

MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Yellow Journalism

Introduction

The number of newspapers grew during the Penny Press era until, come 1900, the number of English speaking daily newspapers (not including weeklies and foreign language dailies) grew to about 1,967. When you consider that the number of English speaking daily newspapers today is closer to 1,900, that means they reached their peak in the early 1900s.

Let's review the growth of newspapers one more time:

First papers 1690	
Pre-Revolution 35 (c. 1770)	+35
Post-Revolution 55 (c. 1775)	+20
Pre-Penny Press 512 (c. 1820)	+457
Post Civil War 1,967 (c. 1900)	+1455

About 1900 a new era of journalism started forming. It is called "New Journalism." Real exciting, huh?

Actually there were several strains of journalism and one of them, at least, was the most colorful of the journalism eras.

Papers during this time grew because of greater wealth in the country, a larger and growing population and because of the improved literacy. Characteristics of papers during this time included:

- Characteristics of papers
- Low priced, aggressive, easy to read
- Believed news was primary function
- Exhibited independence of opinion
- Crusaded actively
- Appealed to masses with better design and content

Yellow Journalism

Newspapers certainly could be interesting during this time. One of the strains of journalism became known as yellow journalism.

The term came from a popular cartoon character in newspapers called "The Yellow Kid." The kid was a baldheaded kid that wore a yellow night shirt. Yellow Kid cartoons had a lot going on in one panel. The kid was in the corner somewhere and the message on his night shirt brought the all the action together.



But it is not a cartoon that the era was remembered for. Some publishers became quite sensational and bold in their news coverage. Papers were not above conducting hoaxes to trip up their competitors and doing almost anything to build circulation. Reporters would act as detectives and solve crimes ahead of police so that they could be the first to report the news. If that meant that they had to destroy evidence along the way to keep others from solving the crime, well, then

Perhaps two of the most well-known, most revered and most despised publishers of the day were Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. The two waged battle to become the most powerful publishers of all time.

Joseph Pulitzer



Joseph Pulitzer was a Hungarian immigrant who came to America to cover the American Civil War. He ended up in Missouri. While there he purchased a dying newspaper, the St. Louis Post and Dispatch and had the good fortune to land St. Louis' membership in the Associated Press.

He wrote a declaration of principles that declared from thereon that the paper would be looking out for the little guy and would become a champion for the people against special interests. He was high on accuracy and felt that accuracy, accuracy and accuracy were the three most important things about newspapers.

That is not to say that his paper did not have its blemishes, but he developed an outstanding reputation in the newspaper industry before moving on to New York --the then Mecca of journalism-- and bought the New York World. He hired the best reporters of the day and was the one who started running the Yellow Kid cartoon. (William Randolph Hearst later stole the artist and cartoon by offering higher pay. Hearst hired him back with another pay raise. Hearst countered by hiring the artist back again. At that point Pulitzer just got another cartoonist to draw the kid, so the cartoon appeared in both publications.)

To build readership he not only ran public concern causes, he staged news stories designed to draw attention to his paper. For instance, he hired the female reporter --a novelty in itself for the time-- Nelly Bly and commissioned her to challenge Jules Verne's book "Around the World in 80 Days." He sent her on an around-the-world trip and covered it as though it was the most important news story of the day with daily reports. A big contest was run to guess how much time it would take here. (She did it in less than 80 days.)

Pulitzer was hard nosed in his demands for good journalism and today the highest awards a journalist can win for reporting are the Pulitzer Prize. Still, he could and did exhibit corporate unscrupulousness. For a look at this see Disney's "Newsies" movie.

William Randolph Hearst

Pulitzer's biggest competitor and clearly the most colorful character in American journalism was William Randolph Hearst.



Hearst was born to a poor miner who came into possession of the deed for the Mother Lode silver mine, one of the richest strikes in America. He was sent to the best schools, and thrown out of them because of his practical joke personality.

His father parlayed his riches into a political career in California. As was the practice of politicians of the day, he purchased several newspapers to serve as a mouthpiece for his political career. Young Hearst talked his father into letting him take over running the San Francisco Examiner. If Pulitzer's watchword was "accuracy," Hearst's was "Gee Whiz!" He felt a day was lost if there wasn't something in the paper that caused the reader to say "Gee Whiz!"

