

A Muckraking Model

Investigative Reporting Cycles in American History

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Investigative reporting has long been considered a vital bulwark of democracy as a check on wrongdoing in politics and public policy. But a century after an American president coined a pejorative word to describe it—“muckraking”—exposé journalism has proved to be cyclical, waxing in some political periods and waning in others. While various studies have focused on the *effects* of investigative reporting, little scholarship has been written about its *causes*; and none has offered an overarching analysis that explains patterns of evolution over time. By using traditional historical methodology, this article traces the history of muckraking in America and proposes a unifying theory that explores its changes over the past two and a half centuries: a Muckraking Model based on supply and demand. This theory examines an important aspect of the intersection between press and politics and may have predictive value for the future as well as historical value about the past.

Keywords: *investigative reporting; advocacy journalism; muckrake; journalism history; Lincoln Steffens; Watergate*

One hundred years ago, on March 17, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt coined a new phrase that soon entered the American lexicon: “muckrake.” It was not a term of endearment. As a politician trying to curb the worst excesses of America’s industrial revolution while still preserving the nation’s capitalist system, the president’s delicate balancing act sometimes seemed threatened by a dangerous new kind of journalist: the investigative crusader whose writings inflamed the masses. Roosevelt likened this journalistic dirt-digger to a character from John Bunyan’s seventeenth-century fable, *Pilgrim’s Progress*:

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The man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward with the muck-rake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who could neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor.¹

Although the president's use of the word was pejorative, the muckrakers themselves embraced the insult as a badge of honor. The term stuck.

Muckraking—also known as investigative reporting, adversarial journalism, advocacy reporting, public service journalism, and exposé reporting—has evolved over the years in style and technique. Different practitioners have predictably offered different definitions: some emphasize in-depth reporting that is more time-consuming than traditional daily journalism; others claim that the very phrase “investigative reporting” is a misnomer since all reporting involves investigation of some kind. According to America's leading organization of muckrakers, it is “the reporting, through one's own work product and initiative, [of] matters of importance which some person or group want to keep secret.”²

Nonetheless, despite these varying definitions, the core of investigative reporting throughout American history has been its use of fact gathering to challenge authority and oppose the abuse of power—political, governmental, corporate, or religious—on behalf of ordinary citizens. This “journalism of outrage,” as one writer has characterized it,

is a form of storytelling that probes the boundaries of America's civic conscience. . . . Investigative journalists are reformers not revolutionaries. They seek to improve the American system by pointing out its shortcomings rather than advocating its overthrow. By spotlighting specific abuses of particular policies or programs, the investigative reporter provides policy makers with the opportunity to take corrective actions without changing the distribution of power. (Protest 1991: 5, 11)

Investigative reporters are “custodians of public conscience,” two other scholars noted, whose

reporting yields stories that are carefully verified and skillfully narrated accounts of special injury and injustice . . . with a meaning that always transcends the facts of the particular case. Their stories call attention to the breakdown of social systems and the disorder within public institutions that cause injury and injustice; in turn, their stories implicitly demand the response of public officials—and the public itself—to that breakdown and disorder. (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 3)

To be sure, the line between fair-minded investigative reporting and partisan witch-hunting or sensationalistic gossipmongering can be a fine one, and it has been repeatedly crossed over the years (Collins 1999; Garment 1991; Sabato

1991). At the same time, significant and substantive public service journalism has often been more celebrated than practiced in part because wrongdoing may be difficult to uncover and documenting it can generate costly lawsuits, alienate advertisers, and be expensive to produce (Greenwald and Bernt 2000: 35). Still, in its pure form, muckraking can be a crucial check on abuse of power by large institutions, molding opinion to shape public policy and affirm important societal values (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 183–202; Grenier 1960: 552–58).

To date, most studies of investigative reporting in the United States have focused on its *effects*—whether they have been positive or negative, substantive or illusory. But little scholarly attention has been devoted to the historical *causes* of investigative reporting in America. So far, no overarching or systemic analysis has been developed to explain the evolution of investigative reporting over time and offer predictive analysis of when such muckraking may occur in the future. That is what this article, using traditional historical methodology, will attempt to do, first by tracing the history (and historiography) of investigative reporting in America and then by proposing a unifying theory to try to explain its changes over time: a Muckraking Model.

