

Abstract

Yellow journalism, a term used for the use of negligent and flamboyant newspaper reporting without regard to facts, is examined in this paper. Its history and development, its purpose in the media and its impact on history are discussed.

From the Paper:

"Yellow Journalism is a term used for the use of negligent and flamboyant newspaper reporting, without regard to facts. With yellow journalism the truth is usually misrepresented or concealed, more often than not, there may be no truth to the story at all. In its infancy, the term yellow journalism was used to describe the writing tactics used by William Hearst's New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer's New York World. These men used yellow journalism to exaggerate and misguide the American public on happenings in Cuba; such reporting may have even sparked the Spanish-American war. Yellow journalism is by no means a memory in America's distant past; even the most conservative newspapers still practice it in a refined form today. Tabloids such as the Star and the Inquirer are notorious for sensationalizing and even falsifying headlines. Additionally, every once in a while straight edged newspapers papers such as the Wall Street Journal may get into the act as well. In 1996, ABC News was singled out for reporting that Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu had called then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a traitor, further investigation revealed that the accusation was false."

Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies

Newspaper Research Journal, Fall 2003 by Strout, Lawrence N

Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies, by W. Joseph Campbell (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 209 pages.

As the author rightly points out, the term yellow journalism is alive and well today, more than 100 years after it was coined. The connotations associated with the use of the word are also quite clear-sensationalized and irresponsible news reporting.

Campbell's book seeks to be the definitive work about yellow journalism, from debunking myths that have been perpetuated for decades to identifying the lasting impact of the over-the-top reporting style of the "yellow" journals. In large part, Campbell achieves his goal by applying classic historical methods and content analysis to the "evidence" available about yellow journalism.

Campbell first takes on the origin of the term yellow journalism, surmising from meticulous research that the term first appeared in the New York Press in January 1897 and was "not directly" associated with the Hearst-Pulitzer rivalry over the cartoon character the "Yellow Kid." One myth down, three to go.

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The assumption that the yellow journals appealed primarily to the lowbrow audiences of the late 1800s and early 1900s is the next myth to fall. Cleverly using urban demographic data to compare the cities where yellow journalism flourished to where it did not, Campbell writes: "To characterize yellow journalism as appealing principally or exclusively to downscale readers not only is elitist: It misrepresents the broad appeal of the genre...." Two myths down, two to go.

The final two "debunked" myths relate to the same topic: The SpanishAmerican War. First, the famous telegram allegedly sent from William Randolph Hearst to artist Frederic S. Remington after Remington asked to return home because all was quiet in Cuba. Hearst, so the story goes, replied: "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." Campbell, in almost excruciating detail, attacks the source (James Creelman) and identifies dispatches printed in the New York Journal at the time that suggest the contrary. Campbell concludes that the story "deserves relegation to the closet of historical imprecision." To attack the myth that the yellow journals played a large role in the United States getting involved in the Spanish American War, Campbell looked at the content of the yellow journals and researched the writings of key figures in the McKinley administration. Again, he found no evidence that the SpanishAmerican War was greatly influenced by the yellow press newspapers.

In debunking all of the four major myths about yellow journalism, Campbell's research is thorough and sound and the evidence is clearly presented and backs up his assertions.

The second part of Campbell's book - *Defining the Legacies*-is less compelling.

Campbell embarked on a content analysis of newspapers in ten-year periods from 1899 through 1999. In the analysis, he uses a coding method that incorporates the major characteristics of yellow journalism-such as multicolumn headlines, multicolumn illustrations and using the newspaper's name in a headline-to track whether the characteristics have lived on or died. Again, Campbell carries out the research in meticulous detail, pointing out the strengths of the method used and conceding its weaknesses while surmising, "American newspapers have become more uniform in content" and "more graphically vivid while generally eschewing the most flamboyant content variables associated with yellow journalism."

The final chapter of the book-still under Defining the Legacies-Campbell attempts to tie the major trends associated with yellow journalism to today's journalism throughout the United States and the world. From "development journalism" (the news media promoting national unity and objectives), to public or "civic" journalism (journalists crusading to better their communities), to crime-solving journalism, Campbell connects all of them back to the yellow journalism era. His arguments are less impressive here because several, if not all of the trends mentioned, could be tied to the Penny Press with the right excerpts lifted from stories in Benjamin Day's New York Sun and James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald.

But the weakness of one part of the book does not diminish the overall work of Campbell. The well-researched book is laid out in clinical fashion, but it is not sterile to read. In fact, the book is an interesting read from cover to cover while still being formatted-with frequent use of bulleted lists-for easy use as a reference work. *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* is a must read for everyone who wants to know the "truth" about yellow journalism.

Strout is an associate professor and director of the Mass Communication Program at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. He is author of the book *Covering McCarthyism: How the Christian Science Monitor handled Joseph R. McCarthy, 1950-1955*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999.

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