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## "Blessed be the critics of newspapers": journalistic criticism of journalism 1865-1930

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“BLESSED BE THE CRITICS OF NEWSPAPERS:”  
JOURNALISTIC CRITICISM OF JOURNALISM 1865-1930

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined journalistic press criticism between 1865 and 1930. It sought to understand how the first modern journalists conceived of their profession in a period of great transitions.

As the study revealed, journalists writing about journalism between 1865 and 1930 discussed recurring themes such as commercialization, sensationalism, advertising, and ethics. They expressed ambivalence toward the rise of big business in their field and the consequences it could have on the quality of the work. In the process, journalists also defined journalism as a profession providing a public service or as a business aiming solely for circulation and profit. Definitions shifted depending on the period during which the journalists wrote.

Criticism during the period under study often reflected the social and cultural trends journalists witnessed. During the postbellum era, it mirrored the belief in the American Dream of wealth, well-being, and democracy. In the 1890s, criticism focused on the downsides of commercialism, expressing the fears people felt toward the new corporate giants. During the progressive period, the writings of press critics revealed the pride they felt in the civic services journalism provided. But World War I brought an end to progressivism. During the 1920s, disillusioned journalists criticized “mediocre” journalism. Their frustration echoed that of the old generation of progressives.

Underlying the journalists’ criticism was also the perception they had of news. Excited about the democratic promise of this new concept, postbellum critics praised journalism more than they criticized it. During the 1890s, and despite the downsides of commercialism, journalists never lost hope because, for them, news democratized information. The progressive period seemed to confirm the democratic potentials of news, promoting pride among critics. But the

propaganda campaigns of World War I broke the spell, as critics realized that news was potentially susceptible to propaganda. The establishment of public relations as a profession based on the spinning of news during the 1920s further aggravated the problem. Journalists, who had kept their optimism throughout the previous fifty years, became concerned, in the 1920s, that many newspapers did not live up to the democratic promise of the press.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Although George Smalley criticized the sensationalist papers of the 1890s, admitting that they “trade in filth,” the *New York Tribune* correspondent still felt proud to be a journalist. “I am ready enough to stand or fall with the profession and with my colleagues in the profession if there be any question of attack or defense,” he wrote.<sup>1</sup> The journalism Smalley talked about was relatively new. It originated in the penny press of the 1830s and slowly assumed its modern character after the Civil War. Providing millions with information about local and world events, the post-war press filled journalists with “so deep a draught of that matchless elixir.”<sup>2</sup> Envious young men frequently wrote the papers to ask how they could join.<sup>3</sup> Those who did felt “a delightful sensation that approximates intoxication.”<sup>4</sup> Smalley spoke for his colleagues in the trade. Journalists in postbellum America frequently highlighted the nobility of their calling and the thrills of newspaper work.

Their excitement was not without basis. Newspapers were the first mass media the world experienced. Seen as a modern institution, they guaranteed adventure, prestige, and power to the people who joined the profession. Journalists in postbellum America saw themselves as the pioneering operators of a “great civilizing engine.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore not surprising that they wrote a lot about their profession. During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, scores of journalistic critics reflected on the profession. They defined its mission, praised its potential, and condemned its excesses.

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Smalley, “Notes on Journalism,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 97 (July 1898): 214, 219.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Ralph, “The Newspaper Correspondent,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 14 (July 1893):162.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dana, “Journalism: A Lecture Delivered to the Students of Union College,” *McClure’s* 4 (1895): 555.

<sup>4</sup> John William Keller, “Journalism as a Career,” *Forum* 15 (August 1893):691.

<sup>5</sup> Dana, “Journalism,” 555.

This work studies the evolution of journalistic press criticism between 1865 and 1930. It examines how journalists viewed the rise and development of the modern mainstream press,<sup>6</sup> by analyzing how they conceived of their profession and identifying the meanings and values they attached to it during a period of quick change and sharp transitions. More specifically, and in hope of unearthing the way the first modern journalists perceived the press, this study will focus on three questions central to the critical texts:

1-The definition of journalism: The study examines how journalists framed journalism as an entity, the discourse they used to describe it, and the role and mission they attributed to it. Did journalists, for instance, define journalism as a profit-generating business or as a public service that promotes democracy?

2-The critical themes: The study also surveys the issues journalists addressed as they discussed journalism. Including topics such as sensationalism, journalism schools, and consolidation, this review of themes unveils the journalists' hopes, fears, and concerns about the press.

3-The evolution of the journalistic definition and critical themes during the period under study: Because the decades covered include numerous social, cultural, and political developments as well as changes in the press itself, this study examines whether the way journalists framed the press and the themes they addressed in their criticism also changed accordingly.

In her book on press criticism during the nineteenth century, Hazel Dickens Garcia explains that critical texts reveal the values people use to discuss journalism and the assumptions they have on what the press should and could do. Because they stand at the intersection between society and journalism, such texts also underline the socio-cultural trends and changes of the

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<sup>6</sup> The term "mainstream press" is explicitly used here to indicate that the articles and books under study do not include the African American and other ethnic press –despite their valuable contribution to the history of American journalism. Mainly due to time limitations, the sample surveyed was limited to appraisals of the White Anglo-Saxon press, mostly in the North East.



times.<sup>7</sup> As James Carey argues in reference to all types of communication, criticism is the embodiment of culture.<sup>8</sup> Understood in this sense, it becomes an ideal subject for a cultural history approach. Instead of studying past events, behaviors or texts, cultural historians study the structures of meaning people assign to them.<sup>9</sup> Press criticism constitutes the written expression of the meaning journalists assigned to their profession. It offers a window into the collective consciousness of the professional community that helped shape modern mainstream journalism.

This argument particularly lends itself to criticism written in magazines. As Frank Mott explains in his seminal book on American periodicals, such “files furnish an invaluable contemporaneous history of their times.”<sup>10</sup> Theodore Peterson, also an expert in American magazine history, contends that the magazine is particularly influential and reflective of the culture because it is primarily an editorial medium where writers introduce new ideas, examine them critically, and assess their worth. Produced with less haste than newspapers and radio programs, they provide a “fairly lengthy treatment” to the subjects they cover.<sup>11</sup> Such characteristics make magazines an ideal channel for press criticism. Based on these considerations, this work focuses specifically on press criticism by journalists in American magazines such as *The Arena*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Collier’s Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Forum*, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, *The Nation*, *North American Review*, *Scribner’s Monthly*, *Scribner’s Magazine*, and *The Writer*. A complete list is available in the appendix.

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<sup>7</sup> Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> James Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 86-94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 89. See also David Paul Nord, “Intellectual History, Social History, Cultural History.. and Our History,” *Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 646; David Paul Nord, “A Plea for Journalism History,” *Journalism History* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 9.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1956), 387-388.

The main contention of this work is that the American journalists' views of mainstream journalism were affected by their perception of news as a concept and simultaneously reflected the changes taking place in US society. News, or the timely account of yesterday's facts, was still a novelty in 1865. Introduced by James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, it set American newspapers apart from their European counterparts. Europe's journalism in the 1860s was largely a political commentary on political, social, and cultural issues. In the United States, in contrast, newspapers competed to cover the latest account of yesterday's events. Journalists' views of the American press largely depended on their perception of news as an objective set of facts allowing people to form timely opinion about issues pertaining to the Republic. As journalists' views of news evolved between 1865 and 1930, so did the scope and tone of their criticism.

At the same time, journalists' views of the mainstream press mirrored the changes taking place in US society. Their criticism evolved as new socio-cultural, intellectual, and political trends arose. In a way, this argument recalls the thesis of the *Four Theories of the Press*. First published in 1956, the influential book by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm proposed that "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates."<sup>12</sup> The nature and characteristics of the press accordingly depend on the way the culture defines the nature of humanity, society, and state, and on the relationship it establishes between individuals and institutions. In a similar fashion, the press during the period under study, as well as –mostly significantly– the journalists' appraisal of this press, reflect the socio-cultural, intellectual, and political developments taking place in the United States at the time.

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 1.

Based on this contention, this study divides press criticism between 1865 and 1930 into five intervals. The themes critics addressed and the definitions they gave to journalism were more or less consistent with the way they perceived news at the time as well as the socio-cultural and intellectual trends characterizing US society during each period. These intervals, of course, are not absolute. Change rarely happens suddenly, in one specific year. Shifts nevertheless do occur and must be traced chronologically. This study is therefore divided as follows: 1865 to around 1893, 1893 to around 1905, 1905 to 1917, 1917 to the early 20s, and finally the 1920s as a distinctive decade.

The four decades after the Civil War witnessed unprecedented industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization while the movement westward continued.<sup>13</sup> Despite the difficulties that accompany great transitional phases and the setback of two significant economic crises in 1873 and 1893,<sup>14</sup> Americans in general projected a strong optimism about the future and a belief in the superiority of their modern, democratic, and increasingly powerful country. Postbellum times also marked the rise of modern universities, modeled after German institutes of higher education. Such organizations helped establish a culture of professionalism and crystallized the belief in scientific solutions for social and business problems.<sup>15</sup> The evolutionist theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, in vogue in postbellum America, provided a “scientific” alternative to the supernatural explanation of progress.<sup>16</sup>

This study breaks the postbellum period into two different episodes; 1865 to 1893 and 1893 to 1905. During the 1860s and the 1870s, the United States was still a collection of

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard A. Weisberger, *The New Industrial Society* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969). See also Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Maury Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 44-52.

<sup>15</sup> Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> Weisberger, *The New Industrial Society*, 97.

dispersed and autonomous “island communities.”<sup>17</sup> Usually white and Protestant, these microsocieties cherished family and explained problems in terms of purity and sin. But the industrial revolution soon shattered the independent communities. Competition, economic crisis, urbanization, cultural clashes, and waves of immigrants rocked the independence of local communities. Faced with an impersonal, different world in the cities and a crumbling system in the country, Americans in the 1890s grasped for solid ground.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1890s, the number of small family-owned ventures of post-bellum America slowly dwindled with the rise of big business.<sup>19</sup> Severe competition, market saturation, and price decline indeed provoked a consolidation trend that soon characterized the American market. Between 1895 and 1910, three hundred companies disappeared into mergers each year.<sup>20</sup> Tensions rose between capitalists and workers, setting off a wave of anti-trust feelings.<sup>21</sup> The anxieties and disillusionment of the 1890s, coupled with a severe economic crisis in 1893, soon gave way to a new phase in American history.

Historians disagree about the exact nature and causes of the progressive period.<sup>22</sup> Peter Filene even questioned the notion of a coherent progressive movement.<sup>23</sup> Despite these differences, historians agree that between the early 1900s and World War I, a loosely-knit group of optimistic reformers with differing and overlapping agendas crusaded against monopolies, class conflict, and vice.<sup>24</sup> Hoping to remedy the problems of the burgeoning industrial urban

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<sup>17</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, xiii.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-75.

<sup>19</sup> Licht, *Industrializing America*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Glenn Porter, *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1910* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-21.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 113-132.

<sup>23</sup> Peter G. Filene, “An Obituary for ‘The Progressive Movement’,” *American Quarterly* 22, no 1 (Spring 1970): 20-34.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” 113-132 and McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 77-182.

society, they often embraced bureaucratic structures as a means to alleviate problems.<sup>25</sup> The progressive period also witnessed the rise of investigative journalists who denounced the excesses of business corporations and the corruption of political and social players. Known as the muckrakers, such reformers mainly published their articles in American magazines.<sup>26</sup>

World War I marked the end of the progressive era. The United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson. His Committee on Public Information, established a week after the proclamation of war, orchestrated a sweeping domestic propaganda campaign to support America's war efforts. It sponsored speeches by renowned public figures, photos, newsreels, large-print posters as well as magazine and newspaper articles. The press was requested to self-censor any material that could endanger the safety of the United States or empower its enemies.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1917 and the early 1920s, strong tensions bid laborers against capitalists. Workers organized hundreds of strikes, calling for a new rational order and, in some cases, the displacement of the capitalistic control of industry. Rumors of a Bolshevik conspiracy against the government and businesses spread, creating general fright.<sup>28</sup> This culture of fear disappeared, however, when the temper of peace replaced the war mood in the early 1920s.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the economic crisis early in the decade, the 1920s witnessed a "tide of prosperity in full flood."<sup>30</sup> Cars and electrical utilities flooded the market while department stores offered

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<sup>25</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, 158-163. See also Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate 1870-1920* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America 1893-1914* (New York: Columbia Journalism Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Richard Barry, "'Freedom' of the Press?" *North American Review* 208, no. 756 (November 1918): 702-709.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Information History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Perennial Library, 1931), 38-63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 58-62.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 132. Farming, coal-mining, textiles, shipbuilding and the shoe and leather industries, were however excluded from this trend of abundance.

glittering displays and parades to lure delighted customers.<sup>31</sup> US Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover proposed a cooperative order that enlisted the help of government and universities in the support of big business, further improving the economy.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the concept of fashion, marketing campaigns, and installment buying were introduced to teach people to buy what they want, rather than what they need.<sup>33</sup> Public relations, first exercised at the beginning of the century to quell anti-trust campaigns, became a formal profession.<sup>34</sup> The 1920s also witnessed the dissolution of Victorian self-discipline. Entertainment, from jazz and sophisticated movies to automobile rides and amusement parks, became a mark of the post-war decade.

Throughout these five intervals of time, journalism changed and press criticism by journalists changed accordingly. As the US society adapted to the industrial revolution and the new economic, social and cultural realities it entailed, journalism also reinvented itself, slowly becoming the modern version Americans know today. Through this period of transformations, journalistic press critics reacted to the various trends, reflecting, in the process, the fears and hopes they felt in the face of constant change. Depending on the social mood around them, journalists' definition of journalism varied between a profession providing a public, democratic service and a business focusing on circulation and profit. As the critics' perception of news changed, so did their views of the press. Between 1865 and 1930, journalists slowly shifted from praise and optimism to disparagement and gloom.

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<sup>31</sup> Gary Dean Best, *The Dollar Decade: Mammon and the Machine in 1920s America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003). See also William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 349-379.

<sup>33</sup> Best, *The Dollar Decade*, 32-49, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001) See also David Miller and William Dinan, *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

No media scholars have focused on journalistic appraisals exclusively. This work partially fills that gap by considering in depth critiques by journalists, thus outlining a collective definition of journalism during a period when it constantly changed. The cultural history approach, never before used in the study of criticism, makes this work a valuable contribution to an understudied field. Historians who have studied criticism often adopted the paradigm of progress toward democratic media, frequently used in journalism history –what Carey dubbed as “Whig interpretation.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast, this study transcends the traditional narrative of names and events. It extends its examination beyond the role of journalism in developing democracy to study how journalists experienced their formative task and appreciated its significance.

This work proceeds more or less chronologically. To set the stage, chapter 2 reviews the literature of press criticism, examining what journalism historians have looked at so far and underlining the contributions this work seeks to make. To clarify how the study’s main questions will be answered, chapter 2 also discusses the tenets of the cultural history approach. Chapter 3 covers journalistic press criticism between 1865 and 1893, when journalists were still intoxicated by the novelty and potential of the first mass medium. Chapter 4 covers the period between 1893 and 1905, a time during which disillusioned journalists criticized the excesses of sensational and yellow journalism –although their fascination with journalism and its potential remained intact. The following chapter shows how many critics supported the progressive battles of reforming journalists. Between 1905 and 1917, they called for ethical reforms and discussed muckraking. Some investigated the press itself, in the same way reformers investigated political and corporate powers. Chapter 6 examines the years 1917 to the early 1920s, when journalists turned to the

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<sup>35</sup> Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” 88. Carey borrowed the term “Whig” history from Herbert Butterfield to describe the dominant approach to the study of journalism’s evolution. He argued that historians typically frame journalism history through the lenses of progress and improvement, with the press moving from a biased partisan institution to a free, socially responsible industry. “The problem with this interpretation,” Carey wrote, “is simply that it is exhausted; it has done its intellectual work” (p. 88).

criticism of government and coped with the new idea of news bias. Finally, chapter 7 covers the 1920s, when entertainment tabloids rose and the power of business over the press consolidated, driving some journalists to wonder whether the days of democratic journalism were over.



## CHAPTER 2: A CULTURAL HISTORY APPROACH TO PRESS CRITICISM

“Blessed be the critics of newspapers,” Paul Bellamy, president-elect of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), said in his 1924 inaugural address.<sup>36</sup> Then managing editor of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Bellamy did not display a typical American journalist’s attitude toward press criticism. Media professionals were (and remain) defensive about appraisals of their performance.<sup>37</sup> Journalists often cite First Amendment rights against attempts to hold them accountable for the material they produce.<sup>38</sup> Constitutional protection, however, did not stop the deluge. Various parties—including journalists themselves—consistently censured the press. In one famous example, Charles Dickens dubbed New York papers the morning’s “New York Sewer,” “Stabber,” “Private Listener,” and “Peeper.”<sup>39</sup>

And yet, criticism scholars maintain that informed, institutionalized, and standardized criticism is very scarce, especially today. “[F]inding media criticism means engaging in an intellectual scavenger hunt through obscure journals and small-circulation opinion magazines,” wrote the editors of a 1995 *Media Studies Journal* issue addressing contemporary criticism.<sup>40</sup> This study sets out on a comparable hunt, focusing, however, on the formative era of modern mainstream journalism. Covering critical articles and books published between 1865 and 1930, it looks specifically at the evolution of journalistic articles evaluating newspapers.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Bellamy, quoted in Marion Tuttle Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices: American Press Criticism 1880-1950* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Wendy N. Wyatt, *Critical conversations: A Theory of Press Criticism* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007), 17; James B. Lemert, *Criticizing the Media: Empirical Approaches* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 14. See also Kenneth Starck, “Needed: Criticism from Within,” *Grassroots Editor* 13 (November/December 1972): 23.

<sup>38</sup> James Carey, “Journalism and Criticism: The Case of an Undeveloped Profession,” *The Review of Politics* 36, no. 2 (April 1974): 227.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Dickens, quoted in Lee Brown, *The Reluctant Reformation: On Criticizing the Press in America* (New York, NY: David McKay Company, 1974), 26.

<sup>40</sup> The editors, “Media Critics,” *Media Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1995): xi.

The choice is not haphazard. Appraisals of journalism by journalists provide a unique window into the profession. A review of journalistic media criticism brings to light the way journalists considered their occupation at any given time. It highlights the professional and ethical standards they observed –and the ones from which they diverged. The study also illuminates the concerns journalists had during episodes of significant change. It brings to life the voices behind the scenes. Following the recommendation of cultural historian Raymond Williams, the study is not limited to the examination of press critiques by important journalists, traditionally the focus of criticism literature. It looks rather at mainstream magazine articles and books by mostly middle-class white American journalists, published between 1865 and 1930. As a cultural history of criticism, this study focuses on the public discourse journalists create as they wrote about the press. For this reason, it only rests on an overview of criticism found in public forums, articles, and books. It does not explore what critics wrote in private and therefore leaves out material stored in journalists’ personal papers. Because the period covered does not extend beyond 1930, this research focuses solely on the criticism of the print media. When the words “press,” “media,” and “journalism” are used to avoid repetition, they refer only to newspapers and magazines. Similarly, because the critics under study were all journalists, the words “critics” and “journalists” are often used interchangeably.

This study of journalistic press criticism started with an overview of various indexes including *Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature*, *American Newspaper Journalists*, *American Magazine Journalists*, Linda W. Hausman’s *Criticism of the Press in U.S. Periodicals 1900-1939*,<sup>41</sup> and Warren Price’s *The Literature of Journalism*.<sup>42</sup> Entries considered in *Poole’s Index*

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<sup>41</sup> Linda W. Hausman, “Criticism of the Press in U.S. Periodicals 1900-1939: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Journalism Monographs* 4 (August 1967).

<sup>42</sup> Warren Price, *The Literature of Journalism: An Annotated Bibliography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1959).

include journalism, press, journalist, writer, editor, reporter, publisher, news, newspaper, magazine, advertising, society, business, and war. The working definition of criticism this work adopts is any positive or negative appraisal of journalism, or discussion of the trends, standards, performance, effects, roles, and/or structure of the profession. Articles addressing the training and/or performance of individual journalists were also considered.

### **Press Criticism Literature**

Press criticism plays a pivotal role in a democratic capitalist system such as the United States. According to Orlik, informed judgments of the media guide consumers and protect them against potential abuses.<sup>43</sup> For Marzolf, critics act as “civilizing agents.”<sup>44</sup> They are the journalistic conscience. Watchdogs of the watchdogs, they remind the press about its democratic mission whenever it diverges into a quest for circulation and profit. Writing on freedom of the press, Clapper argued that press criticism is the ideal guard against prior censorship and regulation.<sup>45</sup> Because it holds the media accountable for their actions *without forcing* them to cooperate, criticism is the only acceptable system for improving newspapers. Carey went a step further. He argued that democracy is “essentially a theory of criticism.”<sup>46</sup> With no ultimate authority such as the Church or monarchy, democratic systems require a means of ensuring that truth and knowledge prevail. Based on a set of procedures and an unemotional language,

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<sup>43</sup> Peter B. Orlik, *Electronic Media Criticism: Applied Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 16. See also Leah R. Vande Berg, Lawrence A. Wenner, and Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Media Literacy and Television Criticism: Enabling an Informed and Engaged Citizenry,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 2 (October 2004): 222.

<sup>44</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 1-6.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond Clapper, “A Free Press Needs Discriminating Public Criticism,” in *Freedom of the Press Today: A Clinical Examination by 28 Specialists*, ed. Harold L. Ickes (New York, NY: The Vanguard Press, 1941), 85. Other scholars also discuss this issue. They include Edmund B. Lambeth, *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 104-119; Brown, *The Reluctant Reformation*, 6-7; and Wyatt, *Critical Conversations*, 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> Carey, “Journalism and criticism,” 228.

criticism provides the answer. “A forum of criticism ... would correct and complete observations,” Carey wrote.<sup>47</sup>

Given the importance of press criticism, the literature covering this subject is surprisingly limited. Few journalism scholars have examined how American media criticism evolved. The few studies that exist cover distinct subjects during varying periods. This chapter provides an overview of the history of American media criticism from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the present. Unlike the scope of this study, the material reviewed below does not focus solely on what journalists wrote about journalism. It encompasses historical studies of press criticism by various sources.<sup>48</sup> The following review divides the period according to the media or source featuring press criticism, the theories underlying criticism, the content evoked in the critical texts and the quality and style of the material.

The first recognized article on press criticism in America appeared in 1836. Written by British politicians and authors E. L. Bulwer and Sergeant Talfourd, it appeared in the *American Quarterly Review*.<sup>49</sup> After the Civil War, magazines and newspapers became a significant source of press criticism. *Scribner’s Monthly*, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, *The Nation*, *Forum*, and *Collier’s Weekly* are among the many periodicals that examined press performance during the nineteenth century and beyond. In the 1920s, criticism books, such as Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Brass Check*, appeared on the market.<sup>50</sup> Magazines, books, and newspapers –later along with radio, television, and the Internet– made up the main channels for press criticism.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>48</sup> Examples of criticism sources include journalists, ombudsmen, journalism reviews, journalistic councils, media and other academics, politicians, religious authorities, etc.

<sup>49</sup> Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in the Nineteenth-Century America*, 136.

<sup>50</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 76-105.

With the rise of social sciences at the turn of the century, academic journals, focusing mostly but not exclusively on media effects, surfaced in the US. From 1927, when Robert Benchley joined *The New Yorker*, and until 1963 with the death of A. J. Liebling, “The Wayward Press,” a regular piece on media performance, appeared in the prestigious magazine.<sup>51</sup> *The New Yorker* continued the criticism tradition beyond the 1960s and, since then, media beats have emerged in American newspapers around the US.<sup>52</sup> In 1961, Columbia University founded the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR), creating a tradition of press criticism in journalism reviews.<sup>53</sup> In 1967, journalist Ben Bagdikian called for the establishment of ombudsmen, generating a new critical source on press performance.<sup>54</sup> The period also witnessed the rise (and, in many cases, fall) of press and news councils. Finally, the US government’s concern about violence and riots during the 1960s and 1970s led to the assignment of several commissions investigating the connection between television and violence.<sup>55</sup> Such bodies evaluated press performance from a social sciences perspective.

The history of media criticism in the US can also be divided according to the schools of thought underlying the critics’ arguments. From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1950s,<sup>56</sup> journalistic criticism was mainly based on a libertarian theory of the press. It stipulates that the marketplace of ideas can regulate the press’s ills and therefore objects to any kind of intervention. Media critics of the period emphasized the importance of press freedom and did not encourage governmental action against the problems they described. Critics during the early

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<sup>51</sup> Edmund Midura, “A. J. Liebling: The Wayward Pressman as Critic,” *Journalism Monographs* 33 (April 1974).

<sup>52</sup> The regular column, “The Wayward Press,” however did not survive the death of Liebling.

<sup>53</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 181.

<sup>54</sup> John Maxwell Hamilton, “Ombudsmen of the Press,” *The Nation* (March 16, 1974): 336.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *The Reluctant Reformation*, 68-73.

<sup>56</sup> After the 1950s, libertarianism ceased to be the main ideology underlying criticism but it does not mean that it disappeared completely. Some critics today oppose any intervention from any side.

nineteenth century also disparaged the influence of political parties on the press, a prevalent tradition at the time.

After the 1950s, the social responsibility theory of the press competed with libertarianism as the main approach to press criticism. Journalism reviews were established, press and news councils were erected, and ombudsmen were hired. The trend came as a direct, but delayed, outcome of the Hutchins Commission recommendations. Appointed in the 1940s to evaluate the media, the commission found press performance unsatisfactory. Media were owned only by a few, were out of touch with the sensitivities of the people, and were acting irresponsibly, the commission declared.<sup>57</sup> To remedy the situation, the press must act responsibly. Freedom without responsibility is unacceptable, the commission wrote. It called for a mechanism of self-criticism and monitoring by non-governmental organizations. In 1947, journalists rejected the commission's verdict but its recommendations ultimately prevailed –even among journalists. Liebling, for example, called for the establishment of a model paper against which media would measure their performance.<sup>58</sup>

During most of the period under study, and still today, another school of thought emerged. Frustrated about the grip of publishers and big businesses on the profession, some press critics at the end of the nineteenth century criticized journalism from an institutional perspective. They exposed the negative influence of capitalism on press content and condemned commercialization and sensationalism. During the 1920s, many journalistic critics adopted this approach. Upton Sinclair, for example, accused the press of prostituting itself to big businesses.<sup>59</sup> George Seldes, meanwhile, wrote extensively on how the political economy of the press

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<sup>57</sup> Leigh, ed., *A Free and Responsible Press*.

<sup>58</sup> Midura, "A. J. Liebling," 17.

<sup>59</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Self-published, 1919).

suppressed the truth. He used examples from his long experience in the field.<sup>60</sup> Some critics appraising the media from an institutional perspective are open to the idea of an alternative press. Many propose activism. Sinclair went as far as to suggest public ownership of the media.

Another way of studying the historical evolution of media criticism is through the analysis of style and content. During the last two centuries, press critics reacted to the cultural, social, and political events around them, as well as the evolution of the press itself. Dicken-Garcia explains that, between 1800 and roughly 1850, most criticism focused on the importance of press freedom and the ills of partisanship.<sup>61</sup> Newspapers were then mouthpieces of the political parties that owned them. Criticism during that period was infrequent and simplistic. It offered broad, unspecific solutions such as having a good man take charge of the paper. “With such a press.. enlightened, regulated, and free, and with the best talents of her best sons enlisted in her service, what has America to fear?” Bulwer and Talfourd asked in the first recognized press criticism article.

In 1833, Benjamin Day published the first penny paper, sold on the street for one penny. James Gordon Bennett soon followed with his *New York Herald* in 1835. Although still partisan, the new generation of papers was not owned by political parties. It focused on news rather than views and included topics such as sports and crime. As a result, critics between the 1840s and the Civil War worried mainly about trivialization of news. As Dicken-Garcia explains, they called for the abolition of crime stories, arguing that they could generate violence.<sup>62</sup> Criticism became frequent as well as more specific and informed after the 1870s, according to Marzolf. Between

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<sup>60</sup> George Seldes, *You Can't Print That! The Truth Behind the News, 1918 to 1928* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1929).

<sup>61</sup> Dicken-Garcia, 136-154.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 155-182.

the 1880s and 1900, critics mainly attacked sensationalism and yellow journalism.<sup>63</sup> The race for circulation worried press critics who denounced the “filth” journalists generated as a result.

As Marzolf explains, critics appraised the press through the lenses of progressivism during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> They debated the ideal newspaper, called for the establishment of ethical standards and journalistic canons, and criticized the excesses of conglomeration within the newspaper industry. Also a result of progressivism, the period between the early 1900s and the 1920s produced a generation of muckrakers, investigating the press and exposing its corruption. In 1911, journalist Will Irwin published his classic *Collier's Weekly* articles. A result of 18 months of reporting, the series explored all aspects of the profession, from its history to its role and its excesses.<sup>65</sup> Irwin's articles criticized the role of publishers and advertisers yet at the same time hailed the development and influence of the press.

In 1917, the United States went to war against Germany and its allies. To mobilize public opinion for intervention and to prompt Americans to hate the Germans, the US government orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign. Its success prompted a series of critical books on public opinion, including Lippmann's *Public Opinion*. Lippmann deemed the public unable to grasp reality, partly because of the media's misrepresentation of reality. People, he wrote, only had “pictures in their head,” often based on media stereotypes and propaganda.<sup>66</sup> They were therefore unable to govern themselves. His argument came as part of a larger conversation Lippmann started earlier, when he uncovered the *New York Times*' bias during the coverage of the Bolshevik revolution. In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann's disillusion about public opinion and democracy reached its peak. The journalist said the public was ignorant, often immoral, and

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<sup>63</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 6-21.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 62-67.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Hudson, “Will Irwin's Pioneering Criticism of the Press,” *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Summer 1970): 263-271.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1922).



always self-absorbed. Comprising a majority of inactive and indifferent “bystanders,” the demos could not rule.<sup>67</sup> In response to Lippmann’s argument, John Dewey wrote that the public only existed in potential. When a problem erupts, a public forms around it to take action and dissolves when the problem is solved. To expect the continuous presence of an interested public “out there” is misleading.<sup>68</sup>

According to Marzolf, the 1917-1930 era was the golden age of media criticism.<sup>69</sup> Attaining new intellectual heights, criticism addressed media from an institutional perspective. Much of the later criticism was limited to mere reactions to specific articles or events.<sup>70</sup> During the 1930s, criticism addressed President Roosevelt’s New Deal. It was not clear, Marzolf wrote, whether critics were evaluating the press or the Democratic president. During World War II, patriotic feelings tamed the critics, although some of them did raise concerns about press freedom during the war.<sup>71</sup> Between the 1940s and the 1960s, criticism became professionalized and regular. CJR and other journalism reviews made their first appearance while A. J. Liebling of *The New Yorker* emerged as one of the most important critical voices of American journalism at the time.<sup>72</sup> Frustrated by the influence of publishers on editorials, Liebling often focused on such problems. He criticized the right-wing press, the influence of advertisers, and the reliance on syndicated, prepackaged articles. Based on solid reporting, his articles included information and evidence rather than just opinion. They usually named names.<sup>73</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, America was under the spell of McCarthyism and some critics, such as Seldes, condemned the press’s alignment with the governmental view. Seldes visited nine communist countries in

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (Edison: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

<sup>68</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1927).

<sup>69</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 67-105.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Lehmann, “A. J. Liebling and the Plight of Press Criticism,” *Raritan* 26 (Summer 2006): 137-151. See also Arthur Danto, “The Language of Media Criticism,” *Media Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 31-33.

<sup>71</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 149-162.

<sup>72</sup> Lehmann, “A. J. Liebling and the Plight of Press Criticism.”

<sup>73</sup> Midura, “A. J. Liebling,” 1-46.

Europe to check the claims of the press and found that bias, stereotypes, and half-truths pervaded the papers.<sup>74</sup> After the 1970s and until the present times, criticism exploded in quantity but not in quality according to some criticism scholars. Lemert spoke of a “cacophony of voices”<sup>75</sup> without content and Lehmann of the “perversion of media criticism,”<sup>76</sup> a reference to the articles that merely react to isolated incidents but fail to address the institutional problems of journalism.

### **The Cultural History Approach**

The existing criticism literature covers press appraisals using the conventional paradigm of professional and democratic progress. Scholars traditionally studied journalism history in general, and criticism in particular, through the framework of skills and practices. They have also examined the role of such practice in enhancing democracy. Professionalism is limited to a study of skills, knowledge, codes of conduct, and vocational standards.<sup>77</sup> Journalistic commonality is accordingly reduced to the tenets of the profession –a framework that limits the possibilities of research and overshadows the complexity as well as the problems of journalism. The cultural history approach, which this study proposes, provides an enhanced perspective where the communal character of the press “arise[s] less through rigid indicators of training or education ... and more through the informal associations that build up around shared interpretations.”<sup>78</sup> As Barbie Zelizer puts it:

[J]ournalism simply does not require all the trappings of professionalism. Unlike classically-defined professions like medicine or law, where professionals legitimate their actions via socially-recognized paths of training, education, and licensing, these trappings have only limited relevance for practitioners. ... We need a frame that might explain journalism by focusing on how journalists shape meaning about themselves.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> George Seldes, *Tell the Truth and Run* (New York: Greenberg, 1953).

<sup>75</sup> Lemert, *Criticizing the Media*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Lehmann, “A. J. Liebling and the Plight of Press Criticism,” 138.

<sup>77</sup> Wilbert E. Moore, *The professions: Roles and rules* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970).

<sup>78</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Journalists as Interpretive Communities,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 1 (1993): 223.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

This is specifically what this study strives to do. It examines the journalistic criticism of the press to understand how journalists in general, and the critics among them in particular, self-reflected on their profession.

The cultural approach to journalism history moves beyond a description of major personalities and an analysis of important events. It examines, as James Carey said, “the thought within” such events.<sup>80</sup> Instead of providing an economic, social or political account of the rise of the modern newspaper, for instance, cultural historians would look at how journalists conceived, and dealt with, the successive changes and developments of the press. Borrowing from anthropology, such historians engage in an ethnographic study of earlier times, analyzing archival materials to resuscitate the structural imagination that gave meaning to people, things, and events in a specific temporal and spatial context.<sup>81</sup> Although critics may argue that ethnography is only possible when subjects are alive, cultural historians like Edward Sapir contend that “language is felt to be a perfect symbolic system ... for the handling of all references and meaning that a given culture is capable of.”<sup>82</sup> Systematic bodies of shared meaning, including verbal and visual archival materials, become a revealing window into the world of their authors.

