article in the *Rural Repository*, a magazine published in Hudson, "combines embellishment and utility in happy proportions [and] is usually considered a very valuable appendage to the gentleman." What a watch did for an individual, a public clock did for a village or town. A New Yorker who visited Catskill during the 1820s was much impressed when he beheld a church steeple with "an excellent toned bell" and next to it, "a town clock . . . which strikes the hours regularly."

As the prices of clocks and watches fell, their snob appeal diminished. By the 1820s, a majority of rural households in the valley had clocks or watches, and their utility as timepieces was becoming paramount. Comments about the importance of timeliness and punctuality became more and more common in business and agriculture. Time "increasingly became a public preoccupation in mid-Hudson Valley towns," Bruegel says. "[In] an economy whose division of labor was growing more complex, clocks and watches served to organize the processes of production and distribution and to open the community outward."

By midcentury, the valley's inhabitants had acquired "a new sense of time," Bruegel says. It no longer seemed, as it had when the century began, "an abundant resource that suffered squandering." Instead, as novel measures of productivity came into use, time became "a scarce [resource] that required husbanding."

PRESS & MEDIA

The End of Editorials?

"Climbing Down from the Ivory Tower" by Judith Sheppard, in *American Journalism Review* (May 1995), 8701 Adelphi Rd., Adelphi, Md. 20783.

The loss of authority evident in so many American institutions seems finally to have reached that stronghold of certitude, the newspaper editorial page. "Lately there's been a real sense of self-doubt that's crept up on many editorial boards," says Jane Eisner, editorial page editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "We're questioning whether it's right to take stands and speak in one voice."

At the *Spokane* [Washington] *Spokesman-Review*, editors have ceased questioning: they've muzzled themselves. "We took our space to 'be God' and gave [readers] the space. Less God space, more people space." So says Rebecca Nappi, a former *USA Today* political reporter (who says she hates politics) who is now an editorial board member and an "interactive editor" at the *Spokesman-Review*. Editorials have been cut from 13 a week to eight, are signed by the writer "for the editorial board," and sometimes are even rebutted, in a feature called "Both Sides." The newspaper's impersonal institutional voice is no longer heard. Syndicated columnists have been cut back. More space is given over to readers' letters and to longer pieces by local people that "are solicited, polished, and sometimes virtually ghost-written" by the "interactive editors," according to Sheppard, a former newspaper reporter who teaches journalism at Auburn University.

Few newspapers have gone as far as Spokane's, but many have moved in that direction. "Today," Jay Bookman, an editor at the *Atlanta Constitution*, has written, "the editorial page (at this and other papers) is more a debating society than a pulpit. . . . Editorials are no longer meant to be the final word on a subject; part of their purpose now is to set the agenda for further debate."

"But will editors who are so acutely attuned to readers remain independent enough to take unpopular editorial stands?" asks Sheppard. "Most great moments in

American editorial page history rose out of opposition to majority points of view." Indeed, more than once, courageous editors have helped alter the course of history. During the 1950s, the *Atlanta Constitution's* Ralph McGill and Hazel Brannon Smith of the *Lexington* [Mississippi] *Advertiser*, crusading at great personal and financial risk, helped turn the tide against segregation in the South. That is not a tradition, Sheppard suggests, to be abandoned lightly in the name of letting the people speak.

Mencken as Newsman

Like Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner, Stephen Crane, and Carl Sandburg, among others, H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) began his writing career at a newspaper. Unlike them, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., an emeritus professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, observes in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 1995), Mencken remained a newspaperman all his working life.

It certainly wasn't because of a passion for covering the news, as such. He soon tired of that—as did most of the young men and women who wrote for newspapers en route to literary careers. He ceased to take satisfaction in getting out a daily paper, did not wish to direct news coverage, lay out pages, write headlines, battle the composing room. From about 1908 onward Mencken was a commentator, not a reporter, and for the remainder of his days on earth it was the expression of his opinion, not the gathering of news, that concerned him.

He remained a newspaperman because he liked to sound off, to make a noise. In that respect he did not, in one sense, differ from any other person who has written for a living, whether fiction or fact, prose or poetry. . . .

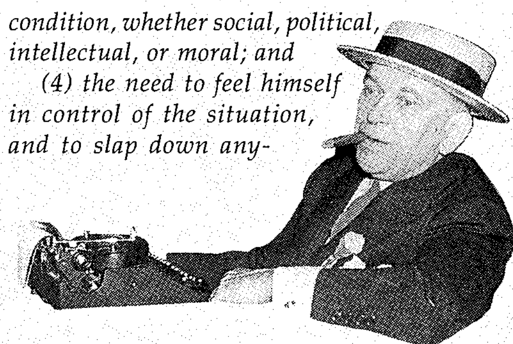
But there were particular compulsions at work within him that made it vital that he do his sounding-off in newsprint. . . . These were:

(1) the need to demonstrate that although possessing intense artistic leanings he was no dreamy esthete but an eminently practical and worldly-wise fellow;

(2) the need and wish to smite self-righteous authority-figures;

(3) the need to insist upon the absolute futility of any attempt to ameliorate the human condition, whether social, political, intellectual, or moral; and

(4) the need to feel himself in control of the situation, and to slap down anything and anybody appearing to menace that control.



Such needs existed not in separation but in creative relation to and as part and parcel of each other. For Mencken, however, their combined thrust meant that he couldn't cut loose from his role as a newspaper columnist—not even in the 1920s when the American Mercury *was in full flower and he was happily battling prohibitionists, book and magazine censors, anti-evolutionists, American Legionnaires, the British Empire, Calvin Coolidge, chiropractors, believers in Christian Endeavor, and all other Right Thinking people everywhere. Each Monday his [Baltimore]* Evening Sun *column kept the animals stirred up and reasserted his presence on the home front.*