
SOCIETY

Fischer, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, analyzed a survey of 1,050 residents of 50 northern California communities ranging from small rural towns to central San Francisco neighborhoods. He found that, more strikingly than most, city people inhabit two worlds—one public and the other private. Surrounded by a “mosaic” of social and ethnic groups and often encountering unconventional, potentially threatening characters, city dwellers learn to “type” strangers and keep unknowns at a distance.

Indeed, fully 31 percent of the central-city households approached by Berkeley pollsters refused to be interviewed, compared with 20 percent or less elsewhere. (However, once admitted into urban homes, surveyors found their hosts just as cooperative as small-town folk.) Fischer also discovered that urbanites were far more apt to cite groups (blacks, gays, “older people”) as the best or worst aspects of their neighborhoods. City dwellers were the most likely to distrust “most people,” but they were no more likely than exurbanites to feel that way about their own neighbors. In fact, they reported chatting casually with neighbors and borrowing small items from them just as frequently as did small-town residents.

City dwellers see their relatives less frequently, but they socialize more often with friends. Fischer found no differences in the closeness of small-town and urban friendships. Nor did he turn up any correlations between urban living and “feeling upset, nervous, or depressed,” “feeling angry,” or “feeling pleased and happy.”

Life in the city, Fischer concludes, estranges individuals from “unknown, socially dissimilar” people—without affecting their capacity to form deep, long-lasting relationships.

PRESS & TELEVISION
Journalism
Uber Alles?

“The Imperial Media” by Joseph Kraft in *Commentary* (May 1981), American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

“A cross between a bootlegger and a whore”—if this description from Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s *Front Page* (1928) ever did fit reporters, it certainly does not now. But even as newsmen in the national media have gained in earnings, status, and influence, their credibility has nose-dived among “Middle Americans.” In response, many journalists have embraced a “self-serving”—and indefensible—“First Amendment ideology.” So charges Kraft, a syndicated columnist.

Most newsmen concede that complete objectivity is impossible. But many have defended a reporter’s autonomy by maintaining that the sheer number of news organizations and their intense rivalries cancel out any journalist’s biases. However, Kraft counters, this defense is valid only if journalists comprise a diverse group. The need for special-

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ists who can cover increasingly complex issues has created a press corps that is "better educated, more highly-paid, more sure of itself" on average than are most Americans. As a result, says Kraft, reporters now hold the attitudes of most affluent, highly educated Americans—including skepticism of military and law enforcement officials and a receptivity to minority complaints. They tend to dismiss Middle America's anxieties about gun control and abortion as "disconnected single issues." The reaction has been unmistakable: Public confidence in the print media, for instance, fell from 24 percent in 1975 to 19 percent in 1980, according to a Harris poll.

Lately, journalists have contended that "the news" is so important to America's well-being that reporters' rights supersede everyone else's. In 1971, for example, the *Stanford Daily News* unsuccessfully argued in the courts that the Constitution shields newspaper offices from police searches even when the information sought is crucial to law enforcement. In the 1978 *Farber* case, *New York Times* attorneys contended, in vain, that a reporter's right to keep his sources confidential outweighs a criminal defendant's right to confront his accuser.

The First Amendment and freedom of the press are precious, Kraft writes, "but not transcendent in value." Only by dropping their self-righteous posture and acknowledging competing claims will journalists regain public support.

H. L. Mencken, Closet Feminist

"H. L. Mencken and Equal Rights for Women" by Edward A. Martin, in *The Georgia Review* (Spring 1981), University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. 30602.

An avowed connoisseur of voluptuous, compliant women and a confirmed bachelor most of his life, Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956) encouraged his reputation as one of America's most piggish male chauvinists. Yet much of his locker-room rhetoric was a satirical put-on, masking ardently pro-feminist views, contends Martin, an English professor at Middlebury College (Vt.).

Starting out as a reporter and editorial writer in Baltimore, Mencken emerged in the Roaring Twenties as one of America's leading cultural commentators. It was a period when sexual tensions had flared, notes Martin. The Nineteenth Amendment gave women the vote in 1920. The free-living flapper was in vogue. Mencken often lampooned the sexual revolution, paying leering tribute to flappers and buxom waitresses in his writings, and ridiculing the stridence of the suffragettes. In his *In Defense of Women* (1918), he burlesqued the absurdities of male-female relationships by showering the fair sex with outrageously lavish praise.

Yet the same Mencken, in a more serious vein, described his feminine ideal as "emancipated from convention and superstition . . . the full equal of her man." He endorsed women's suffrage in his editorials. Privately, he associated with independent, professional women, such as Sara Haardt, the writer whom he married. And as book critic for *The*