The history of journalism has traditionally focused on the narrative of press freedom.<sup>83</sup> Revolving around the idea of journalistic progress, it has mainly examined the role of media institutions in the rise of democracy and press sovereignty. Historians addressed the slow conversion from partisanship to commercialism, the relapse into sensationalism, and the subsequent progress into social responsibility. Scores of biographies have commemorated the

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<sup>80</sup> Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” 89.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Sapir, *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: MacMillan, 1937), s.v. “Language.”

<sup>83</sup> John Nerone, “The Future of Communication History,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 23, no. 3 (August 2006): 254.

unrecognized agents and leaders of these developments. In 1974, a discontented Carey proposed to “ventilate” the discipline.<sup>84</sup> He called for a cultural history approach, based on the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz.

In his 1973 seminal essay, Geertz defined culture as a system of public symbols within which social behaviors, institutions, and processes can be “thickly described.”<sup>85</sup> Divorcing the scientism of his predecessors, he advocated an interpretive approach to culture as an elaborate network of public symbols. In one of his most quoted paragraphs, he wrote:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.<sup>86</sup>

Culture, for Geertz, is the context that informs behavior and gives meaning to a wink or a cockfight. It finds articulation through social action as well as various sorts of artifacts embodied within this action. For this reason, behavior cannot be considered arbitrary. It *embodies* culture and should not be divorced from it. Geertz encouraged researchers to see and understand any activity through these semiotic lenses.

Geertz’ approach ignited a revolution across the humanities, including history departments around the US.<sup>87</sup> Carey was among the early adopters of this cultural turn. “For us to understand these events [in journalism history] we must penetrate beyond mere appearance to the structure of imagination that gives them their significance,” he wrote in an essay calling for a Geertzian approach to journalism history.<sup>88</sup> Discounting the notion of high culture, Carey described the concept as a set of symbolic actions reflecting the collective understanding of social experience. From this perspective, journalism becomes a form of consciousness, an

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>85</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Nord, “Intellectual History, Social History, Cultural History... And Our History,” 645-648.

<sup>88</sup> Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” 89.

embodiment of culture. Following the same approach, this study treats the critical text as a window into the collective consciousness of the journalistic community. Criticism accordingly ceases to be the sole objective of the research. It becomes, rather, a receptacle of the study's objective –namely journalistic culture.

The emergence of illustrations, and later of photography, provides an appropriate example to distinguish between “Whig history” and Carey’s cultural approach. Looking at the past with contemporary lenses, traditional historians may present photography as a new invention that helped enhance newspapers and magazines. They may survey the technological history of the new device and trace its use in print journalism during the nineteenth century. Cultural historians, however, transcend the object itself to examine how journalists interpreted its emergence. They use the visual and verbal archives to explore the meaning press personnel assigned to the new invention. We may look, for example, at press critics who deplored the use of photography. Strongly affected by the print culture, they saw the new device as a degrading expression of sensationalism and feared its eventual effect on the written word. Noted journalist Edwin Lawrence Godkin wrote in *The Nation* that “[t]he childish view of the world” had become “so to speak, ‘on top.’”<sup>89</sup> In the journalistic discourse of nineteenth-century critics, we can already see the origins of the cultural struggle between print and visuals.

James Carey’s call for cultural history was not without success. In line with his approach, many media scholars and historians now see communication as a symbolic act and focus on the social construction of reality, whether in the present or the past. A considerable amount of research addresses what John Pauly terms the process of “meaning-making.”<sup>90</sup> In essence, scholars examine present or past communities to study “how groups use cultural artifacts to

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<sup>89</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, “Newspaper Pictures,” *The Nation* 56 (April 1893): 307.

<sup>90</sup> John J. Pauly, “A Beginner’s Guide to Doing Qualitative Research in Mass Communication,” *Journalism Monographs* 125 (February 1991): 2.

assert and sustain a version of reality, articulate and celebrate a sense of identity, and disguise or flaunt styles of dominion and control.”<sup>91</sup>

Also reflecting the cultural turn, three interdisciplinary subfields have emerged in the study of media history: the history of technology, the history of the book, and the history of the public. The history of technology focuses on the social construction of technological inventions where culture, policy, and economy intersect.<sup>92</sup> “[W]ork in the history of technology ... always sets itself up as a corrective to presentist utopian and dystopian fantasies about media forms working Trojan horse-like,” John Nerone writes.<sup>93</sup> Based on such works as Carey’s study of the telegraph, Marshall McLuhan’s technological determinism, and the discursive theory of Michel Foucault, this tradition is based on the assumption that technology is “an expression and creation of the very outlooks and aspirations we pretend it merely demonstrates.”<sup>94</sup>

Another subfield that echoes Carey’s call for a cultural approach is the history of the book. “[T]roubled by the scholarly tendency to read meaning from texts,” historians in this tradition “seek to find meaning created in the reading process.”<sup>95</sup> Less interested in the institutional study of media, historians of the book trace the life of a given communication product, from authorship to readership, and examine the cultural experience that occurs as the cycle closes, joining the two ends. Research studies adopting an interpretive community model fall within this subfield.

Finally, the concept of cultural history also inspired what became known as the history of the public sphere. Scholars within this tradition examine the practice of journalism in the larger

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>92</sup> Nerone, “The Future of Communication History,” 255-256.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>94</sup> James Carey, *Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 257.

context of a transforming public realm –or more lately of various public realms.<sup>96</sup> Influenced by Jurgen Habermas, historians of the public sphere have moved away from textual content to examine the “metadiscursive conditions” outside the text.<sup>97</sup> Based on a spatial approach to the past, this tradition allows “a more satisfying form of argument about the impact of certain ideas.”<sup>98</sup>

The cultural approach to the study of journalism history does not emphasize the concept of power relations. It does not necessarily look at the role dominant classes and media owners, producers and distributors play in shaping public consciousness. Historians like David Paul Nord find this a weakness. Nord, who wrote a number of articles criticizing Carey, has regularly argued for a recognition of the role that institutional structures, processes, and conventions play in the cultural mix. Referring to Geertz’ famous webs of significance metaphor, he explains that “men and women are suspended in webs spun by others” because media messages “arrive from the top down.”<sup>99</sup> Cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears also calls for the acknowledgement of hegemonic ideas in discursive studies of media content. Borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, he exposes the diffusion of dominant values into cultural texts.<sup>100</sup> In one sense, Nord’s and Lears’ critiques do not bear on this particular study as the dissertation examines journalists reflecting on their own profession. In other words, critics are, at the same time, producers and receivers of the journalistic text they comment upon. This work will, however, consider the potential effects of management on journalistic critics as it studies the latter’s professional and ideological assumptions.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 258-259.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Nord, “A Plea for Journalism History,” 10-11.

<sup>100</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 574.

In its analysis of critical texts, this study follows Carlo Ginzburg's *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*. In this work, the renowned cultural historian recommends a minute investigation of telling details where authors may be unintentionally honest.<sup>101</sup> Added to the thematic analysis of the general arguments of a text, such "clues," as Ginzburg calls them, provide an insight into the author's world. In this context, the cultural historian compares the study of historical texts to the examination of an anonymous artwork, where trivial details such as the shape of an ear may reveal the identity of the artist more clearly than the conspicuous characters of the painting.<sup>102</sup>

In terms of this study, such "clues" can reveal the interpretive "strategies" of the journalistic community and provide a transparent window into how critics assign meanings to the press. In one example, veteran journalist Slason Thompson wrote an editorial in 1890 defending journalists against the overwhelming public criticism of yellow journalism. In the course of the article, he cautioned that sensationalism distorts reporting: "In its character as a chronicler of daily life, the newspaper is like unto a history and it must not permit the necessity for sensation to pervert history."<sup>103</sup> This single sentence reveals that Thompson considered journalism's mission and value to be the recording of historical facts. Many of Thompson's colleagues shared his belief. Journalists in the 1880s and 1890s saw themselves as "embryo historian[s]"<sup>104</sup> and were therefore appalled by the yellow journalism of the Gilded Age. When sensationalist reporters exaggerated facts to impress their readers, they distorted the historical record journalists were so proud to write.

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<sup>101</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 103-105.

<sup>102</sup> Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, 96-97.

<sup>103</sup> Slason Thompson, "Newspapers: Their Rights and Duties," *The Open Court* 3 (1890): 2059.

<sup>104</sup> S. S. Kingdon, "Should Reporters Express Opinions?" *The Writer* 2 (1887): 30.



In *The Long Revolution*, Williams recommended that researchers uncover the cultural values and meanings embedded in intellectual and imaginative works to reveal wider issues of significance. As Williams explained:

It is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities ... that general cultural analysis is concerned.<sup>105</sup>

Such an examination of larger cultural and social patterns comes after the collection of clues and telling details. In its hunt for such patterns, this study will examine the assumptions journalists held about journalism, the professional and ethical standards they observed, and the ideologies that underlay their views and attitudes. It will explore how press critics between 1865 and 1930 experienced the rise and development of the world's first mass medium.

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<sup>105</sup> Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 63.

### CHAPTER 3: THE EXCITEMENT OF A NEW PROMISE

On a cold December night in 1877, the conversation was lively at the small basement restaurant on the corner of Printing-house Square in New York City. Exhausted after a long day of work, journalists nevertheless shared “many and many a brilliant story” and talked about the encounters they had with “men with worldwide reputations.”<sup>106</sup> At the nearby press, the newspaper they put together was going to print. It would be read by thousands of people across the city and beyond.

The evening was typical. A communal feeling united these late-night chatters. A mixture of pride and excitement, it reflected the general mood that journalists in postbellum America shared at the time. Pioneers of the first modern mass medium, they relished the prestige it entailed, boasted about its power, and underlined its democratic possibilities.

The journalistic criticism of journalism between 1865 and 1893 reflected this mood. It revealed the thrill journalists felt about the newness and prestige of their calling, the power they attributed to it, and the steps they proposed to improve it further. Most of all, press criticism in postbellum America was optimistic about the democratic promise of an inherently American version of the press. The writings of the critics mirrored the confidence many Americans shared about the growing power of an industrial United States.

This chapter examines forty-three articles journalists wrote about journalism between 1865 and 1893. It takes the entire body of articles as one collective discourse reflecting the journalists’ interpretation of, and opinion about, the modern press that emerged after the Civil War.

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<sup>106</sup> William H. Rideing, “The Metropolitan Newspaper,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 56, no. 331 (December 1877): 46.

## A New Journalism

In order to understand the period of 1865 to 1893, we need to go back in time to 1833. On September 3 of that year, Benjamin Day published the first issue of the *New York Sun*, a commercial daily that relinquished partisan support and sold on the street for one penny. Starting a trend that came to be known as the “penny press,” the *Sun* revolutionized American journalism.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, political parties sponsored the press in the United States. Tensions between federalists and anti-federalists had encouraged both groups to publish their own newspapers in order to recruit supporters and criticize each other. When, during the early decades of the nineteenth century, it was decided that presidents would be elected by the people, the press acquired a new, crucial function: Recruiting voters.<sup>107</sup> Opinion-based and entirely political, newspapers became party mouthpieces and a main component of electoral campaigns. Editors assigned by, or belonging to, the party in question ran the paper. They addressed their audiences as voters, provided them with information about the party, partisan activities and campaigns, and criticized opponents. On the whole, however, their approach was persuasive rather than informative. The press was here to recruit. Its relation to the people was top-down. It was the party addressing its constituents.

The *New York Sun* in 1833, the *New York Herald* in 1835, and others, relinquished political patronage, counting instead on circulation. Although still editorially aligned with one party or the other, the new “penny press” was not party-owned or supported.<sup>108</sup> It paved the way for the emergence, after the Civil War, of commercial journalism –one where readers were regarded as consumers rather than voters. To lure readers and increase circulation, pennies

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<sup>107</sup> Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 11-36.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 36-59.

included sports, crime, and other entertaining subjects in addition to politics.<sup>109</sup> They introduced the concept of news as we know it today: A timely account of yesterday's facts.<sup>110</sup> Reporting events rather than merely commenting about them, the pennies led to the rise, in postbellum America, of the reporter as an essential component of the press personnel.<sup>111</sup> These changes reversed the top-down dynamic of the party press by democratizing information. When the war ended in 1865, papers were on the way to truly becoming *newspapers*, an authoritative source of news for the masses.

Journalists in the postbellum era rejoiced about the emerging journalism. Looking at the first modern papers with today's lenses, and with the knowledge of the problems commercialism helped create, we may not appreciate the pride and excitement of the first modern journalists. For them, "independent journalism," as some liked to call it,<sup>112</sup> represented a significant democratic promise; it divorced papers from the influence of political parties and offered people the impartial, empirically-based facts they needed to make up their own opinion. For the journalists writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, commercialization and a news-based press offered hope. They were a welcome solution to the biases of the previous communication system, prevalent earlier in the century.

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<sup>109</sup> Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America*, 82-89.

<sup>110</sup> James Carey, "A Short History of Journalism for Journalists: A Proposal and Essay," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 3-16.

<sup>111</sup> Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Whitelaw Reid, "Schools of Journalism," *Scribner's Monthly* 4 (May 1872): 204; John Lesperance, "American Journalism," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 8 (August 1871): 76; Noah Brooks, "The Newspaper of the Future," *Forum* 9 (July 1890): 572.

## Praise and Pride

Of the forty three articles covering journalistic press criticism between 1865 and 1893, twenty were favorable about the press and six negative.<sup>113</sup> Another nine included criticism but were overall positive and optimistic about the future. The remaining eight did not offer an opinion. All in all, critics tended to praise the press. With a decidedly evolutionist twist –Herbert Spencer, founder of social Darwinism, being one of the most influential thinkers in the US at the time– journalists found the press to be an epitome and necessary component of modern society. William Rideing, a regular contributor for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, wrote that the press “is the very essence of our times, embodying the highest results of discovery in all times.”<sup>114</sup> Charles Fiske of *The Writer* concurred. “Philosophers say that this spread of the newspaper is an evidence of a developing civilization,” he wrote. “We are overtopping our ancestors. We are more intelligent. We know more than they did.”<sup>115</sup> Whitelaw Reid of the *New York Tribune* described journalism as “a necessary concomitant of our civilization and our government.”<sup>116</sup> In another example, John Lesperance, a St-Louis native who wrote primarily for Canadian newspapers, declared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*:

We have all respect for the American Press. We acknowledge its service in times of peace and in times of war –services so peculiar that they often exceeded those of the statesman's eloquence or the commander's sword. It reflects our civilization, and is instrumental in moulding it.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Of the six negative articles, three came from *The Nation*. The reason may be that, unlike other magazines, *The Nation* did not feature articles with broad focus addressing journalism in general. Instead, the weekly magazine addressed specific incidents where journalists or newspapers acted irresponsibly. Another reason may relate to *The Nation's* critical approach to news and other subjects. Dubbed “the weekly Day of Judgment” by American novelist Charles Dudley Warner, the liberal periodical was known for its hard-hitting style. See William Armstrong, *E. L. Godkin: A Biography* (Albany, NY: Albany State University, 1978), 92-94.

<sup>114</sup> Rideing, “The Metropolitan Press,” 59.

<sup>115</sup> Charles Fiske, “The Revolution in Journalism,” *The Writer* 5 (August 1887): 91.

<sup>116</sup> Reid, “Schools of Journalism,” 196.

<sup>117</sup> Lesperance, “American Journalism,” 181.

Using an explicitly evolutionist lexicon, noted journalist Julius Chambers wrote in *The Arena* that “through the ‘natural selection’ of the public, a new and nobler species of journalism has arisen and now exists. The newspaper of to-day, evolved from rudimentary forms, is a splendid and heroic organism.”<sup>118</sup>

To make sense of such statements, one should remember that the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of unparalleled growth in the United States. Industrialization, urbanization, and mechanization transformed the country into a massive industrial and economic power. When critics presented journalism as a reflection of, or necessity for, American civilization, they were celebrating the new press as an advanced and sophisticated institution with great promise.

The metaphors critics used to describe journalism testified to the nobility they ascribed to its mission. For them, the press was an important civil service, an educational organ that promised to instruct, and therefore empower, the American public. Journalists dubbed newspapers an “indispensable auxiliary to civilization,”<sup>119</sup> the “journalistic instructors of mankind,”<sup>120</sup> a “public benefactor,”<sup>121</sup> the “chief instrument in popular education,”<sup>122</sup> and the “great enlarger of our intellectual horizons.”<sup>123</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, editor-in-chief of *The Nation*, compared the press to the Greek agora, “the only means possessed by the citizens of interchanging thought and concerting action.”<sup>124</sup> For the journalists of the postbellum period, the modern newspaper, based on news and serving the people, was to be the prime foundation for an

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<sup>118</sup> Julius Chambers, “The Chivalry of the Press,” *The Arena* 4 (June 1891): 121.

<sup>119</sup> James Parton, “American Newspaper Press,” *North American Review* 102 (April 1866): 378. See also Rideing, “The Metropolitan Newspaper,” 59.

<sup>120</sup> Arthur G. Segwick, “Editorial Perspective,” *The Nation* 10 (January 1870): 54.

<sup>121</sup> Franklin B. Sanborn, “Journalism and Journalists,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 34 (July 1874): 62. See also Chambers, “The Chivalry of the Press,” 101.

<sup>122</sup> W. P. A., “A Letter to a Young Journalist Whose Education Has Been Neglected,” *Scribner’s Monthly* 4 (October 1872): 757.

<sup>123</sup> R. E. Thompson, “The Age of Newspapers,” *The American* 6 (October 1883): 407.

<sup>124</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, “The Newspaper and the Reader,” *The Nation* 1 (August 1865): 165.

improved democracy. Its chief importance came from this mission. For the critics, the role American newspapers would play in empowering the people made the US press different from (and, for many, superior to) its counterparts around the world.<sup>125</sup> As *New York World* journalist David G. Croly put it:

The day is not far when the American press will fully realize the high mission entrusted to its charge. In enterprise, versatility, and vivacity; in the fullness and variety of its news; and in its adaptability to the wants of such a busy, energetic, intelligent community as that to which it appeals, it surpasses the press of any other country. It is not, however, all that it should be, all that it might be, or all that it is destined to be.<sup>126</sup>

To honor the status of their enterprise, several journalists argued that journalism should be acknowledged as a profession. As historian Burton Bledstein explains, a culture of professionalism, celebrating white-collar expertise and the self-governing exercise of judgment, animated the rising middle-class in post-war America. During the last four decades of the nineteenth century, the number of trained nurses increased eleven times, technical engineers six times, and architects five times.<sup>127</sup> Referring to one's occupation as a profession became a way of elevating its status. Funeral directors and plumbers, for instance, publicly demanded that their vocations be considered professions.<sup>128</sup> It is therefore understandable that, between 1865 and 1893, thirteen out of forty three critics argued that journalism should be a profession or described the press as such. It was a call to honor the new journalism and to substantiate its status as a respectable vocation. In one example that reveals the era's pride in bureaucratic organization, Junius Henri Browne, a correspondent for the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune*, wrote:

Journalism has grown to be a profession. ... Each department of the newspaper is under the direction of a qualified mind. The great labor of its daily publication is divided and

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<sup>125</sup> As we shall see later, American press critics often compared the press of the United States with Europe's. Some found the latter to be superior due to its literary tradition but most agreed that American journalism was superior, or would soon become superior, because of its democratic promise.

<sup>126</sup> David Goodman Croly, "What a Newspaper Should Be," *Putnam's Monthly* 11 (March 1868): 338.

<sup>127</sup> Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 39.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

subdivided, each laborer being responsible to the head of the department, and all the heads being responsible to the manager, and he in turn to the chief. The organization is thorough, the system complete, the coordination admirable.<sup>129</sup>

Only five articles opposed this contention.<sup>130</sup> They argued that journalists could not be professionals because the wages they earned were quite modest or, in one case, because their work was mechanical.

Closely related to this issue were calls to institute schools of journalism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, college departments played a major role in fostering professionalism in such fields as law, medicine, and architecture. Following the German model of higher education, the inadequate colleges of antebellum America reinvented themselves to meet the growing demands of an increasingly industrial society.<sup>131</sup> They provided their graduates with the credibility they required to perform as professionals. Borrowing the concept, some journalists encouraged the formation of journalism schools as a way to improve newspaper performance and promote the authority and credibility of the press as an established profession. "One of the best results, indeed, of the proposed collegiate training, would be the fostering of a professional feeling," the *New York Tribune*'s Whitelaw Reid said in an address at the University of the City of New York.<sup>132</sup> He ambitiously proposed that such education should thoroughly cover writing, US and world history and politics, common, constitutional, and international law, political economy, logic, modern languages, art, literature, and philosophy. A journalist who signed his

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<sup>129</sup> Junius Henri Browne, "Newspaperism Reviewed," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 38 (December 1886): 723. For more examples, see W. P. A., "A Letter to a Young Journalist Whose Education Has Been Neglected," 757; Reid, "Schools of Journalism," 194; Lesperance, "American Journalism," 175; James Parton, "Falsehood in the Daily Press," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 49 (June 1874): 278; Rideing, "The Metropolitan Press," 59; Boehm, "The modern Newspaper," 643; Thompson, "Newspapers," 2059.

<sup>130</sup> Four of these five articles were in *The Nation*: Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "The Business Side of Journalism," *The Nation* 11 (October 1870): 255; Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "The Profession of 'Journalism'," *The Nation* 17 (July 1873): 37-38; Arthur G. Segwick, "The Future of the Newspaper," *The Nation* 28 (June 1879): 432-433. The last one figured in *The Arena*: Chambers, "The Chivalry of the Press," 97-98.

<sup>131</sup> Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 123-124, 310-331.

<sup>132</sup> Reid, "Schools of Journalism," 167.



name as W. P. A. agreed with him. “You are quite right,” he wrote in *Scribner’s Monthly*, “that a course of study might be framed which could prepare for and lead up to it [the profession of journalism], as directly as the studies of the lawyer or the physician.”<sup>133</sup> A few critics, including most notably Godkin who did not see journalism as a profession, were skeptical. For such critics, journalism was a skill to be acquired through leg work; instead of wasting time in journalism schools, aspiring candidates were to enroll in majors such as political science, law or literature. Godkin predicted that the concept of journalism schools would fail because no financial rewards resulted from such an investment:

There is no industry of modern times in which the part played by labor is so large, and the share in the profits received by labor so small. And it is this fact which... will prevent its being a profession for which men will prepare regularly at school or college.<sup>134</sup>

### **Boasting about Power and Prestige**

Journalistic critics writing between 1865 and 1893 were particularly boastful and optimistic about the potential power of the press, assumed possibly because newspapers were America’s first mass medium. The establishment of public schools during the 1830s and 1840s and of compulsory education between the 1850s and World War I promoted literacy in the US and paved the way for the rise of a mass audience of readers.<sup>135</sup> Journalists saw people on hackney-coaches, in vessels, and in streetcars reading the paper “like boys conning their lessons on their way to work.”<sup>136</sup> Men and women devoured the evening papers at dinner tables.<sup>137</sup> As historian Gunther Barth explains, the press created tangible bonds among the alienated residents of the American metropolis. It reduced the anxiety and solitude of the city by “revealing

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<sup>133</sup> W. P. A., “A Letter to a Young Journalist Whose Education Has Been Neglected,” 757.

<sup>134</sup> Godkin, “The Profession of ‘Journalism’,” 38.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 99-111,

<sup>136</sup> Parton, “American Newspaper Press,” 377.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

(people's) common humanity and identifying their pursuit of money as the common denominator of urban life."<sup>138</sup> The number of general-circulation dailies quadrupled between 1870 and 1900. The *New York World* alone hit an unprecedented daily circulation of two hundred fifty thousand in 1887.<sup>139</sup> University graduates wrote editors to inquire about careers in journalism,<sup>140</sup> while politicians, ministers, scientists, and business managers sought the company and favor of journalists.<sup>141</sup>

Impressed with the popularity of the newspaper, press critics boasted about "this gigantic power" of journalism.<sup>142</sup> An editorial in *The Nation* declared that it "promises to be the most influential of the professions."<sup>143</sup> Noah Brooks of Sacramento's *Daily Union* described the press as "the foremost power of all Christendom."<sup>144</sup> Writing in the *North American Review*, Godkin noted that newspapers are "exerting more influence on the popular mind and the popular morals than either the pulpit or the book has exerted in five hundred years. They are now shaping the social and political world of the twentieth century."<sup>145</sup> John Cockerill, then editor of the *New York Morning* and four-time president of the Press Club, argued that newspapers were particularly powerful because they threatened to unveil corruption in society and politics. "No other power than that of the press ever would or could have produced this result," he wrote.<sup>146</sup>

Of the forty-three articles under study, only two suggested that the power ascribed to newspapers was exaggerated.<sup>147</sup> When Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, ran for

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<sup>138</sup> Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 59.

<sup>139</sup> Edwin Emery and Henry Ladd Smith, *The Press and America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 345, 379.

<sup>140</sup> Dana, "Journalism," 555.

<sup>141</sup> Godkin, "The Profession of 'Journalism,'" 38.

<sup>142</sup> Reid, "Schools of Journalism," 203.

<sup>143</sup> "The Editorial Type," *The Nation* 8 (February 1869): 128.

<sup>144</sup> Brooks, "The Newspaper of the Future," 574.

<sup>145</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "Newspapers Here and Abroad," *North American Review* 150 (January 1890): 202.

<sup>146</sup> John Cockerill, "The Newspaper of the Future," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 50 (August 1892): 221.

<sup>147</sup> See Chambers, "The Chivalry of the Press," 102-103; Browne, "Newspaperism Reviewed," 727.

presidential elections in 1872 and lost despite the support of most American papers, only Julius Chambers questioned the critics' assumption about the power of the press. "In Greeley's defeat for the Presidency all theorists who had dwelt upon the so-called 'Power of the Press' received a shuddering blow," he wrote.<sup>148</sup> But critics remained certain about the power of the press. At times, they even seemed intoxicated with the prestige, adventure, and charm of working in journalism. Cockerill described the unusual tasks involved in a journalistic career:

It is exactly by reason of its glaring obliquities and moral shortcomings, sad as it may seem, that the great metropolitan newspaper is now apparently enabled to address an audience of millions each morning, to send out expeditions into the remote corners of the world, to explore unknown seas and climb inaccessible mountains, to dictate to Presidents and bully statesmen, to foretell the news so accurately as almost to compel the vindication of its predictions; to delve into the inmost heart of man or woman and pluck from it a secret dearer than life itself; to desecrate the sanctity of the fireside and violate all that the family and the individual hold dear; to detect crime and insure its punishment; to pursue malefactors beyond the reach of the slow processes and instruments of the law; to annihilate space and make all the difference of time in the world as nothing—in short, to be what it is: the greatest marvel of the intellectual and material powers of man at the period of their highest development.<sup>149</sup>

In another example, Gustav Boehm, a self-described "full-fledged newspaperman,"<sup>150</sup> described the appeals of the profession:

I have experienced the almost Oriental charm of newspaper life, and would not give it up for anything. I know that "The Press," or better "Bohemianism," as it sometimes is called, possesses the properties of sweet blood, that is, the man who has tasted of it will always seek it again, no matter after how long an interval of following other occupations, he will always grasp it like the drowning man grasps the straw, wherever and whenever the chance offers.<sup>151</sup>

Franklin Sanborn, editor of the *Boston Commonwealth*, wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* that:

There are no limits, in the ambition of enterprising editors, to the future power of the American newspaper. It is not only to make and unmake presidents and parties, institutions and reputations; but it must regulate the minutest details of our daily lives,

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<sup>148</sup> Chambers, "The Chivalry of the Press," 102.

<sup>149</sup> John Cockerill, "Some phases of Contemporary Journalism," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 13 (October 1892): 695-696.

<sup>150</sup> Gustav Boehm, "The modern Newspaper," *The Inland Printer* 5 (June 1888): 643.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

and be the school-master, preacher, lawgiver, judge, jury, executioner, and policeman, in one grand combination.<sup>152</sup>

Such rhetoric was widespread enough to warrant two entire articles about the journalists'

notorious lack of modesty. In his characteristically acerbic style, Godkin wrote in *The Nation* that:

writers are deeply impressed with the mystery of their profession. They talk of "News" as if it were an invisible force or afflatus which seized on the journalist, and made him speak whether he would or no, sometimes in the small hours of the morning and sometimes in the small hours of the afternoon, but the coming and going of which, or the requirement of which, no man could predict or explain.<sup>153</sup>

### **Focus on the Transitional 1880s**

Although this second chapter examines the entire postbellum era of 1865 to 1893, this section focuses more narrowly on the shorter period of the 1880s. The rise of sensational newspapers during this period makes it a transitional phase between the excitement of the 1870s and the disappointment of the 1890s; as the drawbacks of a commercial press system slowly emerged, some critics reacted to the trend, introducing a new, more critical rhetoric to their conversation.<sup>154</sup> Although they remained positive overall, journalists writing about sensationalism criticized the press with some severity. Despite their disappointment, however, they remained optimistic about the future and potential of newspapers.

The beginning of the 1880s marked the rise of a new wave of sensational newspapers in the United States.<sup>155</sup> Hoping to ensure large circulations, such papers exaggerated facts and focused on sensational stories, scandals, and crime.<sup>156</sup> They were a far cry from the promise of

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<sup>152</sup> Sanborn, "Journalism and Journalists," 55.

<sup>153</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "The Mystery of the Newspaper," *The Nation* 21 (August 1875): 104. For more comments on journalists' modesty, see also "The Editorial Type," 128; Lesperance, "American Journalism," 175; Sanborn, "Journalism and Journalists," 63-64; Godkin, "The Profession of 'Journalism'," 37.

<sup>154</sup> Such drawbacks would become more evident during the 1890s, with the rise of yellow journalism. As we shall see later, criticism during this period intensified.

<sup>155</sup> The first wave of sensational papers came with the penny press of the 1830s-1850s.

<sup>156</sup> Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 22-33.

the civilizing and democratizing agents early press critics had hoped for. It is particularly during this period that unfavorable criticism surfaced in the journalists' articles about the press. Some critics strongly condemned commercialism, sensationalism, and the ensuing spread of inaccuracy, invasion of privacy, and defamation.<sup>157</sup>

Referring to the spread of crime news during the 1880s, Robert Ellis Thompson of *The American* denounced "the calamities, the rascalities and the acerbities" in newspapers.<sup>158</sup> Charles Congdon, who for thirty years was associated with late editor Horace Greeley and his *New York Tribune*, accused newspapers of being "tyrants" and Condé Benoist Pallen, editor of *Church Progress* and the *Catholic World*, described them as "sewer[s] for public and private immorality."<sup>159</sup> Brooks spoke of all "the faults and the follies of the thing that goes now by that name."<sup>160</sup> He condemned the sensationalist press for its "looseness of statement, its disregard of truth, and its often willful perversion of facts."<sup>161</sup> An unsigned article in the *North American Review* depicted the habit of reading papers as "a mild form of mania which needs regulation and control as much as other petty vices of human nature."<sup>162</sup> Although he distinguished good papers from bad, the *Chicago Herald's* Slason Thompson admitted that "the daily newspaper is in some respects a vast clearing-house of worthless gossip."<sup>163</sup> He wrote that journalism should be the

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<sup>157</sup> Although journalists focused on issues of inaccuracy, defamation and invasion of privacy, none of the articles specifically framed these issues as ethical questions or called for an ethical code of journalistic conduct. It was not until the rise of progressivism, in the first decade of the twentieth century, that such calls were heard from time to time.

<sup>158</sup> Thompson, "The Age of Newspapers," 407.

<sup>159</sup> Charles T. Congdon, "The Adulteration of Intelligence," *North American Review* (January 1883): 90; Conde Benoist Pallen, "Newspaperism," *Lippincott's Monthly* 37 (November 1886): 472-473.

<sup>160</sup> Brooks, "The Newspaper of the Future," 570.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>162</sup> "The Newspaper Habit and Its Effects," *North American Review* 143 (September 1886): 308.

<sup>163</sup> Thompson, "Newspapers: Their Rights and Duties," 2059.

daily chronicler of history and therefore urged that papers “must not permit the necessity for sensation to pervert history.”<sup>164</sup>

But, despite the criticism, illustrating intense disappointment, praise and optimism dominated the discourse of journalists writing between the early 1880s and the early 1890s. Of the twenty five articles published during these transitional years, thirteen were favorable, three negative, and five overall positive but with some criticism. The remaining four did not include a slant. Of the three negative articles, two were predictably so: Pallen, who wrote the first one, was at the same time a journalist and a priest. In his article, he clearly resented the authority people gave to “liberal” newspapers at the expense of the Church. He wrote:

There are thousands upon thousands to whom the newspaper serves as a purveyor not only of news, but of literature and religion. ... In politics, in literature, in religion, the newspaper is accepted as infallible guide. There can be one result of this, –a debauch of intellect. The mental powers grow stagnant, the judgment warped, and intellectual freedom an impossibility. ... With the eclipse of the light of truth follow darkness and that blind rush after a false happiness which ends in dissolution.<sup>165</sup>

The second writer who clearly disfavored modern newspapers was Congdon. A long-time staff of the *New York Tribune* when Horace Greeley was still its editor-in-chief, the American journalist belonged to an older generation of press personnel, a generation that came before the press was fully commercialized. It is therefore understandable that he strongly resented the new circulation-oriented press. A nostalgic Congdon wrote:

There may have been a time when the leading American newspapers were all of them free from this debasing passion for financial success; some of them may be so still. There have been, perhaps there may still be, editors like Mr. Greeley, quite careless of acquiring wealth. ... But it cannot be denied that too many newspapers, particularly those printed near the great centers of business, are now no more than the instruments of the self-seeking, the ambitious, the lovers of pelf, and the lovers of power.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Pallen, “Newspaperism,” 476-477.

<sup>166</sup> Congdon, “The Adulteration of Intelligence,” 91-92.

Other critics were very rarely, if ever, disappointed in journalism or journalists themselves. If the press suffered from the by-products of commercialism, then only business rooms were problematic. Journalism, for the critics, was not. In fact, the articles under study suggest that journalists were upset to see society severely condemn journalists. Only Pallen criticized the newsroom. Resenting “the galling disapproval of [their] contemporaries,”<sup>167</sup> other critics blamed the counting room, the publishers, the advertisers, and the audience. They pictured the journalist as a victim of the circulation-based system. Writing in *The Inland Printer*, a Georgia and Milwaukee journalist who refused to give his name attacked the publishers for imposing their commercial policies on journalists, leaving them “cribbed, cabined and confined under most humiliating positions.”<sup>168</sup> Chambers complained in *The Arena* that senior editors “live[d] in a glass house, with all the world for critics.”<sup>169</sup> The *Chicago Herald*’s Thompson found the people’s criticism of the press ungrateful and spoke of a conspiracy against newspapers. “Let any discovery of science, any achievement of genius, become in any way a phenomenon, likely to appeal to the general craving for something new, and the editor will turn with thankful avidity from the sensations of darkness and crime to those of sweetness and light,” he wrote.<sup>170</sup> Boehm also declared in *The Inland Printer* that he wished to:

... break a lance for that much-abused, much-accused individual who must, as a tooth of the large cog-wheel, as a part of the machinery, submit to the demands of the driving power, or to be crushed to pieces under the supreme force –the newspaper man and his personal honor as ‘gentleman.’<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Browne, “Newspaperism Reviewed,” 722.