History of Investigative Reporting

Although the term “muckraking” did not develop until the twentieth century, investigative reporting in the United States has a rich historical tradition. “I was not the original muckraker,” one of its best-known practitioners, Lincoln Steffens (1931: 357), righteously declared. “The prophets of the Old Testament were before me.” The earliest known muckraking on American soil can be traced to the first colonial newspaper published in 1690. Printer Benjamin Harris’s *Publick Occurrences* was a forerunner of both the noble and lowbrow traditions that would come to characterize investigative reporting in America. In its first issue, the newspaper exposed allegedly “barbarous” human rights abuses of French prisoners of war and a supposed sex scandal in which the king of France “used to lie with” his “Sons Wife.” Four days later, British authorities shut down the newspaper; its first issue was also its last (Stephens 1988: 2). Two generations later, in 1735, printer John Peter Zenger accused New York’s colonial governor of corruption and was charged with seditious libel. In his successful landmark defense, Zenger’s lawyer articulated what would prove to be the investigative reporter’s creed for the next two and a half centuries: “the liberty of exposing and opposing arbitrary power . . . by speaking and writing truth” (Katz 1972: 99).

During the years leading to the American Revolution, newspapers and pamphlets frequently challenged British colonial leaders by exposing their misdeeds, although primarily through invective rather than objective journalism (Bailyn 1967). After the Revolution, muckraking largely became a partisan weapon

during bitter disputes between the nation's new rival political factions, which funded newspapers as party organs. The *National Gazette*, the paper of Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party, exposed corruption in the office of rival Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton; as a result, several Hamilton aides at the Treasury Department were convicted for insider trading of government bonds. In the 1830s and 1840s, muckrakers working for Democratic newspapers uncovered payoffs involving the National Bank, which was supported by the rival Whig Party. Abolitionists, early union organizers, and other activists established their own crusading newspapers, although their polemical exposés were largely propagandistic in nature and their circulation and influence was minimal (Protest 1991: 32).

In general, early-nineteenth-century muckraking was infrequent and had little impact. The partisan nature of newspapers limited such reporting to exposés of the opposition party; businesses, churches, the military, and other important institutions went unexamined. Investigative journalism was further restricted by newspaper dependence on government contracts for printing as well as limited circulation due to widespread illiteracy, dispersion of the population in rural areas, and technological limits to printing (Folkerts and Teeter 1998: 98–101). The awarding of government contracts to favored printers was a particularly potent form of political patronage in Washington, D.C., where transcribing congressional debates was so lucrative that it essentially underwrote the cost of the partisan press;³ thus, most journalism in the nation's capital was from the beginning a curious blend of partisanship and stenography, a trend that arguably continues to the present day.

After the Civil War, muckraking increased but not significantly. The *New York Times* uncovered graft by Boss Tweed in New York City's Tammany Hall and the *New York Sun* exposed the Crédit Mobilier scandal of the Grant administration. Still, there was a distinct partisan flair to these exposés; the *Times* was a Republican newspaper targeting a Democratic machine while the *Sun* was a Democratic paper targeting Republicans (Serrin and Serrin 2002: 99–102; Steele 1993).

However, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, most newspapers had evolved from partisan to commercial entities (Baldasty 1992). Urbanization helped concentrate populations in locales where large circulation could be established. Technological improvements—linotype, telegraph, illustrations, and mass production—increased demand while decreasing the price of production.⁴ One-cent newspapers were cheap enough for large numbers of an increasingly literate population to buy. And because these new mass-circulation newspapers were economically self-sustaining, they were not dependent on political parties for subsidy. In fact, since profit was tied to circulation, nonpartisanship made economic sense to avoid antagonizing supporters of either political party. Publishers began replacing a more narrow partisan outlook with a broader

concept of social responsibility to the community at large (Harris and Stein 1973: 26; Hofstadter 1955: 187–93; Protess 1991: 33).

