



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Authors, columnists and editors know the written word exerts profound influence on the human mind. Simply putting a thing into print, even though it is obviously untrue, gives it a ring of authority and credibility.

This is one of the reasons writers (whether they be writers of books, magazines, newspapers or pamphlets) are under some kind of divine obligation to be agonizingly truthful. Propaganda is one-sided and slanted. Columnists are opinionated. But reporting must always be fair and factual. And, as any newspaper editor knows, there are some times when even facts must not be printed, for they are either incomplete or will cause harm to innocent people.

Several years ago a friend was arrested on a charge of being lewd and lascivious. A near hysterical mother had come into the police station and charged him with molesting her little boy. The newspapers printed the story, and although they were careful to state the charges were "alleged," the damage was done. Later the mother admitted she had the wrong man and publicly apologized, but it was too late. Eventually the man had to move to another city.

In England, if a man's character is in question, his friends will often "put out the word" on him. The purpose is to exonerate. Sadly to say, in America "putting out the word" on somebody usually means just the opposite.

For many years to come, I'm sure, political experts will be discussing just how much affect columnist Jack Anderson's false labeling of Thomas Eagleton as a public drunk had to do with the former vice-presidential candidate's withdrawal. Even though Anderson retracted his statement and publicly apologized, the stigma remained. The powerful influence created by putting a thing into print is a factor that should never be underestimated by those with pens.

Columnist Jack Fay, who shares this page with me, is sometimes labeled as a "labeler." But I've read Jack's column ever since it started appearing and even though he (and his friend, Charlie the Squirrel) are opinionated, they're fair. Calling a spade a spade is quite different from calling a rake a spade.

Of course, some people are going to read their ideas into what is written, regardless of the writer's meaning. Such was the case with one of my relatives, a dedicated Communist-hater. Somehow she began to believe that the Communists had a secret plan to destroy America by putting poison into canned foods. It was a slow acting poison which would eventually wipe out all freedom-loving canned food eaters. The labels on the cans, she said, were all marked with a code so the Communists would know which ones to buy and which ones to avoid. The non-poison cans (or was it the poison cans) were marked with a tiny "C" with a circle around it.

I rejected her idea. Yet as I browsed through the grocery stores I began to notice that a few cans did indeed have a tiny circled "C" on the label, on the top near the seam of the paper. Even though I knew the concept was absurd, I couldn't help but wonder if I shouldn't start buying only the marked (or was it unmarked) canned goods — just in case.

It just goes to point out the power of something in print, even something as insignificant as a mark on a label. During the elections which have just taken place, many charges have been hurled against America's newspapers, but Thomas Jefferson's concept that he'd rather live in a country without government than a country without newspapers, is still true. Some reporting has been slanted, and some journalists are yellow, but most are fair. And our nation is what it is today largely because publishers and editors solemnly realize the influence of the printed word.