

The press at the century's turn: cultural icon, corporate behemoth, corrupted arbiter

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The year was 1883, and Joseph Pulitzer was not feeling very well. The Hungarian immigrant had come to the United States during the Civil War. He drifted to St. Louis, and worked for the German language press. His English wasn't very good. Neither was his health. He faced the prejudice of a bigoted age, called "Joey the Jew" by his competitors. The future for Joey did not look bright.

But Pulitzer was like many immigrants who have come to America. He worked hard to succeed. In fact, he worked ferociously and shrewdly hard, and managed to build an empire of the most powerful industrial-strength product of communication ever seen in the world. The mass-circulation newspaper. But he made himself sick doing it.

So Pulitzer left St. Louis for New York on his way to a European break. While in New York, though, he learned about a newspaper called the *World*. A pathetic little rag barely eking out 15,000 a year in circulation. Pulitzer bought it. Three years later its circulation was at 250,000—and that was just a start. It would become the world's greatest symbol of a golden age of journalism.

Along with Pulitzer's legendary nemesis, William Randolph Hearst, the enormously successful manufactured product of the press in the Gilded Age came to define the power of industrial journalism in Western democracies. And this has a lot to do with war, including the war of 1914.

In some ways it was the dominance of journalism in the great age of machines that prepared people in Allied democracies for war. As Spanish Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo marveled to an American reporter during the Spanish-American War of 1898, "The newspapers of your country seem to be more powerful than the government."

The growth of the mass-circulation press of the nineteenth century perhaps more than any other idea reflected the confident spirit of an extroverted age. Journalism before the industrial revolution was a pastime of artisans, often a glorified newsletter for the politicians whose subventions kept them in business. Newspapers and magazines were expensive then, and mostly for serious readers.

Advertising was limited—why should companies advertise when they can't make very many widgets anyway, nor ship them efficiently, for consumers beyond a local reach? In any case, printing presses were slow, and setting metal type by hand—well, a good compositor could certainly work as fast as your average adolescent texting on a smartphone. But you'd need to pay for a lot of them.

A confluence of social and industrial changes in the late nineteenth century upended the entire idea of what journalism ought to be. The publishers of what people called New Journalism were men like Pulitzer and Hearst— or Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe) in Britain, or Jean Dupuy in France. Or J. J. McClure for magazines. They realized that writing could be business. Big business. But it would require a new way of thinking about journalism. Instead of aiming to a few thousand elite, they would aim to the teeming masses, the newly literate who toiled in the burgeoning cities. Instead of political dullness, they would cover human interest, the sensational, the emotional. Instead of costly copies that only the moneyed class could afford, they would drop the price to little of nothing—2 cents, a halfpenny, 5 centimes. Magazines for a dime.

Problem: You'll sell a whole lot of copies. You'll need a warehouse of hulking new rotary presses running through barrels of ink and forests of paper. You'll need perhaps hundreds of workers, and you'll have to pay for all that. How?

The industrial revolution that made mass production possible also made mass media, because now you had a growing base of manufacturers who could produce thousands of widgets at the flip of a switch. They needed to sell this surplus beyond their home towns. To build demand, they needed to advertise. And in the symbiotic relationship between advertisers and publishers, the press grew to the behemoth of the age, creating tycoons and feeding an apparently insatiable public of readers.

In Paris you could choose from 80 daily newspaper titles in 1914; four had over one million circulation. During the age of yellow journalism in the United States, Hearst and Pulitzer saw their newspapers grow to top one million daily circulation. Large circulations became the standard everywhere industrial journalism could take hold, and not only in newspapers. General-interest magazines also came to dominate homes and thoughts of nearly everyone. In the United States a dozen magazines reached an amazing three million homes.

Everyone who was anyone wrote for the mass media, the prestigious such as Theodore Roosevelt usually choosing magazines. In France the big Paris dailies sold around the country, buoyed in prestige by the intellectuals and politicians who wrote opinions. Writing for the sensationalist *Daily Mail* in London was a young man of ambition writing about the Boer War named Winston Churchill.

A publisher who could circulate in the hundreds of thousands could make a fortune. He could become a tycoon. A nation's power-broker.

But the key was circulation. High circulation brought high advertising rates, and that's what created press barons.

To sell as many publications as possible was the goal of most publishers in this era of New Journalism. What happened when they did that is a story a little bit different among the allied nations. But they did share some ideas.

Stacking them deep and selling them cheap was easy enough. But nearly free doesn't guarantee, as we say nowadays, lots of eyeballs. Pulitzer turned around the tiny New York *World* by discounting the sober idea of the press serving as a public forum, a place for people to reason and reflect. To cultivate interest in their papers, publishers like Pulitzer turned to a tactic hardly new, but taken to a level unknown before the Gilded Age. What was the trick? We know that, of course. It was sensationalism.

In this manufacturing age, publishers manufactured interest in their newspapers by featuring pages of crime, of sex, of atrocities and scandals, of ripoffs and rich, of crusades and stunts, of screaming headlines and outrageous illustrations. These dailies were sold on the streets by scruffy newsboys who took a tiny cut of the proceeds. Their marks were common folk on their way from work who had little time for reflective journalism, and little understanding of ideological complexities.

