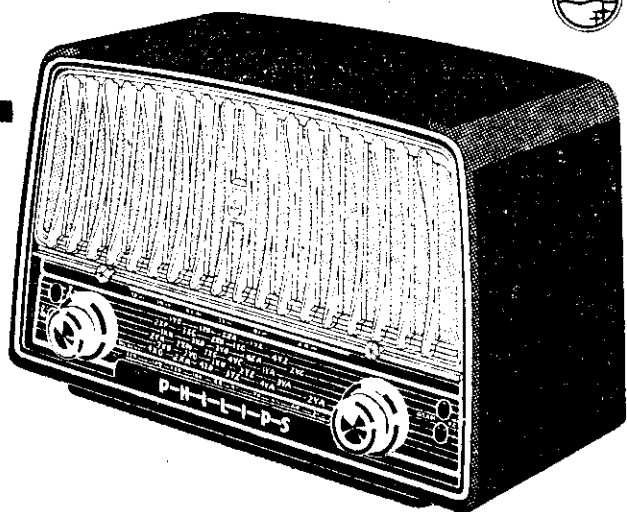


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Dinosaurs in Fleet Street

WHEN the weekly magazine *Picture Post* ceased publication a few weeks ago, and reports were received of possible mergers between London newspapers, correspondents began to refer to an "economic crisis" in British journalism. All the reports mentioned television. There are other factors: the price of newsprint, and production costs generally; but the effect of commercial television, especially on advertising policy, seems to be decisive. The money to be spent by advertisers is not unlimited, and if part of it is spent on television it must be diverted from newspapers. In the scramble for what is left, the prizes go to papers at two extremes — the mass circulation dailies, and papers (like *The Times*) with what is known as "quality-readership." A similar trend has been noticed in the United States, where an old-established weekly, *Colliers*, still with a large circulation, had to close down. Without advertising, they die.

This means that an old struggle has been intensified. There can be little doubt that it will end with the survival of a few papers, most of them produced for entertainment rather than for news. Yet at that point the survivors may find their gains to be smaller than had been expected. They may still have to fight among themselves for the final monopolies, rather like the dinosaurs in their struggle for living room in a world to which they could not adapt themselves, and perhaps with similar results. For the millions who read lightly, or merely blink at the headlines before they turn to the strip cartoons and the racing intelligence, may be passive to the point of docility; but they need not be faithful, and their habits are changing. They are concerned increasingly with images; and no matter how frantically a newspaper dresses out its pages, and splashes them with pictures, it cannot compete in visual attraction

with a screen on which the pictures move and come to life. Meanwhile, the papers which remain true to their functions, and are in the great tradition of English journalism, are being squeezed out of the race. And this is a tragedy which will later have clearer implications. Without a strong provincial press, there can be no training ground from which a man may go fully equipped to Fleet Street. Accuracy in the treatment of facts, and responsibility in comment, are found most often in the provinces or in the few national dailies which stay faithful to provincial standards. They are values not greatly prized where the clamour is loudest.

Good newspapers like *The Times* will not die easily, and indeed may outlive some of their flamboyant rivals; but it is hard to see how they can keep their present character unless the economics of production will allow them to serve a modest public. In the strange new world that most of us see now as if it were a mirage of chromium towers and plastic bubbles on a flat skyline, newspapers as we know them today may cease to exist. A generation is growing up which is learning to absorb images passively through the eyes. Without words, and the effort of imagination they demand, the habit of thought is weakened. It is true that thought has never been widely shared; but the dream of an educated community, consciously moving towards adult standards, is fainter than it used to be. In a scientific age the authority of the word must persist. Yet those who feel and express it are likely to become more noticeably a minority, and they will have great power, perhaps too much. It is not merely an economic crisis we are witnessing in overseas journalism, but a social mutation; and in the next few years, unless there are interruptions, we in New Zealand will feel its impact.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 21, 1957.