<sup>168</sup> “English and American Journalism,” *The Inland Printer* 8 (July 1891): 887

<sup>169</sup> Chambers, “The Chivalry of the Press,” 101.

<sup>170</sup> Thompson, “Newspapers,” 2059.

<sup>171</sup> Boehm, “The Modern Newspaper,” 644.

Browne, who complained that newspapers are sometimes too anxious to please their readers, explained that “this is not the fault of the working journalist, but of the power in the counting-room, always ranged on the side of the ledger.”<sup>172</sup>

As these statements show, journalists distinguished between the newsroom and the counting room in newspapers. Newsrooms presented the “journalistic” side of journalism. It was, for the critics, the source of press potential and it preserved its commitment to public service and democracy. Focused on business rather than popular well-being, the counting room, on the other hand, was responsible for the excesses of newspapers in the eyes of the critics. It was *a business rather than a journalistic entity*, an outsider. Such distinction, expressed in most articles on the subject, perhaps denotes a strong esprit of camaraderie between journalists. It may also suggest that critics refused to admit the flaws in the new journalistic model.

With their characteristic optimism, several critics were also convinced that the lapse into sensationalism was only momentary. They forecast that newspapers would soon relinquish scandals and crime to fulfill their democratic promise. The *Daily Union*’s Brooks wrote an extensive article in *Forum* about the newspaper of the future. He painted the picture of a news-based, truthful, and independent publication. The ideal paper would have few or no ads, no bias, and would work for the enlightenment of mankind. “There is hope,” Brooks wrote, “that we have reached the lowest depth of the deplorable business, and that journalism will after a while experience a species of moral uplift that will raise us all into a higher and purer atmosphere.” The *New York Morning*’s Cockerill also addressed the future of journalism in his *Lippincott*’s article. He explained that newspapers would maintain their mechanical perfection. They would become more courageous, diligent, powerful, and committed to the betterment of their profession

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<sup>172</sup> Browne, “ ‘Newspaperism’ Reviewed,” 724.



and of society.<sup>173</sup> In his characteristically emphatic style, Parton addressed publishers in an article in *Forum*:

Your abdication makes room and prepares the way for the true and final journalist, who will abjure the paste-pot and the brush, and concentrate his attention upon his proper office of giving the news of the morning with intelligent and patriotic elucidations of the same. I see in these newspapers gone to seed the approaching end of the advertisers' corrupting dominion, and the emancipation of the editor from the degrading thralldom of the commercial "Old Man" in the counting-room.<sup>174</sup>

*The Writer's* Fiske predicted that newspapers would later consolidate, increase in strength and independence, and fearlessly attack corruption among public officials.<sup>175</sup> The Georgia and Wisconsin journalist writing in *The Inland Printer* declared that "neither sordidness nor sensationalism is fit or calculated to be the *final* guiding principle of the newspapers of a progressive, fair-minded, liberty-loving people like the Americans, who already in pictorial journalism far surpass their old-country brethren."<sup>176</sup> This optimism may provide another indication of journalists' refusal to acknowledge the downsides of a commercial press. Critics writing between the early 1880s and early 1890s were apparently convinced that, in the final analysis, the new journalism could only be committed to public service.

### **The Democratic Promise of News**

At the center of the modern press's potential, and of the critics' optimism, was the concept of news. Born into a world where factual accounts of events continually bombard us on TV and radio, in newspapers, on the Internet, and even through mobile phones, we tend to take news for granted. Exposed to hundreds of articles, books and lectures about media bias, we also find it difficult to see news as a scientific breakthrough, a way of faithfully recording reality, the Truth with a capital *T*. In postbellum America, however, the concept of news was new.

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<sup>173</sup> Cockerill, "The Newspaper of the Future," 222-226

<sup>174</sup> James Parton, "Newspapers Gone to Seed," *Forum* 1 (March 1886): 20.

<sup>175</sup> Fiske, "The Revolution in Journalism," 92-93.

<sup>176</sup> "English and American Journalism," 888.

Journalistic critics writing between 1865 and 1893 took great pride in being its pioneers and were quite optimistic about its potential. They presented news as the prime democratic alternative for a declining partisan press. News, for the critics, was the cornerstone for independent journalism: Reporters, the heroes in the new press narrative, provided people with the facts they would need to make autonomous decisions. They dethroned the partisan editor who imposed the party's viewpoint on the public. As Alfred Balch put it in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*:

The key-note of the American newspaper is news. Alongside of that, opinions are of small value in the eyes of American newspapermen. This, I think, is partially the result of the almost universal education in this country; and it is beyond question that universal suffrage has much to do with it. Our habits of life tend in every way to make a man form his opinion for himself, and education renders this possible. Readers of newspapers, then, ask for news, and they are willing to make up their own views upon it.<sup>177</sup>

Of the forty-three articles under study, twenty-five specified what the main task of a newspaper should be. Of those twenty five, fifteen said the paper is meant to record and transmit the news while seven said it should educate people, namely by providing them with factual information.<sup>178</sup> As Lesperance underlined in *Lippincott's*, "the word *newspaper* is by us understood literally. We expect a journal to give us news from all parts of the world as early as possible and with full details."<sup>179</sup> James Parton, a famous biographer and writer for *Home Journal*, was even more emphatic. "An editorial essay is a man addressing men, but the skilled and faithful journalist, recording with exactness and power the thing that has come to pass, is Providence addressing men," he wrote in the *North American Review*.<sup>180</sup> Parton explained that newspapers "do good" when they transmit the news and "do harm" when they comment about

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<sup>177</sup> Alfred Balch, "English and American Newspapers," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 48 (July 1891): 90.

<sup>178</sup> Critics writing during the early 1890s added another task to the responsibilities of the paper, namely that of unveiling corruption. As we shall see later, this task became a prime focus during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. It reflected the progressive currents of the time. In the 1880s, few journalists noted regrettably that the main task of a newspaper has become to make money.

<sup>179</sup> Lesperance, "American Journalism," 179.

<sup>180</sup> Parton, "American Newspaper Press," 378.

it.<sup>181</sup> Writing for *Putnam magazine*, *New York World* journalist David G. Croly argued that newspapers should report facts “without the slightest tinge of personal or partisan bias.”<sup>182</sup> He explained that the press “has no business to have opinions of its own.”<sup>183</sup> Godkin compared partisan newspapers with the *claqueurs* of the French theater, who merely applaud when given a signal. “We are glad to say, however, that every day a larger and larger portion of the press is becoming disgusted with these odious functions and will not perform them,” he added.<sup>184</sup> Godkin called on newspapers to present people with the impartial facts and arguments they need to “vote with knowledge.”<sup>185</sup> Arthur G. Sedgwick, editorial writer for *the New York Evening Post*, even reported a call for the elimination of the editorial page. “It has sometimes been thought by persons of a reforming turn that a great improvement might be made in journalism by the omission from the columns of the newspaper of all editorial discussion,” he wrote.<sup>186</sup> Impartial, news-based writing was so valued it soon became a standard of fine journalism. Eugene Benson, who wrote a series on New York journalists for *the Galaxy*, strongly praised Godkin for his “disinterested examination of men and things.”<sup>187</sup> Benson portrayed *the Nation*’s founder as a model writer due to his fairness and impartiality. As S. S. Kingdon put it in *The Writer*, the “rule” was that “facts, cold and barren, are his [the reporter’s] to use at will, but opinions no matter how pregnant and important they may be, are the prerogative of the editor.”<sup>188</sup>

The call for news-based papers and the attack on political organs reflected a growing trend against partisanship in the United States. As historian Michael McGerr explains, politics in

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 405.

<sup>182</sup> Croly, “What a Newspaper Should Be,” 330.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 333.

<sup>184</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, “Judicious Journalism,” *The Nation* 6 (February 1868): 106-107.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>186</sup> Sedgwick, “Editorial Perspective,” 54.

<sup>187</sup> Benson, “New York Journalists,” 871.

<sup>188</sup> Kingdon, “Should Reporters Express Opinions?” 29.

antebellum America was “a celebration of partisan values.”<sup>189</sup> Exciting torchlight parades, mass rallies, campaign clubs, marching companies, and spectacular campaigns bonded rural and urban communities to the party. But the political style of the nineteenth century began to crumble after the Civil War.<sup>190</sup> Promoted by liberal reformists, the educated voter ideal slowly became the mainstream. Deliberative and intellectual pamphlets gradually replaced spectacular demonstrations of partisanship. Although political demonstrations did not completely disappear by 1892, educational politics had become a standard among both Republicans and Democrats. Newspapers promoted and, at the same time, reflected this shift.

The pride critics expressed about news also reflected the scientism of the era. The rise of industrialization to unprecedented levels after the Civil War produced a change in the way people conceived and organized their environment. As Americans adjusted to the demands of industrialization, the focus in society shifted from the “why” to the “how,” creating demand for efficient technique and expertise.<sup>191</sup> Responding to this need, universities between 1870 and 1900 graduated expert professionals to fill in the ranks of emerging industries.<sup>192</sup> The emphasis on “scientific” management grew in every field. As historian Maury Klein explains, “by the late nineteenth century, Americans in virtually every profession proclaimed their intention of making a ‘science’ of the field or taking a ‘scientific’ approach to their work.”<sup>193</sup> For the journalists in postbellum America, this desire manifested itself in the reverence for news. As an alternative to opinion, news for the critics presented an *accurate, unbiased record of reality*. It was an independent voice speaking to the people, for the people. It is therefore understandable that

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<sup>189</sup> McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 29.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 69-105.

<sup>191</sup> Weisberger, *The New Industrial Society*, 96-104. See also Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 17-19; Thomas Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 24-47.

<sup>192</sup> Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 310-331.

<sup>193</sup> Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 19.

eleven of the forty three critics writing between 1865 and 1893 defined newspapers as a faithful *historical report* of the day's events.<sup>194</sup> *The Writer's* S. S. Kingdon described the reporter as an "embryo historian."<sup>195</sup> Such an impartial record enabled people to make individual political decisions, under no pressure from parties or government officials. It presented, for the critics, *a democratic guarantee for the future of the Republic*. With the introduction of news, journalists were optimistic about the future of American journalism and that of the United States.

Also relevant is the fact that critics identified US papers as inventions, discoveries or machines, possibly to elevate the status of newspapers and to mark the fact that news-based journalism is an (American) innovation. Croly, for example, explained that the replacement of partisan opinion with impartial facts was "as important in journalism as the invention of the spinning-jenny in manufactures, or of the steam-engine in mechanics."<sup>196</sup> Chambers compared the news-based papers to the American railroad,<sup>197</sup> Lesperance to "the galvanic battery, the steam engine and other great motors."<sup>198</sup> M. Y. Beach of *The Writer* spoke of the modern newspaper as "a locomotive,"<sup>199</sup> Godkin identified it as "a factory,"<sup>200</sup> and Cockerill as "one great mechanical perfection."<sup>201</sup> Five other articles used the machine or invention metaphors to describe the press.<sup>202</sup> During an age of unprecedented mechanical and technological

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<sup>194</sup> See, for example, Croly, "What a Newspaper Should Be," 330; Sanborn, "Journalism and Journalists," 59; Parton, "Falsehood in the Daily Press," 272; Sedgwick, "The Future of the Newspaper," 433; Thompson, "The Age of Newspapers," 407; Kingdon, "Should Reporters Express Opinions?" 29; Thompson, "Newspapers; Their Rights and Duties," 2059; Cockerill, "Some Phases of American Journalism," 697.

<sup>195</sup> Kingdon, "Should Reporters Express Opinions?" 30.

<sup>196</sup> Croly, "What a Newspaper Should Be," 332.

<sup>197</sup> Chambers, "The Chivalry of the Press," 113.

<sup>198</sup> Lesperance, "American Journalism," 174.

<sup>199</sup> M. Y. Beach, "Newspaper Enterprise," *The Writer* 5 (July 1891):145.

<sup>200</sup> Godkin, "Newspapers Here and Abroad," 198.

<sup>201</sup> Cockerill, "Some Phases of Contemporary Journalism," 697.

<sup>202</sup> See Parton, "American Newspaper Press," 376-377; Sedgwick, "The Future of the Newspaper," 433; M. Y. Beach, "Value of Ideas in Journalism," *The Writer* 5 (December 1891): 256-257; Balch, "English and American Newspapers," 91; Cockerill, "The Newspaper of the Future," 222.

breakthroughs,<sup>203</sup> representing the news-based press through such metaphors reinforced its high standing. In postbellum America, journalists optimistically looked at news and newspapers the way we look at the Internet and other digital innovations today, namely as a ground for limitless possibilities. The invention metaphor was also a way to underline that American journalism was truly *an innovation*, as opposed to Europe's traditional, opinion-based press.

Journalists indeed saw the news-based press as a distinctively *American* invention. Commercial, technologically innovative, democratic, and increasingly powerful, modern journalism was, in the eyes of the critics, uniquely American. It reflected the ideals that the US slowly embraced as it seceded from Europe. Like the United States, the new journalism originated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, where the relationship between government and people is top-down, and later broke with this tradition in favor of a more egalitarian system. In fact, twelve critics writing between 1865 and 1893 compared European and American journalism, sometimes in an attempt to understand their country's new approach to journalism and to reflect on its potentials. Nine of them found that the US press was superior, or believed it would become superior, because it focused on the news when European papers still relied on opinion.<sup>204</sup> John Lesperance, a St-Louis native who wrote primarily for Canadian newspapers, noted that American journalists should learn about literary excellence from the French and moderation and politeness from the English but that they were otherwise bound to surpass their European counterparts because they relied on news. "The London Times thought it had done wonders when it organized its staff of 'our own correspondents,'" Lesperance wrote. "But we have gone

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<sup>203</sup> Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 27-32.

<sup>204</sup> For articles favoring the US over Europe, see Lesperance, "American Journalism," 175-181; Reid, "Schools of Journalism," 20; Rideing, "The Metropolitan Press," 47; "The English and American Press," *The Nation* 36 (February 1883), 119-120; Browne, "'Newspaperism' Reviewed," 724; Brooks, "The Newspaper of the Future," 571-572; Godkin, "Newspapers Here and Abroad," 197-204; Balch, "English and American Newspapers," 87-93; Cockerill, "The Newspaper of the Future," 224.

far beyond that.”<sup>205</sup> William Rideing, a regular contributor for *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, agreed. “In the number and ability of the staff, and in the completeness of organization, we believe that the journalists of no other city compare with those of New York,” he argued. “In London, Manchester, and other English towns, local news is gathered in a hap-hazard fashion; but in New York every point to which news may possibly come is occupied with fidelity and diligence by experienced men.”<sup>206</sup> Responding to an English journalist’s criticism of the American press, *The Nation* admitted British newspapers were intellectually superior but that they ran far behind US dailies in their “reckless partisanship” and their “subserviency to personal ends and interests.”<sup>207</sup> *The Nation*’s editor, Edwin Lawrence Godkin, found that the opinion-based French dailies could hardly be called newspapers in the American sense. He compared the news coverage in French papers to the romantic *feuilleton*.<sup>208</sup> Writing in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, Alfred Balch compared between American and English reporting of events. Reviewing how a British newspaper covered a military incident in Egypt, he wrote that “[f]rom an American standpoint this is bad journalism, and a reporter who should be guilty of such work would not be retained any longer than it took a telegram to reach him.”<sup>209</sup> As these various quotations show, journalists considered news to be the strong point of American journalism. Just as the United States was slowly growing as a democratic power, independent from the Old Continent, so was the news-based American journalism rising as an alternative to the opinion-based press of Europe.

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<sup>205</sup> Lesperance, “American Journalism,” 180.

<sup>206</sup> Rideing, “The Metropolitan Newspaper,” 47.

<sup>207</sup> “The English and American Press,” 120.

<sup>208</sup> Godkin, “Newspapers Here and Abroad,” 199.

<sup>209</sup> Balch, “English and American Journalism,” 91.

## **A Reflection of Postbellum Optimism about US Potential**

The optimism, the praise, and the boasting about power, rooted in the democratic promise of a news-based journalism, reflected a wider postbellum optimism in the potential of a growing industrial America. The few decades following the Civil War were certainly not free of worries. A severe economic crisis struck the country in 1873. Twelve to fourteen percent were unemployed in 1876 and eighteen percent in 1894.<sup>210</sup> Technological breakthroughs, from the light bulb to plowing machines, threatened entrenched interests and put many people out of business. They brought loss of jobs and identity for some and gains for others.<sup>211</sup> Breaking with their past in the countryside or in Europe, people converged on the big cities, only to find what witnesses described as “nearly unbearable tensions.”<sup>212</sup> Disoriented among strangers, they struggled to cope with the difficult urban life and the constant ferment in business, technology, and society.<sup>213</sup>

But, despite the tensions that change invariably brings, the nineteenth century was overall a time of economic, geographic, and population growth in the United States. The industrial revolution, maturing after the Civil War, presented business entrepreneurs with opportunities to flourish financially.<sup>214</sup> Combined with a capitalist free economy, it provided the tools for mass production and the incentive for mass consumption. In 1860, France, Great Britain, and Germany topped America in terms of industrial output. At the turn of the century, however, production in

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<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 46.

<sup>211</sup> Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 27.

<sup>212</sup> Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 48.

<sup>213</sup> See Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*; Barth, *City People*.

<sup>214</sup> It should be clarified, here, that the economic growth mainly benefited rich and middle-class white Americans. With the advent of industrialization, the former expanded their businesses and the latter moved up the social echelons through the bureaucratic jobs they secured in mushrooming corporations. Poor, mainly immigrant, working classes meanwhile suffered from low and unstable wages, poor health and limited resources. Farmers were also largely excluded from the economic gains.



the US dramatically surpassed that of the three countries combined.<sup>215</sup> Railroad mileage, averaging thirty-five thousand in 1865, jumped to a hundred thousand miles by 1881.<sup>216</sup> Coal production increased from about thirteen million short tons in 1867 to over two hundred ten million in 1900.<sup>217</sup> New mechanical and electrical machines came in all sizes and shapes. Examples included electrical light bulbs, modern machine guns, photography, canning technology, corn cutters, pea shellers, the telephone, new printing presses, linotype machines, typewriters, chemical medicines, perfumes, benzene, machines for wood cutting and metal working, x-ray machines, new telescopes and microscopes, refrigeration technology, central heating, cooking stoves, bathtubs and toilets, and bridge-building technology.<sup>218</sup>

As communication and transportation technologies broke the physical barriers to territorial expansion, Americans migrated westward in search of land. The US economic expansion was multiplied with the availability of “more soil than anyone had ever imagined.”<sup>219</sup> In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act, a bill that allowed any citizen to claim a hundred and sixty acres of public land for a ten-dollar fee. Government granted candidates the domain after five years of continuous residence and improvement of the land, as well as a fee of twenty-four to thirty-five dollars.<sup>220</sup> Lured by the “American Dream,” Europeans flocked to the United States. Around thirty-two million immigrants reached the continent between 1820 and 1930, contributing to a population increase from 9.6 to 122.7 million during this period.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Licht, *Industrializing America*, 102.

<sup>216</sup> Weisberger, *The New Industrial Society*, 12.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>218</sup> Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 27-32.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> *Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Vicking Press, 1968), 503. Quoted in J. Herbert Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan: The Ideas Behind American Journalism* (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1990), 194; U.S. Census Bureau, “Selected Historical Decennial Census Population and Housing Counts,” U.S. Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html> (accessed April 20, 2009).

Coupled with this growth was the excitement of the democratic experience. Americans saw themselves as the children of the Enlightenment and the conscious realization of its liberal teachings –what historian Sidney Mead called “the religion of the democratic society and nation,”<sup>222</sup> which confirmed the still-powerful religious belief that God especially blessed the US –the US as a “city set on a hill” ideal. As Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story said in 1826, the United States is “the latest, and, if we fail, probably the last experiment of self-government by the people.”<sup>223</sup>

Despite the misery immigrant workers and farmers lived in, Americans in general projected a resilient optimism about the future and an unshakable belief in the superiority of their increasingly powerful country. As historian John Fiske passionately wrote in 1884, many Americans agreed that:

The future is lighted for us with the radiant colors of hope. Strife and sorrow shall disappear. Peace and love shall reign supreme. The dream of poets, the lesson of priest and prophet, the inspiration of the great musician, is confirmed in the light of modern knowledge.<sup>224</sup>

This “gospel of America,” as communication scholar J. Herbert Altschull calls it,<sup>225</sup> was based on philosophical optimism, a teleological doctrine contending that, created by God, the world is a positive good and is organized for the best.<sup>226</sup> Philosophers of optimism encouraged people to behave as free individuals and reap their rewards on earth. They promoted a strong faith in humans, their environment, and the future. In the United States, philosophical optimism

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<sup>222</sup> Sidney Mead, “American Protestantism since the Civil War: From Denomination to Americanism,” *The Journal of Religion* 36, no. 1 (January 1956): 2.

<sup>223</sup> Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, quoted in William Vincent Byars, ed., *The Handbook of Oratory: A Cyclopedia of Authorities on Oratory as an Art and of Celebrated Passages from the Best Orations* (St Louis, MO: Ferd. Kaiser, 1901), 449.

<sup>224</sup> John Fiske, quoted in Boyd C. Shafer, “The American Heritage of Hope,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37, no. 3 (December 1950): 434. See also Louis B. Wright, “Historical Implications of Optimism in Expanding America,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 94, no. 1 (February 1950): 18-23; Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan*, 183-187.

<sup>225</sup> Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan*, 188-192.

<sup>226</sup> Wright, “Historical Implications of Optimism in Expanding America,” 18-23.

translated into an unshakable belief in the growing power and superiority of the modern, civilized, and democratic United States. As historian Boyd Shafer writes, Americans “usually saw the colossus of the New World as a place where life would become freer and more abundant than it had ever been.”<sup>227</sup>

Among the most influential advocates of this philosophy was American poet and journalist Walt Whitman. The chief spokesman for the ideology of hope, Whitman relentlessly underlined the prominence his homeland gave to the “common man.” He believed in an America where sacred individualism combined with an equally revered sense of belonging to one social order; the United States of America. His writings promoted the concept of the self-reliant democratic individual who overcame hardships and guided the country to the fortune it was bound to achieve.<sup>228</sup> This destiny was, for him, a God-given right America truly deserved.<sup>229</sup>

Writing in 1876, Whitman sang the praises of an industrial United States:

To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free,  
To fill the gross the torpid bulk with vital religious fire,  
Not to repel or destroy so much as accept, fuse, rehabilitate,  
To obey as well as command, to follow more than to lead,  
These also are the lessons of our New World;  
Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia  
...For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.  
Steam-power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum.  
These triumphs of our time, the Atlantic’s delicate cable,  
... This earth all spann’d with iron rails, with lines of steamship threadings every sea,  
Our own rondure, the current globe I bring.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Shafer, “The American Heritage of Hope, 1865-1940,” 427.

<sup>228</sup> Whitman was influenced by the transcendentalism of the American poet and philosopher Ralph Emerson, popular in antebellum America. Believer in the potential of the new country, Emerson advocated optimism, self-reliance, and development. Highly individualistic, he urged people through the numerous inspiring lectures he gave to follow their inclinations and rely on themselves. In his 1836 essay *Nature*, Emerson preached a fusion with nature, asserting that such unity with the creation was also a union with the Creator. His vision of God was that of an inevitably benevolent deity that made the world a good and noble place. See Woodbridge Riley, *American Thought: From Puritanism to Pragmatism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), 140-154.

<sup>229</sup> Wright, “Historical Implications of Optimism in Expanding America,” 18-23.

<sup>230</sup> Walt Whitman, *Song of the Exposition* (1876). [http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/logr/log\\_088.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/logr/log_088.html) (accessed February 21, 2010).

Also popular in postbellum America was the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and his followers. When Darwin wrote his *Origin of the Species* in 1859, the United States was on the brink of Civil War. It was not until the 1880s that evolution established itself as an accepted reality by many Americans.<sup>231</sup> It proved compatible with the American faith in science and technology. But the popularity of Spencerian evolutionism soon transcended that of Darwin. The sales of Spencer's books in the United States amounted to 368,755 volumes between the 1860s and 1903, a record for manuscripts on philosophy and sociology.<sup>232</sup> Spencer adapted Darwin's concept of natural selection to social development, arguing that "society advances where its fittest members are allowed to assert their fitness."<sup>233</sup> Unable to cope with competition, the weakest die out, allowing society to progress. For US enthusiasts, Spencer's message gave a scientific validity to the philosophy of Americanism. It demonstrated that progress was inevitable, showed that God helped those who helped themselves and provided a moral justification for the Capitalist concept of competition.<sup>234</sup>

The popularity, among many Americans, of philosophical optimism and Social Darwinism, coupled with the unprecedented industrial, demographic, and geographic growth, consolidated the idea of the American Dream. Despite the setbacks of an economic crisis and the anxieties of a changing social order, the United States of postbellum America was distinctively different from the nation of the early nineteenth century. To many Americans in the postbellum era, it was a growing power that promised opportunity, well-being, and democracy. Journalists writing between 1865 and 1893 believed themselves to be the fulfillers of this American Dream

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<sup>231</sup> According to historian Richard Hofstadter, a fierce battle raged for a few years between evolutionists and defenders of religion. By the 1880s, however, evolution had been "translated into divine purpose" and the two trends came to coexist peacefully. See Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 16.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Herbert Spencer, quoted in David Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 197.

<sup>234</sup> Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan*, 201-202.

and its democratic promise. The details of their writings suggested a shared belief in the superiority of America, manifested, in the mind of the critics, in the modern American press. For many critics, the rise of the innovative news-based press as a growing journalistic power mirrored the rise of its homeland as a promising industrial power. The power of the US press was a metaphor for the power of America. Three critics, in fact, explicitly made the connection between American journalism and America. Writing in Lippincott's, Lesperance argued that:

The immense power of journalism is one of the most salient traits of American civilization. The ordinary observer has only to open his eyes to convince himself that chief among the agencies which reveal the American mind and display the idiosyncrasies of our national ethics is the universal and unrestricted publicity of our thoughts, sayings and actions.<sup>235</sup>

The *Boston Commonwealth's* Sanborn was even more explicit. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he declared that:

We have passed rapidly from a provincial to an imperial position among the nations, with all the attendants of our prosperous career, –fabulous wealth, increased culture, a prodigious diversity of tastes and interests, an a wide expansion of the horizon of individual ambition. These things stimulate us in all directions, and their influence is nowhere more keenly felt than in the field of journalism, where they are first noted and most frequently registered and compared.<sup>236</sup>

The *New York Morning's* Cockerill echoed Sanborn's optimism about the power of both American journalism and Americans in general during the three decades after the Civil War:

As surely as the Republic of the United States is to be the great nation of earth at no distant date, even if it be not so now, great in the broad democracy of its government, in the simplicity of its institutions, in the opportunities it offers alike to rich and poor, native and foreign-born, great in the average intelligence, education, refinement, and morality of its people, and greatest in its newspaper press, –so surely will that newspaper press stand at the head of journalism in all countries.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Lesperance, "American Journalism," 174.

<sup>236</sup> Sanborn, "Journalism and Journalists," 60.

<sup>237</sup> Cockerill, "The Newspaper of the Future," 224.

## CHAPTER 4: THE BUSINESS OF A NEWSPAPER

Lincoln Steffens, famous writer for *McClure's* magazine, opened his 1897 piece with a train scene where a few executive heads of American newspapers discussed their vocation. Appropriately titled “The *Business* of a Newspaper [italics ours],” the article reported a conversation about branding, pricing, profit, circulation, and advertising. “Executive heads ... likened the management of it [the newspaper] to that of a department store,” Steffens wrote. He noted that public policy questions and the democratic role of a newspaper “were not once raised.”<sup>238</sup> The conversation Steffens reported exemplified the attitude of newspaper owners and publishers in the 1890s. During this period, journalism had become a business whose main objective is to generate profit. Long gone were the political organs of the Greeleys and the Raymonds.

Writing between 1893 and 1905, critics grappled with this new reality, as the downside of commercial journalism became more obvious. In some cases, disappointment replaced the excitement of the early years. In others, journalists still saw the democratic potentials of a press that sensationally battled corruption as Steffens did –he was a muckraker but thought well of business. All in all, however, and despite their divergences in the very definition of journalism, critics displayed a strong optimism about the future. Their writings mirrored the US mood during the period, as Americans struggled to deal with the problems of industrialism and an increasingly business-oriented society.

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<sup>238</sup> Joseph Lincoln Steffens, “The Business of a Newspaper,” *Scribner's Magazine* 22 (October 1897): 447.

## Anxieties and Optimism

Historian Henry Commager described the 1890s as the “watershed of American history.”<sup>239</sup> During this period, he said, “the New America came on as a flood tide.”<sup>240</sup>

Originating in the industrial, geographic, and population changes of the postbellum period, new problems requiring new solutions imposed themselves, forcing Americans to slowly change and adapt. Already felt in the 1870s and 1880s, the problems of urban life, the maldistribution of wealth, and business consolidations became central issues for the growing middle class in this later period. Yet middle class professionals, including journalists, remained confident in their ability to solve the era’s problems and create an ideal society where justice, well-being and virtue prevailed.

Although small family-owned ventures dominated the US economy in postbellum America, competition soon led to market saturation and price decline, forcing companies in the 1890s to expand vertically or merge horizontally.<sup>241</sup> Encouraged by a communication and transportation revolution and borrowing from the bureaucratic model of the railroads, producers turned to various forms of cartel but were soon confronted with antitrust laws that made the behavior illegal.<sup>242</sup> The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, challenging cartel formation, paradoxically encouraged “holding companies created through legal union of previously separate businesses.”<sup>243</sup> Around the same time, New Jersey incorporation laws stipulated that a given company could legally own another. By 1895, the big business trend had caught fire. Three

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<sup>239</sup> Henry S. Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 41.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>241</sup> Porter, *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1910*, 58.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 54-55.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 72.

hundred companies merged each year,<sup>244</sup> provoking the strong anti-trust movement that was to last until the second decade of the twentieth century.

Along with these changes came a new business subculture where the accumulation of wealth became an ideal. A new class of wealthy capitalists, committed to money making, rose to prominence with the growth of big business. They helped transfer the centers of economic and political gravity from the country to the city, accentuating the contrast between urban progress and rural poverty. The upper ten percent, as historian Michael McGerr calls them,<sup>245</sup> controlled manufacturing processes, transportation, communication, and banking in trusts and monopolies, creating anger among the less fortunate. The life of leisure and pleasure the privileged class often displayed came in stark contrast with the struggles of workers, who suffered from low wages, limited opportunities, constant threats of layoffs and frequent accidents at the factory.<sup>246</sup> Tensions between capital and labor became a constant in US society, especially after the 1893 economic crisis that further deepened the gap between owners and workers.

Added to the clashes were the difficulties of a new urban environment. Severed from their simple existence in the country and living among strangers, many of whom spoke a foreign language, urban Americans had to cope with small living and work spaces, a dull routine, poor hygiene, and the restricted organization of a heavily industrialized society.<sup>247</sup> Immigrants, meanwhile, grappled to adapt to a new culture of tenement and factory. With little chance of improving their fate, newcomers suffered from limited and insecure jobs, low wages, and difficult living conditions.<sup>248</sup> As historian Thomas Haskell argues, the new urbanized environment where one often relied on strangers in daily life created a helpless feeling of

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>245</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 3.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 3-39.

<sup>247</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, 44-76. See also Barth, *City People*, 7-27.

<sup>248</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 13-40.



interdependence at the turn of the century.<sup>249</sup> For Haskell, the urban life of the 1890s, controlled by machine technology, factory discipline, and big business, obscured the usual tangible agents of change in the eyes of the people. This recession of causation undermined the noble image of independent human beings, creating further tension.

The initial response to the agitations and anxieties came in the form of a Populist upheaval. Created in 1892, the People's Party called for a change from gold to silver currency, for economic reforms that improved the condition of farmers, and for the nationalization of the railroad, telephone, and telegraph industries. But when William Jennings Bryan, representing both Democrats and Populists, lost the presidential elections of 1896, the People's Party dissolved.<sup>250</sup> In the midst of the tensions, a new middle class, comprising small proprietors and professional experts, slowly rose to battle the hardships. Optimistic about their ability to improve society through concerted human action, "progressives" proposed a variety of laws and reforms to solve the problems of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Their efforts, already taking shape at the turn of the century, marked the following two decades in America. As we shall see in the next chapter, reformers challenged business monopolies, fought the excesses of the Gilded Age, and articulated an organizational revolution in corporations and the government. At the center of their efforts was a reliance on bureaucracy and the expertise of social science professionals.<sup>251</sup> Despite the difficulties of the period, progressives were confident they could help achieve an ideal society, reflecting the can-do mentality that characterized believers in the American Dream.

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<sup>249</sup> Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science*, 24-47.

<sup>250</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, 84-111.

<sup>251</sup> See Wiebe, *The Search for Order*; Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," 113-132; Zunz, *Making America Corporate 1870-1920*.

This dichotomy of fear and hope, of skepticism toward big business and faith in democracy, was clearly reflected in the writings of critics between 1893 and 1905. Journalists indeed criticized commercial journalism but praised its democratic potentials at the same time. Some saw the press as a business focused on making profit while others presented it as a profession offering a vital public service.

### **Commercial Journalism**

Journalists were part of the progressive movement, exposing corruption and proposing solutions. At the same time, journalism became a big business, displaying some of the excesses of corporate giants. The writings of journalistic press critics between 1893 and 1905 similarly reflected the dichotomy of tension and optimism that characterized the American society at the turn of the century. Mirroring their contemporaries, some journalists expressed a malaise about the state of the press during the period under study coupled with a resilient optimism in their ability to correct it. At the heart of their concern was the new commercial journalism. Often a far cry from the fearless, independent press postbellum critics had hoped for, the new model reflected, in many ways, the business culture of the 1890s.

The deaths of Horace Greeley in 1872, Charles Dana in 1897, and Edwin Lawrence Godkin in 1902 marked the end of personal journalism.<sup>252</sup> Such a press reflected the character and policies of its editors and often overlooked circulation concerns. Typified perhaps most acutely by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*,<sup>253</sup> the new journalism was dedicated to making profit. At the center of this change were the soaring costs of acquiring and operating newspapers. The introduction of linotype machinery, octuple presses, folding machines, color processing, and photography, and the rising costs of reporting, news agency subscriptions, and distribution

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<sup>252</sup> Commager, *The American Mind*, 68-69. See also Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 337-411.