Mass-circulation newspapers appealed especially to immigrants and rural workers who had moved to urban areas and were trying to learn how to cope in their new environment. Journalistic exposés proved popular with these readers, and aggressive publishers like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst began specializing in sensational scandal coverage. Nellie Bly became famous when she went undercover to expose conditions in mental wards, and Ida B. Wells documented the horrors of lynching for African American newspapers. Other writers exposed previously taboo subjects like prostitution and slum tenement conditions. Political reform groups, like the Chicago Civic Federation, found large-circulation newspapers valuable allies, particularly since such activists had no political machine of their own to spread their message. For all its aggressiveness, however, this muckraking was largely local in its reach and sporadic in its frequency (Folkerts and Teeter 1998: 232–35, 260; Nord 1984: 265–73; Protess 1991: 29–34).

But by the beginning of the twentieth century, muckraking became ubiquitous and national in scope. Ironically, this proliferation of investigative reporting was made possible by the very industrialized capitalism that the muckrakers exposed. In particular, the transcontinental railroad led to national distribution and marketing, which in turn created a demand for nationwide advertising and thus the first mass-circulation national news publications. Newspaper chains began to reach from coast to coast, the beginning of a century-long evolution toward consolidated corporate media. Nationwide magazines started to flower, made more popular by their unprecedented ability to reproduce arresting photographs. Total circulation climbed into the tens of millions as these new, slick national publications became the primary delivery system for the muckrakers (Cook 1972; Filler 1993).

The decade between 1902 and 1912 is generally regarded as the heyday of muckraking, the “golden age of public service journalism.” These muckrakers soon became famous: Lincoln Steffens, exposing municipal corruption in *The Shame of the Cities*; Ida Tarbell, documenting the crimes of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil in *McClure’s* magazine; and Upton Sinclair, working undercover in Chicago meat-packing plants to write his epic work, *The Jungle*. In general, the muckrakers targeted corporate wrongdoing, government misbehavior, and social injustice; they viewed all three as interconnected to each other and to systemic problems spawned by the U.S. Industrial Revolution. Nonetheless, they were for the most part reformers, not radicals. Tarbell’s exposé, for example, focused on how Standard Oil’s ruthless tactics against competitors led to higher prices for the consumer, not the corporation’s exploitation of workers or proposals to nationalize it. Although some of the muckrakers became socialists—

most famously, Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens—most of them believed in reforming capitalism, which they realized had not only spawned the many injustices that they decried but also the reform journalism that made it profitable to document these abuses in the first place.⁵

In the century since the muckrakers' heyday, historians have continued to debate their political and journalistic legacy (Stein 1979: 9–17). The earliest scholarly interpretations were mostly positive, linking the muckrakers to important Progressive Era reforms: the Pure Food and Drug Act, child labor laws, federal income taxes, the direct election of senators, and the antitrust prosecution of Standard Oil, among others (Regier 1932). Later historians, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, criticized the racism of the muckrakers and viewed them as status quo elitists attempting to preserve their social position from assault by industrialization and ethnic immigrants (Franklin 1956: 431; Hofstadter 1955, 186–98; Kolko 1963). More recent historians reached a position somewhere in the middle, noting the limits of muckraking while praising its “exposure of the underside of American capitalism” (Miraldi 2000; H. Shapiro 1968: 29–33, 44–64, 70–75, 82–93).

In any case, by the time the nation entered World War I, the golden age of muckraking had come to an end.⁶ Historians have offered various explanations for the muckrakers' demise: that the reforms they engendered ameliorated the Industrial Revolution's worst abuses and thus the need or appetite for muckraking; that the decline of the Progressive political movement inevitably meant the decline of muckraking because the two were inextricably linked; that World War I turned the public's focus abroad and increased public deference to authority at home; that media consolidation eliminated magazine outlets for muckraking; that individual journalists turned inward to narrow careerism or their families; and that irresponsible muckraking alienated the public, which had already grown weary of journalistic negativity (Hofstadter 1955: 195–96; Regier 1932: 194–214). These various explanations have been more asserted than proved, though they appear to have varying measures of truth in them.

