
Regier, C.C. The Era of Muckrakers,
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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PRESS MUZZLED AND UNMUZZLED

IT IS AN interesting and not easily explicable fact that the leading articles and books attacking the press appeared after muckraking in other fields had practically come to end. Why the press had not come in for its share of exposure much earlier is something of a mystery, and it is equally strange that muckraking should continue its attacks on one institution when it had ceased attacking almost all others. It is difficult to believe that there was less corruption in the press before 1910 or 1912 than there was afterwards, but possibly the very fact that a number of muckraking magazines were forced out of existence had something to do with awakening interest in the subject. There is the possibility, also, that the attempt to reform the newspapers appealed to citizens who had grown weary of the sensationalism all too common in the latter days of the muckraking era.

In the whole range of journalistic endeavor no organization came in for such violent denunciations as were visited upon the Associated Press. As early as July, 1909, William Kittle, writing in the *Arena* on "The Making of Public Opinion," had pointed out that the supreme court of Illinois had held the Associated Press to be a monopoly in February of 1900, while the supreme court of Missouri, in December of the same year, had reached a decision that it was not a monopoly. He himself was of the opinion that it was a monopoly

and he pointed out that it had all the earmarks. In July, 1914, "Observer," a contributor to the *Atlantic*, discussed the same subject, reaching the conclusion that the Associated Press at least tended toward monopoly control. Other writers were not so moderate, and James H. Barry, editor of the *San Francisco Star*, called it, according to Upton Sinclair, "the damndest, meanest monopoly on the face of the earth—the wet-nurse for all other monopolies."

The organization of the Associated Press, according to its critics, was narrow and exclusive. In 1914 it was reported that there were 894 members, each having one vote, but the actual number of votes cast ran into the thousands. The discrepancy, as was pointed out by Gregory Mason in the *Outlook* for May 30, 1914, and by Will Irwin in *Harper's Weekly* for March 28 of the same year, was due to the fact that for every \$25 worth of bonds which an original member took he received one extra vote. Most of the newspapers took \$1,000 worth of bonds, which meant, combining these votes with their membership votes, that they had forty-one votes apiece. Since the papers which joined later had only their membership votes, the "old crowd" had absolute and perpetual control. The directors and managers, then, were not chosen by a majority of the approximately nine hundred members, but by the small group of bondholders.

Mr. Irwin, in his article on the subject, went on to describe certain other of the undesirable features of the organization. By the "power of protest" any member of the "A. P." could veto the application for a franchise of any competing newspaper within sixty miles. A gesture of reform, however, had been made in 1900, when it was ruled that any newspaper which had been denied a franchise by the "power of protest" could make application to the annual meeting of the association and could receive a franchise if four-fifths of the members voted in favor of the application and against the

protest. This, Mr. Irwin asserted, had happened only two or three times, and usually such an application was voted down without hesitation.

The organization also enjoyed peculiar power because of the fact that, when it was reorganized in New York in 1900, the directors secured their charter under the section of the law which permits "Mutual Companies"—literary, social, and fish and game clubs. In such an organization a member may be expelled for an act derogatory to the interests of the association. This meant, obviously, that no member could criticize the "A. P." without endangering his valuable franchise. Mr. Irwin stated that two or three liberal publishers, after having expressed their opinion of the "A. P. cinch," anxiously insisted that he should not quote them. "For heaven's sake," one of them said, "don't quote me in print, and don't tell anyone I've said this. The fine for such an offense runs from \$50,000 up."

Both Mr. Kittle, in the article which he published in the *Arena* in 1909, and Mr. Irwin, in his 1914 *Harper's Weekly* article, were interested in discovering the bias of the Associated Press. Kittle made a study of the attitude of the directors as they revealed it in their own newspapers, for they all controlled big dailies, and of the fifteen directors twelve had held office continuously from 1900 to 1914. He found that the *Kansas City Star-Times*, under William R. Nelson, had published more progressive articles and editorials than the other fourteen combined. These fourteen, he wrote, were

. . . huge commercial ventures, connected by advertising and in other ways, with banks, trust companies, railway and city utility companies, department stores, and manufacturing enterprises. They reflect the system which supports them. They cannot afford to mold public opinion against the net-work of special interests which envelop them. ←

As between the Democratic party and the Republican party, Mr. Kittle thought, the Associated Press was fairly impartial, but he intimated that progressive movements were exceedingly fortunate if they got a square deal. The only affirmative policy that he could discover was a determination to report the unusual and spectacular because that was what sold papers.

