

(Note: This essay is intended to be the conclusion of a longer piece – under construction – to accompany the Muckraking class.)

What happened to Muckraking?

After nearly a decade of wild popularity during which politicians and corporate elites quaked and circulations soared, muckraking died back – some would say died out – about 1912. Historians offer a number of possible explanations for its demise, although arguably the investigative impulse remains central to journalism to this day.¹ Some of the extinction theories may lack factual support, while a combination of the others – and other societal causes as well – likely account for muckraking per se's departure from the American scene.

Media historian William David Sloan sums up the generally accepted theories for muckraking journalism's demise:

... vested interests killed the reform-minded magazines; the public grew tired of its continuous stream of exposes; the best reporter-reformers moved on to other endeavors; muckraking journalists lost their base of support as the Progressive impulse in the nation declined; and, in the most optimistic view, the journalist investigations had prompted reforms and thereby diminished the need for further muckraking.²

This essay briefly examines these claims and adds, for discussion, additional possibilities not discussed in the literature on muckraking.

Given the human greed and lust for power that were muckraking's *raison d'être*, it seems improbable that the field was a victim of its own success, putting itself out of business simply by purifying souls and gaining regulation to perpetuate the result. Certainly, Upton Sinclair, whose

¹ See, for example, Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 188-194.

² William David Sloan, *The Media in America: A History*, 8th ed. (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2011), 319.

1906 *Jungle* has been called “the pinnacle of the muckraking movement,”³ felt the job had never been completed. Pointing out that “If muckraking – as Sinclair vehemently maintained – was not simply about exposing the awful truth but also about pursuing that exposure to an end of legislative action and social change,” *The Jungle* may have been a singular success, “Sinclair’s real argument against the oligarchy of corporate interests, corrupt government, and a muzzled press that functioned to sustain the shocking societal and economic inequality – a system within which the meat packers’ situation was only an egregious example – was largely ignored, especially by the press.”⁴

Likewise, Samuel Hopkins Adams, who wrote the influential *Collier’s* series exposing the patent medicine industry, felt it necessary to revisit the reforms purportedly enacted after “The Great American Fraud” appeared in 1905-1906. According to historian Cassedy:

Adams and other reformers watched with concern as the Pure Food and Drugs Act was administratively undermined and emasculated under the pressures of the patent medicine interests during the few years after 1906. They were appalled as the Referee Board set up by President Roosevelt and his Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson, acted in virtual concert with the food industry to undercut the efforts of Dr. Harvey Wiley’s Bureau of Chemistry at enforcing the Pure Food and Drugs Act. Several key officials of the Department of Agriculture were, in fact, revealed to be actively obstructive and antagonistic to the act, its purposes and its enforcement. In a 1910 muckraking article, Adams reported that “the statute which required seventeen years of unremitting effort to place upon the books is, so far as many important forms of adulteration are concerned, practically an inert machine. It is being destroyed by the old allied forces of fraud and poison.”⁵

³ Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott, “Introduction,” in Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), ix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵ James H. Cassedy, “Muckraking and Medicine: Samuel Hopkins Adams,” *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1964): 85-99, at 87.

Nevertheless, media historian Sidney Kobre, among others, writes that “The government ... took care of many of the evils described in the articles by passing laws and by establishing agencies such as the Pure Food and Drug Administration. The public believed, therefore, that there was little need for additional exposés.”⁶

Just business?

Business considerations – profit, payback or defense – may have been partly behind the demise of muckraking. Kobre says that “In some instances, advertisers, whose companies had been attacked in the periodicals, withdrew their advertising.”⁷

Kobre adds that “Banks, which had extended credit to some of the magazine publishers, now tightened up. Some magazines, as a result of these situations, went bankrupt and others were merged with different periodicals.”⁸ But, when “big business interests absorbed other publications,” it was not always simply the old monopolistic version of larger fish swallowing smaller fish for the financial gain of a successively bigger, more robust corporation. “When the J.P. Morgan and Thomas Lamont interests (banking) in the form of Crowell Publishing Company purchased *The American Magazine* in 1916,” Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill point out:

the owners claimed there would be no change in policy. Even Ray Stannard Baker, a writer for *McClure's* and then for *The American Magazine*, saw no reason for the new business connection to disrupt established policies or restrict freedom of expression. The staff of the *American* either was kidding itself, or it did not understand the power of big business. *The American Magazine* did not survive its new ownership.⁹

⁶ Sidney Kobre, *Development of American Journalism* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1969), 719.