The half century after the muckrakers—from World War I to the Vietnam War—was a kind of “Dark Ages” for investigative reporting. Even the enormous public alienation from the economic and political turmoil brought on by the Great Depression in the 1930s failed to rekindle aggressive exposé journalism, although FDR's government-funded writer's project did produce some worthy documentary efforts (Folkerts and Teeter 1998: 444). A few journalists, mostly on the Left, continued the lonely crusade: socialist Upton Sinclair attacked monopolistic mainstream media; columnists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson specialized in political corruption and scandal; I. F. Stone, Jessica Mitford, and the *Nation* magazine challenged cold war politics; and Edward R. Murrow used the new medium of television to attack Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red-baiting

demagoguery (J. Anderson 1979; Bayley 1981: 192–202; Cook 1972; Cottrell 1993; Mitford 1968; Pilat 1973; Sinclair 1936). But these were aggressive exceptions that proved the rule of journalistic conformity. “By 1950 investigative journalism ebbed to its low point of the century,” one scholar wrote. “Objectivity and deference to authority had become dominant journalistic norms” (Protest 1991: 45).

By the 1960s, however, a new muckraking age was born as a younger generation of crusading journalists challenged segregation, the Vietnam War, political corruption, and corporate malfeasance. The legal climate for aggressive journalism improved with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act and promedia rulings by the Supreme Court in *New York Times v. Sullivan* and other cases. National and local investigative reporting teams sprouted around the country in alternative, mainstream, and elite publications alike. Magazines introduced a “New Journalism” with a heavy investigative emphasis while television turned muckraking into dramatic morality plays as popular programs like *60 Minutes* generated huge profits. The invention of the copying machine helped whistleblowers leak evidence documenting wrongdoing, and nonprofit organizations devoted to institutionalizing watchdog journalism, such as Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and the Fund for Investigative Journalism, took root. Some investigative reporters—Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, Mike Wallace—became household names (Aucoin 2005; Protest 1991: 47–54; Schudson 1992: 187–91)

These new muckrakers resembled their predecessors of the early 1900s: educated middle-class urban professionals who believed in the importance of truth as a check on wrongdoing. Like the turn-of-the-century muckrakers, 1960s journalists believed in individualism and meritocracy and were instinctively critical of business, politics, and bureaucracy. Yet they were also different in some important ways, focusing more on government misconduct than corporate misdeeds. The new muckrakers were more dispassionate in tone, less blatant in their advocacy and political agitation. Secular careerists rather than religious crusaders, their ethos of objectivity discouraged open affiliation with political movements or leaders. These modern muckrakers were less radical than their forbearers, their indictment of society more limited and less systemic (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 10–14, 61–84; Miraldi 2000: 157–64; Protest 1991: 53–54; Stein 1975: 297–303).

Historiography of the 1960s muckrakers is less extensive than of their predecessors, but what has been written parallels writing about the previous generation of muckrakers (Behrens 1977; Downie 1976; Dygart 1976; Woodward and Bernstein 1974). In both periods, the initial analysis—often written by journalists themselves—was largely positive. Subsequent interpretations criticized investigative reporting for undermining confidence in government and business

and even “losing” the Vietnam War (Garment 1991; Lipset and Schneider 1983: 403–6; Sabato 1991). Later works have involved a synthesis that views the reportage of these events in more balanced terms (Schudson 1992: 103–26).

Yet it did not take long before the frenzy of investigative reporting began to wear off (Borjesson 2004; Greenwald and Bernt 2000; Hertsgaard 1988; Olmsted 1996; Wallis 2004). Again, as in the Progressive Era, the explanations were varied: the end of the 1960s and 1970s political turmoil, media mergers, adverse legal rulings, and public weariness. As in the last years of the muckrakers, irresponsible scandal coverage overshadowed substantive public service journalism. This trend arguably continues to the present day.

Connecting the Dots

So what is the pattern here? For the most part, no serious scholarship has attempted to answer this important question in any rigorous manner. Most writing on investigative reporting has largely been restricted to how-to trade school manuals by journalistic practitioners (D. Anderson and Benjaminson 1976; Bolch and Miller 1978; Gaines 1998; Mollenhoff 1981; Weinberg 1996). Media histories, on the other hand, have largely described rather than analyzed the ups and downs of investigative reporting over time and have focused primarily on the effects rather than the causes of investigative reporting (Emery and Emery 1992; Folkerts and Teeter 1998; Serrin and Serrin 2002; Sloan 2002). One journalist noted a cyclical process of “corruption, then exposure, then reform, followed by a slow drift back into corruption” (Hamill 2003: viii). Another attributed fluctuating investigative tides to undifferentiated “ebbs and flows with the commercial publishing market, with political movements and technological changes, with the whims of media ownership, with literary trends and journalistic fashion” (B. Shapiro 2003: xix). But to date, no systemic analysis has been developed for why muckraking has waxed and waned over different periods of American history.