Mr. Irwin also found a conservative, capitalistic attitude but he was inclined to attribute it less to deliberate partisanship and unfairness than to the environment and training of the reporters. These agents, he pointed out, selected from the events of the day such news as squared with their conservative picture of the world, and the organization hindered, or prevented, the rise of publishers who might present the other side. This, to his mind, was the real quarrel with the Associated Press—that it tended to keep young men from exercising a directive influence on its policies. The “power of protest” prevented new men from obtaining franchises in their own territories, and as a result the organization was a powerful force for reaction. More vehement protests were voiced by various writers, among them Charles Edward Russell, who, in an article which he wrote for *Pearson's* in April, 1914, charged the Associated Press with deliberately misrepresenting the strike situation at Calumet, Michigan, in an attempt to turn public sentiment against the strikers. This, he said, was the usual policy of the “A. P.”

The charges that were brought against newspapers in general were much the same as those directed against the Associated Press in particular. It was frequently charged and widely believed that the newspapers were dominated by the capitalists, that important news was suppressed or distorted to please the advertisers, that editorials were “slanted” so as to attract advertising, and that “Big Business” lavished

money on the newspapers for the purpose of creating public opinion favorable to their interests.

A thorough and revealing survey of the newspaper field was made by Will Irwin in *Collier's* as early as 1911, but eight years later, in 1919, a much more violent and much more famous attack appeared—Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check*. This book Ernest H. Gruening, writing in the *Nation*, July 17, 1920, under the title “What Every Newspaper Man —× Knows,” called a “fascinating and thorough treatise upon the American press, based on a variety of personal experiences and on contacts, direct and indirect, with newspapers, newspaper stories, and newspaper men.” It is, Mr. Gruening maintained, an exposé and an indictment, and he continued:

It marshals fact after fact and arrays incident after incident, waving aside hearsay and rumor. Respecting no locality, it covers metropolitan and country newspapers from coast to coast, pays its respects to magazines, and delves into the workings of news associations. It is a complete, masterful study.

The facts, Mr. Gruening wrote, were incontrovertible; but the conclusions which the author reached were a different matter. Being a Socialist, Sinclair had seen everything through the spectacles of class-consciousness, making no allowances for selfishness, timidity, ignorance, partisanship, lack of public spirit, or downright dishonesty.

Gruening's judgment seems to have been sound. Sinclair's belief that every case of distortion was the result of a capitalistic conspiracy must be regarded with scepticism, but his exposure of conditions prevailing in the newspaper world has a vast amount of documented evidence behind it. With his thesis that since the days of Mark Hanna the betrayal of public opinion has been deliberately planned and systematically carried out we need not long concern ourselves, nor need we believe his statement that high-priced experts sit in

council with the masters of industry and determine precisely how this shall be presented and that suppressed. There is, perhaps, some truth in these charges, but how much it is not our duty to decide in the present work. What does concern us is the great mass of carefully supported exposure of the activities and methods of the press.

Of the many instances of suppression and distortion which Sinclair gives two may be selected as typical. During the hearings of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1914, when the railroads were trying to secure a 5 per cent increase in freight rates, a certain Mr. Thorne of the Iowa State Railway Commission cross-questioned the railroad presidents and showed that 1912 had been the most profitable year in their history, and that in twelve years the capitalization of the roads had been increased 92 per cent and dividends had increased enormously. The country was showing much interest in the investigation, but many of the leading newspapers did not report a single word of Thorne's statements, though they gave columns to the speeches in which the presidents told how much they needed the increase. The other case had to do with Roosevelt's investigation of the packing plants. The people were clamoring for news, but the reporters would not accept any information from Sinclair, who had a first-hand knowledge of the situation. He wrote "They never sent out a single line injurious to the packers, save for a few lines dealing with the Congressional hearings, which they could not entirely suppress."

Other writers cited similar examples of the way in which news was controlled in the interests of the industrialists and financiers. Mr. Kittle, in his *Arena* article of 1909 mentioned above, quoted from a story which Gustavus Meyer told in the *Milwaukee Social Democratic Herald*. Mr. Meyer said that he had investigated the record of Senator Dryden, president of the Prudential Insurance Company, for David Graham

Phillips, who was then engaged in writing his famous series on "The Treason of the Senate" for the *Cosmopolitan*. Mr. Phillips had incorporated the material in his article for October, 1906, but a few weeks before publication the business manager of the *Cosmopolitan* announced his intention to "kill" that part of the article which dealt with Dryden. The Prudential Insurance Company, he said, had sent a four-page advertisement to the magazine, and he doubted if it was worth losing four or five thousand dollars for the sake of printing a few paragraphs. The paragraphs were dropped, and instead of attacking Senator Dryden the October number published an article eulogizing him and his company.