⁷ Ibid. See also, Jean Folkerts, Dwight L. Teeter Jr., and Edward Caudill, *Voices of a Nation: A History of Mass Media in the United States*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2009), 289.

⁸ Kobre, *Development of American Journalism*, 719.

⁹ Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill, *Voices of a Nation*, 289.

Baker's apparent naivete, not the only paradoxical example of blinding idealism among leading muckrakers, is remarkable for an investigative reporter. No cub reporter in any American newsroom has believed the "no changes" introduction in decades.

Nevertheless, examples of financial and business payback can be found. In 1908 Benjamin Hampton became editor of *New Broadway Magazine*, a small publication in New York City, renamed it *Hampton's New Broadway*, and "increased its national circulation to almost half a million by turning it into one of the most important mouthpieces for antitrust muckraking from 1909 through 1911, at which point corporate pressure on the magazine's shareholders and credit bankers forced Hampton to give up the publication."¹⁰

After Adams reexamined the state of patent medicine regulation in *Hampton's* magazine in 1910 and *Collier's* in 1912, he wrote *The Clarion*, "a luridly embellished fictional version of the fight on patent medicine evils."¹¹

But the book was refused advertisement in the newspapers at Binghamton, NY, home to Dr. Sylvester Andral Kilmer and his family, who produced a line of eighteen herbal patent medicines, including "Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root Kidney Medicine," which became "The Great Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root Kidney, Liver & Bladder Remedy"; "Indian Cough Cure/Consumption Oil"; "Female Remedy" ("The Great Blood Purifier and System Regulator"); and "Ocean Weed Heart Remedy."¹²

¹⁰ Mark Lynn Anderson, "The Historian Is Paramount," *Film Industry* 26, no. 2 (2014): 1-30, at 19.

¹¹ Cassedy, "Muckraking and Medicine," 88.

¹² Cassedy, "Muckraking and Medicine," 88; Joe Nickell, "Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root," Center for Inquiry. Accessed at <https://centerforinquiry.org/blog/dr-kilmers-swamp-root/>. "Dr. Kilmer's Medicine Bottle," Interesting Artifacts of Fort Stanwix National Monument, National Park Service. Accessed at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/dr-kilmer-s-medicine-bottle.htm>.

Adams related to the *Journal of the American Medical Association* how his publisher, Houghton Mifflin, had sought to place advertising for the book in Binghamton's newspapers:

To the *Press*, Houghton first sent an advertisement "specially designed to arouse the local interest of a city largely devoted to the patent medicine industry," i.e., Swamp Root. Quite understandably, perhaps, because the paper had once belonged to the owners of the Swamp Root business, it rejected this advertisement. It also turned down a later, more general one. Adams' point was emphasized, however, when the other daily, the *Republican-Herald*, also rejected both advertisements "owing to a peculiar agreement existing between the Binghamton newspapers. . . ." Meanwhile, Adams reported, "the local book stores refused to order it, although it was having one of the largest advance sales of the year in other parts of the country. One store made no secret of the fact that fear of the Swamp Root interests kept the novel off their shelves. It was not even obtainable at the local public library."¹³

But Sloan suggests that the corporate vengeance theory needs caution. "There is evidence for this allegation," he writes, "but it has to be weighed carefully with the knowledge that its source was often the frustrated muckrakers themselves."¹⁴

Rise of chains

Moreover, anti-competitive impulses that would pare the number of publications – muckrakers among them – were at work even before the age of the Muckrakers began. Consolidation can be seen nearly coincidental to the period – part of the same spirit pervasive in this new facet of the industrial age – as magnates bought and brought together chains of newspapers and magazines. In Great Britain, corporate constriction had begun in the 1890s and a decade later its effects were felt in the United States as well. E.W. Scripps owned thirty-three newspapers by 1914. William Randolph Hearst would come to own many more: by 1922, twenty daily and eleven Sunday papers; six magazines, including the muckraking *Cosmopolitan*; "two

¹³ Cassedy, "Muckraking and Medicine," 88.

