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‘Single out the rascals for distinction from their fellows’: Realist, Prosecutorial, Yellow, and Radical Muckraking in the Progressive Era

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Instead of a single muckraking movement, four shades of muckraking existed during the Progressive Era. While all muckrakers were involved in exposure of wrongdoing, they differed, sometimes drastically, in *how* they exposed. *Realist* muckrakers, such as Ray Stannard Baker and Ida Tarbell, presented multiple sides of an issue, avoided inflammatory language, and tended to abstain from editorializing. *Yellow* muckrakers, including Thomas Lawson and David Graham Phillips, used sensational language, ridiculed and demonized their opponents, and treated their own opinions as if they were certainties. *Prosecutorial* muckrakers, such as Mark Sullivan and Norman Hapgood, wrote like prosecutors—telling restrained but one-sided stories that were based on a strategic and partial selection of facts. *Radical* muckrakers, including Upton Sinclair and Charles Edward Russell, infused their journalism with their ideology, giving voice to investigative journalism that preached revolutionary socialism. Drawing on the ideas of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, I argue that those journalistic distinctions are important because journalists not only share information with the public, but they also share their epistemology and model public discourse. This monograph clarifies an influential moment in journalism history and helps us recognize how different types of journalism can advance or hinder a democratic culture.

While investigative journalism existed for decades before the Progressive Era,¹ the term “muckraking” came from a speech by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Moments after construction workers lowered the cornerstone of the new House of Representatives onto its foundation and covered it in corn, wine, and oil in accordance with some ancient and now abandoned tradition, the president stood before a crowd of spectators and both praised and criticized investigative journalists.² Roosevelt argued that some types of journalism created social division and planted seeds of chaos and radicalism, while other forms of journalism educated the public, created greater understanding of social problems, and provided a foundation for positive social change.³

Roosevelt’s muckraker speech is typically remembered as an attack—a president calling journalists’ names—but the text of his speech reveals something more nuanced and significant. He began by honoring “every writer” who exposed “evil” in business and politics, so long as it was done with “honesty, sanity and self-restraint.” He told his audience

that progress required the “unsparing exposure of the politician who betrays his trust” and “of the big businessman who makes or spends his fortune in illegitimate or corrupt ways.” Roosevelt argued: “The men who with stern sobriety and truth assail the many evils of our time, whether in the public press, or in magazines, or in books, are the leaders and allies of all engaged in the work for social and political betterment,” but those who employ “hysterical sensationalism” utilize “the very poorest weapon wherewith to fight for lasting righteousness” and “may do more damage to the public mind than the crime itself.” Then Roosevelt made the enduring association between investigative journalism and the muckraker, maintaining: the men with the muckrake are often indispensable to the well-being of society, but only if they know when to stop raking the muck If the whole picture is painted black there remains no hue whereby to single out the rascals for distinction from their fellows.⁴

This monograph can be seen as a refinement of Roosevelt’s

muckraking speech—an attempt to re-capture the distinctions between different types of investigatory journalism in the Progressive Era, and to consider the possible implications that these divergent types of journalism can have on public opinion and democracy.

Roosevelt’s muckraker speech was almost certainly politically motivated. His unnamed target was David Graham Phillips, and possibly Phillips’ publisher William Randolph Hearst who was trying to break into presidential politics.⁵ While Roosevelt is largely remembered as a Progressive, he was also the head of the Republican party which dominated the Senate. Phillips’s series “Treason of the Senate,” published in Hearst’s *Cosmopolitan*, was a direct journalistic attack on the Republican-controlled Senate. Throughout the nine-part series, Phillips ridiculed and mocked twenty-one Senators, eighteen of which were Republicans, including New York Senator and Roosevelt ally Chauncey Depew, who Phillips’ called a “buffoon” and “a spineless sycophant” who had a “greasy tongue and a greasy backbone.”⁶

The daily press, spurred on by powerful opponents of investigative journalism, largely ignored Roosevelt’s distinction and instead latched onto the “muckraker” label as a derogatory term for *all* investigative journalists who exposed the unsavory sides of society.⁷ Many historians also ignored the more precise meaning in Roosevelt’s speech and instead wrote that the President gave investigative journalists a “collective title,”⁸ “labeled all of the crusading journalists of the day muckrakers,”⁹ and “chastised the Tarbells, Bakers, and Steffenses—along with such coworkers as David Graham Phillips and Upton Sinclair, Charles E. Russell and Samuel Hopkins Adams.”¹⁰ The original distinction between different types of journalism and their varied impact on public opinion and political debate has been all but lost.¹¹

