war and peace, of social strategy and the ultimate distribution of political power, are intimate experiences within a circle of what, potentially at least, are personal acquaintances.

Since position and contact play so big a part in determining what can be seen, heard, read, and experienced, as well as what it is permissible to see, hear, read, and know, it is no wonder that moral judgment is so much more common than constructive thought. Yet in truly effective thinking the prime necessity is to liquidate judgments, regain an innocent eye, disentangle feelings, be curious and open-hearted. Man's history being what it is, political opinion on the scale of the Great Society requires an amount of selfless equanimity rarely attainable by any one for any length of time. We are concerned in public affairs, but immersed in our private ones. The time and attention are limited that we can spare for the labor of not taking opinions for granted, and we are subject to constant interruption.

1. George Creel, *How We Advertised America*.
2. Hence the wisdom of taking Yap seriously.
3. W. Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace*.
4. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*.
5. Ross, *Social Psychology*, Ch. IX, X, XI.
6. *Cf.* Part III

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