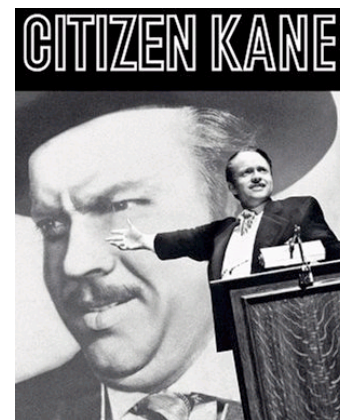
He experimented with printing advances and made the Examiner a powerful paper that, like Pulitzer and others around the country, took on special interests, such as the Southern Pacific Railroad, which was extremely powerful in California.

But Hearst tired of San Francisco and moved to New York and bought the Journal. He continued his campaigning ways, but on a national scale. To make his paper stand out, he didn't just hire the best reporters of the day, he hired Pulitzer's top reporters away.

Hearst was a true lord of the press and became quite powerful. A new biography out on him points out that he even had Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini as columnists in his paper prior to World War II. In fact, he thought he had talked Hitler out of war because Hitler was his employee.

War and Hearst were words that went together often. Many historians argue that the Spanish-American War was a result of Hearst sensationalizing news of Cuban atrocities that may or may not have happened. A popular, but probably apocryphal story is that he hired the great artist Frederick Remington to go to Cuba and supply pictures of the war there. Remington supposedly telegraphed back, "Hate to spend your money. There is no war." To which Hearst is supposed to have cabled back, "You supply the pictures. I'll supply the war." Soon after the U.S. battleship "Maine" ("Remember the Maine!") blew up in the Havana harbor. It is still a mystery as to whether the explosion was an act of war, sabotage or an accident, but suddenly we were at war with the Spanish in Cuba.

A good look at Hearst's life can be seen in the movie, "Citizen Kane," which we'll see later this semester.



People's Champions

What makes it difficult to classify this era solely as "Yellow Journalism" is that there was so much else going on. Even Pulitzer and Hearst were considered among the strain of journalists known as People's Champions. While part of the power elite, they used their power to fight for causes the common man would appreciate. When the French gave us the Statue of Liberty, for instance, one of the papers mounted a public campaign to raise money for the government to buy Governor's Island and turn it into a park where the statue could be placed.

This kind of journalism was popular outside of New York, too. Perhaps one of the most well-known publishers fitting into this category who resisted the lure to operate out of New York was E.W. Scripps, who ran a chain of mid-Western newspapers in the Ohio area. His papers were "small in size, but big in heart" and fought fearless crusades. The papers had a spirit of protest and featured hard-hitting local editorials.

And it wasn't just the newspapers doing this. The general interest magazines of the day -- magazine such as McClures, Cosmopolitan and Ladies Home Journal (before they became better known as women's magazines) and Saturday Evening Post -- also developed a trend of reporting called muckraking. The we'd call muckraking the beginnings of investigative journalism. Writers would do long stories --some even wrote books-- uncovering the seedy side of such icons of the day as John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil, the Chicago beef industry, patent medicine companies and more. The term derived from the concept that the pond may look clear, but if you rake up the muck at the bottom you'll see how dirty things really are.

Jazz Age Journalism

Still another colorful strain of journalism during this era popped up in selected areas of the country, such as Chicago. Jazz Age journalism was the precursor to tabloid journalism and left perhaps the most enduring stereotype of journalists in American's minds: Ill-educated, hard drinking slobs who would do anything to get a story, even make it up. The stereotype comes mostly from a play that was written in the late 1920s, "The Front Page." The play was made into a movie at least four times -- including an interesting modern adaptation of the story happening at a television station rather than at a newspaper. We'll be watching one of those versions when we Go to The Movies.



Reading Assignment

You should be reading the chapter on newspapers in your textbook to get more information about newspapers.

Exercise

The term yellow journalism is used to define sensational reporting, where the reporter makes too big a deal of the facts or blows the story out of proportion. Give a modern day example of where the press could be accused of yellow journalism.

Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

J100x - YourLastName - Yellow

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