Maxwell Anderson, now a successful dramatist, wrote for the *New Republic*, December 14, 1918, an article called "The Blue Pencil," in which he exposed the inside workings of a large newspaper. Reporters and assistants, he said, despised the editor and his policy, but they had to eschew anything new or progressive if they wanted to keep their jobs. Much earlier, in October, 1914, an anonymous article appeared in *Collier's* with the title, "The Confessions of a Managing Editor." The author stated that the managing editor of a paper was under the thumb of the business office, and was forced to keep from the columns anything that might damage the advertisers. Charles Edward Russell, in his "How Business Controls News," in *Pearson's*, May, 1914, told some interesting stories of what had happened to editors who published news distasteful to the financiers. Will Irwin, writing in *Collier's*, from January to July, 1914, maintained that editorial writers were often required to color their editorials in such a way as to attract advertisers. George Creel, as already noted, charged the papers with distorting facts during labor disputes, and other writers echoed this charge. Many serious thinkers were alarmed by these statements and by the truth they obviously contained, and Professor Ed-

ward A. Ross, writing in the *Atlantic* in 1910, stated that the popularity of the muckraking magazines was due to their publishing news which the papers suppressed.

Another charge against the press was that it often prostituted itself to create public opinion favorable to big business. As early as 1906, in one of the first articles on the newspapers, Ray Stannard Baker had shown "How Railroads Make Public Opinion." He stated that in 1905 the railroads, alarmed by the public clamor for railroad legislation and by the passage of the Esch-Townsend bill in the House of Representatives, undertook a sweeping campaign to reach and change public sentiment. A firm of publicity agents was established with headquarters in Boston and branches in New York, Chicago, Washington, St. Louis, and Topeka. In each office was a large corps of employees, directed by experienced newspaper men. These journalists and their assistants undertook a careful survey of all the newspapers, and visited hundreds of editors, noting the views of each on economic and political questions. Then literature which would put the railroads in a favorable light was supplied by them to the editors who frequently, perhaps usually, did not know whence this material came. The results were amazing. In the week ending June 5, 1905, the newspapers of Nebraska published 212 columns of matter unfavorable to the railroads and only two columns of favorable matter. Eleven weeks later, after a careful campaign had been made, the Nebraska papers, in the course of a week, published 202 columns that were favorable to the railroads and only four columns that were unfavorable.

Naturally the railroads were not the only corporations that played this little game. Kittle, for example, in his article, "The Interests and the Magazines," *Twentieth Century* (successor to the *Arena*), May, 1910, showed what the Standard Oil Company was doing. He said that John D. Arch-

bold, vice-president of the company, sent \$5,000 to George Gunton of *Gunton's Magazine* "as an additional contribution to that agreed upon and to aid you in your most excellent work," and also promised a subscription of \$5,000 to the *Southern Farm Magazine*. An anonymous writer in *Collier's* described the activities of Standard Oil publicity agents in the West. Swift and Company, according to Upton Sinclair, spent a million dollars a month in the effort to defeat a bill before Congress which provided for government control of the packing industry, and Armour's paid farm publications \$2,000 a page for "special articles." An editorial in *McClure's* charged the Mutual Life Insurance Company with paying as much as a dollar a line for favorable stories published in the newspapers, and *Collier's*, on March 18, 1911, denounced the efforts of the American Wool Company.

The technique of using the papers to influence public opinion was, Kittle stated in his *Arena* article of 1909, carefully worked out. Numerous well organized bureaus furnished adroitly prepared articles, letters, and interviews to the newspapers, which printed them without indicating their source. Corporations paid generously for advertising space with the tacit agreement that they could control the news and editorial columns as well. Such an organization as the Municipal Ownership Publicity Bureau published a magazine and sent out articles and news items to the press in order to discredit municipal ownership and advance the interests of the gas, light, water, and traction companies.