Consider, for example, the most extensively studied period of investigative journalism, that of the early-twentieth-century muckrakers. While historians of this era have vigorously debated (and disagreed about) the impact of the muckrakers, almost all have embraced a political explanation for what caused this journalistic outpouring, which they linked inextricably with the politics of Progressivism (Goldman 1958: 136; Hofstadter 1955: 186; Regier 1932: 194–214). “To an extraordinary degree, the work of the Progressive movement rested upon its journalism,” one eminent historian wrote:

The fundamental critical achievement of American Progressivism was the business of exposure, and journalism was the chief occupational source of its creative writers. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Progressive mind was

characteristically a journalistic mind and that its characteristic contribution was that of the socially responsible reporter-reformer. (Hofstadter 1955: 186)

But this political explanation of muckraking ignores important economic, legal, social, technological, and cultural causes that also played an important role in muckraking.

Similarly, the resurgence of investigative reporting during the 1960s and 1970s has also largely been explained in political terms as the product of America's foment over civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal (Behrens 1977: xii–vii; Downie 1976: 6–15; Dygart 1976: vii–ix). Once again, economic, legal, social, technological, and cultural explanations have largely been passed over.

This narrowly political analysis not only misses other causes of investigative reporting; it also fails to provide a consistent explanation applicable to other periods in history. For example, if political foment (the Progressive movement in the early 1900s, Vietnam/Watergate in the 1970s) led to investigative reporting, why have other reform periods in American history (such as the Great Depression/New Deal of the early 1930s) been unaccompanied by a similar burst of muckraking?

Is there a deeper and more complete analysis that can connect the dots here? I believe there is, based on extrapolating from a little-noticed observation by Northwestern University journalism professor David L. Protes (1991: 36) about the early 1900s muckrakers:

The historical pendulum swung toward muckraking as two mutually reinforcing phenomena converged: the demand for information about societal ills from an alienated, literate population of consumers; and a fiercely competitive national media that sought to supply it. No convergence of similar forces had occurred prior to 1900, and none would occur again until the late 1960s.

Protes (1991) did not elaborate further or examine the larger implications of his brief observation; but without naming it as such, he in essence advanced a quasi-economic explanation of muckraking, one based on the laws of supply and demand: Investigative reporting reaches a critical mass when both its supply (stimulated by new technologies and media competition) and its demand (by an aroused public hungry for exposés in times of turmoil) is high. This explanation includes political, social, and cultural causes, since such foment increases demand for exposé journalism; and it includes economic, technological, and legal causes as well, since new media outlets with greater reach and latitude boost the supply of muckraking. This broader and more inclusive explanation seems to offer a larger, overarching analysis for the twentieth-century's two prime eras of investigative reporting.⁷

A Muckraking Model

I believe that this same supply-and-demand analysis can be used to explain investigative reporting during other periods of American history. Indeed, I have constructed a model for how this might be represented, one that extends beyond merely the peak periods of muckraking to include the various cycles of investigative reporting over time (see Figure 1).

In Category 1, both demand for muckraking, and its supply, are high; this leads to the greatest periods of investigative reporting: in the 1760s and 1770s, before and during the American Revolution; 1902 to 1912, during the heyday of the original muckrakers; and in the 1960s and 1970s during Vietnam and Watergate. In all of these eras, political, economic and social turmoil—caused (respectively) by oppressive colonialism, the Industrial Revolution, and an unpopular war and political scandal—spurred public demand for investigative reporting. New technologies—the printing press, national magazines, television—increased the supply of muckraking.

In Category 2, the demand for investigative journalism is high but the supply is low. This is what occurred during the Populist and New Deal eras, when economic dislocation and political foment was acute but mainstream media outlets, facing little journalistic competition, offered scant criticism of the status quo.