¹⁴ Sloan, *The Media in America*, 319.

wire services, the largest newspaper feature syndicate, a newsreel company, and a motion picture production company.”¹⁵ In New York City, Frank A. Munsey “merged or contributed to the merger of the *Press* into the morning *Sun*, the morning *Sun* into the *Herald*, the *Herald* (Bennett’s old paper) into the *Tribune* (Greeley’s old paper), and, finally, the *Globe* into the *Evening Sun* and the *Mail* into the *Evening Telegram*.”¹⁶

Media scholar Mitchell Stephens observes:

“Consolidation” this process is called. The number of daily newspapers in the United States would begin to decline after 1915. And when there are fewer of any kind of news organ [magazines included], those that survive inevitably aim to attract more general audiences. American newspapers began migrating away from where many of their wildest but most creative ancestors had lived – the fringes.¹⁷

Tougher job

One piece of the puzzle that seems under explored is that muckraking simply became harder on a number of fronts. The trusts, child labor, housing, and food and drug safety were in one sense the low-hanging fruit. Muckraking’s next wave of investigators were going to have to search wider for targets and deeper to rekindle interest in subjects already covered. Child labor, for instance, had already been exposed by a number of celebrated muckrakers, including Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives*, 1890)); Lewis Hine, (child labor photo essays, 1908-1924); John Spargo (*The Bitter Cry of Children*, 1906); even the creative publicity stunts of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones.

¹⁵ Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 202.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The muckrakers also were finding that the subjects of their investigations were becoming more aggressive in the defenses they employed to keep the journalists out. As early as 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote to Roosevelt in the White House that “A man has to be something of a detective, or else intimate with the workingmen, as I was, before he can really see what is going on. And it is becoming a great deal more difficult since the publication of ‘The Jungle.’”¹⁸ He added:

I have received to-day a letter from an employe of Armour & Company, in response to my request to him to take Ray Stannard Baker in hand and show him what he showed me a year and a half ago. He says: “He will have to be well disguised, for “the lid is on” in Packingtown, he will find two detectives in paces where before there was only one.”¹⁹

Overload

One piece of the decline puzzle, Kobre argues, was that “Public interest in the muckraking exposés also drained off into the Progressive Movement with the election of Woodrow Wilson as President in 1912.”²⁰ More than simply the election of Wilson, 1912 marked the thunderous Progressive champion Theodore Roosevelt’s run – and loss – as a third-party candidate, a statement, perhaps, that the public had had enough.

Media historian Frank Luther Mott contends that “The number of these magazine crusades, and the lack of restraint of some of them at length wearied and sickened the public, and they subsided. At the same time the newspaper crusades of the same character decreased. Many

¹⁸ Upton Sinclair to Theodore Roosevelt, March 10, 1906. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed at <https://www.archives.gov/global-pages/larger-image.html?i=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/upton-sinclair-letter-t-roosevelt-1.jpg&c=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/upton-sinclair-letter-t-roosevelt.caption.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kobre, *Development of American Journalism*, 719.

crusaders were disillusioned, as [Fremont] Older and Steffens were to be later.”²¹ Tarbell herself predicted that this might derail reform efforts pursued by some of the muckrakers and other radical reformers. In her autobiography, she wrote, that nothing good would come of simply raising alarms. “Now I was convinced that in the long run the public they were trying to stir would weary of vituperation, that if you were to secure permanent results the mind must be convinced.”²²

Although examination of copies of *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and other muckraking magazines suggests that these covers were not screaming at readers from the newsstands – with exceptions such as *Collier's* skull illustration for Adams' *The Great American Fraud* – public ennui or toughening from being bombarded with sensational details is advanced by some historians for the end of muckraking. Journalists tend to follow each other's leads, and investigative success can generate a feeding frenzy. That occurred during the Penny Press era; again in the so-called “objective” press era of the 1870s and 1880s; and yet again with the sensational and Yellow press of the 1890s. More recently, the outpouring of investigative journalism immediately after the Watergate scandal of the 1970s brought concern even within the industry that the projects found everywhere were overdone and ultimately would generate public antipathy, if not outright backlash. Not everything needed to be investigated or muckraked, it was pointed out.

In the muckraking era, whether by correlation or actual causality, readers seemed to respond to a lull in the muckraking. Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill point out that “*McClure's*

²¹ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 575.

²² Ida M. Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 242.

circulation actually increased immediately after the muckraking period, as the muckrakers became heavily involved in promoting World War I.”²³

Moving on

Another consideration advanced for muckraking’s demise is that for various reasons, some of the older muckrakers simply left the game that, in some cases, they had never meant to inhabit for long in the first place. According to Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill, “Many became biographers and, disillusioned, turned to America’s past as well as to travel and religion, losing faith in the masses who failed to respond to middle-class altruism.”²⁴ Lincoln Steffens became a full-time government reformer – Ida Tarbell had sensed “Steffens’ growing dissatisfaction with the restrictions of journalism” as early as 1908.²⁵ Baker joined Woodrow Wilson’s team and ultimately wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Wilson. Phillips – muckraking’s bad boy in 1906 – was already well into a career as a novelist when he was gunned down in 1911. Adams, and others, dissatisfied with the periodicals business, joined Sinclair as muckraking novelists.