<sup>253</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press in America*, 337.

increased the average paper's annual expenses to two million dollars.<sup>254</sup> Steffens reported that one paper paid around \$220,000 in 1896 for editorial and literary matters, \$290,000 for local news, \$180,000 for illustrations, \$125,000 for correspondents, \$65,000 for telegraph, \$27,000 for cable, \$410,500 for the mechanical department, \$617,000 for paper and \$219,000 for other miscellaneous operating costs.<sup>255</sup> When James Gordon Bennett founded the *New York Herald* in May 1835, his capital was \$500. He started alone. Pulitzer, who bought the *New York World* in 1883 paid \$340,000. By the mid-nineties, the *World's* value amounted to ten million. It employed 1,300 journalists and staff members.<sup>256</sup>

The monumental increase in costs coincided with the rise of mass production across industries. Corporations found in newspapers an effective outlet to market their products and increase sales. The ensuing rise of advertising transformed many papers into businesses whose sole objective was to generate profit. As one critic put it, "the fundamental principle of metropolitan journalism to-day is to buy white paper at three cents a pound and sell it at ten cents a pound."<sup>257</sup> In many cases, the business or circulation offices controlled the newsroom. As one journalist explained, "from the counting-room came all sorts of suggestions intended to influence the editorial conduct of the paper, suggestions of personal puffery, of sensational devices, of the expediency of attracting or placating particular interests."<sup>258</sup> In some cases, business offices censored articles that hurt important advertisers, imposed "reading-matter" (advertisements disguised as articles), or flattened editorials that could potentially upset readers or advertisers. In most newspapers, publishers now hired editors rather than the other way around.<sup>259</sup> To lure

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 386.

<sup>255</sup> Steffens, "The Business of a Newspaper," 459.

<sup>256</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press in America*, 221, 368.

<sup>257</sup> Keller, "Journalism as a Career," 691.

<sup>258</sup> William Morton Payne, "What a Daily Newspaper Might Be Made," *Forum* 16 (November 1893): 364.

<sup>259</sup> Truman De Weese, "From 'Journalism' to the 'Newspaper Industry,'" *The Independent* 54 (December 1902): 2953.

advertisers, profit-oriented papers focused on increasing circulation. They provided audiences with sensational stories of crime and melodrama.

### **Sensationalism and the Yellow Press**

As discussed in the previous chapter, sensational newspapers had already surfaced during the early 1880s. In one of the earliest analyses of press content, Kentucky journalist and author John Gilmer Speed designated 1882 as the date around which sensational articles became frequent enough to be noticed.<sup>260</sup> With the increase of profit-oriented journalism during the 1890s, however, sensationalism reached new heights. Many newspapers put articles on violence, scandal, and melodrama on the first page. They followed stories of marital treason, family quarrels, and sordid crimes from week to week, prompting *The Independent* to compare them to “the village gossip of olden days.”<sup>261</sup> Sensational newspapers also used illustrations to lure subscribers. It is estimated that in 1891, around a thousand American artists supplied pictorial materials to five thousand newspapers and magazines around the country. The *Boston Globe* alone spent thirty thousand dollars a year on its engraving plant in 1893.<sup>262</sup>

During the second half of the 1890s, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst engaged in a bitter war for circulation in New York City. Known as the yellow press, their newspapers took sensationalism to new levels. They screamed headlines in huge print on dramatic but often trivial subjects like “The Mysterious Murder of Bessie Little” and “Mlle. Anna Held Receives Alan Dale, Attired in a ‘Nightie.’”<sup>263</sup> They featured lavish pictures and colored comic strips and included articles on pseudoscience, sports, crime, sex, and corruption. Love, power, hate, and sympathy were among their favorite themes. Eager to boost their

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<sup>260</sup> John Gilmer Speed, “Do Newspapers Now Give the News?” *Forum* 15 (August 1893): 705-711.

<sup>261</sup> “The Wickedness That Isn’t So,” *The Independent* 55 (September 1903): 2240.

<sup>262</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 407.

<sup>263</sup> These two examples are actual headlines from William Randolph Hearst’s *Morning Journal*. Quoted in Emery and Smith, *The Press in America*, 425.

circulation, yellow papers did not hesitate to use faked interviews and to exaggerate the facts. As historian James Rogers explained around ten years later, “when Hell is quiet and there is no sign of an eruption, a reporter is immediately sent to make one at any cost.”<sup>264</sup> Often self-congratulatory, yellows promoted themselves as champions of the underdog, which was not an unfounded claim. Sympathetic to workers and immigrants, such papers did address the concern of the people and expose the corruption of officials and corporate magnates.

### **Disappointment about the Sensational Press**

The initial euphoria of postbellum journalists and the hope they attached to commercial journalism receded between 1893 and 1905 but it did not disappear. The number of negative articles did increase considerably. As the previous chapter indicated, only five out of the forty-three articles between 1865 and 1893 were negative overall. At the turn of the century, the number jumped to fourteen articles that were entirely negative and twelve that included strong criticism of commercial journalism but differentiated between this model and between responsible journalism. At the same time, however, twenty-one articles spoke favorably of journalism while eight did not express an opinion. In addition, of the fifty-five articles under study, twenty-five were optimistic that the relapse was momentary and the press was bound to improve. Only six were pessimistic while twenty-four did not comment on the future.

The negative articles mostly attacked sensationalism and the ensuing trivialization of newspaper content. Journalists, who were proud about the news-based character of their American press, were upset that the race for circulation distorted and exaggerated the daily facts of life, thus depriving newspapers of their most valuable asset. Sensationalism was problematic for the critics because it compromised the accuracy of the information people would use to make political decisions. It also distorted the record newspapers left for coming generations about US

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<sup>264</sup> James Edward Rogers, *The American Newspaper* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1909), 55-56.

society at the turn of the century. It is therefore not surprising that twenty-four articles out of fifty-five included criticism of sensationalism and the ensuing distortion of news. Also meaningful is the fact that, between 1900 and 1905, seven articles declared that papers would fail to achieve their democratic promise.<sup>265</sup> None of the articles published on journalism in the early period were skeptical about that.

“Everything is so covered with the millinery of sensationalism that none but the wisest can detect the truth beneath,” Kentucky author and journalist John Gilmer Speed wrote in *Forum*.<sup>266</sup> William Morton Payne, associate editor for *The Dial*, agreed. “The distinction between the real and the sensational is, however, of much importance, and the influence of a paper for good will largely depend upon the care with which this distinction is made,” he wrote, also in *Forum*.<sup>267</sup> John Henderson Garnsey called in *The Arena* for “some protection from the journalistic filth issuing from the great cities”<sup>268</sup> while an editorial in *The Independent* observed that newspapers have “raised scandal-mongering to the dignity of a learned profession.”<sup>269</sup> The editorial sarcastically explained that “creative” journalists should simply disregard truth to be able to raise their articles to the status of “scare heads,” a reference to the large sensational headlines splashed on the first pages of yellow papers. The anonymous confessions of a provincial editor, published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, corroborated *The Independent*. “Success came when I exaggerated every little petty scandal, every row in a church choir, every hint of a

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<sup>265</sup> See “The Alert-Press Fallacy,” *The Nation* 71 (August 1900): 104; Brooke Fisher, “The Newspaper Industry,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 89 (June 1902): 745; “Confessions of a Provincial Editor,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 89 (March 1902): 352; De Weese, “From ‘Journalism’ to the ‘Newspaper Industry,’” 2956; George Alger, “Sensational Journalism and the Law,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 91 (February 1903): 146-147; Horace White, “The School of Journalism,” *North American Review* 178 (January 1904): 29; George Alger, “The Literature of Exposure,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 96 (August 1905): 211.

<sup>266</sup> Speed, “Do Newspapers Now Give the News?” 711.

<sup>267</sup> Payne, “What a Daily Newspaper Might Be Made,” 359.

<sup>268</sup> John Henderson Garnsey, “The Demand for Sensational Journals,” *The Arena* 18 (November 1897): 684.

<sup>269</sup> “The Wickedness That Isn’t So,” 2240.

disturbance,” the disillusioned editor said.<sup>270</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*:

As soon as the collection of it became a business, . . . the sense of proportion about news was rapidly destroyed. Everything, however trifling, was considered worth printing, and the newspaper finally became what it is now, a collection of the gossip not only of the whole world, but of its own locality.<sup>271</sup>

A few journalists were critical about the use of pictures in newspapers. Although critics usually welcomed technological advances, some were unhappy about the introduction of visuals, or what Godkin called “the childish view of the world.”<sup>272</sup> Pictorial representations were associated with yellow journalism in particular and were hence considered sensational devices.

William Morton Payne of *The Dial* wrote that pictures and sensational headlines were the “unhallowed devices of the barbarous age of journalism.”<sup>273</sup> Brooke Fisher, who surveyed the state of journalism in *The Atlantic Monthly*, also associated pictures with “the startling, the painful, the shocking, and the funny” that sensational papers splashed over their pages.<sup>274</sup>

Richard Watson Gilder of *The Century* distinguished between “real illustration,” which he said would last as important device in journalism, and “the ‘misfit’ joke picture” that pervaded yellow papers.<sup>275</sup> Although he defended the press of the 1890s, Charles Ransom Miller, editor of the *New York Times*, called for the abolition of triviality, sensationalism, and pictures. “There must be no pictures,” he wrote, “for pictures are an abomination in the sight of the censors and that settles the case against them.”<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> “Confessions of a Provincial Editor,” 355.

<sup>271</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, “The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 81 (January 1898): 6.

<sup>272</sup> Godkin, “Newspaper Pictures,” 307.

<sup>273</sup> Payne, “What a Daily Newspaper Might Be Made,” 362.

<sup>274</sup> Fisher, “The Newspaper Industry,” 750.

<sup>275</sup> Richard Watson Gilder, “The Newspaper, the Magazine, and the Public,” *The Outlook* 61 (February 1899): 320.

<sup>276</sup> Charles Ransom Miller, “A Word to the Critics of Newspapers,” *Forum* 15 (August 1893): 713.

But the most important concern critics had remained in the realm of ethics. The excesses of sensational and yellow journalism mirrored, in a way, the intemperance of the Gilded Age while the race for circulation reflected the excesses of corporate greed in the 1890s. It is therefore understandable that sensationalism provoked the same uneasiness some people shared about the rise of corporate powers. Few journalists spoke about the vulgarization of morals,<sup>277</sup> in what could be a sign of the progressivism that slowly spread in US society. Most journalists, however, complained about specific ethical mistakes that sensational and yellow papers committed as they competed for readers. Out of the fifty-five articles under study, twenty-four addressed the lack of truth, eleven spoke of defamation, and six of invasion of privacy. Lawyer and journalist George W. Alger noted, for example, that the yellow press often incriminated defendants in murder trials before they were actually found guilty, solely for the purpose of creating a sensation.<sup>278</sup> Lincoln Steffens of *McClure's* spoke of contemporary editors "who 'roast' with a serene conscience" innocent public personalities.<sup>279</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, Godkin's grandson and his successor as the editor of *The Nation*, wrote that "business journalism ... cares as little for accurate and painstaking knowledge as it does for the feelings of the persons with whose misfortunes or notoriety it fills its pages."<sup>280</sup> John Brisben Walker, owner of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, also complained that "the interests of the paper and the public, and the interests of the news writer, seem diametrically opposed; and in the resulting clash truth very often gets badly handled."<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> See, for example, Payne, "What a Daily Newspaper Might be Made," 356; "A Newspaper Symposium," *The Dial* 15 (August 1893): 79; "Responsibility of the Press," *The Independent* 53 (September 1901): 2249; Charles B. Connolly, "The Ethics of Modern Journalism," *Catholic World* 75 (1902): 454; "Confessions of a Provincial Editor," 351-369.

<sup>278</sup> Alger, "Sensational Journalism and the Law," 148.

<sup>279</sup> Joseph Lincoln Steffens, "The New School of Journalism," *The Bookman* 18 (October 1903): 176.

<sup>280</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, "Education and Journalism," *The Nation* 77 (August 1903): 168.

<sup>281</sup> John Brisben Walker, "Some Difficulties of Modern Journalism," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 24 (January 1898): 328.



Journalists in few cases went as far as accusing sensational newspapers, and particularly yellow journalism, of encouraging the Spanish-American War and the assassination of President William McKinley. *The Nation*'s Godkin said sensationalist journalists exaggerated discord and appealed to nationalism because they knew that war would boost circulation. "Newspapers are made to sell; and for this purpose there is nothing better than war. War means daily sensation and excitement," Godkin wrote in reference to the Spanish-American war.<sup>282</sup> Lawyer and journalist George W. Alger, who pointed out that yellow papers seek to direct events rather than report them, also blamed this press for promoting the war.<sup>283</sup> An editorial in *The Independent* implicated yellow journalism of the death of President McKinley. Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist of Polish descent, shot the president twice on September 6 in Buffalo. A few days later, the president passed away, raising questions about the yellow papers' possible contribution to such a crime. As *The Independent* put it:

The Independent uttered no untruth when it said, a week ago, that anarchism has drawn inspiration from the cruelties and debaucheries of yellow journalism. ... In some measure, the American newspaper is responsible for a low moral tone, a somewhat vulgar view of life, a cynical attitude toward all idealism, a tendency to violence and lawlessness, and even an increasing criminality, which thoughtful observers have long been noting with sorrow and with shame, as they have watched the development of a people in which, we sincerely believe, are centered the highest hopes for the future of mankind.<sup>284</sup>

In this quotation is a sense, directly or indirectly shared by critics who worried about press ethics, that yellow journalism could hinder the potentials of the US society –in contrast to the characteristic postbellum belief that a news-based independent journalism would expand the benefits the US could offer to the world. No other critic in the sample accused yellow papers of

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<sup>282</sup> Godkin, "The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion," 9. See also Edwin Lawrence Godkin, "Diplomacy and the Newspaper," *North American Review* 160 (May 1895): 570-579.

<sup>283</sup> Alger, "Sensational Journalism and the Law," 146.

<sup>284</sup> "Responsibility of the Press," 2249.

contributing to the murder of McKinley but the claim was apparently prevalent enough to prompt an article, in *The Nation*, in defense of yellow newspapers.<sup>285</sup>

Whether they criticized sensationalism or accused papers of promoting crime, the negative articles reflected a profound disappointment about a promise that never materialized. After the Civil War, critics had been excited about the divorce between journalism and political parties and the ensuing rise of commercial journalism. But privately-owned newspapers did not match the expectations of postbellum journalists. Free from partisan influence, the papers were now under the control of a different kind of authority, the business room. Journalists now found they had to crusade for a different sort of liberation, namely the freedom from publishers' caprices and the tyranny of the profit motive. As Johnson Brigham, editor of the *Midwest Monthly Literary Magazine*, wrote in 1899:

The journalists of this transition period are working out their emancipation, not from party bossism, for independence within party lines has already come to be the rule, but from counting-room suggestions of a temporizing nature prompting the utterance of words which are best withheld, and the withholding of words that need to be uttered.<sup>286</sup>

Several journalists voiced this complaint. "Journalistic traditions are shattered and ... in the new school the business-office is paramount," reporter and drama critic John Keller observed.<sup>287</sup>

Brooke Fisher noted in *The Atlantic Monthly* that "the fact is that the editor and the editorial are nowadays but means to the circulation and advertising ... and the publisher, the manager of the circulation and the advertising, is supreme."<sup>288</sup> Richard Watson Gilder, editor-in-chief of *The Century*, declared that "the most deplorable thing about the present conditions of journalism is that young men fresh from college, who go to work on these sensational papers attracted by high pay, suffer degeneration in character under pressure to produce what is demanded by cynical

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<sup>285</sup> "Responsibility for Yellow Journalism," *The Nation* 73 (September 1901): 238-239.

<sup>286</sup> Johnson Brigham, "Twentieth Century Journalism," *Midland Monthly* 11 (June 1899): 469.

<sup>287</sup> Keller, "Journalism as a Career," 702.

<sup>288</sup> Fisher, "The Newspaper Industry," 745.

employers.”<sup>289</sup> The *Chicago Record-Herald*’s Truman De Weese articulated in *Forum* the collective belief that the increasing domination of the business room endangered the future of journalism as a literary profession.<sup>290</sup> M. Y. Beach of *The Writer* protested the instructions that publishers imposed on writers, noting that papers that merely reflect the policies of their owners lose “one of the best purposes for which a newspaper exists.”<sup>291</sup> George Smalley provided a more detailed description of such “instructions” in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*:

The counting-house has been known so far to mistake its true functions as to consider itself an authority in the editorial room –such and such a policy, in the view of the business manager, is injurious to the paper, reduces its circulation or cripples its advertising, and he therefore remonstrates with the enthusiast, supposing he remains an enthusiast, who has nominal control over the editorial columns of the paper. What is the generous young soul who wants to convert the world to do in these perplexing circumstances? If he yields, the conversion of the world has to wait. If he resists, the counting-house is only too apt to carry its point, and the editor departs, and in that way also the process of regeneration is delayed, and the editor himself may not easily find another paper to edit.<sup>292</sup>

Disappointed with the new commercial system, journalists articulated a collective protest against the new forms of alienation their peers now experienced. At the same time, such statements constituted a defense of journalists and of the press. For critics, journalism’s missteps did not come from the newsroom, where newspapers were actually produced. Problems came from the business room and the owner, the capitalist. In other words, journalists were not necessarily disappointed in journalism. They were more upset about the behavior of newspaper owners. Their criticism mirrored the general mood against the corporate power and business culture of the Gilded Age.

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<sup>289</sup> Gilder, “The Newspaper, the Magazine, and the Public,” 320.

<sup>290</sup> Truman De Weese, “Journalism: Its Rewards and Opportunities,” *Forum* 26 (December 1898): 449.

<sup>291</sup> M. Y. Beach, “Newspaper Ethics,” *The Writer* 8 (November 1895): 157.

<sup>292</sup> Smalley, *Notes on Journalism*, 218.

## Hope Despite the Disappointment

Despite the disillusion and the criticism, journalists writing about journalism between 1893 and 1905 were not entirely negative. The majority of those who disparaged sensationalism believed in a better future and in their ability to reform yellow papers. Five spoke of the ideal newspaper or of the newspaper of the future.<sup>293</sup> Most journalists admired the powers and potentials of the press as a civilizing agent. To put it succinctly, they despised sensationalism and commercialism but did not lose faith in journalism. Several journalists did not criticize sensationalism at all. Some avoided its mention, focusing on the positive instead, while others defended the trend.

Of the fifty-five articles under study, twenty-five were optimistic about the prospects of US journalism while six were pessimistic. Ten of these twenty-five had spoken critically about the press. John Henderson Garnsey, who wrote an article in *The Arena* criticizing sensational journalism, nonetheless declared that:

There is a time in the future when the expenditure of money and the utterance of dogma will fail to keep up the circulations which constitute the sole value of these 'great' dailies. When that time comes, and not until that time, will the public get what it really wants, and it will not secure such a prize until it begins to think that there is no real demand for sensational journals.<sup>294</sup>

Lincoln Steffens of *McClure's* predicted that business considerations were bound to check the excesses of sensationalism.<sup>295</sup> *The Century's* Richard Watson Gilder also expected that readers would ultimately react to scare heads and scandal, automatically improving journalism.

"Publishers will furnish better papers if readers refuse to buy poor ones," he wrote.<sup>296</sup> Oswald

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<sup>293</sup> See Payne, "What a Daily Newspaper Might Be," 356-363; "A Newspaper Symposium," 79-80; Garnsey, "The Demand for Sensational Journals," 685-686; Walker, "Some Difficulties of Modern Journalism," 328; Frank Munsey, "Getting on in Journalism: An Address Delivered by Mr. Munsey before the Merchants' Club of Boston on December 16," *Munsey's Magazine* 19 (May 1902): 215-218.

<sup>294</sup> Garnsey, "The Demand for Sensational Journals," 686.

<sup>295</sup> Steffens, "The Business of a Newspaper," 465.

<sup>296</sup> Gilder, "The Newspaper, the Magazine, and the Public," 321.

Garrison Villard of *The Nation* expressed his hope in a better future, based on the fact that new small ventures were mushrooming, respectable dailies were able to compete with the yellows and technical achievements paved the way for better papers.<sup>297</sup> The *Catholic World*'s Charles Connolly, who wrote about the moral decadence of sensational papers, anticipated that yellow papers would "turn pale and become white" when "men who can think and write thoughts, instead of men who can invent and amuse, will find their way into the offices of the yellows."<sup>298</sup>

The optimism of critics writing between 1893 and 1905 could be interpreted as a continuation of the confidence journalists expressed in the postbellum era but it is slightly different. In the first decades after the Civil War, journalists were excited about the promises of commercial newspapers because these increasingly news-based channels of information were *new*. As information historian Paul Duguid explains, two reductive "futurological tropes" typically characterize the reception of new media in the modern era.<sup>299</sup> Supercession, the first one, refers to the belief that the new medium will overpower its predecessor. In postbellum America, for example, journalists anticipated that independent commercial newspapers would subsume the party organs. The second trope Duguid refers to is transparency, namely the assumption that the new medium will liberate information from the constraints of the previous media order –as, for example, when journalists after the Civil War welcomed commercial journalism as an escape from the biases of partisanship. The critics of the postbellum period were, then, excited about the promises of a new medium. The optimism of journalists between 1893 and 1905 was slightly different. It reflected a progressive belief, fairly common among US middle classes at that point, in the power of human endeavor to improve society. It mirrored a

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<sup>297</sup> Villard, "Education and Journalism," 168.

<sup>298</sup> Connolly, "The Ethics of Modern Journalism," 462.

<sup>299</sup> Paul Duguid, "Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book," in *The Future of the Book*, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 63-103.

can-do attitude, prevalent among the middle classes, and a will to reform public institutions, private life, and corporate powers. Journalism critics shared in this confidence.

Also important was the journalists' differentiation between the business room and the newsroom. If critics were disappointed about the race for circulation and the ensuing sensationalism, they did not stop believing in journalism and envisioning its potential. Several articles written about the adventures of a reporter's life,<sup>300</sup> the mind-boggling speed of news gathering,<sup>301</sup> the complex system of news agencies,<sup>302</sup> the extraordinary lives of press barons like Pulitzer,<sup>303</sup> the great influence of the press on politics,<sup>304</sup> and the effects of journalism on culture<sup>305</sup> testify to the exhilaration journalists still felt about their profession and the readers' interest in it. Journalists, including those who criticized sensationalism, described their profession with metaphors like "greatest factor in modern civilization,"<sup>306</sup> "great civilizing engine,"<sup>307</sup> "great big modern machine,"<sup>308</sup> "motion picture of civilization,"<sup>309</sup> "great instrument of civilization,"<sup>310</sup> and "honorable calling."<sup>311</sup> Twenty-four articles out of fifty-five boasted about the power of American newspapers. Seven critics compared their influence to that of the Church, possibly in an effort to illustrate the extent of press power. Writing in *The Arena*, John Henderson Garnsey compared editors to "an invisible and intangible oracle."<sup>312</sup> Arthur Reed

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<sup>300</sup> Ralph, "The Newspaper Correspondent," 150-166.

<sup>301</sup> Perry Walton, "How Newspapers Annihilate Time," *Munsey's Magazine* 33 (April 1905): 66-68.

<sup>302</sup> Thomas B. Connery, "Great Business Operations: The Collection of News," *Cosmopolitan* 23 (May 1897): 21-32.

<sup>303</sup> James Creelman, "The Chiefs of the American Press," *Cosmopolitan* 18 (November 1895): 81-90. See also Arthur Brisbane, "Captains of Industry," *Cosmopolitan* 33 (May 1902): 48-54.

<sup>304</sup> Edward G. Riggs, "The Newspaper and Politics," *The Bookman* 19 (July 1904): 477-495.

<sup>305</sup> Arthur Reed Kimball, "The Invasion of Journalism," *The Atlantic Monthly* 86 (July 1900): 119-124. See also Aline Gorren, "The Ethics of Modern Journalism," *Scribner's Magazine* 19 (June 1896): 507-513.

<sup>306</sup> Keller, "Journalism as a Career," 696

<sup>307</sup> Dana, "Journalism," 555.

<sup>308</sup> Munsey, "Getting On in Journalism," 215.

<sup>309</sup> De Weese, "From 'Journalism' to the 'Newspaper Industry,'" 2953.

<sup>310</sup> Alger, "The Literature of Exposure," 212.

<sup>311</sup> Ralph, "The Newspaper Correspondent," 156.

<sup>312</sup> Garnsey, "The Demand for Sensational Journalism," 684.

Kimball, editor of the *Waterbury American*, classified journalism and the pulpit in the same category of opinion vehicles.<sup>313</sup> George Smalley of the *New York Tribune* described the press as a “gospel to all mankind.”<sup>314</sup> Meanwhile, Frank Munsey, owner of *Munsey’s Magazine*, explained that newspapers are “accepted by thousands as their guide and oracle.”<sup>315</sup> Aline Gorren, who maintained in *Scribner’s Magazine* that newspapers constituted the greatest educational source for many thousands, wrote that journalists may have “entered into that species of priesthood.”<sup>316</sup> Richard Watson Gilder of *The Century* was more explicit (and emphatic). “It would hardly be rash to affirm that the dailies, weeklies, and monthlies of our country wield a wider influence than the pulpit, and perhaps even than the schools,” he wrote.<sup>317</sup> Charles Dana, the famous editor of the *New York Sun*, concurred:

Just consider the clergyman. He preaches two or three times in a week, and he has for his congregation two hundred, three hundred, five hundred, and, if he is a great popular orator in a great city, he may have a thousand hearers; but the newspaper man is stronger, because, throughout all the avenues of newspaper communication, how many does he preach to? A million, half a million, two hundred thousand people; and his preaching is not on Sundays only, but it is everyday. He reiterates, he says it over and over, and finally the thing gets fixed in men’s minds from the mere habit of saying it and hearing it; and, without criticizing, without inquiring whether it is really so, the newspaper dictum gets established and is taken for gospel; and perhaps it is not gospel at all.<sup>318</sup>

For most journalists, the power of American newspapers came from their character as news-based channels of information and their ability to unveil the corruption of government officials and corporate powers. In fact, critics saw these two factors as the *raison d’être* of American journalism and the basis of its democratic role, crucial in a republic such as the United States. Of the fifty-five articles written between 1893 and 1905, eighteen cited news gathering as

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<sup>313</sup> Arthur Reed Kimball, “The Profession of Publicist,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 92 (December 1903): 807.

<sup>314</sup> Smalley, “Notes on Journalism,” 218.

<sup>315</sup> Munsey, “Getting On in Journalism,” 217.

<sup>316</sup> Gorren, “The Ethics of Modern Journalism,” 510.

<sup>317</sup> Gilder, “The Newspaper, the Magazine, and the Public,” 317.

<sup>318</sup> Dana, “Journalism,” 556.

the central mission of newspapers and twenty-two mentioned public service and/or the fight against corruption. The twenty-one critics who praised American journalism, either defending or ignoring the sensational trend, did so because of one or both of these services.

“The daily publication of the news is the greatest, the incomparable service of the press,” Charles Ransom Miller, editor-in-chief of the *New York*, wrote in *Forum*.<sup>319</sup> James Creelman, who praised James Gordon Bennett Senior for inventing news, affirmed that “a newspaper’s legitimate work is to give the news of the world and explain it.”<sup>320</sup> Both Edwin Lawrence Godkin of *The Nation* and Thomas B. Connery of the *New York Herald* declared that news is “the life-blood of a great journal.”<sup>321</sup> Connery’s entire article on news gathering at the turn of the century illustrated the importance of the concept and its centrality in American journalism. The *New York Sun*’s Charles Dana wrote that “news is undoubtedly a great thing in a newspaper. A newspaper without news is no newspaper.”<sup>322</sup> John Cockerill, editor of the *New York Morning*, explained that local news is the backbone of journalistic success.<sup>323</sup> Aline Gorren declared in *Scribner’s Magazine* that American journalism was superior to its French counterpart because of its news-based character. She anticipated that the American model, based on news, would soon conquer the Old Continent:

Writers and thinkers who, like M. Brunetière, realize the extent of the change that has come over the French newspaper, and know all that it means in the present and for the future, have made ineffectual attempts, now and again, to turn back the rising tide. But the current of “Americanism” is not to be stemmed.<sup>324</sup>

If this quotation shows anything, it is the parallel journalists sometimes drew between American journalism and America, emphasized here through the destiny of the news-based

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<sup>319</sup> Miller, “A Word to the Critics of Newspapers,” 715.

<sup>320</sup> Creelman, “The Chiefs of the American Press,” 81-82, 88.

<sup>321</sup> Godkin, “The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion,” 7; Connery, “Great Business Operations,” 21.

<sup>322</sup> Dana, “Journalism,” 562.

<sup>323</sup> John Cockerill, “How to Conduct a Local Newspaper,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* 58 (September 1896): 397.

<sup>324</sup> Gorren, “The Ethics of Modern Journalism,” 509.



report. The emphasis on news, already present in postbellum America, did not recede with the rise of sensational newspapers. Despite the inaccuracies that such papers printed, critics viewed American journalism overall as a quasi-scientific process of news gathering that provided people with factual information they could use to make political decisions. In this sense, news empowered the people and reinforced the US democratic system. As it made journalism more powerful, it also helped fulfill the American Dream.

Along with the transmission of news came a new journalistic service, rarely mentioned before the 1890s but central to the conversation on the American press after 1893, namely the fight against corruption. Reflecting the progressive principles that middle class professionals increasingly embraced, several critics conceived the newspaper as a tool to improve society and correct the ills of the Gilded Age. For them, the newspaper became the people's court. As Charles Ransom Miller of the *New York Times* put it:

In countless strifes against municipal corruption and against political bosses and party machines, in exposures of official malfeasance, in prophetic warnings of evils to come from unwise executive or legislative acts, in unwearying exhortation against political and financial follies, and in the promotion of public or charitable undertakings, the press has demonstrated its high utility and put its title to the possession of "accumulations" beyond all contest.<sup>325</sup>

M. Y. Beach of *The Writer* agreed. "A newspaper, whether a daily or a weekly, has as one of its foremost duties to the public that of guarding the people against the wrongs and corruption, whether public or private," he wrote.<sup>326</sup> Even Truman De Weese, who in another article had disparaged the sensational character of American newspapers, wrote a piece where he praised the press for using its power to uncover hypocrisy, expose fraud, and promote justice.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Miller, "A Word to the Critics of Newspapers," 716.

<sup>326</sup> Beach, "Newspaper Ethics," 157.

<sup>327</sup> De Weese, "Journalism," 451.

Eight critics defended yellow journalism on the same account. For them, yellow journalism, despite its faults, represented, served, and thus empowered the people. Louis Megargee, a Philadelphia journalist and writer, recounted in *Lippincott's* how he personally uncovered a medical school's illegal raids of graveyards. "The 'newspaper sensation' has almost invariably as its object and effect the righting of a public wrong. It is generally the child of much thought, careful judgment, untiring industry, painstaking investigation, and unselfish labor," he wrote.<sup>328</sup> Aline Gorren, who found American journalism to be superior to its French counterpart because of its news-based character, also praised the democratic service US papers provided when they fought corruption:

If there be in publicity, for the mass of mankind, that enormous power for compelling righteousness that is assumed, then we are prevented from demurring when its modes of procedure tread, in any direction, too roughly upon our susceptibilities. If the price of the benefaction be an unliterary journalism, a journalism that exploits privacies, we must pay it.<sup>329</sup>

A 1900 editorial in *The Independent* concurred. "The yellow press takes the people's part; It represents them," the column said. "What papers get out injunctions to prevent Ramapo jobbers from pilfering the people's treasury; bring babies in special trains to agonized parents; or offer trips to the Paris Exposition to the most popular rag-picker?"<sup>330</sup> The most emphatic acclaim came from Arthur Brisbane. William Randolph Hearst's right hand and the brain behind his papers, the famous editor devoted an entire article in defense of the yellows. Brisbane said "conservative" papers were the papers of the past while the yellow press was real journalism. He recalled several cases where such papers brought kidnapped children back to their parents, denounced the debaucheries of the rich and famous, fought corruption in Wall Street, and identified criminals. "Yellow Journalism is the journalism of action, and responsibility," Brisbane wrote. "Yellow

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<sup>328</sup> Louis N. Megargee, "A Newspaper Sensation," *Lippincott's Monthly* 52 (1893): 729.

<sup>329</sup> Gorren, "The Ethics of Modern Journalism," 510.

<sup>330</sup> "The Other Side of Yellow Journalism," *The Independent* 52 (March 1900): 786.

journalism is important to the great public because it does frighten, to some extent at least, the big public plunderers.”<sup>331</sup>

The belief in the use of newspapers as a tool to fight government and corporate corruption mirrored the growing reformist trend among the United States’ middle classes. Armed with a can-do belief in their power to change society, confused but determined middle class professionals crusaded against corporate trusts, class tensions, and vice. At the center of their struggle was the newspaper as a popular shield against corrupt power. This new role of newspapers announced the advent, few years later, of a muckraking generation of journalists that were to transform, one more time, the character of American journalism.

### **Journalism: A Business or a Profession?**

As the previous section illustrates, journalists writing about the press between 1893 and 1905 were divided between disillusion and hope. Upset about the race for circulation and the sensational and yellow trends, they nonetheless kept their faith in the civilizing potentials of newspapers. Some journalists complained about the focus on scandal and crime while others concentrated on the public services US papers offered and the democratic role they played. At the center of these divergences is a disagreement over the nature of commercial journalism. Is journalism a business that only seeks to generate profit? Or is it a profession that aspires to serve the public and promote democracy? As we have seen in the previous chapter, postbellum critics were rather certain that commercial journalism would become a significant profession and would play an important role in empowering the people. But as the downsides of commercialism became more apparent in the 1890s, journalists became more divided about the very nature of their vocation. Although eighteen critics agreed that the main mission of newspapers is to transmit the news and twenty-two declared that journalism must fight corruption and/or serve the

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<sup>331</sup> Arthur Brisbane, “Yellow Journalism,” *The Bookman* 19 (June 1904): 400, 402.

public, nineteen said that the sole purpose of journalism is to make money. Seventeen among them criticized this mission.

