

How fared predictions for 20th-century papers?

by W. Joseph Campbell

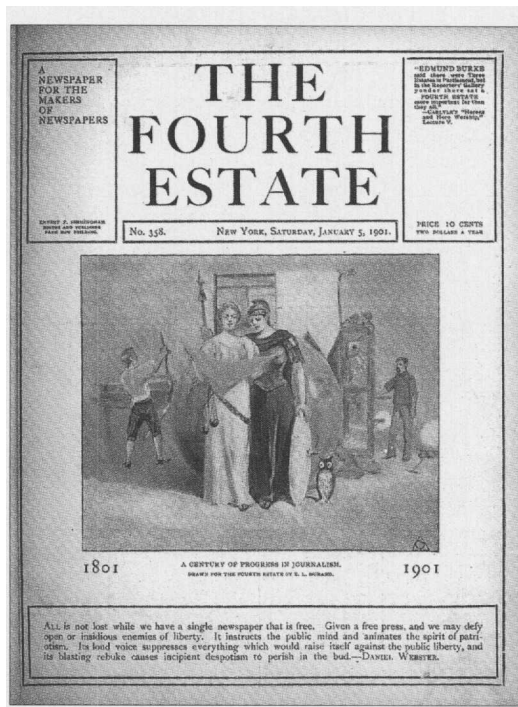
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Nearly 99 years ago, Ernest F. Birmingham, the editor and publisher of *The Fourth Estate* journalism trade publication, paused in what he called "these days of rush and hurry" to contemplate the course the profession might take during the then-new 20th century.

His predictions, which appeared in the issue dated Jan. 5, 1901, turned out to be both surprisingly perceptive and well off-target. In any event, they offer a revealing if mildly amusing sense of *fin-de-siècle* American newspapering, a time when the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer seemed ascendant, a time when lavish illustrations and prominent headlines were increasingly common features of many big-city U.S. dailies.

Birmingham, whose name appears only in passing, if at all, in textbooks of American journalism history, anticipated an increasing emphasis on brevity, a trend driven by a heavy daily flow of news and information. "Even today," he wrote, "twice as much matter is received in a large [newspaper] office as can possibly be used. This tremendous pressure on the columns of the daily paper will make condensation absolutely indispensable."

Such an emphasis would mean "trifling occurrences will not be noted," he wrote. "Only criminal news of the most important character will be printed. Column articles will be reduced to paragraphs, and long editorials will be conspicuous by their absence." He added, "The newspaper that suits the bustling American best is that which gives all the news expressed in terse, pointed sentences in the briefest possible manner."



Less accurately, however, Birmingham wrote, "It is not at all probable that the model newspaper of the new century will exceed 10 or 12 pages."

One of his predictions certainly can be seen as strikingly prescient. He seems to have anticipated what American journalists at the end of the 20th century might well recognize as the online editions of newspapers, accessible by laptop computers.

"It is probable," Birmingham wrote, "that the new century will produce a compact mechanical device by the aid of which every subscriber will be supplied with newspapers printed in his own home, like the tape of a stock ticker."

In any case, as Birmingham noted, "improvements in the devices for the transmission of dispatches by wire are constantly being made, inventors having already

perfected an apparatus by which 100 words a minute can be sent."

Such devices lent support to a commonly expressed feeling that the end of the 19th century was a hurried — and hurrying — time. Birmingham evoked such sentiments in describing the demands that then faced the editor of a metropolitan daily newspaper:

"The thousand and one questions he must answer daily and the problems he must solve keep his brain on the stretch continuously.

"So while he would like to sit down for an hour and let his thoughts travel back over the achievements accomplished in his own world in the hundred years that have gone by, or to the century stretching before us, he cannot do so for lack of time."

Birmingham was not hesitant to offer or to pass along short-term predictions, either. In the final issue of *The Fourth Estate* of the 19th century, he addressed the growing popularity of illustrations in daily newspapers. "Careful observers of matters journalistic," he wrote, "have expressed their opinion that the prodigal use of pictures that now marks the most popular of the penny newspapers has become such a nuisance that a reaction is certain to follow in the near future.

"The art or news editors in their efforts to provide subjects for illustrations have fallen into the very bad habit of illustrating the most commonplace and unimportant events." In 1926, Birmingham sold *Fourth Estate*, which was merged a year later with *Editor & Publisher*. ■

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