As historian Jean Palmegiano wrote of the British press, "Collective reason seemed to have given way to collective emotion, logic to impression, thought to desire." In the United States big dailies could whip readers into an emotional frenzy, and in France journalists swung a revolving door between press and government.

Those who reached to the emotions of their readers bathed under a cascade of profits and influence. More eyeballs: it became an addiction. Pulitzer's New York *World* and Hearst's New York *Journal* joined the most famous press battle in history, the yellow journalism period of the Spanish-American War.

Whether the two newspapers actually compelled President William McKinley to declare war on Spain over Cuba is still a matter of historical debate. What is obviously true is that the sensationalist press in New York screeched, blustered, attacked, cajoled, and often lied its way through the war that was aimed at turning the United States into an imperialist power—although a johnny-come-lately one, at that. Lied, yes. That was stock in trade of yellow journalism. The newspapers accused the Spanish of all varieties of atrocity, of attacking hospitals, raping women, burning priests alive, killing little boys and feeding their pieces to the dogs. Few of these atrocity stories could be checked out, as the journalists wrote from their comfy hotels in Havana based on unconfirmed accounts of the anti-Spanish locals.

Atrocities involving women in particular could move circulation, and so when the *Journal* found out about a jailed young woman named Evangelina Cisneros, no tree was spared in

its coverage. Celebrity reporter Richard Harding Davis reported that Cisneros was strip searched in public by three Spanish officers. Frederic Remington's drawing of the officers leering at the naked woman brought outrage all the way to the United States Congress, some members of which used the sensationalist press as their authority for drafting anti-Spanish legislation.

Pulitzer's *Journal* didn't like being scooped. So it tracked down the Cisneros story. As it turned out, Cisneros was actually searched in private by a female officer. But the *Journal's* slightly greater effort at probity didn't lead to its temporizing of frenzied calls for war following the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine*.

The *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, killing 266 American sailors. It was an incident of great utility for yellow journalism. Americans had died, and America wanted the government to do something. The problem was this: no one knew what caused the ship to explode. No one, that is, except the press. Hearst was sure it was the Spanish. It had to be. It was convenient for it to be, because here was a *casus belli*. Pulitzer wasn't quite so sure, not at first, anyway. Some evidence seemed to indicate the explosion came from inside the ship. What's more, the Spanish government probably had no doubt that the United States Navy would defeat them in a war. Why would they have the least interest in provoking one?

"Spanish Treachery" screamed the headlines. Pulitzer soon declared himself convinced, and whipped sentiment for war. Everyone seemed to believe it had to be Spanish treachery because the press had told them so. And not just in New York. While this is a story of the New York press, these were among the dominant in resources and influence: hundreds of newspapers around the country reprinted the stories. The *World* repeatedly called for the government to take action. An editorial declared, "No man's life is safe. American citizens are imprisoned or slain without cause. Blood on the roadsides, blood in the field, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! And not a word from Washington."

We know McKinley finally declared war. Only years later did Pulitzer admit he changed his opposition to the war for just one reason: to increase circulation.

The Pulitzer-Hearst press war of the century's turn is the most famous story of that sensationalist age, but in shame it doesn't necessarily top what was happening elsewhere. France by 1900 was teeming with newspapers barely scraping by. Most were no longer living by their old lifelines from political subventions as in the past. In the industrial age they had to live by their capitalist wits. This system worked pretty well in Britain. It worked extravagantly well in the United States. In France, however, advertising was unpopular. Advertising was held in disrepute, probably because it was generally disreputable, patent medicine advertising and the like. By the early twentieth century, British newspapers had five times as many ads as French newspapers. United States newspapers had 20 times as many.

Some French newspapers—well, a lot, actually—turned in desperation to two other ready sources of income, bribery and blackmail. Whether the French press during this era showed abominable venality, as some historians have claimed, is open to debate. It might have been merely moderate venality. But the idea of taking a bribe to produce or not produce a piece certainly was not absent from other nations' journalism during this period. What the French called the “inspired story,” a supposedly legitimate story actually produced in response to a secret payment, also was standard fare in the United States. In this country the federal Newspaper Publicity Law of 1912 supposedly put an end to this practice by requiring the word “advertisement” to appear above all matter published for money.

But if the press during this era may have set a shameful example of ethical relativism for capitalist ideals, that doesn't tell the whole story. Editors saw their readers not as merely masses to feed. They also saw them as victims to be championed. And say what you will regarding motives, the Gilded Age press set the standard for investigative journalism.

Crusading journalism seemed primarily to be a characteristic of United States publications. French journalists often doubled as government politicians or bureaucrats for the Third Republic, and so were really insiders instead of watchdogs. In Britain stunts and exposés boosted circulation. But Pulitzer and Hearst purported to run newspapers willing to step up to protect the poor and the immigrants in the tenements. Pulitzer actually started out as a poor immigrant himself. Hearst started out rich. So Pulitzer's *World* more aggressively showed real interest in crusades to help the poor and the immigrants. After an 1883 heat wave in New York killed 392 poor children under 5 in the tenements, the *World's* investigation shocked readers with headlines such as “How Babies Are Baked.” It also increased circulation, but the fact of the matter was that press crusades during this age did spur people into demanding action from government.