An editorial in *The Dial* noted that most newspapers in the United States would fail the tests of journalistic professionalism, which include the scientific collection of news, the focus on real rather than sensational news values, and the adoption of ethical standards. “Most of them are frank enough to admit ... that the work of newspaper production is, like the work of the dealer in real-estate or of the stock-broker, essentially a form of money-making,” the editorial said.<sup>332</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin of *The Nation* agreed. “They [newspapers] are, as they often openly avow, enterprises for making money,” he explained.<sup>333</sup> Reporter and drama critic John Keller observed that a vast majority of the press capital did not come from journalists. “Nearly all the money with which newspapers, successful or unsuccessful, have been started in New York, has come from sources alien to journalism itself,” Keller wrote.<sup>334</sup> This reality, according to the New York reporter, explained why the press had become a business; capitalist publishers did not appreciate literary accomplishments and public service as much as they valued the accumulation of money. A business entrepreneur “cannot see advantage in anything not convertible into money,” Keller explained.<sup>335</sup> Brooke Fisher declared in *The Atlantic Monthly* that journalism had become a business designed to generate profit, with public service but a by-product:

What wonder that, as a “business proposition,” the newspaper is exceedingly attractive to capital, and that the pecuniary object far outweighs the political, –in short, that the press has grown to be so fancy an “industrial” that it might well have already become a “trust,” and been completely lost to public benefit and behoof.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> “A Newspaper Symposium,” 79.

<sup>333</sup> Godkin, “The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion,” 6.

<sup>334</sup> Keller, “Journalism as a Career,” 700.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 701.

<sup>336</sup> Fisher, “The Newspaper Industry,” 745.

Fisher's complaint speaks to the malaise that other journalists shared at the turn of century. Commercial journalism, which was initially seen as a solution to partisan bias and political control, turned out to be a money-making business. For some critics, the new model reduced the press to a mere commercial enterprise instead of elevating it to the status of a profession. As historian Burton Bledstein explains, professionals, by definition, offer the public a service whereas industrialists provide material products.<sup>337</sup> We may not see a drastic difference between the two but, at the turn of the century, many Americans, especially in the middle class, looked at professionalism with an eye of respect and at the spread of big business enterprises with an eye of contempt (Fisher said journalism may have become a "trust").<sup>338</sup> Besides, the democratic promise of newspapers was associated with the public services it offered. With this in mind, we can better understand the uneasiness certain journalists felt to see newspapers aim for profit: The more business-like papers became, the further they were from reaching the respected status of a democratizing profession. As *The Nation*'s Oswald Garrison Villard put it:

The profession bears in many of its aspects a growing resemblance to a trade. More and more men own newspapers in order to profit from them as they would be the sale of patent medicines or of boots and shoes. It is a commonplace that newspaper proprietors are far more concerned to-day with the sums which can be made out of their properties than with the opportunities they may have to enunciate political principles or to insist upon high ethical standards in our national life.<sup>339</sup>

But some journalists disagreed with Villard. Despite the race for circulation within many papers at the turn of the century, fifteen critics considered journalism to be a profession. For these journalists, newspapers provided two important public services, even with the eye they had

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<sup>337</sup> Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 36-37.

<sup>338</sup> See McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 147-181; Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 34-35. It is important to note, here, that two journalists, Joseph Lincoln Steffens and Truman De Weese, did not find the commercialization of newspapers problematic. See Steffens, "The Business of a Newspaper," 465; De Weese, "From 'Journalism to the 'Newspaper Industry,'" 2956. John Cockerill and Frank Munsey may have also shared the same feeling for they wrote articles on how to produce a paper that succeeds financially, measuring the accomplishments of newspapers in terms of profit. See Cockerill, "How to Conduct a Local Newspaper," 397; Munsey, "Getting On in Journalism," 214-215.

<sup>339</sup> Villard, "Education and Journalism," 168.

on profit; papers provided people with factual, unbiased information (news) and they fought the corruption of government officials and business magnates. *The Dial*'s William Morton Payne, who criticized sensationalism in newspapers, nonetheless affirmed that journalism is a profession. "I do not see how the statement can be questioned," he wrote in reference to the professional status of the press. "Its work [the press'] is closely allied to that of the educator and the clergyman, in certain aspects to that of the lawyer."<sup>340</sup> Writing in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, the *New York Tribune*'s George Smalley, declared:

Whether, again, journalism be a profession or not, in the sense that law and medicine are professions, it is at least an occupation, and one of great importance, both to those who follow it and to the community in general. And if its place be doubtful, or the rules which govern its conduct less definite than those which prevail elsewhere, the more reason for trying to ascertain its true relation to social and political life, and the right methods to be followed in its pursuit.<sup>341</sup>

Lincoln Steffens pointed out that lawyers and medical doctors, like newspaper publishers, profited financially from the services they offered. For him, journalism was at the same time a business and a profession, and so were law and medicine. "Journalism, a business, is a profession too, like law and medicine, and just as the best lawyer or the best physician, in the long run, makes the best collections, so the best journalist gets in the end the best 'ads,'" the *McClure*'s reporter wrote.<sup>342</sup> The *Chicago Record-Herald*'s Truman De Weese, who admitted that the business side of journalism raised a question about its status as profession, concluded, after a review of the opportunities the press offers and the services it provides, that journalism could not be seen as a mere business. He wrote:

In the scope of its activities; in the expanse of its field of political attainment; in the richness of those compensations that come from a realization of the power to exalt virtue, to uncover hypocrisy, to expose fraud, to redress wrong, to promote justice, to encourage

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<sup>340</sup> Payne, "What a Daily Newspaper Might Be Made," 364.

<sup>341</sup> Smalley, "Notes on Journalism," 213.

<sup>342</sup> Steffens, "The New School of Journalism," 174.

high thinking, and to touch humanity in all its impulses, aspirations, and achievements, the profession of journalism is incomparable among the vocations of men.<sup>343</sup>

The critics who, like De Weese, considered journalism to be a profession focused on the services newspapers offered rather than the circulation for which they battled and the profits that they generated. These critics chose, perhaps intentionally, to concentrate on the work of the newsroom and ignore the aspirations of the counting room. Their selective interpretation possibly reflects a desire to improve the status of journalism and its standing and role in the American society at the turn of the century.

Closely related to this conversation was the debate about journalism schools. For some critics, the establishment of journalism schools was meant to improve the performance of the press and to elevate it to the prestigious level of a learned profession. During the postbellum period, the dialogue about the status of the press went hand in hand with the disagreements about the value and role of journalism schools. It remained so between 1893 and 1905. The debate became especially hot in 1902 when Columbia University's new president, Nicolas Murray Butler, accepted Joseph Pulitzer's plan to set up a school of journalism and prizes for the press. An aging Pulitzer had "repented" his race for circulation with William Randolph Hearst and slowly transformed the *New York World* into a more respectable newspaper. The famous publisher offered Columbia University a sum of two million dollars to establish a journalism school that would "raise the character and standing of the newspaper profession, and ... increase its power and prestige through the better equipment of those who adopt it."<sup>344</sup> Pulitzer's initiative was based on the same concerns that animated his contemporaries. As the *New York World* statement put it: "Journalism, which is really the most intricate and exacting of all professions,

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<sup>343</sup> De Weese, "Journalism," 451.

<sup>344</sup> The *New York World*'s statement about Pulitzer's initiative to establish a journalism school at Columbia University in New York. As stated in Kimball, "The Profession of Publicist," 805.

requiring the widest range of knowledge, and holding a highly responsible relation to the people and to public affairs, ranks in many minds as not even a profession at all.”<sup>345</sup>

Journalists were divided about the necessity of the journalism school. Those who objected did so on the ground that journalism was a mere business and hence did not require professional training. Those who were receptive to the idea based their opinion on the need to improve journalism and raise it to the status of a profession. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, who often argued against the idea that journalism was a learned profession, made fun, in *The Nation*, of a lecturer who called for the establishment of journalism schools. Because newspapers are commercial enterprises, Godkin contended, it would be futile to educate journalists. The solution, in his opinion, was to educate readers.<sup>346</sup> Also writing in *The Nation*, Godkin’s grandson Oswald Garrison Villard concurred with his grandfather. “The ultimate aim of all education, and particularly of collegiate instruction is the building up of character. If the Columbia school is successful in this respect, most of its graduates will prefer snow-shoveling to a service which knows little or nothing of conscience and truth-telling,” he said in reference to the sensational and yellow trends at the turn of the century.<sup>347</sup> Arthur Reed Kimball, editor of the *Waterbury American*, argued against journalism education because, he said, a journalist’s work in a commercial system depended on the whims of the public.<sup>348</sup> The *New York Sun*’s Charles Dana, on the other hand, called for a broad program, including language, politics, law, and literature.<sup>349</sup> “Journalism needs more college men,” Truman De Weese declared in *Forum*.<sup>350</sup> He explained that university training would help elevate the status of journalism into a learned

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Edwin Lawrence Godkin, “Blowitz on Journalism,” *The Nation* 56 (January 1893): 62-63.

<sup>347</sup> Villard, “Education and Journalism,” 168.

<sup>348</sup> Kimball, “The Profession of Publicist,” 807.

<sup>349</sup> Dana, “Journalism,” 556-561.

<sup>350</sup> De Weese, “Journalism,” 443.



profession. Lincoln Steffens of *McClure's* concurred. "If our colleges were what they should be, and if our newspapers were what they should be, there might be then no need of a School of Journalism," he wrote. "As things are, there is a place for the Joseph Pulitzer Foundation at Columbia University."<sup>351</sup> Steffens said that a collegiate education for journalists must include Latin, Greek, philosophy, English and foreign literature, English language, ethics, sciences, law, history, and the business of journalism. The breadth of the program he proposed testifies to the high standing he ascribed to his vocation. Horace White, who succeeded Godkin as editor-in-chief of the *New York Evening Post*, also called for a broad program that would improve the status of journalism. "If the authorities of Columbia are fit for their places, general culture will receive an impulse from Mr. Pulitzer's donation, and journalism will share therein," he wrote.<sup>352</sup>

As the debate about journalism schools illustrates, critics writing between 1893 and 1905 diverged between a disappointment about the situation of journalism at the turn of the century and the hope to improve this state of affairs. Reflecting a disagreement about the very nature of journalism, the balance critics conveyed between discontent and optimism reflected the general mood of the American society at the time. As the problems of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization became evident enough to require a solution, an anxious but optimistic middle class slowly rose to the challenge. Its progressive battles soon changed the face of America and, by extension, the character of American journalism.

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<sup>351</sup> Steffens, "The New School of Journalism," 173.

<sup>352</sup> White, "The School of Journalism," 25.

## CHAPTER 5: THE PRESS OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

“It is the welfare of the state and the decency of the people that are at stake,” Edward M. Shepard, the defense attorney for Norman Hapgood, dramatically told the jurors.<sup>353</sup> Editor of the famous *Collier’s Weekly*, Hapgood was on trial for criminal libel. He had published an article denouncing the corruption of *Town Topics* magazine, a gossip-based New York weekly specialized in reporting sensational scandals. As Hapgood showed in his article, *Town Topics* “overlooked” the missteps of the rich who paid.

Hapgood won the case, scoring a triumph for the muckraking press of the progressive era. “The acquittal of Norman Hapgood on the charge of criminal libel is a great victory for decency,” an editorial in *The Nation* declared.<sup>354</sup> It congratulated *Collier’s Weekly* for fearlessly exposing the facts, pointing out that the magazine had “fought the good fight.”<sup>355</sup>

The “good fight” was not *Collier’s* first and would not be its last. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the weekly magazine was among the many periodicals that waged a war on corruption in public and private organizations, including the press itself. Inciting praise and some discontent, the muckraking and reformist press was the locus of much journalistic criticism of journalism between 1905 and 1916. Critics often commended the press for fighting corruption. They saw in this battle the realization of journalism’s democratic promise. Among the journalists who opposed muckraking, some denounced its excesses. Most, however, worried about the consequences of commercializing a good cause. For these critics, many magazines were unconcerned about the well-being of society. They reported sensational

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<sup>353</sup> “Says Town Topics is a Disgrace: Trial of Norman Hapgood Somewhat Exciting,” *St. John Daily Sun*, January 26, 1906, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=37&dat=19060126&id=jIwmAAAIBAJ&sjid=5TUDAAAIBAJ&pg=4195,4366739> (accessed March 20, 2010).

<sup>354</sup> “Society Journalism,” *The Nation* 82 (February 1906): 88.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

scandals for the sole purpose of increasing circulation. The positive and at times even the negative criticism mirrored the progressive trends that animated middle class Americans during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It reflected the reformers' optimism, their fierce battles against vice, and their deep fears of the corrupting influence of big business.

### **A Generation of Progressives**

As we have seen in the last chapter, the rise of big business and the drawbacks of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration created tension during the 1890s. New problems require new solutions. Responding to the challenge, a loosely-knit generation of middle class professionals, small proprietors, and bureaucrats slowly changed American society. They called for taming big business, dissolving class tensions, vanquishing vice, and reorganizing business, government, and the city. Progressives believed in the righteousness of Victorian morals and the power of professional social science to make industrial America a better place.

Among the most important battles reformers fought was the one against business trusts. Between the early nineties and World War I, the growth of big business was monumental. In 1918, the largest five percent of America's corporations earned around eighty percent of the total net income of corporate profit, while the smallest seventy-five percent only managed six percent.<sup>356</sup> In 1893, the federal government collected three hundred eighty-six million dollars in revenue while Pennsylvania Railroad alone earned one hundred thirty-five million and the railroad industry in its entirety grossed over one billion. As historian Maury Klein puts it, "Most Americans simply could not comprehend the size of these new giants."<sup>357</sup> Many were also fearful of their potential corrupting force. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, progressives mostly battled big business in the courts and through government resolutions. They

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<sup>356</sup> Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 134.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

championed the Federal Reserve Act (1913), which regulated the chaotic banking system, and antitrust suits, which sought to break big corporations in courts. Reformers lobbied for corporate taxation, with incentives that reduced taxes on companies supporting local communities.<sup>358</sup> Journalists exposed the corruption of corporate powers such as Standard Oil. Most progressives, however, did not work to kill big business but rather to tame it, thwarting its potential corrupting force. As President Theodore Roosevelt put it, “we can do nothing of good in the way of regulating and supervising these corporations until we fix clearly in our minds that we are not attacking the corporations, but endeavoring to do away with any evil in them.”<sup>359</sup>

The language of President Roosevelt evoked the evangelical protestant values that informed progressive objectives.<sup>360</sup> Reformers during the first two decades of the twentieth century waged passionate campaigns against vice. Using public policy and association to help build a better environment in the cities, they banned liquor, waged a battle against prostitution and saloons, and strove to limit divorce.<sup>361</sup> Convinced that poverty and economic constraints led to vice, many established programs and organizations to help the deprived. They fought child labor, introduced a series of educational reforms to improve the school system, and established juvenile courts. Although the causes they supported and laws they instituted were not fully embraced by other classes, progressives pushed aggressively to improve the urban environment. They worked to improve the sanitation of apartments and to erect public parks, baths, gyms, pools, and auditoriums.

Progressives also tried to mediate relations between capitalists and labor. Spending long hours at the factory and struggling to make ends meet, workers at the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>358</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 154.

<sup>359</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, quoted in Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America*, 150.

<sup>360</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 84.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid*, 79-117.

century clashed with industry owners. They called for shorter days and an increase in wages. Many resorted to unions and labor organizations for support. The number of strikes and lockouts across the country reached around a thousand in 1898 and jumped to around three thousand in 1901.<sup>362</sup> But industrialists often refused to cooperate with unions, further inflaming the situation. As historian Michael McGerr puts it, “in the 1900s, no one knew what the outcome would be.”<sup>363</sup> Determined to improve the situation, middle class progressives tried to act as mediators between the two parties. Often unable to approach the upper class directly, they resorted to government and the law to pressure industrial moguls while their strategies in dealing with workers were more compassionate. Progressives established charity organizations to help the lower classes. They used social science methods to study labor conditions and invited workers and employees to discussions of labor-related issues. Neither side of the conflict, and especially the upper class, welcomed the reformers’ efforts. By 1920, and despite some advances, progressives failed in improving class relations.

The organizational revolution middle class reformers championed in business companies, governmental institutions, and big cities was more effective. Relying on scientific management, social science theories, and civic reform, professionals and skilled experts adopted complex procedural principles and policies, and devised standardized work systems. Underlying their efforts was a strong commitment to bureaucracy. As historian Robert Wiebe explains, “at the heart of progressivism was the ambition of a new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”<sup>364</sup> Such an approach provided the standardized and consistent system middle classes aspired to during a time of major transitions.<sup>365</sup> At the city level, progressives

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid, 119-120.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>364</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, 166.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid, 151, 165.

introduced reforms to improve public health, expand services, and systemize the management of urban communities. In corporations and the government, middle class professionals hired workers and white collar employees, organized departments, handled wages and promotions, devised administrative policies, and set prices and rates.<sup>366</sup>

Progressives had a strong confidence in their ability to improve society, and that extended to journalism. Although most newspapers and magazines had turned into large corporations at the end of the nineteenth century, many journalists saw themselves as part of the progressive middle class. Through their writings, they tried to fight corruption in corporations and government, acting as the judge on behalf of the popular masses.

### **Journalism as a Progressive Tool**

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, newspapers and magazines became efficient tools in the progressive movement. Projecting the reformist ambitions of the middle class, reporters exposed big business domination of the US Senate, illegal activities of trusts, food poisoning and patent medicine fraud, insurance company scandals, child labor, racism, and a variety of other political and social issues.<sup>367</sup> Between 1903 and 1910, magazines in particular became famous for fighting corruption. Flourishing under the leadership of progressive editors, periodicals such as *McClure's*, *Collier's Weekly*, *The American Magazine*, *Everybody's Magazine*, and *Hampton's* strove to show how private interests corrupted the public sphere and to expose the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Underlying their efforts was a strong sense of social responsibility and a belief in the interdependent role of communal organizations and local institutions to improve the industrial cities of modern America.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Zunz, *Making Corporate America*, 50-59.

<sup>367</sup> Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order*, 202-203.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-208.

Tirelessly hunting for corporate and political corruption, muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, and Upton Sinclair became the subject of both praise and criticism. Their writing was nonetheless popular among magazine readers. *Collier's* circulation, for instance, almost doubled between 1903 and 1907 while *Hampton's* jumped from twelve thousand in 1907 to four hundred eight thousand in 1910.<sup>369</sup> Such circulation booms encouraged investors whose sole aim is making money to establish or buy muckraking magazines. William Randolph Hearst, the king of the yellow press of the 1890s, bought *Cosmopolitan* and transformed it into a muckraking periodical. Supporters saw the trend as a democratic weapon on behalf of the people. Opponents were divided between those who denounced muckrakers for seeing harm everywhere and those who complained about the commercialization of an originally honorable initiative. The two sides nonetheless reflected, in one way or the other, the progressive movement that defined America during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

### **Praise and Optimism**

Of the eighty-one articles written between 1905 and 1916, thirty-three praised journalism and nineteen criticized it. Another thirteen pieces spoke both positively about journalism in general and negatively about specific trends such as sensationalism or commercialism. The remaining sixteen did not include an opinion. The sheer excitement that followed the Civil War, when commercial journalism was in its birth stage, did not last beyond that period but it did not completely disappear. Although critics were now more aware about the excesses of journalism, they still believed in the democratic potential of a news-based press. More importantly, during this progressive period, many critics found in muckraking and reform-focused journalism a realization of this promise. Forty-four out of eighty-one said that the mission of journalism was to fight corruption or serve the masses.

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid, 205-206.

Rollo Ogden, editor-in-chief of the *New York Evening Post*, found that modern journalism was more effective than the law in penalizing powerful offenders. He wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly* that:

The very clamor of newspaper publicity was like an embodied public conscience pronouncing condemnation, every headline an officer. I know of no other power on earth that could have stripped away from these rogues every shelter which their money could buy, and been to them such an advance section of the Day of Judgment.<sup>370</sup>

Although he criticized yellow and red journalism, George Ochs, brother of the *New York Times* owner and his associate in the newspaper publishing business, explained that a journalist who does not fight corruption “when statesmen fail, when administrators stumble, when popular disillusion prevails” would be betraying his profession.<sup>371</sup> An editorial in *The Bookman* saw the rise of muckraking magazines as a “refuge from newspapers” and hoped that the dailies would follow the example of their monthly and weekly counterparts.<sup>372</sup> The column called on newspapers to abandon their editorial policies that solely focused on increasing circulation and to engage in the investigative journalism magazines had come to master. An anonymous New York editor, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, explained that despite their excesses, muckraking magazines helped improve society. “They are doing very tangible good,” he wrote. “They are not shouting for mob rule; they are asking for the enforcement of the law.”<sup>373</sup> George Harvey, editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, also defended progressive magazines. “The good done greatly outweighs the harm,” he argued. “Some exaggerations have been made, some grave injustices doubtless have been done, but on the whole it has been chiefly truth, not falsehood.”<sup>374</sup> In one of his famous fifteen articles investigating journalism, Will Irwin wrote in *Collier’s Weekly* that the

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<sup>370</sup> Rollo Ogden, “Some Aspects of Journalism,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 98 (July 1906): 15.

<sup>371</sup> George W. Ochs, “Journalism,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 28 (July 1906): 55.

<sup>372</sup> “A Refuge from Newspapers,” *The Bookman* 24 (January 1907): 425-426.

<sup>373</sup> “Is an Honest Newspaper Possible?” *The Atlantic Monthly* 102 (October 1908): 445

<sup>374</sup> George Harvey, “The Magazines in Journalism,” *Harper’s Weekly* 54 (March 1910): 8.



American press acted as the light and the teacher. “The newspaper, or some force like it, must daily inform them [the masses] of things which are shocking and unpleasant in order that democracy, in its slow, wobbling motion upward, may perceive and correct,” he explained.<sup>375</sup> Upton Sinclair, himself a muckraker, compared the trend to “the particular nerve cell in the burned child which cries out to the child, Do not put your finger into the fire again!”<sup>376</sup> In his eulogy of William Rockhill Nelson, founder of the *Kansas Star*, William Allen White, another progressive, praised the late journalist for his “continuous battle for civic life and State improvement.”<sup>377</sup> White added that “newspaper enterprise, plus fundamental honesty, gave Mr. Nelson vision to see that the ‘Star’s’ interests were with the people’s interests, and the people’s interests were with the antimonopoly crowd.”<sup>378</sup>

These assertions mirrored the progressive values of the professional middle class. Journalistic critics, like muckrakers in general, found in newspapers and magazines an effective reforming tool and an instrument for social change. All the above critics praised the press specifically for its ability to battle corruption. The image Ogden evoked of the “powerful” offenders suggests that the *New York Evening Post* editor saw corruption at the level of society’s dominant forces. This, as Ogden pointed out, casts the press as a protective shield safeguarding the weak from the strong. Both Irwin and Sinclair reiterated the same image of journalism acting on behalf of the people. Others emphasized the good that came out of muckraking, namely enforcement of the law, truth, civic life, and state improvement—all representing progressive ideals.

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<sup>375</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: All the News That’s Fit to Print,” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (May 1911): 18.

<sup>376</sup> Upton Sinclair, “The Muckrake Man,” *The Independent* 65 (September 1908): 518.

<sup>377</sup> William Allen White, “The Man Who Made the ‘Star,’” *Collier’s Weekly* 55 (June 1915): 12.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

As we have seen in the last two chapters, critics writing between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century often evoked the democratic potential of American journalism. During the progressive period, critics proclaimed that they found in the reformist press a realization of these promises. Because journalism was more powerful than the powerful, because it exposed corruption and protected the weak, critics found that the American press effectively represented and empowered the masses, reversing power relations among classes. This made newspapers and magazines an essential component of the US democratic system and, by extension, of the American Dream. It also tilted the balance in favor of critics who saw journalism as a profession, as opposed to those who considered it a profit-oriented business. Through its progressive battles, the press offered Americans a civic service and this mission elevated it to the ranks of a profession.

The emphasis on battling corruption did not discount the importance and role of news. News, the source of journalists' pride, praise and optimism between 1865 and 1905, continued as the focal point of most journalists' belief in the superiority and power of the American press. Although more progressive themes occupied the center stage between 1905 and 1916, news remained a source of pride in the sense that impartial facts were the weapons reporters brandished when they investigated the government and corporate powers. Muckrakers were news-gatherers. As Upton Sinclair, the controversial socialist writer, put it, "the Muckrake Man began his career with no theories, as a simple *observer of facts* [emphasis ours]. ... He followed the facts, and the facts always led him to one conclusion."<sup>379</sup> Will Irwin of *Collier's Weekly* depicted the investigation of scandals as "the means of fighting popular causes by news."<sup>380</sup> He

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<sup>379</sup> Sinclair, "The Muckrake Man," 519.

<sup>380</sup> Will Irwin, "The American Newspaper: The Fourth Current," *Collier's Weekly* 46 (February 1911): 14.

described news as “the nerves of the modern world”<sup>381</sup> and hailed the reporter as the “newest arm of this newest power in civilization.”<sup>382</sup> Although Irwin’s tone was balanced throughout his fifteen-article series on journalism, his writing became emphatic when the famous journalist talked about reporters. Irwin depicted them as the heroes of American democracy. Two articles in *Everybody’s Magazine*, celebrating New York reporters and their counterparts in other cities, evoked the same fascination with the reporter and by implication with news.<sup>383</sup>

Like the critics of the 1890s, journalists writing during the peak of the progressive period projected a strong optimism in the future of the American press. Of the eighty-one articles under study, thirty-five were optimistic, four pessimistic, and forty-two included no reference to the future. The New York editor who wrote an anonymous article in *The Atlantic Monthly* explained that even commercial newspapers were bound to improve because publishers would soon realize that readers appreciate truthfulness and accuracy. “The market for excellence is inexhaustible and this country is plainly beginning to see the sterling market-value of honesty,” he explained.<sup>384</sup> An editorial in *The Dial* presented a similar argument when it saw hope in the readers’ likely rejection of dishonest journalism. “We cannot carry credulity so far as to believe that any considerable body of readers will, in the long run, prefer a ‘faked’ account to a truthful one, an imaginary to a real interview, a spurious illustration to an authentic one,” the article said.<sup>385</sup> George Harvey, the editor of *Harper’s Weekly* who wrote an article defending muckraking magazines, declared that, to him, the direction journalism was taking “seems

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<sup>381</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Power of the Press,” *Collier’s Weekly* 46 (January 1911): 15.

<sup>382</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Reporter and the News,” *Collier’s Weekly* (April 1911): 21.

<sup>383</sup> See Hartley Davis, “Stories of Our Foremost Newspaper Men and ‘Beats’ They Have Scored: The New York Reporters,” *Everybody’s Magazine* 14 (January 1906): 64-72; Hartley Davis, “Stories of Our Foremost Newspaper Men and ‘Beats’ They Have Scored: Reporters in Many Cities,” *Everybody’s Magazine* 14 (February 1906): 200-208.

<sup>384</sup> “Is an Honest Newspaper Possible?” 447.

<sup>385</sup> “What the Public Wants,” *The Dial* 47 (December 1909): 500.

constantly upward and strengthening.”<sup>386</sup> Commenting on the death of Joseph Pulitzer, an article in *The Outlook* predicted that the downsides of yellow journalism would not survive this trend’s founder while the advantages would be preserved:

What is good in modern popular journalism we believe will endure. The energy that has circled the world with channels of information, making all the world one, the dramatization of what is really dramatic in current history so that the humblest can enter into the life of his brothers wherever they are, the exaltation of simplicity and clarity in statement –these and other good qualities will not be lost.<sup>387</sup>

Criticizing the newspapers’ widespread habit of invading privacy, an editorial in *The Century* nonetheless anticipated reform:

It is not improbable that one of the next important movements in this country will be for a greater sense of responsibility to wholesome public opinion on the part of the press. There is so much that is good and helpful and truly progressive in the better newspapers, and they are so sound on the larger questions of national policy, that it is to be hoped that the reformation of the grosser faults of journalism will be initiated by them.<sup>388</sup>

As we shall see later, many reform-focused magazines did investigate the press during the period under study, in the same way they muckraked other institutions.

As these examples show, critics writing between 1905 and 1916 believed in the desire of human beings to improve their condition and in their ability to do so. Journalists thought that either readers or media professionals were likely to revolt, in the end, against the excesses of journalism and to help transform it into a better version of itself. This faith in human goodness and in potential for change reflected the can-do attitude progressives shared during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is important to remember here that most of the journalists in the sample were themselves part of the professional middle class. Magazines played a key role in the progressive movement, and it comes as no surprise to find in them an echo of the reformers’ ideals.

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<sup>386</sup> Harvey, “The Magazines in Journalism,” 8.

<sup>387</sup> “Mr Pulitzer and American Journalism,” *The Outlook* 99 (November 1911): 609.

<sup>388</sup> “Newspaper Invasion of Privacy,” *The Century* 86 (June 1913): 311.

## Criticism of the Scandal Mania

Although the muckraking and reform-focused press generated much praise, some critics were wary of the trend. Articles criticized the excesses of reform-oriented magazines and saw the emphasis on scandals in some periodicals as an extension of the yellow press tradition.

Journalists worried about the commercialization of the reform movement. What started as a genuine effort to reform society became, according to some critics, a means to raise circulation and attract advertisers.

“Every multi-millionaire is fair game for daily exploitation,” an editorial in *The Century* complained.<sup>389</sup> It pointed out that the hunt for scandals, driven by a desire to increase profit, had reached excessive proportions. “There is nothing pertaining to his [the multi-millionaire’s] horse, his ox, his man-servant, his maid-servant, or anything that is his which is so trifling as to be overlooked in the race for newspaper circulation,” the article said. An unsigned piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* reiterated the same argument, suggesting that progressivism may be going too far. “I am growing a bit rebellious against this constant demand and supply in the matter of information regarding recent evil,” the anonymous author wrote. “Have we not grown over-alert in the search for this special kind of news?”<sup>390</sup> The article argued that such emphasis on crime, fraud, and vice came chiefly from “a desire to startle” and a “love of the sensational.”<sup>391</sup> George Ochs, publisher of the *Chatanooga Times*, warned that the yellow journalism of the 1890s had turned into a red journalism that saw American society and politics as thoroughly evil. Although he commanded newspapers for battling corruption, Ochs warned against some sensational periodicals that found wickedness in most American institutions. An editorial in *The Independent* complained about the defamation and invasion of privacy that took place as journalists wrote

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<sup>389</sup> “A Curb for the Sensational Press,” *The Century* 83 (February 1912): 631.

<sup>390</sup> “The Other Side,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 113 (March 1914): 357.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

reported on scandals. “Neither the reputation of worthy men nor the virtue of pure women is any longer safe from the bloodhounds of a gang of newspaper thugs, fully half of whom are millionaires, and some of whom pose as philanthropists,” the editorial said.<sup>392</sup>

For critics such as Ochs, the battle against corruption had lost its original reformist impulse and relapsed into the sensationalism of the 1890s. At the origin of this transformation, these critics charged, was the publishers’ race for circulation and profit. The editorial in *The Independent* specifically mentioned “millionaires” posing as “philanthropists.” This reference to newspaper and magazine publishers suggests that, according to the critic, business considerations had corrupted the reformist press. They reduced the civic service newspapers and magazines originally offered into a mere commercial enterprise focused on making money at the expense of the public good. An editorial in *The Nation* called for an end to the “frenzy of witch-hunting.”<sup>393</sup>

Having uncovered every imaginable political and social evil, we went into pathology and began a passionate hunt for anything that could possibly be the matter with us. ... A vast appetite for horrors had been created, and to satisfy that appetite editors grew reckless; then they grew desperate; then they grew ridiculous.<sup>394</sup>

The editorial explained that articles by journalists like Ida Tarbell had “opened up a vast new field of publishers’ profits.”<sup>395</sup> The popularity of such pieces, reflecting the resentment people felt toward business magnates, helped several press entrepreneurs, including William Randolph Hearst, amass considerable fortunes. Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *The American*, differentiated between the original reform-centered journalism that aimed at fighting corruption and the muckraker as “the soul of the circulation man.”<sup>396</sup> For the editor of *The American*, muckrakers were a commercialized, profit-oriented version of the originally progressive trend. An editorial in

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<sup>392</sup> “The Scandal of Criminal Journalism,” *The Independent* 61 (October 1906): 946.

<sup>393</sup> “The Popular Magazine,” *The Nation* 92 (February 1911): 187.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ellery Sedgwick, “The Man With the Muck Rake,” *The American Magazine* 62 (May 1906): 111.

*The Century Magazine* denounced the sensationalism of scandal-driven newspapers, pointing out that the main motive behind the investigation of private lives was commercial:

Some purpose of serving the public interest, more or less far-fetched, is always, and easily, woven into the fabric of the day-by-day or week-by-week exposure of private misfortune; but the real object of exploitation is to stimulate the sale of the newspaper and thereby maintain “circulation.”<sup>397</sup>

Although it commanded the magazine muckrakers’ reforming efforts, an article in *The Survey* noted that many periodicals engaged in nothing more than “crusades of publicity.”<sup>398</sup>

As the above statements suggest, journalists who warned about the excesses of muckraking were not necessarily opposed to progressivism as a philosophy. They were, rather, critical of publishers who capitalized on the popularity of reform-focused journalism to increase their fortunes. Such publishers had established or bought muckraking magazines for the sole purpose of making money. In other words, critics worried that profit considerations had corrupted an originally honorable calling. They did not want to see business considerations undermine the professional, civic services newspapers and magazines offered at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense, the concerns of these critics mirrored that of the progressives. During that period, reformers feared the corrupting effects of big business and battled it in courts and through the government.

### **Muckraking the Press: Will Irwin’s Investigations**

The media’s battle against corruption during the progressive period extended to serious investigation of the press itself. In the period between 1905 and 1916, Will Irwin’s fifteen-article series in *Collier’s Weekly* stands out as the most influential of these efforts.

Will Irwin’s articles, published in 1911, originated in a year-long investigation of the press, based on numerous interviews with reporters, editors, and publishers across the United

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<sup>397</sup> “Newspaper Cruelty,” *The Century Magazine* 84 (May 1912): 150.

<sup>398</sup> “Freedom of the Press,” *The Survey* 24 (June 1910): 367.

States. When Irwin started working on the articles, he was an established reporter at *Collier's Weekly*. His experience included eleven years of work in journalism at institutions such as the *New York Sun* and *McClure's*. According to Irwin himself, what started as an effort to muckrake the press soon turned into a quasi-scholarly study of the origins, purposes and principles of the press.<sup>399</sup> The result was a balanced examination of American journalism's power, its history, its processes, and its main problems. Two general themes structure Irwin's articles; a celebration of news and the reporter and an effort to evaluate, and perhaps come to terms with, the business side of journalism. In this sense, Irwin's fifteen-article series comes as a culmination of forty-five years of press criticism by journalists. It provides a synthesis for the arguments articulated before him, from the dawn of commercial, independent journalism after the Civil War until the moment when Irwin started his investigation in 1910.