It was the hypocrisy of the Press which particularly disgusted Upton Sinclair. He cited the case of General Otis, a wealthy newspaper owner in Los Angeles. Otis, Sinclair asserted, appeared in the *Times* as a Republican and advocated the "open shop" policy so fiercely that some outraged labor leaders blew up the *Times* building with a dynamite bomb. At the same time he secretly owned the *Herald*, which

was "independent," "Democratic," and favored the "closed-shop." Another large paper preached the virtues of being poor in editorials bearing such titles as "My Lady Poverty," the while it was making a million dollars a year from doubtful advertising. Sinclair declared that the hypocrisy of the press was such that there were two propositions which were invariably true: first, any proprietor of a department store anywhere in America might divorce or be divorced with entire impunity so far as the press was concerned; second, "no radical in America can divorce or be divorced without being gutted, skinned alive, and placed on the red-hot grid-dle of Capitalistic Journalism." To emphasize his accusations he quoted a New York editor as saying:

The business of the New York journalist is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell his race and his country for his daily bread. . . . We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks: they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.

And he stated that a Los Angeles editor had written, "We are hired poisoners, whose lot it is to kill the things we love most."

Among newspaper owners William Randolph Hearst was several times singled out for attack. Frederick Palmer wrote four articles on "Hearst and Hearstism" for *Collier's* in 1906, and Steffens discussed Hearst in the *American*, November, 1906. Steffens, who, after years of investigations, had come to the conclusion that personally vicious men were comparatively rare, treated Hearst as a social phenomenon, and blamed the times rather than the man for the evils of yellow journalism. This did not altogether please the other members of the staff, and there was a rather warm session of the editorial board. At last it was decided that the article should

be published, and Mr. Phillips asked what it should be called. "Why," said Miss Tarbell, who had been acting as peacemaker, "call it 'William Randolph Hearst' by Lincoln Steffens." "Yah," grumbled Finley Peter Dunne, "out of Arthur Brisbane."

The magazines were attacked as well as the newspapers, and here there was the additional point—it was widely believed, and probably pretty well proven, that more than one of the muckraking magazines had been put out of business. In 1912 George French wrote for the *Twentieth Century* two articles, "Masters of the Magazines" (April), and "The Damnation of the Magazines" (June), in which he showed how financial interests controlled the majority of periodicals.

To-day [he wrote] it is the paper-maker that is the master of this magazine, the big advertiser of that one, a financial house of the other; and in the last analysis, this control comes down to a control in the interests of money, whether the root of the matter is a big unpaid paper bill, and "accommodation" note at some bank, or a veiled subscription to stock or bond issue.

Charles Edward Russell, writing in *Pearson's* for February, 1914, under the title, "The Magazine Soft Pedal," illustrated how advertising could influence magazine policy, by saying that when his first article on the Beef Trust appeared seven pages of advertising was withdrawn, and that his article on the Tobacco Trust had a similar effect.

The magazines which engaged in exposure were in danger not merely of losing their advertisers but also of being forced out of existence. The most conspicuous example of this danger was the story of *Hampton's*, which has been repeatedly told. Benjamin Hampton purchased the *Broadway Magazine* in 1907, when its circulation was 13,000. He changed the name to *Hampton's*, plunged into muckraking, and in four years had brought the circulation up to 440,000. But he was continually offending the most powerful corporations in the

country, and they began to bring pressure to bear upon him. Not only did they try to secure control of the magazine and to weaken it by withdrawing advertisements, but they also kept spies in the office to furnish them with information. A young man with good references applied for a place as accountant, worked diligently for a few months, and then suddenly left—without explanation but with a complete list of the several thousand stockholders of the magazine. Immediately, Russell tells us, these stockholders were flooded with “devilishly cunning” literature designed to undermine their confidence in the magazine.

The climax of the struggle came when, in December of 1910, *Hampton's* published an article attacking the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. Before the article appeared, a representative of the road visited Hampton, discussed the article with him, and warned him that if the article was printed *Hampton's* would be on the rocks in ninety days. The article was published, and the threat was carried out. First came a campaign among the advertisers, and then the stockholders were bombarded. In May, 1911, Hampton found that he had to have money to tide him over the dull summer months, but he could not borrow \$30,000 from any bank in New York, despite the fact that his business had been valued at two million dollars and that back of the paper he offered was collateral worth at least two hundred thousand. In the issue of August, 1911, Mr. Hampton stated that he and his magazine had been in a hand-to-hand fight with Wall Street, and all the banks were closed against him. Finally he was forced to sell, for ten thousand dollars, this enterprise into which more than a million had gone, and in less than a year *Hampton's* had ceased to exist.