The way we remember Roosevelt’s muckraker speech is significant because of its relation to our larger interpretation of the muckrakers. While the term “muckraker” has remained in the public lexicon—shifting from being an insult to being embraced as synonymous with investigatory

journalism¹²—historians’ interpretations have been hindered by too loose a recognition of the varying styles, impulses, epistemologies, and methods of the muckrakers. Both journalists who were beholden to “stern sobriety and truth” as well as “wild preachers of unrest” who were “sensational, lurid, and untruthful” have all been classed as muckrakers.¹³ This paper attempts to bring more precise terminology to the way we think about the muckrakers, and argues that we need to confront and modify confusing and stilted terms.

The paper is organized into four parts. The first is a historiography of the muckrakers, which argues that many historical interpretations of the muckrakers have placed disproportionate emphasis on their commonalities and shared essence, at the expense of recognizing their journalistic differences. The second part builds on the ideas of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann to consider why differences in journalistic tone, method, and epistemology are crucial for the health of democratic debate. I argue that journalists not only pass on information to their readers, but

also share their epistemological outlook; they give the public a method for making sense of the world and a model for discussing public events. Based on this theoretical perspective, in the third part I layout an alternative interpretive framework that classifies the muckrakers based on four different approaches to investigative journalism. In the conclusion I consider how different types of muckraking influence the formation of a democratic culture.

Historiography of the muckrakers—pluralism or a central essence?

In 1906, in the midst of the muckraking movement, the literary editor of *The Independent*, Edwin E. Slosson recognized the varying hues of muckraking. “When the historian of American literature write of the opening of this century, he will give one of his most interesting chapters to the literature of exposure,” wrote Slosson. “It blossomed forth in every hue of rhetorical red, from the aniline cerise of Miss Tarbell’s tale of Standard Oil to the Tyrian crimson of Mr. Lawson’s story of Amalgamated Copper.”¹⁴ What those different shades of

rhetorical red would actually look like were still in flux during Slosson's time, as if the paint was yet to dry on the historical canvas.

In the opening chapter of *Drift and Mastery* (1914) Walter Lippmann tried to classify different types of muckraking, but he gave up after looking at “a thousand gradations of credibility and exaggeration.” Lippmann does not spend much time exploring the variations within the muckraking movement, beyond writing that there was a difference between later muckraking which was more exaggerated and conspiratorial, and “the earlier kind of muckraking” which was more moderate and willing to tell readers of both the honest and the corrupt sides of business and politics.¹⁵ As time has gone on, historians have been less likely to emphasize the various hues or gradations of muckraking, and have instead searched for a central essence.¹⁶

An early example of the central essence interpretation is in C. C. Regier's *The Era of the Muckrakers* (1932). Regier described the muckrakers as a “fighting” force who were “nauseated,” “shamed and sickened” and “did not mildly call

attention to evils,” but instead “threw ... bricks” and “thundered their denunciations in bold-face, italics, and large sized caps.” This interpretation fit a muckraker like Charles Edward Russell—whose journalism displayed passion and resentment, and who, by his own admission, wrote that “wherever an exploiter showed his head” he was “ready with a brick to heave at it.”¹⁷ But interpreting the muckrakers as outraged militants contradicted Regier's own description of other muckrakers, such as Ida Tarbell, who “did not ... let personal bias affect the diligence of her research” and whose articles on Standard Oil were a “careful historical analysis.”¹⁸

Louis Filler (1939) continued the search for a central muckraker essence. He described a generalized muckraking movement that was the opposite of Regier's radical, disgusted, and attacking movement. Filler's muckraking movement was moderate, good natured, and detached. He emphasized a “straightforward style, concerning itself with facts and figures.” This fit Tarbell, but contradicted not only Russell's style of muckraking but other muckrakers such as

David Graham Phillips, who swung wildly and demonized his opponents, and was generally light on evidence to support his bold charges.¹⁹ In Phillips's popular series "Treason of the Senate" (1906), the upper chamber of congress was more dangerous than "an invading army" and a "monster" with "many heads."²⁰ Even Phillips' publisher, William Randolph Hearst, who was known as one of the "yellowest" of all publishers, was said to have stopped the presses of *Cosmopolitan* after reading Phillips' article and said: "I had intended an exposé. We have merely an attack. Voice is not force. Windy vituperation is not convincing.... The facts, the proof, the documentary evidence are the important thing, and the article is deficient in them."²¹