In the first article of the series, Irwin examined the power of the press, concluding that it was "the most powerful extrajudicial force in society, except religion."<sup>400</sup> In his review of journalism history, the *Collier's* reporter spoke of four currents: The early editorial press, inherited from England, the news-based press introduced by James Gordon Bennett, the drop of the old, stilted style that the *New York Sun's* Charles Dana championed, and the profit-driven yellow journalism of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst.<sup>401</sup> Irwin examined the performance of various newspapers across the country. He discussed news and the role of the editor and the reporter, casting the latter as the central figure of American journalism.<sup>402</sup> The

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<sup>399</sup> Will Irwin, *The Making of a Reporter* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1942), 164-169.

<sup>400</sup> Irwin, "The Power of the Press," 15.

<sup>401</sup> See Will Irwin, "The American Newspaper: The Dim Beginnings," *Collier's Weekly* 46 (February 1911): 14-17; Irwin, "The Fourth Current," 14-17, 24, 27.

<sup>402</sup> Will Irwin, "The American Newspaper: The Editor and the News," *Collier's Weekly* 47 (1911): 18-19, 28-29; Irwin, "The Reporter and the News," 21-22, 35-36.



famous reporter thoroughly discussed the questions of sensationalism and circulation races,<sup>403</sup> commercialism,<sup>404</sup> the advertising influence,<sup>405</sup> and the pressure publishers exercise on the newsroom.<sup>406</sup>

As Irwin examined these various issues, two main themes dominated, namely a celebration of news and an effort to evaluate and accept the commercial side of the press. Irwin spoke of news as a “necessity” and a “discovery” that required “genius.”<sup>407</sup> “News is the main thing, the vital consideration to the American newspaper; it is both an intellectual craving and a commercial need to the modern world,” he argued. “No bread wagon, no supply of blankets, caused half so much stir as did the arrival of news.”<sup>408</sup> Although Irwin’s entire fifteen-article series was balanced, his commentary on news and the reporter was emphatic. “He is to the individual reader the most important functionary in a newspaper organization, just as the police power is to the humble private citizen the most important function of the law,” the *Collier’s* reporter wrote about his colleagues.<sup>409</sup> Irwin presented news as the main asset of American journalism, the reason behind its power, and the source of its democratic promise. Like the critics of the postbellum era, he drew a parallel between the news-based American press and the United States as a new power. Irwin presented the early press of the pre-Bennett period as an “Anglo-Saxon inheritance” controlled by partisan elitist editors and the news-based press as a new democratic idea where the middle class dominated.<sup>410</sup> The second was born from the first. One

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<sup>403</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Spread and Decline of Yellow Journalism,” *Collier’s Weekly* 46 (March 1911): 18-20, 36;

<sup>404</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The New Era,” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (July 1911): 15-16, 25.

<sup>405</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Advertising Influence,” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (May 1911): 15-16, 23-25; Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Unhealthy Alliance,” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (June 1911): 17-19, 28-34.

<sup>406</sup> Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: The Foe from Within,” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (July 1911): 17-18, 30.

<sup>407</sup> Irwin, “The Dim Beginnings,” 16.

<sup>408</sup> Will Irwin, “What Is News?” *Collier’s Weekly* 47 (March 1911): 16.

<sup>409</sup> Irwin, “The Reporter and the News,” 21.

<sup>410</sup> See Irwin, “The Fourth Current,” 14; Irwin, “The Dim Beginnings,” 15.

cannot help but see a parallel with the history of the United States as a new democratic country, born of Anglo-Saxon inheritance, where the middle classes now ruled.

The second emphasis in Irwin's fifteen-article series is an assessment of the commercialism of the American press. How did this business side affect the nature and mission of journalism? In his first article, Irwin reiterated the question many asked before him. "Is journalism a business or a profession?" he inquired. "Should we consider a newspaper publisher as a commercialist, ... or must we consider him as a professional man, seeking other rewards before money, and holding a tacit franchise from the public for which he pays by observance of an ethical code?"<sup>411</sup> Irwin reported that the publishers and editors he interviewed diverged strongly on the question, some considering the newspaper a product for sale while others seeing journalism as a democratic public service.<sup>412</sup> In four of his articles, he provided a balanced discussion of the commercialism of the press, the role of advertising, and the influence of the counting room, reviewing the pros and cons of these three factors. Irwin himself seemed to think that the business influence in journalism did not discount its professional nature and the important service it provided; the *Collier's* reporter indeed emphasized the democratic promise of news and the role newspapers played in battling corruption.<sup>413</sup> The solution Irwin chose for the problems of the press also confirms his position. After reviewing and refuting several proposals such as stricter legislation, the endowed press, and adless subscriber-funded papers, Irwin wrote that "in the profession itself lies our greatest hope. In spite of all commercial tendencies, its personnel and intelligence are improving year by year."<sup>414</sup> Irwin accepted the commercial nature of newspapers, for his solution was to leave the press as is. At the same time,

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<sup>411</sup> Irwin, "The Power of the Press," 15

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Irwin, "The Power of the Press," 18.

<sup>414</sup> Will Irwin, "The American Newspaper: The Voice of a Generation," *Collier's Weekly* 47 (July 1911): 15-16, 23-25.

the famous reporter saw journalists themselves as a professional body. It gave him and others hope about the future.

Irwin's confidence in the professional side of journalism and the public services it offered reflected that of his fellow reformers. As we shall see, however, the fall of progressivism after World War I and the rise, during the 1920s, of three pro-business administrations tilted the balance in favor of a corporate approach to journalism, dashing the hopes of progressive journalists. The propaganda campaigns President Woodrow Wilson championed in 1917 and 1918 also transformed critics' perception of news, slowly reversing the tone of press criticism during the 1920s.

## CHAPTER 6: THE TURNING POINT

“Are we, then, to have a ‘reptile press’ as the consummate flower of a paternal government?” The *North American Review* asked in a mixed metaphor highlighting its editor’s alarm.<sup>415</sup> The unsigned article pointed at several measures the American government had enforced in attempt to control US public opinion. “It was not for nothing that the founders of the Republic placed the freedom of the press among the fundamental principles upon which the nation is based,” the article noted.<sup>416</sup>

Until the US declaration of war in April 1917, such rhetoric was unheard of among journalistic press critics. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, critics in our sample had called for the emancipation of the press from the whims of publishers or the pressure of advertisers. None addressed governmental control of the press. As the *North American Review* put it, the question was “uncalled for.”<sup>417</sup> But the measures President Woodrow Wilson took during World War I to ensure unity at home had changed the critical discourse. In 1917 and 1918, journalists directed their complaints toward the government, criticizing what famous editor H. L. Mencken later called “Dr. Wilson and his patriotic *Polizei*.”<sup>418</sup> Critics emphasized the importance of a free press for the well-being of a democratic republic.

The propaganda campaigns of the war years also transformed the journalists’ conceptualization of news. After the end of World War I, and for the first time since the introduction of factual reporting, critics slowly came to the conclusion that news could be subjective. During the postbellum period, journalists had been ecstatic about the democratic potentials of fact-based newspapers. One journalist had spoken about “Providence addressing

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<sup>415</sup> “Are We To Have a ‘Reptile Press?’” *North American Review* 209 (January 1919): 9.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>418</sup> Henry Louis Mencken, “Footnote on Journalism,” *The Nation* 114 (April 1922): 493.

men.”<sup>419</sup> After World War I, however, press critics suddenly realized that news could be manipulated. This new awareness stimulated basic and sophisticated analyses of press bias. It also made the years 1919 to 1922 a turning point in the history of journalistic criticism of journalism.

To better illustrate the transitional nature of this phase, this chapter divides the war and post-war years into two different periods: 1917 to 1918 and 1919 to 1922. Transitions rarely take place at one specific point in history. They often take years to materialize, leaving time for people to comprehend the meaning of the change. During the war years, journalists were divided between those who embraced Wilson’s progressive crusade and those who opposed the abridgment of freedom of speech. Even the latter willingly cooperated with the government. It was not until the war was over, however, that the impact of the propaganda campaigns slowly dawned on journalists, thereby changing their rhetoric.

### **Censorship and Propaganda Campaigns**

When Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection in November 1916, he competed under the slogan “he kept us out of war,” reminding Americans of the efforts he made during his first term to isolate the United States from the conflict in Europe.<sup>420</sup> On the evening of April 2, 1917, however, a solemn Wilson urged the US Congress to “formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it.”<sup>421</sup> Provocative German transgressions, such as an unrestricted submarine warfare campaign and a secret telegram to Mexico, enlisting its help against the United States, had changed Wilson’s position.<sup>422</sup> After four days of deliberation

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<sup>419</sup> Parton, “American Newspaper Press,” 378.

<sup>420</sup> David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>421</sup> “Text of the President’s Address; The War Resolution Now Before the Congress,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1917. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9802E6D7143AE433A25750C0A9629C946696D6CF> (accessed April 21, 2010).

<sup>422</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 5-6, 10.

during which senators gave no less than one hundred speeches,<sup>423</sup> the US Congress declared war on the Central Powers; Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Bulgaria. For many progressive Americans, including Wilson himself, the war against the Kaiser and his allies was an international extension of the reform movement at home, a “war to end all wars” and spread democracy abroad.<sup>424</sup>

In an effort to silence anti-war and dissident voices and to rally the country behind him at a time when class, ethnic, and ideological tensions were a constant in US society, Wilson appealed to the xenophobia that was already widespread in 1917. He signed the Espionage and Sedition Acts, two laws that the attorney general ultimately used to suppress and punish “hyphenated Americans,” or foreign-born US citizens who proved disloyal to the country’s (and Wilson’s) policies.<sup>425</sup> As part of his efforts to promote the war and ensure victory, the American president also created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), an agency devoted to spreading propaganda at home and abroad.<sup>426</sup>

Supervised by the secretaries of state, of war, and of the navy, the CPI operated under the leadership of a civilian, George Creel. Creel was an energetic journalist, devoted progressive and loyal Wilsonian. Determined to “mobilize opinion yet safeguard democracy,”<sup>427</sup> Creel developed the agency into a complex and sophisticated propaganda bureau that communicated with

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<sup>423</sup> “Debate Lasted 16½ Hours; One Hundred Speeches Were Made –Miss Rankin, Sobbing, Votes No; All Amendments Beaten; Resolution Will Take Effect This Afternoon With the President’s Signature,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1917. [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9D06E4D6143AE433A25755C0A9629C946696D6CF](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9D06E4D6143AE433A25755C0A9629C946696D6CF) (accessed April 21, 2010).

<sup>424</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 280, 294-295. See also Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, 276. It should be noted here that some progressives such as pacifist settlement leader Jane Addams strongly opposed the war.

<sup>425</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 24. In one of his 1915 speeches, Wilson himself had described such individuals as “citizens of the United States ... born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of national life.” See “Defense and Loyalty Keynotes of the President’s Address; Full Text of Appeal Made to Congress to Safeguard the Nation’s Peace,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1915. [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9900E5D6133FE233A2575BC0A9649D946496D6CF](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9900E5D6133FE233A2575BC0A9649D946496D6CF) (accessed April 21, 2010).

<sup>426</sup> James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words That Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information 1917-1919* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939), 51.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Americans at home and allies and enemies abroad. He saw the CPI as a way to replace government censorship, as practiced in Europe, with publicity efforts, thus safeguarding freedom in America. For Creel, the agency was also a progressive tool to help the US win the war and hence extend the reform movement beyond American borders.<sup>428</sup>

The CPI communicated its patriotic messages through speeches and news releases in English and other languages, photographs, posters, brochures, advertisements, the telegraph, cable, movies, exhibitions, and the agency's own daily newsletter, the *Official Bulletin*. Twenty-four bureaus and divisions oversaw operations in the US and abroad.<sup>429</sup> Creel enlisted the help of muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell, Will Irwin, Ernest Poole, and Charles Edward Russell, all of whom shared his and Wilson's goal of "making the world safe for democracy."<sup>430</sup> He hired public relations pioneer Edward Bernays to help him design his campaigns as well as scores of famous cartoonists, including Charles Dana Gibson, James M. Flagg, and Louis D. Fansher, to design posters and other visuals. The CPI carefully enlisted around seventy-five thousand volunteers, known as the "Four-Minute Men," to give four-minute speeches about America's involvement in the war to any audience willing to listen. The "Four-Minute Men" made over seven-hundred and fifty thousand speeches in over five thousand communities.<sup>431</sup> Before the war was over, the CPI had distributed two-hundred twenty-five million pamphlets in various languages, sponsored war expositions and school activities attended by several million attendees, issued six thousand press releases, and produced several films.<sup>432</sup> Altogether, the Committee on Public Information's net cost amounted to \$4,464,602.39.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid, 68-74.

<sup>430</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 59.

<sup>431</sup> Nancy Snow, *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control Since 9/11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 52.

<sup>432</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 61.

<sup>433</sup> Mock and Larson, *Words That Won the War*, 67.

Messages that the CPI transmitted included all aspects of the war from the promotion of the selective draft, liberty loans, food conservation, food pledges, income taxation, and the Red Cross to warnings about specific dangers, enemy spies in the US, and German propaganda, to information about the Central Powers and the Triple Entente, why the US went to war, what was at stake, and how battles developed. The CPI also sought to improve people's morale at home and discourage enemies abroad. The committee's most important currency –at least originally– was facts, not opinion. Historians Mock and Cedric explained that “news was the life-blood of the CPI. ... [W]ithout it there would have been no Committee on Public Information.”<sup>434</sup> It was the agency's reliance on news to sway public opinion in the United States and abroad that brought the realization, among journalistic critics of journalism, that news could be subjective.

George Creel repeatedly pointed out that press cooperation with the CPI was voluntary and that his agency did not possess censorship power.<sup>435</sup> According to the CPI's “preliminary statement,” published in May 1917, editors could not circulate “dangerous” news such as stories about naval and military operations in progress, movement of official missions or secret agents, and plots against the president. They had to consult with the CPI regarding “questionable” material such as military operations, training-camp routine, technical inventions, and sensational war-related rumors. But they could publish all other stories, dubbed “routine” news, without restraint.

Despite Creel's idealism and the promises Wilson made to journalists, “America went under censorship during the World War without realizing it,” as historians Mock and Larson put it.<sup>436</sup> To be sure, neither the CPI chairman nor the US president expressly wished to act as Big Brother. But their progressive motives notwithstanding, they used propaganda that increasingly

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 77-82.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 19.



turned to emotional, racist hate messages. Several measures, including the Espionage and Sedition Acts, curtailed press freedom.<sup>437</sup>

Enacted into law on June 15, 1917, the Espionage Act was originally meant to define and punish spying. In its final version, however, the bill targeted anyone who opposed the war, including the press. The third section of the bill imposed a fine of up to ten thousand dollars and/or up to twenty years imprisonment on whoever “shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operations or success of the military or naval forces of the United States or to promote the success of its enemies” and whoever “shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the United States, to the injury of the service or of the United States.”<sup>438</sup> Effective only when the United States was at war, this section of the Espionage Act “gave teeth to the Committee on Public Information.”<sup>439</sup> Postmaster General Albert Burleson used this section of the bill to control the circulation of news by ethnic communities, radical labor organizations, and minority political parties.<sup>440</sup> Critics charged in 1918 that the Espionage Act violated the First Amendment and Bill of Rights but the Supreme Court unanimously dismissed the accusations in *Schenck vs. United States* in 1919.<sup>441</sup>

The Sedition Act of May 1918 amended the Espionage Act. Inspired by the prevalent nationalism, the Congress added new offenses to the original bill, including the utterance or publication of any

... disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the army or naval forces of the

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<sup>437</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 62.

<sup>438</sup> “Primary Documents – U.S. Espionage Act, 15 June 1917,” First World War: A Multimedia History of World War One. <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/espionageact.htm> (accessed April 24, 2010).

<sup>439</sup> Mock and Larson, *Words That Won the War*, 42.

<sup>440</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 26.

<sup>441</sup> *Schenck vs. United States*, 249 U.S. 47 (1919).

United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the army or navy of the United States, or any language intended to bring the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the army or navy of the United States into contempt, scorn, contumely, or disrepute.<sup>442</sup>

### **Calling for Freedom of the Press (1917-1918)**

Of the twenty-one articles published between 1917 and 1918, thirteen addressed the issue of press freedom. One, written by Creel himself, contended that the press had remained free during the war. Creel focused on the voluntary nature of censorship, differentiating between European and American forms of control.<sup>443</sup> The rest of the articles protested the government's infringement of press liberty. The number of journalistic press critiques written between 1917 and 1918 exceeded the number of articles written in any other period of the same duration throughout the sixty-five years under study.<sup>444</sup> Given that most of these articles covered the issue of press freedom, it is reasonable to conclude that journalists were alarmed. Unlike their predecessors, critics writing between 1917 and 1918 did not focus on the transmission of news or on reform as the primary mission of the press. Twelve out of twenty-one found that journalism's first objective was to enhance democracy.

Although *The Outlook* cautioned that journalists should “draw the line between “legitimate and illegitimate criticism” of the government, especially in times of war, the magazine insisted that the press must remain free. Governmental officers, *The Outlook* wrote, “are the servants of the people; the master must be left free to criticize his servants.”<sup>445</sup> David Lawrence of the *New York Evening Post* underlined the importance of a free press, not only in

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<sup>442</sup> “Senate Accepts Sedition Bill,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1918. [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9B01E1DD103BEE3ABC4D53DFB3668383609EDE](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9B01E1DD103BEE3ABC4D53DFB3668383609EDE) (accessed April 24, 2010).

<sup>443</sup> George Creel, “Public Opinion in War Time,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 78 (July 1918): 185-194.

<sup>444</sup> It should be noted here that the year 1911 included twenty-one articles but it is a special case because fifteen of these articles were part of one series on journalism by Will Irwin. They do not indicate an urgency to protest a specific issue or incident.

<sup>445</sup> “War and a Free Press,” *The Outlook* 116 (May 1917): 57.

the US but also in Europe, to ensure the durability of peace when combat ceased.<sup>446</sup> A 1917 article in *The Nation* warned that, “[e]ven with the Wilson Administration and all our unselfish purposes in going to war,” government censorship of the press and the spread of official propaganda would ultimately hurt the credibility of newspapers and news agencies.<sup>447</sup> An anonymous editorial in the *North American Review* similarly warned against the dangers of the Espionage Act. “Must we go to jail?” the piece asked. “It is only a question of time when this Review will be stopped.”<sup>448</sup> The article described the new legislation as “wicked, vicious, tyrannous” and called on the Postmaster General to study the First Amendment. Reacting against a call to ban William Randolph Hearst’s papers from New York City,<sup>449</sup> *The Nation* wrote that:

It is not reassuring to read of political bodies legislating against certain newspapers, however objectionable, and it is entirely disquieting to read of men in uniform dictating what their respective towns shall or shall not read. This stirs memories of our early Colonial days and of the straits to which some of our national heroes were put to circulate pamphlets in order to oppose authority when it controlled the press.<sup>450</sup>

Writing in the *North American Review*, Richard Barry listed the various ways in which Wilson’s government suppressed the press during war. He spoke of the dissemination of propaganda news, the postmaster general’s intentional delaying of newspaper distribution, the ban on new papers, the rationing of news, filtering through news agencies, and self-censorship. “There exists in the United States to-day a control of the press and a suppression of vital news and public discussion which it is difficult to parallel in English-speaking countries unless one goes back to the time of King James,” Barry noted.<sup>451</sup> He explained that most of the mechanisms suppressing the press

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<sup>446</sup> David Lawrence, “International Freedom of the Press Essential to Durable Peace,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 72 (July 1917): 139-141.

<sup>447</sup> “The Government’s Control of the Press,” *The Nation* 105 (September 1917): 283.

<sup>448</sup> “Must We Go to Jail?” *North American Review* 206 (1917): 673-677.

<sup>449</sup> Hearst’s publications opposed America’s involvement in war, provoking accusations of disloyalty. In the article in question, *The Nation* explains that the New York Supreme Court had turned down an official request to ban Hearst’s papers in New York City. The magazine welcomed the court’s decision.

<sup>450</sup> “Hearst and the Control of the Press,” *The Nation* 106 (June 1918): 701.

<sup>451</sup> Barry, “‘Freedom’ of the Press?” 702-709.

were initially devised for good intentions but had deteriorated into censorship devices. “We are not as badly off as when Milton wrote his *Areopagitica*,” Barry wrote. “Yet each week requires its new *Areopagitica*.” An editorial in the *Bellman* attacked the Committee on Public Information, explaining that the American press was zealous and responsible enough to cover the war without the help of information agencies. “They are supposed to inspire and encourage a vast amount of beneficent publicity, and the publications of the country are expected to stand patiently about, like Mary’s little lamb, until the verbal gruel they prepare is duly dispensed and distributed,” the article sarcastically said.<sup>452</sup>

Although many CPI officers were journalists themselves and although news agencies *voluntarily* announced at the beginning of the war that they would filter their output,<sup>453</sup> ten of the twenty-one articles published in 1917 and 1918 portrayed journalists as collateral victims of the war. During the US involvement in World War I, critics rarely analyzed newspaper content or disparaged the press. Their attacks focused instead on the Wilson government, the CPI, and the laws suppressing journalistic freedom. The issue of press liberty overshadowed all other considerations, including traditional focal points like commercialization, advertising, sensationalism, and ethics.<sup>454</sup> It was not until the war was over that critics redirected their attention to the appraisal of press performance. For a journalistic community that consistently emphasized the democratic promise of news, this comes as no surprise. Given the importance critics attached to news and the democratic promise they attributed to it, the suppression of news amounted for them to an attack on the tenets of the republic and automatically assumed great significance.

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<sup>452</sup> “Exterminating the Press,” *Bellman* 24 (June 1918): 677.

<sup>453</sup> Barry, “‘Freedom’ of the Press?” 703.

<sup>454</sup> In 1917 and 1918, only two articles criticized excessive commercialization. Compared to other periods under study, during which commercialization imposed itself as the central issue in press criticism, this number is quite limited.

Several articles, in this context, emphasized the democratic function of the press and its contribution to the well-being of the Republic. The *Outlook* article mentioned above explained that newspapers represent the power of public opinion and act as a check on governmental performance.<sup>455</sup> The *New York Evening Post*'s David Lawrence wrote that "[i]t is the constitutional freedom of the press that has made of America a democracy in fact as well as in name. It is the freedom of the press that permits the formation of public opinion."<sup>456</sup> *The Nation*, which belonged to the owners of the Post, agreed. "The minute you begin to interfere with freedom of public utterance you endanger the Republic; this is no less true in war time than in time of peace," its editors explained.<sup>457</sup> An article in *The Dial* also emphasized the democratic role of newspapers. It declared that "a democracy uninformed is a democracy chloroformed."<sup>458</sup> As these comments show, journalists considered news to be the best basis for an informed public opinion. This belief, however, would start to change after the war.

### **New Awareness: The Subjectivity of News (1919-1922)**

As historian David Kennedy writes, "the progressives and Wilson, thrust into cautious embrace in 1917, went down in defeat together at war's end."<sup>459</sup> The propaganda campaigns Wilson sponsored and the Espionage and Sedition Acts he signed into law were partly responsible for his fall out of favor. As Oswald Garrison Villard, formerly a supporter of Wilson and the war, wrote after the termination of combat, "the more the pity that Wilson has made the great blunder of allowing his dull and narrow Postmaster General, his narrow Attorney General, all the other agencies under his control to suppress adequate discussion of the peace aims."<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> "War and a Free Press," 57.

<sup>456</sup> Lawrence, "International Freedom of the Press," 141.

<sup>457</sup> "Another Menace to the Press," *The Nation* 104 (February 1917): 206.

<sup>458</sup> "The War Within the War," *The Dial* 65 (June 1918): 7.

<sup>459</sup> Kennedy, *Over Here*, 89. See also McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 299-313.

<sup>460</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, quoted in Kennedy, *Over Here*, 89.

Although many progressive journalists had supported Wilson and eagerly contributed to the CPI's campaign, most now realized the implications of their participation. Reflecting on propaganda after the end of the war, critics came to understand that facts could be manipulated and news could be subjective. Largely based on facts, at least at the beginning, the CPI's communication had taught journalists that news was not as impartial as they had thought. With businesses adopting the agency's techniques and public relations becoming an established profession after the war, the disillusion of journalistic critics became more pronounced as time passed.

For over fifty years, press critics had considered news to be the strong point of American journalism. After the Civil War, journalists were thrilled about the promises of a news-based press. Even as the problems of commercialization became apparent and the initial euphoria subsided, American journalists valued their press more than any other because of its news-based quality. This appreciation of news continued during the progressive period, as muckrakers used hard facts to uncover political and corporate corruption. For journalistic press critics, the appeal of a fact-based press rested in its impartiality; unlike opinions, news gave readers the opportunity to see the world as it is and formulate independent opinions. It is this very quality that the CPI's propaganda campaigns ultimately undermined.

Walter Lippmann, founding editor of *The New Republic* and Wilson's close adviser during the war, noted in *The Atlantic Monthly* that an impartial investigation of facts, although indispensable, was "denied us" because reporters were prejudiced and lacked proper training.<sup>461</sup> His observation comes in stark contrast with previous comments critics made about news, where they overlooked the possibility of prejudice. It also underlines the shift journalists went through, slowly converting from war and propaganda supporters to disillusioned opponents. As we will

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<sup>461</sup> Walter Lippmann, "Liberty and the News," *The Atlantic Monthly* 124 (November 1919): 779.

see later, Lippmann took his point a step further in his book, *Public Opinion*, arguing that conception of reality was limited to “pictures in our heads.”<sup>462</sup> In another article where news was presented as a malleable, subjective set of facts, William Brand of the *Journal of Commerce* observed that newspapers were more able to sway readers through news reports than through editorials. “The power of the press is then the power to shape opinion by the presentation, emphasis, suppression, explanation or distortion of facts,” Brand explained.<sup>463</sup> Frank Cobb, the *New York World*’s editor-in-chief, complained that both Wall Street and radical parties had adopted the war’s propaganda efforts, enlisting press agents whose function “is not to proclaim the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but to present the particular state of facts that will be of the greatest benefit to their client—in short, to *manipulate* news [emphasis ours].”<sup>464</sup> He insisted on the great harms of such initiatives, which include a confused public opinion and the absence of independent thought. “The more of that kind of publicity we have the less we know, the less certain we can be of anything,” Cobb explained.<sup>465</sup> The *World*’s editor-in-chief called for suspension of propaganda efforts and the return of “the competent, intelligent, investigating reporter”<sup>466</sup> as the only safeguard for democracy. Although he himself had been the head of the CPI’s foreign bureau, Will Irwin agreed. Irwin differentiated between government propaganda during the war, which he deemed justifiable, and peace-time propaganda, which transformed the post-war period into “an age of lies” where “the propagandist attacks the foundation of public opinion.”<sup>467</sup> Irwin explained that propagandists selectively disseminated news, a process that ultimately led to half-truths and plain lies. Underlying his argument was the

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<sup>462</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1.

<sup>463</sup> William Brand, “Government by the Press,” *The Independent* 102 (April 1920): 181.

<sup>464</sup> Frank Cobb, “The Press and Public Opinion,” *The New Republic* 21 (December 1919): 144.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>467</sup> Will Irwin, “An Age of Lies: How the Propagandist Attacks the Foundation of Public Opinion,” *Sunset* 43 (December 1919): 23.

admission that journalists could manipulate the news, a reality that made it virtually unreliable. An unsigned editorial in *The New Republic* also attacked the credibility of news. Commenting on the coverage of the Imperial Conference in London,<sup>468</sup> the author condemned the omnipresence of press agents and their publicity machines. “The public is in truth being constantly deceived by the ignorant or artful manipulation of the very medium through which it is supposed to be informed,” the article said. “Except to a shrewd and well informed mind, news is to a large extent indistinguishable from propaganda and from guess work.”<sup>469</sup>

This attitude contrasted sharply with the admiration critics expressed toward news in previous decades. Critics in various articles between the postbellum and progressive periods called news “the key-note of American journalism,”<sup>470</sup> the “disinterested examination of men and things,”<sup>471</sup> “the facts, cold and barren,”<sup>472</sup> “the greatest, the incomparable service of the press,”<sup>473</sup> “the life-blood of a great journal,”<sup>474</sup> and “the newest arm of this newest power in civilization.”<sup>475</sup> They saw news as a distinctively American invention reflecting the democratic nature of the country and its government. After the war, they realized that the mere use of hard facts did not guarantee impartiality. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* Frederick Lewis Allen, managing editor of *The Century*, described the change that took place:

Before the war, people who discussed [newspaper ethics] concerned themselves primarily with the question whether the newspapers degraded public morals by their exploitation of divorce scandals and their general preoccupation with men’s misdeeds, and the question whether large advertisers, and especially department stores, could bring about the suppression or distortion of news affecting their financial interests. The war, however,

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<sup>468</sup> The Imperial Conferences were periodic gatherings joining British leaders with heads of states in British colonies. The 1921 Imperial Conference took place in London and was partially focused on the aftermath of World War I.

<sup>469</sup> “Publicity Without Candor,” *The New Republic* 29 (December 1921): 29.

<sup>470</sup> Balch, “English and American Newspapers,” 90.

<sup>471</sup> Benson, “New York Journalists,” 871.

<sup>472</sup> Kingdon, “Should Reporters Express Opinions?” 29.

<sup>473</sup> Miller, “A Word to the Critics of Newspapers,” 715.

<sup>474</sup> Godkin, “The Growth and Expression of Public Opinion,” 7; Connery, “Great Business Operations,” 21.

<sup>475</sup> Irwin, “The Reporter and the News,” 21.



with its censorship, its development of the art of propaganda, and the improvement which it brought about in methods of swaying masses of men by controlling or doctoring the news, has made us realize that the problem of newspaper conduct is larger and more fundamental than we had supposed it to be. We now see that it is immensely important that the press shall give us the facts straight; and not merely the facts relating to department stores and other large business concerns, but the entire mass of facts about the world in which we live –political, economic, religious, scientific, social, and industrial.<sup>476</sup>

The implications of this new realization were momentous. Critics formerly saw news as the strong point of American journalism and a guarantee for a healthy democracy. The new awareness put the authority of the American press in question. It even put healthy democracy in doubt. For press critics, this was a crisis of faith and confidence.

The realization that news could be biased generated sophisticated analyses of newspaper content. One article in *The New Republic* examined the *New York World's* reports about a coal strike at a time when class tensions abounded. The article showed how the *World* slowly gravitated over a period of twenty days from a coverage favoring employers to one supporting labor. Reflecting on the biases of journalists, the author explained that the New York daily should have investigated the facts and supported the coal strike from the beginning. Another article in *The Nation* examined how the Associated Press distorted and the *New York Times* silenced the story of atrocities against Jews in Poland. Although Jewish agencies sent the findings to New York papers, only a Polish minister's denial of the atrocities saw its way into print. The article attacked the "standards of accuracy and of news collection and selection" at the institutions in question. "We take all our Polish news with a grain of salt," the author sarcastically said.<sup>477</sup> *The Nation* and the *Survey* published two other content analyses during this period, one studying the coverage of Vladimir Lenin and the other examining reports of a

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<sup>476</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, "Newspapers and the Truth," *The Atlantic Monthly* 129 (January 1922): 44.

<sup>477</sup> "The *Times*, Associated Press, and *New York Times*," *The Nation* 111 (August 1920): 148.

struggle between labor and capital in the clothing industry.<sup>478</sup> In both cases, however, the authors were not journalists. The very presence of such analyses indicated a loss of trust; the accuracy of news could not be taken for granted anymore.

On August 4, 1920, *The New Republic* published the most important of all, an analysis of the *New York Times*' coverage of the Bolshevik revolution. Authored by Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, both on the magazine staff, the article tested the objectivity of the *Times*' reporting on Russia between 1917 and 1920. The title of the piece, "A Test of the News," was by itself quite significant. It indicated that, after being the subject of admiration for over fifty years, news was now fair game. Lippmann and Merz examined the coverage of uncontested events such as the failure of the Russian Army's offensive in July 1917, the toppling of the government in November 1917, and the signing of Brest-Litovsk treaty in March 1918. The two authors found that "from the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster. On the essential questions the net effect was almost always misleading, and misleading news is worse than no news at all."<sup>479</sup> Lippmann and Merz explained that the "hopes and fears" of the *Times* journalists had constituted "subjective obstacles to the free pursuit of facts."<sup>480</sup> They talked about the "problem of news," calling on journalists to correct these biases because "the reliability of the news is the premise on which democracy proceeds."<sup>481</sup> According to *The New Republic*, the article created an avalanche of reactions, some positive and some not.<sup>482</sup> It was a seminal piece of press criticism. Through their careful analysis of news bias and factual inconsistencies, Lippmann and Merz underlined the

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<sup>478</sup> See Francis Musgrave, "Lenin, the 'Times,' and the Associated Press," *The Nation* 110 (March 1920): 293-294. Paul Blanshard, "Turning Tables on the Newspapers," *Survey* 46 (August 1921): 599-600.

<sup>479</sup> Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News," *The New Republic* 23 (August 1920): 3.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> "Filtering the News," *The New Republic* 24 (September 1920): 61.

essence of the crisis critics faced at the end of World War I: If news was not as objective as it was thought to be, what were the implications for democracy? What was the value American journalism offered? And, on a more philosophical level, could reality be scientifically grasped? It was this last question that Walter Lippmann tried to answer in his classic *Public Opinion*.

Writing in 1922, Lippmann explained in the famous book that people viewed life through “pictures in [their] heads,” an outlook that conflicts with the outside world.<sup>483</sup> These man-made “pictures,” often transmitted through the media, made up the pseudo-environments to which people responded behaviorally. Lippmann examined the factors that limited public access to reality. He spoke of censorship and restricted access, the compression of complex events into short messages, language limitations, time constraints, stereotyping, the complexities of urban life, and, quite significantly, public relations and “the manufacture of consent.”<sup>484</sup> In a sharp critique of American journalism, the famous writer considered that democracy was not possible in mass societies because people saw the world through the press. He called for the institution of an “intelligence bureau” whose mission was to make “the unseen facts intelligible” to decision makers and the public.<sup>485</sup> Lippmann even questioned the accuracy of human perception, providing an evidence of the post-modern seeds the modern world carried within it.

The progression of Lippmann’s thought is revealing. During World War I, the founding editor of *The New Republic* was Woodrow Wilson’s adviser and a supporter of his propaganda campaigns. After the war, Lippmann performed the classic content analysis of the *New York Times’* coverage of the Bolshevik Revolution to illustrate the “problem of news.”<sup>486</sup> In a bid to reconstitute the credibility of the press, he called for professionalization and the establishment of a

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<sup>483</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>486</sup> Lippmann and Merz, “A Test of the News,” 3.

code of ethics to combat journalistic bias. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann questioned the possibility of accurately reporting reality and called for a bureau of experts to advise decision makers and the public. Later in 1925, Lippmann in *The Phantom Public* would completely deny the possibility of democracy. This progression of thought reflects the crisis journalists faced after World War I. Where press critics once believed the press promoted democracy, they now wondered if it hindered it. Critics were forced to question the contribution their profession offered to society and the possibility of a sound democracy.

