

“The Woman’s Club and the Press, 8 April 1902.” In Chicago Woman’s Club Minutes, 1901-1902. Chicago History Museum. Chicago Woman’s Club Records, 1876-1998. Box 21, Folder 4.

The relations existing at present between the Chicago Woman’s Club and the Press are unfortunate. In saying this I do not wish to be understood as criticizing the attitude of the Club, but they are unfortunate, because they are not cordial.

The Chicago Woman’s Club is a semi-public body committed in a measure to work of a public character. The Press is one of the most powerful factors in modern civilization; it is also an ally in all worthy efforts to benefit mankind and the community. Such an organization as ours is more powerful for good with the good-will and co-operation of the Press than without them. Therefore, any relations that are not most cordial are unfortunate.

To consider the situation with fairness and intelligence it is necessary to look at it from the standpoint of both the Woman’s Club and the Press. [sic] Circumstances have given me a considerable acquaintance with newspaper offices and newspaper people, and I think I can give you a fair idea of their attitude.

Let us first consider the situation from the Press standpoint, and endeavor for a moment to put ourselves in the place of the newspaper people.

The newspaper people are not humble folk. They take themselves very seriously. They believe the newspaper to be the biggest thing on earth. They consider it privileged to take a hand in everything in “the earth beneath” if not in “the heavens above and the waters under the earth.” They think that any semi-public body which decides to do without the co-operation of the Press in this Twentieth Century is a relic of the Dark Ages. They mean well towards all good work, and cannot understand why their aid should not be accepted with eagerness and gratitude.

Taking themselves so seriously, newspaper people are naturally sensitive. Enthusiastic loyalty to his paper is the hall-mark of the newspaper man; from the reporter to the editor-in-chief. He resents bitterly anything that can be construed as a slight upon the paper. To his mind, representing the paper, he is the paper. He often carries this idea to excess, and goes around with a chip on his shoulder. The logical outcome of this mental attitude is, that any refusal to give up the news; the whole news, and everything in addition to the news, is an affront to the paper.

His attitude is this: "I am fair and unprejudiced, and know my business. I am a better judge of what ought to be printed than you can possibly be. Tell me everything about it, and leave it to me to print what is right." He recognizes the right of the private individual to refuse to discuss private matters for publication, but he has not patience with this attitude when assumed by a semipublic body. Secret meetings he looks upon with suspicion and contempt.

This is all very fine in theory; in practice it does not always work with satisfaction to all concerned. The reason is, that newspaper people are human like the rest of us. When the newspaper man feels resentment his resentment takes its natural course, and produces the usual effects.

Let us by way of illustration imagine the inside workings of a newspaper office when the club reporter comes in and reports to the City Editor, that the Woman's Club has shut its doors to the reporters. The City Editor goes to the Managing Editor and says, "What do you think, the Woman's Club has shut down on the Press. What shall I do about it?" "Pass 'em up," promptly answers the Managing Editor in the expressive language of the newspaper office. "Better have the club man watch them, though, and if they really do anything, play it up. Otherwise ignore 'em. I guess we can stand it if they can."

So the City Editor throws all the club notices in the waste basket; gives the club reporter emphatic instructions, and repeats them to the society reporter. The result is, that every reporter in town is on the lookout for some story about the Woman's Club, just exactly because the Woman's Club is understood to wish to have nothing printed. If anyone stumbles on to a story, he gives it to his city editor as quickly as the telephone will carry it. If it is worth printing at all, and especially if there is a chance to poke a little fun at the Club, the City Editor "plays it up." Then if there comes a time when there is really interesting news, the newspaper people spare no pains to get it. That's the human nature of it.

But even without this element of human nature in the situation, the standpoint of the Club and of the Press are radically different. The cry all through a newspaper office is "News! News! News!" It is the City Editor's business to get news—bright, entertaining, readable news. He may personally be overcome with admiration at the work of the club department study classes, but he has no space to devote to a report of their proceedings, simply because from his standpoint they are not news.

But from our standpoint these reports are often woefully inadequate. It seems to us as if the reporters merely came to pick out something odd or laughable, and to pay no attention to the serious and important features of our work. We would like to have them go to the other extreme—ignore the things they minimize. But that is not the way things go in a newspaper office. We may not approve, but we cannot change their idea of the relative value of news.

If there is any one class of meetings from our standpoint that should be entirely behind closed doors, so far as the press is concerned, it is the distinctly literary meeting. It is no place for a reporter. The reporter is sent for news, and is after a story, and there is neither in a literary program. It is then that he grasps at anything approaching a feature, and the real worth of the paper and discussion is, of course, ignored.