In Category 3, it is just the opposite: The supply of investigative reporting is high but the demand is not; this leads to periods like the present day, when the new technologies of cable/satellite TV and Internet Web sites provide a kind of pseudo-muckraking, where titillation is more common than substantive public service journalism.⁸ This was also the case in the 1830s, when the development of the mass-produced “Penny Press,” unaccompanied by widespread demand for watchdog journalism, led to sensational coverage of crime and high society.

Finally, in Category 4, both supply and demand for muckraking is low, leading to investigative “Dark Ages” such as the middle of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To be sure, this model should not be overextended nor misconstrued as a reductionist attempt to explain away the many complexities in the evolution of American journalism. The historical record is replete with tenacious muckraking that occurred even in the most hostile of media environments, just as tabloid scandal-mongering has taken place even in golden eras of public service journalism. So, too, the four different categories in this model should be viewed less as rigidly distinct boxes than as archetypes conceived to facilitate understanding and analysis. In many cases, difference between variables—high supply versus low supply, high demand versus low demand—may not be absolute binary choices but instead (sometimes overlapping) concepts along a continuum. And

		<u>DEMAND</u> Political, Economic and Social Turmoil	
		<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<u>SUPPLY</u> New Technologies Media Competition	<i>High:</i>	<u>1</u> American Revolution Muckrakers Vietnam/Watergate	<u>3</u> 1830s penny press Tabloid television Internet blogs
	<i>Low:</i>	<u>2</u> Populist era Great Depression	<u>4</u> Mid-1800s Mid-1900s

Figure 1 Investigative Reporting Cycles

historians may disagree about which journalistic periods belong in which category. Further study, both quantitative and longitudinal, is needed to corroborate and refine this model.

Still, this Muckraking Model offers a coherent explanation for the ebb and flow of investigative reporting over time and offers plausible answers to some unanswered questions about the history of American investigative reporting:

- Why was there such little watchdog journalism in the middle nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Because supply was restricted by stagnant technology and constricted media competition, while demand was limited by political stability and public apathy. In such inhospitable times for investigative reporting, the lonely muckraking banner was held aloft mainly by committed ideologues, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass in the 1850s and I. F. Stone and Jessica Mitford in the 1950s.
- Why was there such modest muckraking in the Populist and New Deal eras despite all the economic and political turmoil? Because high demand caused by economic, political, and social turmoil was stymied by the limited supply of the mainstream media. One result: the growth of alternative journalistic outlets like the Farmers Alliance newspapers in the 1880s and socialist periodicals in the 1930s.
- Why the current proliferation of pseudo-muckraking on cable TV and Internet blogs? Because in a period of economic and political calm,⁹ the public's low demand is drowned in a tabloid ocean supplied by lone bloggers and media conglomerates that prefer the entertaining appearance to the expensive reality of genuine watchdog journalism.

Conclusion

A century after Theodore Roosevelt coined the pejorative term “muckrake,” adversarial journalism continues to offer an important check on wrongdoing by powerful individuals and institutions. For all its faults, serious and substantive investigative reporting remains one of the most vital functions of a free press, a bulwark of democracy that can bring about important societal changes peacefully. Understanding such journalism is a prerequisite to sustaining it.

A muckraking model based on supply and demand suggests that a critical mass of investigative reporting will once again occur in American society only if and when there is a confluence of two disparate historical forces: public demand, created by some combination of political, economic, and social turmoil; and media supply, most likely the result of new technologies and journalistic competition aided by a tolerant legal climate. If history is any guide, both of these divergent streams must come together simultaneously before society will experience the kind of muckraking heydays that previously occurred in other eras of American history. Until then, while the occasional journalistic dissident can be counted on to expose and oppose those in authority, such coverage seems destined to be the exception rather than the rule. In the meantime, in substance if not style, more docile journalism seems likely to prevail.