Another important work on the biases of the press, published in 1920, was Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check*. The famous muckraker did not find a publisher for the book so he published it himself.<sup>487</sup> It became an instant best-seller, with three hundred thousand copies sold during the first year. Based on his twenty-year experience as a progressive journalist with socialist inclinations, Sinclair charged that the press biased its reports to serve private, rather than public, interests. In case after case, the famous muckraker showed how journalists suppressed unfavorable facts, distorted news, refused to publish corrections, and sometimes plainly invented stories. Sinclair concluded that truth was the casualty of capitalism. Swayed by capitalist owners and advertisers, news organizations prostituted themselves to the "Empire of Business."<sup>488</sup> A classic in the history of media criticism, *The Brass Check* is both an example of the crisis of the news and an extension of the muckraking years of the progressive era. Through his personal experience and the analysis of media content, Sinclair offered a verdict similar to that of his colleagues about the subjectivity and failure of news. At the same time, his investigation of corporate corruption recalled the attitude that animated American journalism during the first decade of the twentieth century, when progressivism was still fresh.

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<sup>487</sup> Tom Goldstein, ed., *Killing the Messenger: 100 Years of Media Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 140.

<sup>488</sup> Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 241.

Some of the critics who commented on news bias proposed solutions to the “problem of news.”<sup>489</sup> If democracy and the value of American journalism were to be preserved, journalists had to rescue impartiality. As explained above, in “A Test of the News,” Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz saw hope in the professionalization of the press and the establishment of a technical code of journalistic standards. Frederick Lewis Allen, managing editor of *The Century*, agreed. He found that the best remedies to the biases of news were better education, increased professionalization and the institution of a code of ethics.<sup>490</sup> Faithful to his socialist aspirations, Upton Sinclair proposed public ownership as the only guarantee for press freedom. But regardless of the solutions proposed, the anxiety was there. As evidenced in the statements they wrote and the questions they raised, journalistic press critics faced a major crisis after the war, when they realized that news, the pride of American journalism and the cornerstone of a democratic republic, was prone to manipulation. At stake was the credibility and value of the profession. The rise of public relations, or what some critics described as “business propaganda,”<sup>491</sup> further magnified the problem. This made the years 1917 to 1922 a turning point in the history of press criticism among modern mainstream journalists. As we will see in the coming chapter, the 1920s would bring out a new attitude toward journalism, one where pessimism, for the first time, overshadowed the traditional optimism of journalistic press critics.

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<sup>489</sup> Lippmann and Merz, “A Test of the News,” 3.

<sup>490</sup> Allen, “Newspapers and the Truth,” 53.

<sup>491</sup> See, for example, Allen, “Newspapers and the Truth,” 44.

## CHAPTER 7: MEDIOCRITY AND DISCONTENT

Frank A. Munsey, business magnate and newspaper publisher, was a self-made man. Reserved and kindly, he started his life as a young farmer in Maine and fought his way up, against all odds, to become one of America's millionaires. His newspaper investments alone amounted to sixteen million dollars in 1924.<sup>492</sup> Munsey was ruthless toward his enemies but generous to his friends. He reportedly sent one of his old employees, who suddenly quit his job, a check for half a year's salary.<sup>493</sup> But for many journalists of the 1920s, Munsey was nothing but a newspaper killer. "He has legitimized journalistic murder," Robert L. Duffus of the *New York Globe* wrote in an article about the newspaper publisher.<sup>494</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation*, dubbed Munsey's journalistic estate as a "newspaper cemetery."<sup>495</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* noted sarcastically that "good newspapers when they die go to Munsey."<sup>496</sup> The journalists' animosity came from Munsey's approach to the trade. For him, "the literary profession is a business like everything else."<sup>497</sup> Munsey bought, sold, and merged newspapers the way he did with his real estate holdings and his grocery stores. As Norman Hapgood of *Collier's Weekly* explained, Munsey sometimes bought papers only "because he objected to having [them] around" as competition.<sup>498</sup>

Munsey's philosophy and the newspaper consolidations he sponsored represented a trend several press barons adopted in the 1920s. The contempt he inspired also characterized much of the press criticism during that decade. Disappointed with the excessive commercialism of the press in the 1920s, critics writing between 1923 and 1930 complained about the mediocrity of a

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<sup>492</sup> Robert L. Duffus, "Mr. Munsey," *American Mercury* 2 (July 1924): 298.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>495</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, "Frank A. Munsey: Dealer in Dailies," *The Nation* 116 (June 1923): 713.

<sup>496</sup> Quoted in Villard, "Frank A. Munsey," 713.

<sup>497</sup> Frank A. Munsey, as quoted in Duffus, "Mr. Munsey," 302.

<sup>498</sup> Norman Hapgood, *The Changing Years: Reminiscences of Norman Hapgood* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930), 125.

“plump” press.<sup>499</sup> Generally negative and pessimistic, they criticized consolidation, the influence of public relations, and the standardization of news. For them, many newspapers in the 1920s did not live up to the standards of a responsible press. Critics writing between 1923 and 1930 attacked the emphasis on entertainment and sensational news, especially in tabloids. Their criticism came as an extension of the crisis they faced when they realized news was subjective. It also reflected the disappointment many progressives felt during the 1920s, as they saw three consecutive administrations opt for pro-business policies and indulgence slowly replace the discipline of Victorianism, especially among the young.<sup>500</sup> On the positive side, the journalists’ dissatisfaction indicated that they now had a clearer conception of the ideal newspaper. Many papers in the 1920s did not meet their expectations.

### **Of Consolidation, Public Relations, and Standardization**

American journalists during the 1920s were generally unfavorable about their country’s newspapers. Of the seventy articles written about journalism between 1923 and 1930, fifty were negative, only twelve were positive, and eight were balanced or did not express an opinion.<sup>501</sup> For the first time in the sixty years under study, critics were pessimistic about the possibilities of improving the state of American journalism. Between the Civil War and World War I, journalists who had criticized the press had almost always expressed their optimism that the state of the profession would improve. Of the fifty negative articles published in the 1920s, however, only

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<sup>499</sup> Don C. Seitz, “The American Press: The Palladium of Our Liberties; Is It Cracked?” *Outlook* 142 (January 1926): 20.

<sup>500</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 3.

<sup>501</sup> This chapter will not discuss the positive articles because they dealt of various subjects unrelated to one another and, therefore, did not constitute a specific, more positive trend in the journalistic criticism of the 1920s. One article, for example, commented on the arguments of socialist muckraker Upton Sinclair in *The Brass Check* (see Bruce Bliven, “Newspaper Morals,” *The New Republic* 35 (May 1923): 17-19.). Citing the First Amendment, another argued against the suppression of crime news (see “Should News of Crime Be Suppressed?” *The Nation* 120 (May 1925): 562-563.). A third article addressed the failure of a labor-funded paper (see “Another Newspaper Tragedy,” *The Nation* 118 (May 1924): 601-602.). Another provided a historical journey into the press of the nineteenth century (see Don C. Seitz, “The American Press: Newspaper Dynasties and Great Chieftains of Journalism,” *The Outlook* 142 (January 1926): 66-68.).

eight were optimistic about the future.<sup>502</sup> At the heart of the critics' concerns were the accelerated newspaper consolidations, the rise and normalization of public relations, and the ensuing standardization. For journalists, these trends reduced many newspapers in the 1920s to mediocrity.

The seeds of the consolidation movement went back to the 1890s. During that decade, William Randolph Hearst already owned three newspapers; the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *New York Morning Journal* and the *Evening Journal*. The movement slowly picked up as journalism became a lucrative business and the colossal investment required to start and manage papers made them beyond access except to a few. During the 1920s, the trend accelerated. According to the *Editor and Publisher*, thirty-four newspapers died through suspension and twenty-nine through amalgamation in 1923 alone.<sup>503</sup> By then, twenty-five percent of American dailies were published in some kind of combination.<sup>504</sup> Among them was Hearst's empire, which amounted in 1923 to nine magazines and eight morning, ten evening, and thirteen Sunday papers.<sup>505</sup> One out of four families in the United States read a Hearst publication on regular basis.<sup>506</sup> But Hearst was not alone. By 1924, Frank Munsey, the newspaper murderer, owned sixteen publications, which were left after he merged or killed fourteen.<sup>507</sup> In 1928, the Scripps-Howard chain owned twenty-five dailies while Frank Gannett and his associates controlled ten, mostly in New York.<sup>508</sup> Although scattered throughout the country, newspapers belonging to the

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<sup>502</sup> In total, only eighteen out of seventy articles were optimistic, twenty-five were pessimistic, and twenty-seven did not address the future of American journalism.

<sup>503</sup> Quoted in Will Irwin, "Newspapers and Canned Thought," *Collier's Weekly* 73 (June 1924): 13.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>505</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, "William Randolph Hearst and His Moral Press," *The Nation* 116 (March 1923): 357.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid*, 358.

<sup>507</sup> Duffus, "Mr. Munsey," 303.

<sup>508</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, "The Disappearing Daily," *Forum* 79 (February 1928): 273.



same chain often published, on any given day, many identical news stories and features and several common editorials.<sup>509</sup> Their policies were largely identical, even in handling local news.

Of the twenty three critics who addressed newspaper consolidation, none approved of the trend. Many were biting in their attack. “Is the American daily to go the way of the Indian, the bison, and the horse-propelled carriage?” Oswald Garrison Villard, the editor of *The Nation*, asked.<sup>510</sup> He warned that:

Every disappearance of a daily throws many workers out into the street ... and still further limits the field of journalism. More than that, it helps to concentrate journalistic power in the hands of very rich and powerful persons – something which can never be a happy situation for any country, and least for a republic.<sup>511</sup>

Robert L. Duffus, who wrote an article about Munsey, observed that chain proprietors like him “demonstrated that newspapers are not institutions, like schools and churches, but commodities, like motor cars.”<sup>512</sup> George H. Spargo, who explained in his article that he worked for a chain newspaper, charged that the “paper, directed by the agents of the cold, impersonal corporation, has not the heart or the soul of the independent sheet. It is just a neuter thing, inanimate, un-human.”<sup>513</sup> The fact that Spargo described papers that do not belong to chains as “independent” indicates that consolidation, for journalists, involved a suppression of free speech. The reporter argued that working for chain papers was a dull, routine job that transformed the position into “mere drudgery” devoid of inspiration.<sup>514</sup> John Hunter Sedgwick of the *Christian Science Monitor* agreed. He argued that consolidation bred mediocrity as it killed the independence of newspapers and encouraged them to please readers and advertisers instead of providing sharp

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<sup>509</sup> Bliven, “Our Changing Journalism,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 132 (December 1923): 746.

<sup>510</sup> Villard, “The Disappearing Daily,” 271.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> Duffus, “Mr. Munsey,” 303.

<sup>513</sup> George H. Spargo, “Newspaper Paralysis,” *North American Review* 226 (August 1928): 194.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

editorial.<sup>515</sup> The two critics here referred to the fact that much of the material chain newspapers published was uniform across the country, a reality journalists held in contempt. *The Nation* argued in a 1923 article that consolidation prevented the press from presenting all sides of a public question to its readers.<sup>516</sup> In another article, published a year later, *The Nation* lamented that newspapers had become mercantile enterprises, devoid of any public interest and responsibility.<sup>517</sup> Fabian Franklin of *The Independent* charged that the tendency of papers to “drift into fewer hands” developed a current of “bigness and sameness.”<sup>518</sup> Bruce Bliven, former managing editor of the *New York Globe*, commented that “to have so large a proportion of the country’s press in the hands of two or three men or corporations seems to me a menace in itself. ... The specific danger, of course, is the lowering of our national intellectual standard.”<sup>519</sup> Will Irwin noted in *Collier’s* that consolidation tilted the balance in favor of capital and vested interest and amounted to a homogeneous editorial output and the “standardization of national thought.”<sup>520</sup>

The terminology critics used to address consolidation was suggestive. Journalists spoke of mergers as the killing or impairment of newspapers. Two journalists dubbed the trend “newspaper cannibalism”<sup>521</sup> and two “newspaper paralysis,”<sup>522</sup> while another described chain papers as “neutralized.”<sup>523</sup> Benjamin Stolberg, editor of *The Bookman* and columnist for the *New*

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<sup>515</sup> John Hunter Sedgwick, “Newspaper Cannibalism,” *North American Review* 225 (April 1928): 415.

<sup>516</sup> “More Newspaper Cannibalism,” *The Nation* 116 (February 1923): 232.

<sup>517</sup> “Munsey Destroys Another Daily,” *The Nation* 118 (March 1924): 334.

<sup>518</sup> Fabian Franklin, “The American Newspaper,” *The Independent* 112 (January 1924): 8.

<sup>519</sup> Bliven, “Our Changing Journalism,” 746-747.

<sup>520</sup> Irwin, “Newspapers and Canned Thought,” 14.

<sup>521</sup> Sedgwick, “Newspaper Cannibalism,” 415; “More Newspaper Cannibalism,” 232.

<sup>522</sup> Spargo, “Newspaper Paralysis,” 189; Gaylord M. Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” *American Mercury* 7 (February 1926): 155.

<sup>523</sup> “The Neutralized Newspaper,” *The New Republic* 56 (September 1928): 114.

*York Evening Post*, accused proprietors of “murdering” newspapers.<sup>524</sup> Silas Bent, a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, depicted consolidation as the “gravestone” and “cemetery” of newspapers.<sup>525</sup> Don Seitz, who worked for twenty-five years as business manager for the *New York World*, feared the “extinguishment” of dailies while Stewart Beach, former editorial assistant at *The Outlook*, described the audiences of consolidated papers as “orphaned readers.”<sup>526</sup> *The Nation* spoke of consolidation as “tragedy.”<sup>527</sup> Veteran journalist Gaylord Fuller, who worked in journalism in over twenty cities, depicted merged papers as “suffocated” and “petrified.”<sup>528</sup> The lexicon of death suggests a profound aversion to the trend; if consolidation meant death then nothing worse could happen to newspapers.

Critics writing during the 1920s also resented the normalization of public relations after World War I. They saw the increasing presence of publicity agents as a distorting filter between journalists and their corporate and political sources. Many regarded press agents as a barrier preventing reporters from collecting all the facts. Veteran journalist Don Seitz charged that public relations was behind the “degeneration of the news-gathering instinct.”<sup>529</sup> Silas Bent, contributor to the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, related two instances where journalists printed the material they got from press agents without further investigating the story and thus missed the real scope of events. “Crusading ... is passé,” Bent noted. “The present easy-going attitude is more comfortable for them and for their reporters.”<sup>530</sup> Oliver H. P. Garrett,

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<sup>524</sup> Benjamin Stolberg, “The Man Behind the ‘Times:’ The Portrait of a Publisher,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 138 (December 1926): 730.

<sup>525</sup> Silas Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 137 (June 1926): 768.

<sup>526</sup> Don C. Seitz, “The American Press: Newspaper Dynasties and Great Chieftains of Journalism,” *The Outlook* 142 (January 1926): 68; Stewart Beach, “Leadership and Journalism,” *Outlook and Independent* 152 (June 1929): 291.

<sup>527</sup> “Munsey Destroys Another Daily,” 334.

<sup>528</sup> Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 159.

<sup>529</sup> Don C. Seitz, “The American Press: Self-Surrender,” *The Outlook* 142 (February 1926): 209.

<sup>530</sup> Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” 769.

screenwriter and contributor to the *New York Sun* and *New York World*, noted the difference between newspaper attitude toward press agents before and after World War I:

Before the lamented war, newspaper practice had held suspect, not as news, any information which the subject desired to be published. Press agents were the common enemy of all editors, and only by the most devious tricks, and the most generous outlay of free tickets, could even circus men get stories into the papers. . . . The war and Ivy Lee, most eminent of public relations counsel, broke down this editorial prejudice to a point where press agents and their canned copy became almost as welcome as an Associated Press bulletin.<sup>531</sup>

William George Clugston, a correspondent and author from Kansas, accused reporters of selling themselves to big business. “As we had the stone age and the iron age, so now we have the *propaganda age*,” he said.<sup>532</sup> Veteran journalist Gaylord M. Fuller attacked the “canned” speeches and “propaganda articles” publicity agents prepared for journalists and criticized reporters and editors for not questioning their content.<sup>533</sup> “In exchange for the vigor of old editorial days and persistent penetrating inquiry of the news columns, the apologists for the present day newspaper offer its ‘tolerance,’” he said. “How perfectly nice! How priggish and comfortable!”<sup>534</sup>

Journalists framed the normalization of public relations as a blow to reporters and their news-gathering function. Because the material press agents prepared featured a *calculated selection* of facts, it came as a reminder of the propaganda campaign of World War I and affirmed the realization that news was subjective. By now, critics had realized that, although hard facts were impartial, one needed to report the various sides of a story to ensure objectivity. Journalists saw the articles that publicity officers prepared as tainted and feared that such the

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<sup>531</sup> Oliver H. P. Garrett, “The Gods Confused,” *American Mercury* 12 (November 1927): 328.

<sup>532</sup> William George Clugston, “A Reporter’s Mirror,” *The Nation* 119 (October 1924): 362.

<sup>533</sup> Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 157, 159.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

publication of such material could potentially compromise the credibility of the press. As Seitz put it:

The bee typifies industry and cooperation. Yet the hive has an insidious enemy in a moth which finds its way within and, laying eggs between the frames of honeycomb, breeds a slimy worm which devours comb and honey. The cocoons shut out air, and the bees smother and starve. The “publicity agent” is the bee moth of journalism.<sup>535</sup>

His metaphor illustrates the extent of the danger journalists saw in the normalization of public relations at the time; for critics, publicity agents threatened to metaphorically kill the reporter.

Journalists writing during the 1920s also criticized standardization, which came as a by-product of consolidation, syndication, and the pervasiveness of materials prepared by news agencies and publicity agents. All seventeen journalists who discussed standardization between 1923 and 1930 were unfavorable. Six journalists spoke of “canned” speech, journalism, copy, thought or goods, in reference to the pre-cooked material syndicates and publicity agents distributed.<sup>536</sup> One *Collier's* article featured the picture of a tin can, with the image of Hearst and the words “NEWSPAPER SYNDICATE MATERIAL” on the cover. The caption below the illustration referred to a “well-known brand.”<sup>537</sup>

For journalists, syndicated articles, like publicity content, diminished the amount of first-hand reporting and thus undermined the most important asset American newspapers offered. “Today the aim of every managing editor is to have the same news in his paper that is in every other,” Bruce Bliven, former managing editor of the *New York Globe*, noted in an article on journalism in the 1920s. “Though the fiction writers have not yet discovered it, the old-fashioned

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<sup>535</sup> Seitz, “Self-surrender,” 210.

<sup>536</sup> Chester T. Crowell, “American Journalism Today,” *American Mercury* 2 (June 1924): 201; Irwin, “Newspapers and Canned Thought,” 13; “Syndicated Venality,” *The New Republic* 44 (October 1925): 165; Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 159; Seitz, “The Palladium of Our Liberties; Is It Cracked?” 21; Garrett, “The Gods Confused,” 328.

<sup>537</sup> Irwin, “Newspapers and Canned Thought,” 14.

scoop, or beat, has almost disappeared.”<sup>538</sup> Silas Bent wondered in *The Atlantic Monthly* where had the thrills of newsgathering and writing disappeared. “The day’s grist is gathered into the hopper, put through the mill, and comes out a standardized product,” he complained. “The glamorous excitement and the pride of personal handiwork have gone out of it.”<sup>539</sup> An editorial in the *American Mercury* echoed the same concern. “What has become of the Julian Ralphs and Richard Harding Davises?” The editorial asked, referring to star reporters of the postbellum era.<sup>540</sup> Many newspapers, the *American Mercury* said, had turned into “dull, standardized, unimaginative, groveling dividend-machines.”<sup>541</sup>

Critics of standardization also worried about the ensuing homogeneity they observed in many newspapers, especially those belonging to a press conglomerate. “It is no exaggeration to say that it makes no difference whatever which newspaper the average citizen buys on his way home at night,” a concerned editor complained in *The Nation*.<sup>542</sup> *The New Republic* agreed. “The bored transcontinental traveler who descends at stations along the line and purchases the local journals might be pardoned for feeling that his train is traversing long lops which bring him invariably back always to repurchase, at the same place and from the same boy, the same paper,” the editor sarcastically said.<sup>543</sup> Another article in *The New Republic* noted that the homogenization of newspapers across the country slowly led to “standardization of thought,” increasing “the fierceness with which any departure from the majority opinion, in politics, social ideas, even in dress and mode of living, is resented, in America.”<sup>544</sup> Chester T. Crowell of the *New York Evening Post* noted that the material news agencies distributed across the country was

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<sup>538</sup> Bruce Bliven, “Newspaper Morals,” *The New Republic* 35 (May 1923): 19.

<sup>539</sup> Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” 768.

<sup>540</sup> “Editorial,” *American Mercury* 11 (May 1927): 30.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> “Munsey Destroys Another Daily,” 334.

<sup>543</sup> “Syndicated Venality,” 165.

<sup>544</sup> “Where Journalism Is Going,” *The New Republic* 52 (August 1927): 34.

neutral to a point where newswriting “evolved into a vast repertoire of standard phrases” and became “a study in dullness.”<sup>545</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation* wrote in *Forum* that:

Syndication and the overruling passion of the journalist of today to make his daily as nearly as possible like the most successful one he knows are blotting out the originality of the newspaper. It is no longer highly individual in its typography, its make-up, its contents, or in the expressions upon its editorial page.<sup>546</sup>

### Attacking the “Mediocre” Press

For journalistic press critics, the combination of consolidation, public relations efforts, and standardization created a trend of weak and lifeless dailies. Journalists writing between 1923 and 1930 repeatedly complained about the powerlessness of newspapers whose sole objective is making money. The word “mediocrity” or its equivalent dominated the critical conversation of the 1920s.<sup>547</sup> Journalists writing between 1923 and 1930 spoke of “atrophy,”<sup>548</sup> “complacency,”<sup>549</sup> “fatal compromise,”<sup>550</sup> “marked tendency toward laxity,”<sup>551</sup> “lack of courage,”<sup>552</sup> “smothering atmosphere,”<sup>553</sup> “sacrifice of leadership,”<sup>554</sup> and “cracks in the pedestal.”<sup>555</sup> They described the journalism of the 1920s as “politer,”<sup>556</sup> “lazy,”<sup>557</sup> “fat,”<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Crowell, “American Journalism Today,” 200.

<sup>546</sup> Villard, “The Disappearing Daily,” 273.

<sup>547</sup> Six critics writing between 1923 and 1930 used the word “mediocre” or “mediocrity” in reference to the journalism of the day. See Lawrence F. Abbott, “An Apology,” *The Outlook* 142 (February 1926): 283; Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 155; Seitz, “Self-Surrender,” 210; Sedgwick, “Newspaper Cannibalism,” 415; Silas Bent, “Roller Coaster Journalism,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 4 (May 1928): 884; Spargo, “Newspaper Paralysis,” 189

<sup>548</sup> Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” 768.

<sup>549</sup> “Editorial,” 29.

<sup>550</sup> “Another Newspaper Tragedy,” *The Nation* 118 (May 1924): 602.

<sup>551</sup> Chester S. Lord, “The Modern Newspaper,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 200 (September 1927): 37.

<sup>552</sup> “Sell the Papers!” *Harper’s Magazine* 151 (June 1925): 7.

<sup>553</sup> “The Neutralized Newspaper,” 115.

<sup>554</sup> Beach, “Leadership and Journalism,” 291.

<sup>555</sup> Seitz, “The Palladium of Our Liberties; Is It Cracked?” 20

<sup>556</sup> Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” 769.

<sup>557</sup> Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 160.

<sup>558</sup> Seitz, “Self-Surrender,” 209.

“slimy,”<sup>559</sup> “dull,”<sup>560</sup> “plump,”<sup>561</sup> “spiritually identified with the business community,”<sup>562</sup> and “no better than if it were the avowed puppet of Washington.”<sup>563</sup> An anonymous article in

*Harper’s Magazine* complained that:

never were American newspapermen as a class so lacking in purpose or so contemptuous of their profession, morally and intellectually, as they are to-day when the technical efficiency of the press is at its height. ... Leadership is evidently the last thing in the editorial mind. The complacencies, the prejudices, the “hush” inhibitions of the herd mind in its warmest raptures of self-esteem furnish the leadership. The newspaper merely follows.<sup>564</sup>

Chester T. Crowell of the *New York Evening Post* agreed. Although he noted that newspapers in the 1920s were more accurate and fairer than their predecessors, Crowell found that they had “less imagination, initiative or purpose (barring profit)” and that they exerted little influence on their surrounding.<sup>565</sup> Veteran journalist Gaylord M. Fuller protested that “every lingering spark of vibrant life which had dwelt there was extinguished, and the inequalities and idiosyncrasies which had formerly adorned and enlivened the journalistic scene were reduced to a smooth surface of monotonous mediocrity.”<sup>566</sup> *The Outlook and Independent* observed that newspapers, and more specifically chain papers, “soft-pedal their opinions and become neutral.”<sup>567</sup> In the same spirit, John Hunter Sedgwick of the *Christian Science Monitor* warned that “in the absorption with immediate results which affects us all in this busied world, we overlook the danger of sterilizing our thinking functions and the slavery it brings.”<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> “Editorial,” 29.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Seitz, “The Palladium of Our Liberties; Is It Cracked?” 20.

<sup>562</sup> “The Neutralized Newspaper,” 114.

<sup>563</sup> Silas Bent, “International Window-Smashing,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 157 (September 1928): 427.

<sup>564</sup> “Sell the Papers!” 5, 7.

<sup>565</sup> Crowell, “American Journalism Today,” 204.

<sup>566</sup> Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 155.

<sup>567</sup> “Newspaper Ownership,” *The Outlook and Independent* 152 (June 1929): 134.

<sup>568</sup> Sedgwick, “Newspaper Cannibalism,” 419.



Dissatisfied with the state of many newspapers, and especially chain papers, in the 1920s, journalists compared between the decade's press and its predecessors. Nostalgia often animated critics who found even the yellow press of the 1890s to be more responsible than the "comfortable" chain papers of their times. An anonymous editorial in the *American Mercury* is a case in point. The article argued that:

The good in yellow journalism, even in the sort of yellow journalism that came from the Hearst *Urquell*, was considerable. And to deny the fact is an affectation. It shook up old bones, and gave the blush of life to pale cheeks. ... [T]here was never a time in American history when the old-time Hearst was more needed than he is needed today. The newspapers are steeped in a complacency that would be comic if it was not tragic. With so few exceptions that they may be counted on the fingers of two hands, they accept the Coolidge buncombe as gravely as if it were a revelation from Sinai. The most transparent nonsense, if only it be emitted officially, is printed without question, and hymned in duty bound.<sup>569</sup>

Fabian Franklin of *The Independent* also complained about the "sad falling off in the newspaper standard of news" between the end of the 1890s, when yellow journalism was at its peak, and the early 1920s.<sup>570</sup> Writer and editor Lawrence F. Abbott also explained that mediocre journalism was worse than yellow journalism. The latter, he said, did not present a danger to American life as much as the former did.<sup>571</sup> He proposed the education journalism schools offered as the only remedy for the poor quality of American newspapers. In his comparison between 1890s and 1920s newspapers, Chester S. Lord, former managing editor of the *New York Sun*, found the latter to be more commercialized and sensational than their predecessors.<sup>572</sup> Will Irwin warned in *Collier's* that newspapers had lost that "old fighting character" which animated them at the beginning of the century, ending up with "too much frosting and too little cake."<sup>573</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> "Editorial," 29.

<sup>570</sup> Franklin, "The American Newspaper," 8.

<sup>571</sup> Abbott, "An Apology," 283.

<sup>572</sup> Lord, "The Modern Newspaper," 177-178.

<sup>573</sup> Irwin, "Newspapers and Canned Thought," 29.

To understand the position of 1920s critics, one needs to remember that, although the yellow press of the 1890s was born out of a race for circulation and ultimately profit, a crusading spirit still animated its pages. Both Hearst and Pulitzer sought to combat corruption in public and corporate environments and their papers featured a marked inclination toward labor rights and concerns. Critics, who valued above all the public service journalism offered, were likely to favor the yellow press over chain newspapers providing standardized news. Their disappointment was understandable given that press conglomerates had succeeded a generation of progressive newspapers and magazines that played an active role in fighting corporate and political corruption.

Several critics feared that the chain papers of the 1920s were unable to produce an informed public opinion or protect people against official or corporate fraud. Of the seventy articles written between 1923 and 1930, twenty-six observed that the mission of the decade's press was to make money and thirteen said it was to startle and entertain. Only three said that newspapers were published to transmit news and two evoked the role of papers in serving public interest. Veteran journalist Don Seitz explained, for example, that, newspapers had become "more of a convenience than an influence" and lost their old vigilance and their devotion to any cause except profit. "Eager minds do not develop with financial success, and money is notoriously timid," Seitz explained.<sup>574</sup> The result was a "well-fed watchdog."<sup>575</sup> Stewart Beach, former editorial assistant at *The Outlook*, agreed. He contended that the transformation of newspapers into large corporations adversely affected their watchdog function.<sup>576</sup> New York City writer and journalist Silas Bent explained that, although editors claimed to safeguard liberties in

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<sup>574</sup> Seitz, "The Palladium of Our Liberties; Is It Cracked?" 21.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>576</sup> Beach, "Leadership and Journalism," 291.

the US, “that palladium had crumbled” under the pressure of big business.<sup>577</sup> In another article, Bent reiterated his argument when he said that journalists “lost sight of their public obligation in a feverish competition for mass circulation, which fattens advertising revenue.”<sup>578</sup> *The Nation* referred to a specific instance where a Minnesota journal, originally established as a labor paper owned by the organized workers in the Northwest, was forced to compromise its policies to attract advertisers. “It became more of a newspaper and less the crusading organ of an otherwise voiceless class in the community,” *The Nation* said.<sup>579</sup> The differentiation between a newspaper and a crusading organ here implies that the former is more devoted to making money than championing a political or social cause.

These negative assessments of newspapers contrast starkly with the rhetoric of earlier years. Between 1865 and 1917, journalists had consistently depicted the press as “a necessary concomitant of our civilization and our government,”<sup>580</sup> the “chief instrument in popular education,”<sup>581</sup> “the only means possessed by the citizens of interchanging thought and concerting action,”<sup>582</sup> a “great civilizing engine,”<sup>583</sup> an institution whose “foremost duties to the public [is] that of guarding the people against the wrongs and corruption, whether public or private,”<sup>584</sup> “an embodied public conscience pronouncing condemnation, every headline an officer,”<sup>585</sup> “the means of fighting popular causes by news,”<sup>586</sup> “the most powerful extrajudicial force in society, except religion,”<sup>587</sup> and an entity that “has made of America a democracy in fact as well as in

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<sup>577</sup> Silas Bent, “Two Kinds of News,” *The Yale Review* 16 (July 1927): 709.

<sup>578</sup> Silas Bent, “Scarlet Journalism,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 84 (November 1928): 568.

<sup>579</sup> “Another Newspaper Tragedy,” 602.

<sup>580</sup> Reid, “Schools of Journalism,” 196.

<sup>581</sup> W. P. A., “A Letter to a Young Journalist Whose Education Has Been Neglected,” 757.

<sup>582</sup> Godkin, “The Newspaper and the Reader,” 165.

<sup>583</sup> Dana, “Journalism,” 555.

<sup>584</sup> Beach, “Newspaper Ethics,” 157.

<sup>585</sup> Ogden, “Some Aspects of Journalism,” 15.

<sup>586</sup> Irwin, “The Fourth Current,” 14.

<sup>587</sup> Irwin, “The Power of the Press,” 15.

name.”<sup>588</sup> This type of discourse persisted until 1918, when journalists faced a crisis of confidence as they discovered that news could be subjective. The accompanying decline of the crusading spirit increased the critics’ concern that several newspapers in the 1920s did not serve the public as well as they ought to.

### **The Attack on Reporters**

Several journalistic critics writing between 1923 and 1930 focused their attacks on reporters who lived off of syndicated material and hand-outs from publicity agents. They declared such writers responsible for the ills of 1920s press. Although he explained that the defects of newspapers merely reflected the imperfection of any human endeavor, William George Clugston, a correspondent and author from Kansas, argued that a “large part of the blame that is being heaped upon newspapers should go to the reporters.”<sup>589</sup> He divided most news gatherers of the 1920s into cynics who drifted into routine desk jobs, grafters who flourished only because their newspapers did, and star reporters who often published propaganda material on behalf of business interests. Silas Bent, who contributed stories to various New York publications and was among the most vocal press critics during that period, accused reporters of laziness. “The lack of competition makes him flabby,” he wrote. “He loses initiative, gets so he takes things for granted, ceases to inquire closely. ... He accepts listlessly the statements handed out to him by lawyers, well-meaning propagandists, and publicity agents.”<sup>590</sup> Veteran journalist Gaylord M. Fuller compared between the fierce rivalry that motivated the reporters of yesterday and the lethargy that subdued his contemporaries. He added:

Good reporting is now fast becoming as obsolete as liberty. News is not the obvious but the true, and truth lies at the bottom of a well. It is the duty and the delight of a first-rate reporter to discover it and bring it to the surface –but in these days the reporter is content to

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<sup>588</sup> Lawrence, “International Freedom of the Press,” 141.

<sup>589</sup> Clugston, “A Reporter’s Mirror,” 362.

<sup>590</sup> Bent, “Journalism and Morality,” 768.

sit on the curb and speculate as to what lies in the nether darkness without risking the dangers of the damp descent. ... One remembers the splendid reportorial work done years ago on the Guldensuppe murder mystery and the Marion Clark kidnapping, when reporters solved crimes for the police and performed great services for to the public and achieved precedence for their papers. ... That sort of thing is seldom accomplished now.<sup>591</sup>

The *American Mercury* charged that “reporters of enterprise and courage grow fewer and fewer, the old eager scrutiny of the public business is abandoned, and any sort of fraud, provided only he have money enough, is treated with profound respect.”<sup>592</sup>

This rhetoric about reporters was unprecedented. Between the Civil War and War World I, journalistic press critics raved about the importance of reporters and their power as fact gatherers. Numerous articles celebrated reporting or provided readers with a behind-the-scenes peek into the challenges and adventures of newsgathering.<sup>593</sup> Arthur Sedgwick, editorial writer for the *New York Evening Post*, described reporters as “journalistic instructors of mankind,”<sup>594</sup> and Franklin Sanborn of the *Boston Commonwealth* as “public benefactor[s].”<sup>595</sup> John Cockerill of the *New York Morning* referred to news gatherers as “heroes of the daily newspaper”<sup>596</sup> while Hartley Davis, a New York journalist, explained that reporters displayed “greater energy, more unselfish devotion, deeper loyalty, and ... keener delight in [their] work for the work’s own sake than I have ever encountered in any other walk of life.”<sup>597</sup> Will Irwin, although measured in tone across the articles he wrote about journalism in 1911, became laudatory when he addressed the function of reporters. “He is to the individual reader the most important functionary in a

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<sup>591</sup> Fuller, “The Paralysis of the Press,” 156-158.