It is only fair to state that there are other accounts of the decline of *Hampton's*, some of them sponsored by men who are by no means hostile to muckraking in general. It is said

that there was bad management, and it has been hinted that Mr. Hampton was not entirely sincere. However this may be, there seems to be strong evidence that financial interests, profiting perhaps by weaknesses in the conduct of the magazine, were quick to seize the first opportunity to put it out of business.

Other magazines suffered from the same pressure. George French, in the articles previously mentioned, stated that when *Success*, of which Orison Swett Marden was editor and Edward E. Higgins business manager, went into muckraking, “Uncle Joe” Cannon, who had been forcefully assailed in an article which Higgins wrote, threw the magazine on the table, crying, “Damn *Success*! Who in hell is E. E. Higgins?” And *Success* was damned! The big interests quietly withdrew their advertisements, the paper-makers demanded cash for paper, the banks were loath to lend money, the sales fell off—and *Success*, for which nearly \$400,000 had been offered not long before, was sold for \$2,250.

Pearson's, which had started brilliantly in 1899 with a first number circulation of 100,000, and which, under new management, had reached a circulation of nearly 300,000 in 1906, participated in muckraking, especially in the later years of the era. As a result of its unflinching attacks on various corporations, it lost a great deal of advertising; the Armour interests, for example, canceled an order for eighteen pages after the appearance of an article entitled “How Food Prices Are Made.” Then the New York *Sun* published an article on *Pearson's* financial status. This article, which came into the office from some outside source, was a distorted version of a circular which Arthur W. Little, the publisher of *Pearson's*, had issued to stockholders, and was intended to weaken his financial standing. Mr. Little, despite his recognized position and the excellent security he offered, was unable to borrow money, and it was only by using the

cheapest paper that *Pearson's* was able to struggle on for a little longer.

Other magazines fell by the wayside from time to time. *McClure's*, for example, came to be controlled by the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company. According to Upton Sinclair, *Human Life*, *National Post*, the *Twentieth Century*, and *Times Magazine* all succumbed to the interests. George French, in a third article for the *Twentieth Century* called "Shall the Tail Wag the Dog?" (May, 1912), stated that many magazines had been taken over by the interests which they had previously fought, and that many of the saner and more dependable muckrakers had been forced by 1912 to give up writing on sociological subjects because there was no market for their articles.

In general, the tendency from 1910 on was against the progressive magazines. In 1909 William Kittle, writing in the *Arena*, recorded that there were four actively liberal magazines: the *Arena*, the *American*, *Everybody's*, and *McClure's*. These four had a combined circulation of a million and a third, and they constantly voiced "the indignant protest against all forms of special privilege." The *North American Review* he listed as the most conservative of the popular journals. The next year he added *Hampton's* and the *Outlook* to his roster of the progressives. In 1912 he studied a large number of magazines, including several national weeklies, and noted their attitude toward the Progressive Party. *Collier's* and *LaFollette's* were leaders in the campaign, but *McClure's* had given up muckraking, and *Hampton's* was practically extinct. In 1919, when Upton Sinclair published *The Brass Check*, he could not find a single popular magazine that was actively opposing Big Business.

The attack on the press has gone on. After the war much was said about the way in which the newspapers had distorted war news and had misrepresented conditions in Sov-

iet Russia. The *Nation* and the *New Republic* were the leaders in the post-war campaign for honest news, and the latter published a special supplement entitled "The Crimes of the Times," in which it exposed the bias shown by the *New York Times* in reporting events in Russia. Walter Lippmann, both during and after his connection with the *New Republic*, has been a careful student of the press, and in two volumes, *Public Opinion* (1922), and *Liberty and the News* (1927), he has dealt with this question. Mr. Lippmann, unlike Upton Sinclair, attributes the distortion of news not to a great conspiracy but to a variety of causes.

The critics of the press have frequently offered constructive suggestions for the improving of journalism. Professor Ross has recommended an endowed daily paper, which would publish the news impartially. Hitchcock and Lippmann have advocated the raising of journalism to a profession with high standards. Upton Sinclair suggests legislation which would prevent the publication of false interviews and fake telegraph and cable dispatches, the formation of a union of newspaper workers, and the founding of an impartial newspaper. These propositions and others have been repeatedly debated, for interest in the whole question is still keen.