We should remember, that men's organizations are treated in exactly the same way. Many a convention in Chicago, important enough, but dull, never gets more than a brief mention, unless something out of the ordinary occurs. An ordinary banquet nowadays is handled perfunctorily, if, indeed, it gets any report at all. Where the occasion is sufficiently important to warrant extracts from addresses, you will notice that the brightest bits are picked out and the preference is given to the amusing rather than to the heavy important. Men have long ago given up meeting or dining behind closed doors. Not one semi-public body in one hundred attempts it. If it does, the Press keeps after it till it gets the proceedings. Our own experience shows that a body of reporters, working in concert, will get a pretty correct idea of what is going on behind closed doors. Of course they often get things wrong, but the wonder is, that they get things so nearly right.

I regret to say, that the Chicago Woman's Club is exceedingly unpopular with the reporters. To use their own words, it is considered "the meanest club in the city." They get into trouble both with the club officers and with their City Editors over its meetings. And the situation is getting more strained all the time. We have scarcely a friend in any office in town. Right here a word should be said about the functions of the Press Committee under the present conditions. There is an impression among certain members of the Club, that it is the province of the Press Committee to give out all the proceedings of interest. As a matter of fact, the Press Committee has been made aware most emphatically, that it is not expected to give out news that would be considered of any value of the newspapers. In fact, the Press Committee, instead of being a happy compromise, has proved merely an aggravation of the situation. Even if the Club turns over a new leaf, and changes its policy, it will take sometime to restore cordial relations.

I have gone into this matter at considerable length, because we must all see that it is important, and that, like anything else, it has two sides. Officially, as Chairman of the Press Committee, I have no recommendation to offer. But I should feel, that I was doing less than my full duty to the Club if I did not urge upon you the necessity of doing something to relieve the situation. Officially I should much prefer to be in harmony with the Press. Surely if the Club takes up this matter in earnest, a way can be found to make all smooth.

Personally, as contrasted with officially, I have some ideas on the situation as a whole. Here again I am not prepared to say what I would do to relieve the situation, but I am very sure that I want the situation relieved.

My experience with reporters has been both pleasant and otherwise. There have been times when I've thought they were principally otherwise, but for the time being I've forgotten both, as they have no place in this troublesome question.

As an individual member of the Club I am of the opinion, that we should abandon our present policy. The policy of the club on this question 15 years ago, and the ever-recurring, but never-convincing argument in favor of the Fortnightly policy, are of no weight. The purpose and work of a club like the Fortnightly, which is wholly a social and literary organization, and not in any sense a semi-public body, are so totally different from ours, that the same policy does not apply to both. In the last 15 years the relations between the public and the press have undergone a radical change. If we take the stand of 15 years ago and maintain that the press has no concern without doings, we stand still, while the rest of the world has moved on. Almost without exception, nowadays, the press is made welcome wherever it cares to go.

It is also true, that the scope of the work of the Woman's Club has increased in the last 15 years, and it has now become to manifestly a semi-public body that a new policy should be adopted. Of course, it might be that it would be a failure—that we are not ready for it, but we could try, and at its worst, it would undoubtedly be better than it has been on many occasions in the last few years.

But one may say: "There is no hope of improvements while the present reporters are assigned to the work." This does not follow by any means. A change of policy on our part, would naturally be followed by a corresponding change on their part. Besides this is taking a narrow view of the question. If we make the change, it should be given a fair trial. If it does not succeed with the present reporters, there is no reason why it should not succeed with their successors.

A strong point in favor of the "Open Door" policy is, that by giving the reporters the opportunity to secure their own material by attending the meetings, any false statements or misrepresentation on their part can be dealt with by the club directly through the Editors. But there is no redress when the reporter's only source of information now lies in the conversations overheard in the halls, or the confidential talks with club members after the meetings. Give the reporter the opportunity to hear for himself, and then enforce the By-Law which states, that "no reports, etc." which can only be enforced by each member honorably living up to the law, and I believe the present situation would rapidly improve.

As things stand now the newspapers will ignore us when they can, and exaggerate when they print anything. I would have the Chicago Woman's Club rise superior to the little annoyances, and take its changes along with other important semi-public bodies. I would have it proceed on the proposition, that the Press is a powerful friend under ordinary circumstances and conditions. In my judgment the Chicago Woman's Club can better afford to be laughed at once in a while, than to do without the aid of the press, to say nothing of a lack of good will that amounts nearly to open hostility.

Personally I feel, that if the work we are doing is of real value, it will not only stand the publicity the press may give it, but it will be assisted by this publicity.

(Signed) Mary Belle King Sherman

Mrs. Woolley moved the report for adopted with appreciation of the exceedingly fair and dear way in which the question was presented. Carried.