<sup>592</sup> “Editorial,” 29.

<sup>593</sup> See, for example, Parton, “American Newspaper Press,” 373-419; Rideing, “The Metropolitan Press,” 43-59; Cockerill, “Some Phases of Contemporary Journalism,” 695-697; Megargee, “A Newspaper Sensation,” 729-736; Ralph, “The Newspaper Correspondent,” 150-166; Gorren, “The Ethics of Modern Journalism,” 507-513; Connery, “Great Business Operations,” 21-32; Walton, “How Newspapers Annihilate Time,” 66-68; Davis, “Stories of Our Foremost Newspaper Men and ‘Beats’ They Have Scored,” 64-72; Davis, “Stories of Our Foremost Newspaper Men and ‘Beats’ They Have Scored,” 200-208; Sinclair, “The Muckrake Man,” 517-519; Irwin, “The New York Sun,” 301-310.

<sup>594</sup> Sedgwick, “Editorial Perspective,” 54.

<sup>595</sup> Sanborn, “Journalism and Journalists,” 101.

<sup>596</sup> Cockerill, “The Newspapers of the Future,” 223.

<sup>597</sup> Davis, “The New York Reporters,” 64.

newspaper organization, just as the police power is to the humble private citizen the most important function of the law,” the *Collier’s* reporter wrote about fellow news gatherers.<sup>598</sup>

The changing discourse during the 1920s emphasized the depth of the crisis journalists went through after World War I. Between 1865 and 1917, critics had remained optimistic despite the occasional setbacks of commercialism because they never lost hope in the democratic institution of news. When the counting room prevailed during the 1890s, critics saw reporters, the gatherers of solid facts, as the safeguards of the democratic promise of the press. In the tension between the race for profit and public service, between the business side and the professional side, newsgathering ensured that newspapers never deviated from their civic calling. But the critics’ realization, after World War I, that news was subjective and potentially susceptible to propaganda made reporters more vulnerable to criticism. Equally important were the normalization of public relations and the rise of syndication, which reduced the amount of original news gathering. It did not take much for journalists to understand that businesses could do (or were doing) what the government did in 1917 and 1918. As a result, reporters who relied on publicity and syndicated material came under harsh attack in the 1920s.

### **Of Sensationalism, Entertainment, and Tabloids**

Of the seventy articles published between 1923 and 1930, thirty criticized the newspapers’ desire to entertain and startle. Recalling the melodramatic press of the 1830s and the 1890s, a new wave of sensationalism dominated a large fraction of the country’s papers during the 1920s. Reflecting the spirit of the decade during which consumerism and pleasure slowly eroded the austerity of Victorian ideals, American newspapers were “preoccupied in many instances with sex, crime, and entertainment.”<sup>599</sup> Of course, the trend did not affect all the

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<sup>598</sup> Irwin, “The Reporter and the News,” 21.

<sup>599</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 625.

country's papers. Notable exceptions such as the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor* attested that responsible journalism was also popular during the 1920s. Several papers, nevertheless, focused their coverage on amusing trivialities and thrilling chronicles. News stories in sensational papers often focused on glamorous and sexy Hollywood icons such as Rudolph Valentino and Clara Bow. Pictures "showing woman's graceful proportions almost to the verge of nakedness" became common currency.<sup>600</sup> Sensational journals closely followed the love affairs of the rich and famous, raised shocking crime cases to the spotlight, and glorified celebrities and sports stars.<sup>601</sup> In 1875, sports news occupied about 1.7 percent and crime 4.9 percent of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a major paper in the Midwest. By 1925, the numbers had jumped to 25.4 and 10.7 percent.<sup>602</sup> Advertising, meanwhile, increased more than five times in volume.<sup>603</sup>

Journalists writing between 1923 and 1930 resented the sensational papers' tendency to amuse and startle. Many saw the trend as a deviation from the original objective of the press; instead of serving people and elevating their taste, sensational papers appealed to the most common denominator. Silas Bent, one of the most prolific critics of entertaining and sensational journalism, argued that "journalism for juveniles" provided emotional excitement rather than intellectual fulfillment.<sup>604</sup> Bent, who spoke of "journalistic jazz," "art of ballyhoo," and "roller coaster journalism,"<sup>605</sup> argued that sensational papers deviated from journalism's original calling. "All of us know that the primary function of a responsible press is not to entertain and thrill," he

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<sup>600</sup> Lord, "The Modern Newspaper," 37.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid, 626.

<sup>602</sup> Bent, "Two Kinds of Journalism," 698. Bent took the numbers from a study by Orland K. Armstrong, whom he identified as a "special student of journalism."

<sup>603</sup> Ibid, 699.

<sup>604</sup> Bent, "Roller Coaster Journalism," 884.

<sup>605</sup> Silas Bent, "Journalistic Jazz," *The Nation* 122 (March 1926): 341; Silas Bent, "The Art of Ballyhoo," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 155 (September 1927): 485; Bent, "Roller Coaster Journalism," 884.

wrote.<sup>606</sup> Glenn Frank, editorial writer in *The Century*, explained that “the editor is frequently more concerned with capturing the reader’s ‘interest’ than with discovering and discussing the reader’s ‘interests.’”<sup>607</sup> Bruce Bliven, former managing editor of the *New York Globe*, accused sensational papers of “vulgarity, stupidity, shallowness, and that cowardice which follows the foolish mob instead of standing out for the unpopular standards of common sense.”<sup>608</sup> Blaming readers for the sensational trend, he noted that the best papers in the country had the smallest circulation. Charles Merz of *The New Republic* argued that sensational newspapers did not only express an interest in murder but rather flashed “an interest in murders satisfied more abundantly.”<sup>609</sup> He charged that such papers are only interested in “glittering material.”<sup>610</sup>

Unlike their predecessors who criticized the sensational press of the 1890s, journalists during the 1920s were not concerned that the trend would distort the news and leave an inaccurate record of the day for historians in the future. At the end of the nineteenth century, critics still believed in the impartiality of the news and saw papers as an objective one-day record of history. Their main concern about sensationalism hence focused on the distortion of truth. As one journalist typically said in 1893, “everything is so covered with the millinery of sensationalism that none but the wisest can detect the truth beneath.”<sup>611</sup> During the 1920s, the situation had changed. Conscious by then that news could be subjective, journalists did not see newspapers as scientific machines for recording history. Their concern, underlining the uproar of the “crazy twenties,” focused more on the improper vulgarity in newspapers. Several journalists

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<sup>606</sup> Bent, “Roller Coaster Journalism,” 885.

<sup>607</sup> Glenn Frank, “The Seven Deadly Sins of American Journalism,” *The Century* 106 (July 1923): 477.

<sup>608</sup> Bliven, “Newspaper Morals,” 18.

<sup>609</sup> Charles Merz, “Bigger and Better Murders,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 155 (August 1927): 341.

<sup>610</sup> Merz, “Bigger and Better Murders,” 342.

<sup>611</sup> Speed, “Do Newspapers Now Give the News?” 711.



who criticized sensationalism and entertainment were particularly concerned about the lack of decency in the country's press.

Chester Lord, former managing editor of the *New York Sun*, complained that pictures of women in bathing suits or almost nude proliferated in sensational newspapers. He pointed that the dailies which protested against the ballet costume of a dancer during the 1870s “now print photographs of our bathing beauties, using the finest paper supplements and the rotogravure process that admits of no infidelity to detail.”<sup>612</sup> *The Nation* complained that sensational papers callously inquired about sensitive, private issues among couples. “That any reporter could be so lacking in the fundamentals of simple decency seems incredible,” the weekly magazine wrote.<sup>613</sup> Silas Bent explained that the “saxophone of sex is as characteristic of the journalistic orchestra as the short skirt of feminine attire, and it is a jazz theme.”<sup>614</sup> Elsewhere, Bent dubbed “scarlet” newspapers as “collectors of filth from the divorce courts, and as exhibitors of sex in crime.”<sup>615</sup> Even Roy Howard, chairman of the board of the Scripps-Howard newspaper conglomerate, affirmed the public's right to demand that “no story shall be printed apt to raise any question on the part of a clean-minded boy or girl of twelve or fourteen which cannot readily be answered or explained by any parent who has acquainted his children with the normal realities of life.”<sup>616</sup>

Several critics related sensationalism, entertainment, and indecency to the financial prize they provided. Chester Crowell of the *New York Evening Post* explained that publishers opted for sensational news because it was inexpensive to collect and ensured higher circulation at the same time. “Hence the columns and columns and more columns of utterly idiotic ‘news’ that are

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<sup>612</sup> Lord, “The Modern Newspaper,” 37.

<sup>613</sup> “Journalism's Worst Offense,” *The Nation* 116 (April 1923): 407.

<sup>614</sup> Bent, “Journalistic Jazz,” 485.

<sup>615</sup> “Scarlet Journalism,” 563, 565.

<sup>616</sup> Roy W. Howard, “What Do Newspapers Owe the Public?” *Collier's Weekly* 75 (January 1925): 27.

published in our American dailies,” he said.<sup>617</sup> An unidentified writer in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* also accused editors of focusing on crime and gossip for the sole purpose of increasing profit—a charge that recalled the complaints of critics in the 1890s. “Where the press shows its lack of ethics and good taste is not in reporting but in *exploiting* crime and private scandal,” he continued.<sup>618</sup> Chester Lord, who was concerned about indecency in and outside sensational papers, wrote that:

The editor of today is perhaps more tempted to sensationalism than other editors ever were. He sees the circulation of the sensational papers leaping forward in response to public greed for details of underworld life, for the causes of divorce, for the things which were deemed unfit to print in other days.<sup>619</sup>

Silas Bent also made the same argument. “It is sufficiently clear, I believe, that they [editors] have lost sight of their public obligation in a feverish competition for mass circulation, which fattens advertising revenues,” he explained.<sup>620</sup> The *Saturday Review of Literature* similarly argued that the “odorous condition of popular journalism” was not to be blamed on the public but on publishers. “Some of its evils are due to sheer exploitation, exactly equivalent to commercialized vice,” the editor wrote. “Shrewd entrepreneurs see a public weakness, and turn it to cash.”<sup>621</sup> The above comments suggest that, for critics, the sensational press of the 1920s was part of the larger problem of commercialism. It was the race for profit, typical in the case of big businesses, that promoted such focus in some newspapers.

The rise of tabloids during the 1920s exacerbated the critics’ frustration. The photo-based papers focusing on sensational, lurid news did not originate in the 1920s. The heavily illustrated *Daily Graphic*, published between 1873 and 1889, and Frank Munsey’s *Daily Continent*, which

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<sup>617</sup> Crowell, “American Journalism Today,” 202.

<sup>618</sup> “Sell the Papers!” 6.

<sup>619</sup> Lord, “The Modern Newspaper,” 177.

<sup>620</sup> Bent, “Scarlet Journalism,” 568.

<sup>621</sup> “Catspaws for the Zeitgeist,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 4 (March 1928): 677, 680.

did not survive its first year in 1891, were arguably the country's first tabloids.<sup>622</sup> Their limited popularity, however, did not make them a phenomenon. During the 1920s, in contrast, the three tabloids of New York alone attracted almost two million readers at their peak, or the equivalent in circulation at the time of the *Herald-Tribune*, the *Journal of Commerce*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York World*, the *New York Post*, the *Evening World*, the *New York Sun*, and the *Evening Telegram* combined.<sup>623</sup> Inspired by the popularity of tabloids in Great Britain, Joseph Medill Patterson and Robert R. McCormick started the *Daily News* in 1921. A *New York Times* ad for the paper called on readers to "SEE NEW YORK'S MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS EVERY MORNING IN THE ILLUSTRATED DAILY NEWS."<sup>624</sup> The paper's success during the first year was limited and journalists predicted that it would not survive.<sup>625</sup> By 1927, however, the *Daily News* drew 1,145,481 readers on weekdays and 1,433,478 on weekends.<sup>626</sup> Its success attracted major press barons into the business. Tabloids paid little attention to the regular news other papers covered. Their pages were filled with headlines such as "'Peaches' denies love lure" on the first page.<sup>627</sup> Examples of news the tabloids covered included the story of a wealthy real-estate man enamored with a store clerk, a court case where a socialite charged that his bride lied about her African American lineage, and a party where a nude dancing girl sat in a bathtub full of champagne.<sup>628</sup>

Critics writing between 1923 and 1930 fiercely attacked the tabloids. Samuel Taylor Moore of *The Independent* referred to their readers as "one hundred percent moron."<sup>629</sup> He accused tabloids of inaccuracy, dishonesty, indecency, vulgarity, and of glorifying criminals.

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<sup>622</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 622.

<sup>623</sup> "Who Reads the Tabloids?" *The New Republic* 51 (May 1927): 6.

<sup>624</sup> Quoted in Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 623-624.

<sup>625</sup> Don C. Seitz, "The American Press: Guttersnipping," *The Outlook* 142 (January 1926): 110.

<sup>626</sup> "Who Reads the Tabloids?" 6.

<sup>627</sup> Bent, "Roller Coaster Journalism," 885

<sup>628</sup> Emery and Smith, *The Press and America*, 628.

<sup>629</sup> Samuel Taylor Moore, "Those Terrible Tabloids," *The Independent* 116 (March 1926): 264.

Moore also qualified them as “the deepening quagmire of journalistic muck and filth.”<sup>630</sup> Veteran journalist Don Seitz pictured the readers of tabloids as “the light-minded class —shop-girls, petty clerks, laborers, and the like, together with many women curious to peek into the seamy side.”<sup>631</sup> *The Nation* spoke of the “debased and debasing tabloids.” “When it comes to the exploiting of the misfortunes of the individual who happens to get into the limelight, there is no press on earth as cruel, as cowardly, as low, or as brutal, and none which goes to such lengths,” the weekly journal wrote.<sup>632</sup> Oliver H. P. Garrett, screenwriter and contributor to the *New York Sun* and *New York World*, dubbed tabloids “the new fungus” and “most unwelcome guests.”<sup>633</sup> *The New Republic* called tabloids “a genuine menace.”<sup>634</sup> Its editors worried that the illustrated journals’ “mushroom growth” would make their version of journalism more popular in respectable papers.<sup>635</sup> The magazine argued that the tabloids of the 1920s presented a far more vulgar approach than the yellow journalism of the 1890s. Silas Bent described tabloids as “highly emotional and irresponsible dwarfs.”<sup>636</sup> Only one journalist, Martin Weyrauch of the *New York Graphic*, spoke positively about tabloids. Interestingly, he did not defend them as democratic institutions or public servants. Instead, Wayrauch associated them with American cultural phenomena such as jazz, baseball, skyscrapers, radio, movies, taxi cabs, and beauty contests.<sup>637</sup>

### Positive Implications

Lurking behind the negative criticism of the press were more positive implications. If journalists criticized the “mediocre” press of the 1920s, if they disapproved of reporters who relied on publicity material to write their stories, if they censured the sensational press and the

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Seitz, “Guttersniping,” 111.

<sup>632</sup> “The Press and the Individual,” *The Nation* 124 (March 1927): 333.

<sup>633</sup> Garrett, “The Gods Confused,” 327.

<sup>634</sup> “Who Reads the Tabloids?” *The New Republic* 51 (May 1927): 7.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> Bent, “Roller Coaster Journalism,” 885.

<sup>637</sup> Martin Weyrauch, “The Why of the Tabloids,” *Forum* 77 (April 1927): 492.

tabloids, that is because their conception of the ideal newspaper was well-defined by then. Several newspapers during the 1920s did not match this ideal.

Journalists of postbellum America were ecstatic about the new American press but their excitement was based on their optimistic expectations of what journalism could do, rather than on the performance of the press at the time. The journalists' understanding of what a newspaper should be was unclear. Critics were still trying to make sense of the nascent journalism. They reasoned that a news-based commercial press, devoid of partisan influence, enhanced democracy and guaranteed the well-being of the Republic. Their advice to their fellow journalists focused only on relinquishing partisan ties and providing news instead of opinion. This, for them, seemed to ensure quality journalism. During the 1890s, with the rise of sensational and yellow journalism, critics learned of the downsides of commercial journalism. Their advice became more specific. They called on newspapers to respect people's privacy, avoid defamation, and ensure the accuracy of their reports. Journalists also criticized the influence of the business office and of advertisers on the newsroom. They demanded that newspapers be devoted to public service and the transmission of news. When the muckraking trend rose during the first two decades of the twentieth century, critics praised the reforming spirit of the press but also cautioned journalists against exaggeration. They warned against the tendency some muckrakers had of seeing harm everywhere. Finally, after World War I, journalists realized that news could be subjective and understood that, to ensure impartiality, reporters had to cover all sides of a story. By the 1920s, critics had a clear idea of what newspapers should or should not do. They were critical because many newspapers –and especially chain and/or sensational papers– did not conform to the standards they set. The harsh criticism journalists wrote about their press during

the 1920s suggests that they had, by then, a well-defined ideal against which to measure the performance of their contemporaries.

### **The “Crazy Twenties”**

Like the criticism of earlier years, the articles journalists wrote between 1923 and 1930 reflected the social and cultural trends of the decade which saw the decline of skepticism toward corporate America. In his book about the rise and fall of middle-class reformers, historian Michael McGerr evokes the image of a disappointed Jane Addams, once a dynamic progressive activist. In her diary, Addams described the 1920s as “a period of political and social sag.”<sup>638</sup> Other reformers echoed her discontent. Although the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol was enacted as late as in 1919, the progressive movement lost its vigor after World War I. After years of effort to curtail big business, organize urban America, and combat vice and class conflict, reformers helplessly watched three consecutive administrations favor laissez-faire and individualism. They also saw the pursuit of pleasure compete with Victorian values, especially among the young.

Although the 1920s started with a major economic crisis and the unfounded fears of a communist takeover, known as the “Red Scare,” and although the decade witnessed the rise of xenophobia and fundamentalism, the post-war years were largely known for prosperity, consumerism, leisure, and pleasure. Dominating the White House during the 1920s, Republicans cut the income tax, raised tariffs on imported goods, curtailed the power of labor unions, and placed the federal regulatory agencies, once designed to control corporations, at the service of big business.<sup>639</sup> Between 1921 and 1928, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover founded a

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<sup>638</sup> Quoted in McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 315.

<sup>639</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 315.

system of “non-coercive cooperation between business and government.”<sup>640</sup> He established a formal institutional circuitry involving universities and the Department of Commerce to help serve businesses on a regular everyday basis. Meanwhile, America’s manufacturing industry, reinforced by the organizational revolution at the turn of the century, turned to mass production. Industrial manufacture nearly doubled between 1922 and the end of the decade.<sup>641</sup> During the same period, and before the crash of October 1929, the market in Wall Street attracted millions of first-time investors eager to embrace the wave. By 1928, over a million and a half calls connected the Stock Exchange with the outside world every five hours.<sup>642</sup> As historian Frederick Lewis Allen put it, “the tide of prosperity was in full flood” during the 1920s.<sup>643</sup> The economic boom did not touch all sectors. Textile, shoes, and leather manufacturers, coal miners, ship builder, and farmers did not benefit from the surge.<sup>644</sup> For many Americans, nonetheless, the 1920s were an age of affluence. The gross national product rose by forty-three percent during the decade, exceeding one hundred billion by 1929.<sup>645</sup> Along with economic prosperity and mass production came the frenzy of mass consumption.

Already on the rise since the 1880s, a culture of consumerism slowly set in place, transforming Americans who made their own bread and manufactured wooden toys at home into customers of ready-made goods. By the 1920s, people had learned that buying was “the means to all 'good' and to personal salvation.”<sup>646</sup> Business magnates and department store owners devised marketing techniques to help boost their sales and feed the culture of consumerism. Attractive packaging, visual ads, electrical images, and elaborate window displays lured people by

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<sup>640</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 356.

<sup>641</sup> Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

<sup>643</sup> Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 132.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>645</sup> Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 5.

<sup>646</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 4.

associating products with a value beyond their material worth.<sup>647</sup> Meanwhile, the concept of fashion spread across cities and industries, artificially creating constant demands for new products.<sup>648</sup> Responding to these incentives, people rushed to buy *en masse*. Installment plans enabled Americans to purchase Ford automobiles, houses, furniture, radio sets, refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and the latest fashion in clothing. On December 2, 1927, when Ford launched his Model A, one million people stormed the company's headquarters in New York alone to catch a glimpse of the new car. Police patrols had to be organized in some cities.<sup>649</sup>

Along with the quest for produced goods came the pursuit of leisure and entertainment. Jazz imposed itself as “the perfect music for the Machine Age.”<sup>650</sup> Phonographs across America's cities played the blues. Many inspired youngsters left home and school to join a jazz band, prompting musical instrument factories to work three shifts to meet the demand.<sup>651</sup> Music and dancing brought males and females into close contact and drew considerable criticism in the early 1920s. A few years later came the “gay and orgiastic and wild” Charleston, as one journalist then put it.<sup>652</sup> To the consternation of many in the older generation, dancing by then ranked as one of the most important pastimes among young Americans.<sup>653</sup> During the 1920s, people of all ages flocked to the nickelodeons to watch Charlie Chaplin comedies, Mary Pickford dramas, and Rudolph Valentino and Greta Garbo romances. By 1930, Americans purchased around one hundred million movie tickets on a weekly basis.<sup>654</sup> Other significant pastimes during the 1920s included vaudeville theater productions, lavish Broadway musicals, and dance shows.

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid, 39-70.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid, 91-111.

<sup>649</sup> Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 135.

<sup>650</sup> Best, *The Dollar Decade*, 12.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid.

<sup>652</sup> Quoted in Best, *The Dollar Decade*, 14.

<sup>653</sup> Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 42.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid, 42.



Meanwhile, festive recreational facilities and electrifying amusement parks such as Coney Island attracted city residents fleeing the constraints of urban life.<sup>655</sup> Watching and following college and professional sports became “an American obsession” during the 1920s.<sup>656</sup> The popularity of sports personalities such as Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Gertrude Ederle skyrocketed as baseball, football, boxing, tennis, and golf developed into lucrative industries attracting press agents, sports promoters, radio announcers, and journalists.<sup>657</sup>

Along with consumerism and leisure, the “roaring twenties” witnessed the rise of pleasure and self-indulgence, especially among the young, a trend that upset many in the older generation. With the freedom that automobiles provided, dating replaced older courtship conventions and the traditional role of chaperons quickly faded. Fewer youngsters engaged in premarital intercourse than traditional observers then supposed but many couples, learning from Hollywood films, did flirt with some degree of intimacy.<sup>658</sup> Bathing suit contests, dance groups such as the Ziegfeld girls, the popularity of Sigmund Freud—one man described him as an “epidemic,”<sup>659</sup> and the spreading of birth control devices signaled the change in social mores during the 1920s.

Caught amid the turbulence of the “jazz decade” were the disillusioned progressives. Their long-held belief in the rationality and goodness of humans, already shaken by a bloody worldwide war, came face-to-face with a population that valued leisure, pleasure, and play. The middle class that once combated the exuberant barons of the Gilded Age now immersed itself in material consumption and self-indulgence. Many of the battles progressives fought to curb big

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<sup>655</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

<sup>656</sup> Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 66.

<sup>657</sup> Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 154-163.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid*, 44-45.

<sup>659</sup> For many Americans, Freud came as a license to embrace more sexual freedom and relinquish the self-control of Victorian ideals. See Best, *The Dollar Decade*, 3. For more information about Freud’s theory, see his major works including Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: MacMillan: 1913).

business were ultimately lost in the pro-business policies of their Republican successors. The agencies reformers had instituted to regulate corporate powers now worked for the benefit of the business community. Private corporations adopted to their own interest the publicity tools progressives had designed to promote reform. Meanwhile, the policies of Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover tilted the balance against organized labor. As early as in 1920, progressive journalist William Allen White complained about the “God damned world.” “We’re in about the rottenest period of reaction that we have had in many years,” he said.<sup>660</sup>

Many of the critics writing between 1923 and 1930 were among the disillusioned lot. They saw in the mediocre and sensational papers of the 1920s, several of which had evolved into big businesses, a loyal reflection of the new social order. Their fierce criticism represented the frustration they felt to see the corporate side of journalism overshadow the professional and the race for profit compete with the democratic objectives journalists should covet. During the 1920s, critics became uncertain about the power of the decade’s press to improve society, just as their fellow reformers had come to question their ability to change the world. Journalism was entering a new period and set of concerns. It was not yet dead as many of the papers Munsey bought and put out of business. But it had to learn to cope with a new set of challenges to be economically viable and socially responsible, ensuring that much finer journalism would come in the future.

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<sup>660</sup> Quoted in Kennedy, *Over There*, 287.

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

This study examined journalistic press criticism between 1865 and 1930. Instead of looking at the history of journalism from today's perspective, this work looked at the texts journalists left behind as they commented on and critiqued over six decades of journalistic development. It sought to understand how these first modern journalists conceived of their profession in a period of great transitions.

As the study revealed, journalists writing about journalism between 1865 and 1930 discussed recurring themes such as commercialization, sensationalism, advertising, and ethics. Reflecting the mood of their times, they expressed an ambivalence toward the rise of big business in their field and the consequences it could have on the quality of the work. In the process, journalists also defined journalism as a profession providing a public service or as a business aiming solely for circulation and profit. Depending on the era during which they wrote, critics favored one frame or the other. During the postbellum era, for example, journalists demanded that the press be considered a profession. For them, the democratic service newspapers provided was evident. They called for the establishment of journalism schools to improve the caliber of journalists newspapers hired. The mood, however, changed in the 1890s. With the rise of yellow journalism and the race for circulation and profit, many critics argued that newspapers had become too much of a business selling a product. The balance tilted again, during the progressive years, toward the professional, socially responsible press frame. With muckrakers fighting corruption in the political and corporate worlds, the democratic services of newspapers regained emphasis. Finally, to the consternation of most critics, the business frame dominated again during the 1920s. The rise of consolidation, public relations, and standardized

journalism worried critics, who complained that many newspapers during the decade were focused on making money and did not perform the democratic function they ought to.

As the alternation between the two frames shows, criticism often reflected the social and cultural trends animating American society at the time. Between 1865 and 1930, the United States witnessed a series of transitions where one movement emerged more or less in reaction to the other. At the origin of these successive trends was the outbreak of the industrial revolution in a free market economy such as the United States.<sup>661</sup> Although Americans already imported machines from Europe in the early 1800s, it was not until the end of the Civil War that industrialization became the driving force in the US. The postbellum era was a period of optimism and growth, despite the difficulties that change always brings. The American Dream of wealth, well-being, and democracy manifested itself during this period in the high hopes journalists attached to their profession. In the 1890s, the social climate changed with the rise of big business and the acceleration of urbanization and immigration. The anxieties Americans experienced at the time surfaced in the press criticism of the era. As journalists reflected on the downsides of commercialism, they expressed the fears people felt toward the new corporate giants. Progressivism came largely as a response to the anxieties of the 1890s. During this period, journalists crusaded against corruption, trusts, and vice just as other middle class reformers did. The writings of press critics reflected the pride they felt in the civic services the press provided. But World War I brought an end to progressivism. During the 1920s, the power of big business slowly consolidated while many Americans embraced consumerism, entertainment, and the machine. Disillusioned journalists criticized “mediocre” journalism. Their frustration echoed that of the old generation of progressives.

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<sup>661</sup> Porter, *The Rise of Big Business*, 58.

As the study shows, the journalists' journey from hope to disappointment was not only related to the social and cultural trends around them. Underlying their assessment of the press was the perception they had of news. During the postbellum period, news, or the timely account of yesterday's fact, was still a novelty. It gave American journalism an edge over its European counterpart and guaranteed the well-being of the Republic. Critics believed that news provided people with information to make a personal judgment, instead of accepting the opinions others imposed. Excited about the democratic promise of news, journalists in our articles praised journalism more than they criticized it. During the 1890s, critics confronted sensationalism and the rise of yellow journalism but never lost hope because their views of the news remained intact. For them, factual accounts provided people with a quasi scientific view of the world. The progressive period seemed to confirm the democratic potential of news. Reporters investigated corporate and political powers and fought the corruption of the Gilded Age with the facts they unveiled. But the propaganda campaigns that President Woodrow Wilson championed during World War I broke the spell of news. Although many progressive journalists participated in the campaign of the Committee for Public Information, most of them only grasped its implications after the war ended. Because propaganda messages were largely news-based, at least at the beginning, journalists in our sample suddenly understood that news could be subjective; although reporters supported their coverage with facts, they could bias the end product through processes of selection, emphasis, and elimination. The crisis was profound. Critics realized that news, which they saw as the highlight of American journalism, was potentially susceptible to propaganda. The establishment of public relations as a profession based on the spinning of news during the 1920s further aggravated the problem. Journalists, who had kept their optimism

throughout the previous fifty years, became concerned, in the 1920s, that many newspapers did not live up to the democratic promise of the press.

As the findings of this study show, media are not fixed natural objects. They are living organisms that constantly evolve with changes in the social, cultural, and political trends around them. In the words of sociologist Robert Park, a newspaper continues “to grow and change in its own incalculable ways.”<sup>662</sup> Historian Carolyn Marvin explains, in relation to this point, that media “have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs and procedures embedded in elaborate codes of communication.”<sup>663</sup> In the same way, press criticism evolves with the changes in the cultural and social contexts and in the nature and characteristics of the media in question.

A few studies of criticism have tended to emphasize continuity rather than change. David Rubin, for example, argues that journalistic and other press critics repeatedly voiced six concerns: Sensationalism, triviality and the personality cult, invasion of privacy, the monopolistic industry structure, the influence of advertisers, owner-employee tensions, and the ubiquity of agency-produced material in news.<sup>664</sup> Similarly, Linda Lumsden notes that press criticism by various sources historically revolved around four recurring themes: The dangers of sensationalism and inaccuracies, the interrelation between free press and democracy, social responsibility, and the influence of capitalism on media finances.<sup>665</sup> In one sense, these criticism scholars are correct; the general topics critics discussed did not vary considerably over time.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>662</sup> Robert Park, “The Natural History of the Newspaper,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 29 (November 1923): 273.

<sup>663</sup> Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>664</sup> David Rubin, “Liebling and Friends: Trends in American Press Criticism Between 1859 and 1963” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, Ottawa, 1975).

<sup>665</sup> Linda J. Lumsden, “Press Criticism,” in *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices*, eds. W. David Sloan and Lisa Mullikin Parcell (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), 55.

<sup>666</sup> See Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*; Brown, *The Reluctant Reformation*, Carey, “Journalism and Criticism,” 227-249.

But investigation should extend beyond a thematic review of general press criticism to unearth the variations in the way the critical discourse fluctuated with change in society and in the profession. Focusing on journalists writing about journalism and using a cultural history approach to investigate these texts enabled us to go beyond a thematic history of press criticism and helped us see how the first modern journalists conceived of their profession as it slowly developed. The cultural history of journalistic criticism of journalism allowed us to understand how several generations of media professionals made sense of changes in the press and society and, to a certain extent, how they sought to solve the problems or face the challenges that sixty years of press evolution brought in.

This conclusion raises a question about the conversation surrounding digital media today. As the growing literature on new media suggests, academics struggle to theorize about this transitional phase and predict trends, often to find that technology changes by the time they get published. In such circumstances, looking at parallel historical situations and studying how audiences and professionals experienced emergent media in the past may prove invaluable. When the first modern journalists wrote about commercial journalism in 1865, independent newspapers were still a novelty. They inspired hope and excitement just as the Internet does today. As historians Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pringree explain, “part of the lure of a new medium for any community is surely this uncertain status. Not yet fully defined, a new medium offers possibilities both positive and negative.”<sup>667</sup> It is in such possibilities, often associated with enhancing democracy and breaking the status-quo of accustomed orders, that the critics of a new medium find their hope. But as was the case in the 1890s, systematization and commercialization often restrict access to the medium and the possibility adventurers have in establishing their own

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<sup>667</sup> Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, *New Media, 1740-1915* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), xv.

enterprise. Consolidation soon catches fire and standardization is devised as an answer to soaring costs. As this study shows, criticism at this point becomes unfavorable and optimism dwindles.

Will the trend be the same with criticism of digital media today? Will the initial euphoria associated with the democratizing potentials and influence of the Internet, blogging, and social media subside? The movement toward systematization and commercialization is already apparent. In his book, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, political science scholar Matthew Hindman points out, for example, that most bloggers remain unheard. The few who are belong to the same elite operating offline; affluent white males who graduated from top universities.<sup>668</sup> If history is any lesson, journalistic and other critics of new media today should be more cautious when they excitedly talk about the democratic promise of the Internet. Their rhetoric holds an uncanny resemblance with the press critics of postbellum America.

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<sup>668</sup> Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).



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**APPENDIX**  
**LIST OF MAGAZINES WHERE CRITICAL TEXTS WERE ANALYZED**

American, The

American Mercury

Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science, The

Arena, The

Atlantic Monthly, The

Bellman

Bookman, The

Catholic World

Century, The

Chautauquan, The

Collier's Weekly

Cosmopolitan

Current Opinion

Dial, The

Everybody's Magazine

Forum

Freeman

Galaxy

Harper's New Monthly Magazine (later known as Harper's Monthly Magazine)

Harper's Weekly

Independent, The (later merged with The Outlook and became known as The Outlook and Independent)

Inland Printer

Journal of the National Institute of Social Sciences

Lakeside Monthly

Lippincott's Monthly Magazine

McClure's

Midland Monthly

Munsey's Magazine

Nation, The

New Republic, The

North American Review

Open Court, The

Outlook, The

Public, The

Putnam's Monthly

Saturday Evening Post, The

Saturday Review of Literature

Scribner's Magazine

Scribner's Monthly

Sunset

Survey

Writer, The

World's Work

Yale Review, The

## **VITA**

Born in Lebanon, Yasmine Tarek Dabbous did her undergraduate studies in communication arts (journalism emphasis) at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. She moved to the United States in 1999 to pursue a masters' degree in communication studies at Boston University. Upon graduation, Dabbous worked as public relations consultant in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Beirut and as a freelance writer for several magazines in the Arab World. She also taught as part-time media instructor at LAU. In 2006, Dabbous moved back to the United States to work on a doctorate in mass communication and public affairs at the Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University. Dabbous's research focuses on the history of media criticism, media and society in the Middle East, and gender relations at the interpersonal and mass communication levels.