NINETEEN NINETY TWO was a bad year for the Meejah. One of the worst, in fact, which is saying a great deal. The public regard for the press appeared to have reached an all-time low by the time Christmas arrived – although it has to be said that the press’s regard for the public was not greatly higher. There were times during last year when newspapers in particular – though television cannot be excluded – appeared to treat their readers (and viewers) with a measure of complacent contempt. The coverage of the April general election by some national newspapers was a clear example of this.

Whether 1993 will produce a different and more encouraging scene remains to be discovered – though so far the omens are not good. Television is still settling into its new arena after spawning so many new names and labels and there are continuing sounds of fatigued discontent echoing through the BBC's corridors. Calcutt Mark Two contained no surprises to anyone who had witnessed the style and behaviour of some newspapers in recent times – but we all know that there are no simple solutions to the problems of privacy invasion; at least no solutions which can easily satisfy the public clamour and retain a genuine freedom for journalists to probe into genuine suspicions about the misuse of power and influence.

Even more troublesome is the creeping belief in many areas of the public mind that we are getting “too much news”; that there is “too much to read...”; “too much to absorb”. There was a satirical piece in one of the most serious broadsheet newspapers recently arguing that the real problem with the Meejah was not about invasion of privacy or the lack of substance in journalism but that “we have too much news on too much television and in too many newspapers”. The argument, tongue in cheek perhaps, was that the way to greater sanity would be to have less of all of it.

There is indeed some evidence of a real decline in newspaper reading and, indeed, in reading of “serious issues” in general. The statistics inform us that we are now reading fewer newspapers than ten years ago. The reason for this appears to be because more people are watching television and that the visual image has effectively hypnotised the nation into a kind of increasing illiteracy. The evidence for this is far from wholly convincing – but let us assume for a moment that there is something in the argument.

Ten years ago (according to research) 58 per cent regarded their main source of world news as television against 27 per cent for newspapers. The
latest figures suggest that proportion has changed to 80 per cent against about 20 per cent; in short the gap has doubled. If these figures are accurate – and who can really be sure? – then newspapers have a hard road to travel. They will be tempted to move still further toward a subsidiary role as an adjunct to television. That would be wrong; but the temptation to do so will be increasingly strong.

Of course the whole argument really concerns far wider problems; the cultural changes now taking place as a result of remarkable technological developments; the changes in people’s working lives – even when they are in jobs; the vast range of choice that now exists in selecting leisure activities – all of them distracting from the old habit of reading, or even thinking. There is evidence that the decline in reading and the reading habit has been largely influenced by these factors and that, by definition, we must therefore expect a continuing decline in the reading habit. It is further claimed that six million adults in England and Wales have some difficulty in reading and that around twice that number have a limited range of vocabulary. These are disturbing figures even if, as may be, they are exaggerated.

We are also informed that there is something like a quarter of those between the ages of 16 and 20 (approximately 3.8 million are in that category) who have problems with reading – sometimes quite serious problems. Many in this age range have never read a newspaper and even when they develop a taste for a newspaper it is most likely to be the simplest tabloid. Still more likely it will be a clear-cut preference for watching television.

The more pessimistic among us are already predicting somewhat cynically, of course, that the reading-habit cycle is returning to what it was a century ago before the Northcliffe revolution and the half-penny *Daily Mail*. That, to say the least, would be turning a crisis into a drama.

These questions have concerned journalists for generations, of course. Even so it would be frivolous to ignore the fact that the problem has become all the greater as a result of the factors already described plus the intense competition for readership especially at the lower end of the market. There is no sign yet that any of the newspapers – that is the national press – are sufficiently aware of the problem or regard it as sufficiently important to pick up the challenge. And indeed it is a difficult one to face up to.

Years ago a number of national newspapers made a point of establishing strong links with schools and local education authorities for reasons which were chiefly of self-interest. Quite naturally they wanted parents to buy their newspapers and take advantage of features designed for and targeted on their children. But there was another motive as well. Most of the newspapers who pursued this policy held a strong belief in, and a commitment to, the written word and the liberation brought to the human mind through a better and broader relationship with the written word. Time now, is it not, to revive that dedication?