

'Right To Know' The Sources, Too

Several times recently a reporter has gone to jail for failing to reveal the source of his information. Some newspapers have treated this turn of events like the second coming of the British. Charging off like Paul Revere to rally the local citizenry to protect their freedom, they consider this a new assault on their constitutional rights.

The question is what rights and whose rights? Is it the public's right to know or the reporter's right to say what he wishes to say without being accountable to anyone? Some advocates seem to say that if a special class of citizen is given the right to print facts and alleged facts without saying where he got those facts, civilization will descend into darkness.

I am not so certain I go along with all of this.

I am sure the public, and that means all of us, needs protection from wrong doing somewhere and somehow but I am not sure that the press or the other so-called media is the place to get it.

The grand jury system was set up to give the public, through citizens chosen fairly, the right to look into possible cases of wrong-doing. That is all the protection we need. I cannot think of a system more fair. It may not always work but until someone devises a better system we ought to try to live with it.

Let us admit that no group is 100 per cent fair, honest and well-meaning—neither newspaper peo-

ple, nor professors, nor football players, nor medical doctors. In all walks of life there are individuals who take unfair advantage of special privilege, who will twist facts to reach a selfish end and who will not hesitate to harm others if they can gain advantage. Much as we dislike to so concede it is, unfortunately, true.

Now in the past decade I have seen a half dozen feature articles in well-known newspapers citing as facts things I, personally, knew were not true. A recent newspaper article intended to discredit the Football Hall of Fame cited: "spokesman for. . . ." and "a well-known source. . . ." The citations were untruths. Either the source or the reporter was not telling the truth and should have been exposed.

Similar articles on a proposed business merger recently published contained outright falsehoods which were damaging or libelous. But there seems to be no easy recourse to those who were harmed.

Now, should not all news statements made as facts be indeed factual? If they are not, should there not be some redress? Should not the perpetrator be required to show proof? Is it sufficient to say "that is what I was told, but I won't tell you who told me"? To allow that protection allows someone to destroy a reputation without even a chance of a defense. As a matter of fact, how can one know that there actually was a "reliable source"? Might not the whole thing be a fabrication, formulated for unknown purposes but protected under the figment of "protecting my sources of information"?

I cherish the right to know. But I also cherish the right to know who makes false allegations and the right to defend myself against untruths.

I cannot believe that any class of individuals, newspaper men or scholars, has any special rights to destroy with immunity. Sometime, somewhere we all have to stand up and prove our alleged facts are indeed facts. That is what it is all about. If rumors get started and there seems to be some grain of truth in them, a grand jury can convene and by demanding the facts from everyone concerned either clear a person's reputation or redress a wrong. If a monkey wrench is to be thrown into the system by establishing that there is a certain class of people who never have to account for what they say, the system won't work. Then we will lose one of our constitutional rights—the right to defend ourselves against falsehood.

The issue is not a simple one. There are ramifications here that most of us do not foresee. The resolution of the problem is not a simple one. Let us hope it is not resolved until all viewpoints and consequences have been examined.