Perhaps most significant of these in the long term were conducted by the muckrakers. Muckraking among America's large general-interest magazines rose with the spirit of the Progressives at the dawn of the twentieth century. In fact, American Progressivism throughout its reach before World War I was closely tied to journalism. It was a response to capitalism as it was practiced in an America unrestrained by laws, ethical codes, or even the pesky annoyance of self-doubt during an age of confident racism and domination of the well-to-do. Abuses that marbled though the muscular growth of American industrialism affected mostly the have-nots. And the have-nots during that age consisted of mostly everyone. One percent of the population owned half the country's wealth. Twelve percent owned 90 percent of it. Children worked their young lives away, women were exploited, and the country saw more industrial accidents than any other. City governments were run by crooks, unregulated drugs in guise of patent medicine addicted or killed. Exhausted slaughterhouse workers slipped into huge vats and were canned along with the meat. One investigation showed 84 percent of the U.S. Senate was controlled by corporations.

Those senators served to block any feeble attempt at reform, until the muckraking press took aim. McClure's Magazine in 1902 began a series of closely-researched articles written by Ida Tarbell. "The History of the Standard Oil Company" served as a disingenuous title for an exposé of one of the country's most notorious oil barons, John D. Rockefeller. Readers appalled at the lawlessness and secret agreements to eliminate competition besieged Congress for change, and change came. Standard Oil dissolved into 38 smaller companies. Rockefeller barely escaped jail time. He inadvertently launched the industry of public relations in America when he hired Ivy Lee to burnish his image tarred by the muckrakers. (It actually worked, sort of.)

Muckraking swept through American society, from pharmaceuticals to the U.S. Senate, and by World War I it had remade the country a little closer to its democratic ideals.

By the eve of the Great War, the New Journalism driven by men of great wealth and power had shown itself to be a tool of hideous abuse. But also it could shine as a friend of the downtrodden and a force for public good. One thing was certain: Nobody was ignoring it. In an age before dilution from broadcast or the Web, everyone read these newspapers and magazines.

The Great War swept over the capitalist world like a tornado at the end of a warm summer's day. War was a surprise, but as surprising was the apparent universal zeal of common people to march into the battlefields. Why do much enthusiasm for war? If we consider the press in the decades before August 1914, though, we can see some consistencies. Emotion-based sensationalism and a crusading press can be transferred to fervor for war. As sensationalism would require, most people during World War I saw a cause without nuance, simple, black-and-white, good versus evil. The war could be another crusade, this one, as they called it in the United States, a great crusade to make the world safe for democracy.

Prominent politicians and sometime journalists such as Roosevelt urged people during the Spanish-American war to man up to a war to banish male effeminacy and revitalize national spirit. The same theme played through World War I. And the wild atrocity stories widely circulated throughout the press during that war and the Boer Wars in South Africa set the stage for the kind of stories that so outraged Americans during World War I. Even the themes were familiar. The press used women, often sensationalized through lurid sexual depictions, to evoke emotional response during the Spanish-American war, and again during World War I. Roosevelt during World War I called pacifists "a whole raft of sexless creatures."

Even the sinking of the *Maine*, the event that made the war in the yellow press, had its echo in the 1915 sinking of the *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans. That event as reflected in the American press crystalized opposition to Germany. It guaranteed that if the United States should join the war, it most certainly would not be on the side of the Central Powers.

This transformation of war into a noble crusade of manliness, this myth of the war experience as the late historian George Mosse called it, swept all the nations involved. And certainly while we need to avoid overstating the link, we see some evidence of this in the Gilded Age press that swept those same nations before the war—particularly those of France, England and the United States.

Another influence of sensationalism is perhaps not so grand and sweeping, but perhaps of some significance. Sensationalism is journalism of distraction. The human interest stories, the sexcapades, the crime. Why did newspaper readers in the summer of 1914 seem to know nothing about the possibility of war until just before the mobilizations? Perhaps it was because they were distracted by journalistic trivia.

Some evidence of this comes from the trial of Madame Caillaux. In February 1914 the editor of *Le Figaro* in Paris, Gaston Calmette, began publishing a series of personal letters from the politician Joseph Caillaux to his mistress, who later became his first wife in 1906. By now the politician was married to his second wife. She was exasperated in seeing these letters in print, and likely concerned about what revelations were forthcoming in future letters. So in dramatic flurry she burst into the editor's office and assassinated him.

The story and ensuing trial combined all the best features of sensationalism. It dominated the French press. In fact, it so dominated the press during summer 1914 that it neglected to report the growing threat of military cataclysm. In this case, the press proved to be a fatal distraction.

Resources

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You can find a copy of these remarks and the slide show at www.rosscollins.com/gildedagepress.