Granville Hicks notes, “Upton Sinclair charged in *The Brass Check* that muckraking was deliberately suppressed, and there is something in this charge, but it must also be said that muckraking simply wore itself out as journalistic fashions will.”²⁶ He continues:

²³ Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill, *Voices of a Nation*, 289.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Tarbell, *All in a Day’s Work*, 297.

²⁶ “Granville Hicks, “Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler,” *Commentary*, February 1952. Accessed at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincoln-steffens-he-covered-the-futurethe-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/>.

The early muckrakers documented their exposures with considerable care, but sensationalists moved into the field, and the public got tired. Furthermore, some of the muckrakers themselves, including Steffens, began to question the value of what they were doing. Steffens eventually was to become convinced that it had accomplished nothing. “Take it from me,” he wrote in the ’30s: “muckraking leads to entertainment, not to action. It’s the other way around. Action leads to information.”²⁷

Socialist spiral

It is beyond the scope of this brief essay to explore the political dynamic driving many of the leading muckrakers other than to note in passing that their focus on improving conditions for the “common man” placed them on a left-leaning spectrum. Thus, politics may have contributed to muckraking’s loss of support. If Tarbell, simply interested in letting the facts tell the story, could be considered a centrist, with Steffens more to the left, Sinclair was vociferously radical, on the far left politically, “enough of a socialist to think that any solution that left the power in the hands of the owning class was invariably flawed.”²⁸ In applying that criticism to the press, Sinclair built on the work of Will Irwin, the other great muckraker of the press, whose 1911 series in *Collier’s*, “The American Newspaper,” was “the first systematic attempt to critique journalism”²⁹ and an attempt “to extend progressive thinking to journalism.”³⁰

As Sinclair would echo, Irwin found that “‘Newspapers ... have come more and more to put their views into their news columns.’ He saw reporters coming under pressure from

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ McChesney and Scott, “Introduction,” xxvi.

²⁹ Sloan, *The Media in America*, 318.

³⁰ Kevin G. Barnhurst, “The Problem of Realist Events in American Journalism,” *Media and Communication* 2, no. 2 (2014): 84-95, at 86.

advertisers, corporate buyouts, and the tendency of publishers to join the country club set.” To the extent that readers agreed with these assessments, the muckrakers would lose their punch.

Sinclair, like Spargo, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among other muckrakers, were active socialists. Returning from a visit to the Soviet Union in 1919, Steffens would join Sinclair in repudiating American capitalism: “I have seen the future, and it works.”³¹ In a reflection on Steffens’ politics, Granville Hicks writes that he “had everything Americans are supposed to want—money, prestige, the friendship of the great. And yet he became a Communist in all but party membership.”³² If muckraking and American socialism were on parallel though not necessarily linked trajectories,³³ scholars might well expand examinations of whether America’s response to socialism and, later, communism, may have contributed to the decline of muckraking fervor.

Scholar Courtney Bowers acknowledges that “Though muckraking was a success in its time, it eventually petered out. The religious fervor died away, and the people tired of corruption and dastardly deeds. The major problems had been fixed—the work of the muckrakers was largely done. There was a movement for balanced opinions, sliding away from controversial

³¹ Lincoln Steffens to Marie Howe, April 3, 1919. AZQuotes.com, Wind and Fly LTD, 2020. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/651872>. The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations notes: “Steffens had composed the expression before he had even arrived in Russia.”

³² “Granville Hicks, “Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler,” *Commentary*, February 1952. Accessed at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincoln-steffens-he-covered-the-futurethe-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/>.

³³ Sheila Reeves, “How Radical Were the Muckrakers? Socialist Press Views, 1902-1906,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 1984): 763-770.

stands, and muckraking itself became a big business in which advertising and corporate buyouts became king.³⁴

Given the sketchy interest provided to date by media historians and others, a rich cultural history of the twentieth century's first two decades could be framed from the proverbial "Questions for Further Research."

³⁴, Courtney E. Bowers, "Muckraking: A Dirty Job with Clean Intentions," *The Histories* 7: no. 2 (2019). Accessed at https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol7/iss2/2/.