Notes

1. The muckraker who “consistently refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing,” Roosevelt continued, “speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces of evil.” Roosevelt’s denunciation was surprising in some ways since his political career had been helped tremendously by positive publicity from Lincoln Steffens and other muckrakers. Steffens complained to TR that his speech “put an end to all these journalistic investigations that have made you” and tried to convince the president that investigative journalists were not focused on the muck below but “on the celestial crown of American Democracy above” (Grenier 1960: 552–58; H. Shapiro 1968: 3–8).
2. “The three basic elements,” added Bob Greene of Investigative Reporters and Editors, “are that the investigation be the work of the reporter, not the work of others that he is reporting; that the subject of the story involves something that is important for his or her readers to know; and that others are attempting to hide the truth of these matters from the people.” The investigative organization originally adopted this definition in the early 1980s, only to drop the secrecy requirement in the 1990s, redefining the term to mean “digging ‘beneath the surface’ so we can help readers understand what’s going on in an increasingly complex world” (Bolch and Kay 1978: 3; Mollenhoff 1981: 19).
3. Until Congress established the *Congressional Record* in 1846, party newspapers in the nation’s capital transcribed all House and Senate debates. One of these papers, *The National Intelligencer*, was so closely identified with the government that in 1812 invading British soldiers targeted the paper for destruction while sparing most other private property in Washington (Ritchie 1991: 16–23). Although government funding of newspapers clearly offends

- modern notions of journalistic ethics and independence, at least one scholar has argued that the federal subsidy considerably improved news coverage of political and governmental events (Ames 1972: 22–30).
4. Technology may also have spurred the growth of journalistic objectivity. According to one study, the telegraph decreased political bias because wire services like the Associated Press had to keep their reports relatively neutral to retain newspaper clients of varying political ideologies. Wire service reporting was also generally short and terse because of the cost and difficulty of sending long dispatches by wire. This in turn led to less discursive journalistic writing and the development of the so-called “inverted pyramid” traditional news lead with its up-front summary of the most important information (Shaw 1967: 3–12, 31).
 5. Almost without exception, the muckrakers were white, middle class, and Protestant. Their writings bore an unmistakable religious influence. Earnest and righteous, they viewed their work as a moral crusade. Their core beliefs were optimistic and included honesty, individualism, personal responsibility, and the inherent goodness of man. They believed in equality of opportunity, not condition, certain that truth would prevail if given a fair chance in the marketplace of ideas. They focused on domestic, usually urban, issues, tinged with a hint of American nationalism. Their panacea for the many abuses they uncovered was a simple one: the Golden Rule. “Their criticisms of American society were, in their utmost reaches, very searching and radical,” historian Richard Hofstadter (1955: 196) noted, “but they were themselves moderate men who intended to propose no radical remedies. From the beginning, then, they were limited by the disparity between the boldness of their means and the tameness of their ends.” (See also Filler 1993: 3–7; Miraldi 2000: 1–24.)
 6. “As technology widened the reach of communications, increasing [the] costs of acquiring and starting media enterprises,” wrote Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution (1996: 7), “the news business in the twentieth-century followed some of the same tendencies toward greater consolidation that [could] be seen in other major industries, such as automobile and oil.” Ironically, the century that began with journalistic exposés of monopolistic consolidation by Standard Oil ended with journalistic outlets themselves consolidating into ever larger corporate behemoths, emulating the behavior of the oil business they once attacked.
 7. Proress (1991: 34, 41–42) argued that sustained muckraking did not really begin until the twentieth century because widespread illiteracy before then limited the public’s ability to read journalistic exposés. Nonetheless, early periods of investigative reporting can still be analyzed and explained using a supply-and-demand model, despite the obvious limits that illiteracy posed earlier in American history.
 8. To be sure, contemporary journalism includes numerous examples of important and aggressive investigative reporting, which are annually showcased in venues ranging from Pulitzer Prize awards to conferences by the nonprofit organization Investigative Reporters and Editors (Aucoin 2005; www.Pulitzer.org; www.IRE.org). However, in an era of saturation coverage by 24/7 cable outlets and a seemingly limitless universe of Web logs, such investigative reporting is overwhelmed by less substantive journalistic efforts.
 9. Although contemporary levels of public alienation, as measured in polling data, appear relatively high, current economic, political, and social foment seems nowhere near the same levels that occurred in earlier periods of turmoil such as the industrial revolution, the Great Depression, or the Vietnam/Watergate days of the 1960s and 1970s.

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