First Internationals: IUPA and PCW (1894–1936)

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Introduction

In the fall of 1898, a French and an American journalist took stock of the changing nature of the press of the world. ‘With the perfection of the printing press’, they wrote, ‘with the telegraph and the telephone, with the transformation of the public spirit, more and more eager to be informed, a metamorphosis is taking place: polemics has been relegated to second place, and news has ascended to first’. As a result of this revolution, stressed Albert Bataille and Paul Céker, journalism had become a profession and a career, ‘the job of thousands of brave people who lay no claim to genius but make a living from work that is honourable, regular, often painful, sometimes dangerous’. It was time, they thought, for journalists to correct the public impression that they were recruited among ‘the rootless, those who had failed in other professions, the ne’er-do-wells’.

This appeal from more than a century ago for increased professionalism among journalists was directed by Bataille and Céker to the world’s first international journalism organization, the International Union of Press Associations (IUPA), meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, for the fifth International Congress of the Press. This chapter deals with how the union made efforts to professionalize journalists on the transnational level between 1894 and 1914, and it also looks at how an American-led successor of the IUPA, the Press Congress of the World (PCW), dealt with the same issue during World War I and in the 1920s.

Both organizations have received little attention from historians, possibly because of their lack of concrete achievements. (Even the members of the IUPA complained at times about that lack, contending that the main activities of their congresses were socializing and...
‘burying’ questions in committee for further study.)⁴ Given the purpose of this study, however, assessing the effectiveness of each association is not as important as viewing them as fora for debate, similar to the magazines and journals examined in histories of American media criticism.⁵

For sources on that debate and on the organizations themselves, the study used official proceedings and publications, newspaper and magazine accounts by journalists active in the associations, trade journal reports, and, in the case of the PCW, the personal papers of its founder.⁶ As the subsequent discussion will show, professionalization was an issue of great concern to each of the first two international organizations of journalists, but the way they dealt with it reflected the different views of the professionalization process in America and Europe. The PCW, initiated from the United States, tended to frame its discussion of the issue as one of education and, more importantly, individual standards. The IUPA, dominated by European countries, concerned itself primarily with drawing boundaries against other social groups and raising the status of journalism in the eyes of outsiders. In the case of both associations, however, the professionalization issue arose as a result of a changing work environment, to which the chapter first turns.

The professionalization of journalists has generally been seen as a response to changes in the way newspapers operated, generated revenue and reached readers.⁷ Describing these changes in the British press, Harry Christian uses the term ‘commercialization’, which includes the shift from individual to corporate ownership, the ascendancy of advertising as the main source of revenue rather than subscriptions and political subsidies, and the division of labour separating journalists from newspaper proprietorship.⁸ With such structural changes came changes in newspaper content and function, such as a stress on gathering and publishing news and taking a largely non-political stance. Due to varying levels of industrial development and, to some degree, differing political and cultural traditions, press commercialization occurred at different times in different countries, with the United States leading the way, followed by Britain and France. By the time the first International Congress of the Press met in 1894, the press of other European nations had begun assuming the characteristics of commercialization.⁹

Journalists at the time were conscious of the process of commercialization and also acknowledged that its progress varied between countries. America’s lead was generally acknowledged although not always hailed as beneficial. Two British journalists speaking at an international press