There have occasionally been historians who recognized the contradictions that arise when all the muckrakers are grouped under a singular label. J. Herbert Altschull (1990) wrote that "to some, muckraker is a dirty word, the embodiment of all the excesses of the yellow press" and "to others, it epitomizes the virtues of a democratic press." The tradition of the yellow press—a crass form of tabloid

journalism centered around self-promotion, an embrace of popular prejudices, and commercialism—is at odds with the democratic ideals of the press, where journalists supply the public with as reliable information as possible so citizens can form intelligent judgments.²² Altschull pointed out the contradiction in using a single term to describe a diverse approach to journalism, but he did not propose a new mode of classification that attempted to resolve some of the contradictions.²³

Robert Miraldi did use the term "muckraking" to distinguish between different types of journalism, but his definition explicitly excluded some of the most prominent muckrakers of the Progressive Era. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* was excluded because it was fiction, and Miraldi excluded most of the writing of Mark Sullivan and Norman Hapgood because they were opinion writers.²⁴ This left non-fiction, non-editorial, investigative journalists, which still did not distinguish between other crucial differences in method, tone, and epistemology. Miraldi's definition of muckraking is also too restrictive because it severs the

connective tissue between the muckrakers that did exist. Sinclair, Phillips, and Sullivan, practiced investigative journalism that exposed wrongdoing, as did Tarbell, Baker, and Lawson. To try to remove Sinclair, the most widely remember muckraker, from the muckraking tradition is an unnecessarily sharp break in historical interpretation. Instead of claiming that Sinclair and others were not muckrakers, I believe it is more useful to develop terms to distinguish between different types of muckraking, recognizing their commonalities and their differences.²⁵

Compared to journalism historians, historians of the wider Progressive Era tended to be even less precise in their generalizations about the muckrakers. For instance, in the handful of pages that dealt with the muckrakers, Arthur Link and Richard McCormick (1983) wrote that the muckrakers expressed the “progressive attitude toward industrialism.”²⁶ This overlooks the fact that there was neither a single muckraker attitude towards industrialism, nor a single mode of expression—only a pluralism of perspectives. There were prominent socialist muckrakers,

such as Sinclair and Russell who tended to express their investigative findings in a bellow of despair and ideological zeal. There were others like Henry D. Lloyd who at times favored worker-owned collectives and at other times supported elitist Fabian socialism, and whose journalism was full of philosophical moralizing and footnotes of evidence. And there were muckrakers, such as Tarbell, who wrote an entire series of articles on “The Golden Rule in Business,” which featured favorable articles about industrialists like Thomas Lynch and Henry Ford, written in a restrained and moderate tone.²⁷

Even historians who placed the muckrakers at the center of the Progressive movement, such as Richard Hofstadter, still focused on how to group the muckrakers together into a unified whole.²⁸ Hofstadter wrote that “To an extraordinary degree the work of the Progressive movement rested upon its journalism.” Hofstadter boiled down the muckrakers to a single characteristic: “literary realism.” His term was fitting for a muckraker like Tarbell, as well as her fellow *McClure’s* muckraker,

Ray Stannard Baker, who wrote with care, and even conservatism, about labor violence, railroad propaganda, and segregation. Baker kept his opinions out of his text, and instead quoted sources directly in an attempt to “tell their stories, exactly as [he] heard them . . . hot out of life.”²⁹ But Hofstadter’s literary realism doesn’t come close to describing the muckraking of Phillips or the millionaire-muckraker Thomas Lawson, whose series “Frenzied Finance” offered an exaggerated and sensational look at the world of big business. While Hofstadter described the muckrakers as “moderate men [and women] who intended to propose no radical remedies,”³⁰ Lawson explicitly called for “quick, radical, action.”³¹ It was not just the yellow muckraking of Lawson—Hofstadter’s “literary realism” failed to capture the radicalism of Sinclair, Russell, John Kenneth Turner, and Gustavus Myers—all of whom used muckraking to promote their ideology.³²

In the 1970s there was a well-documented shift in the way historians interpreted the Progressive Era that offers a meaningful parallel to the current state of the historiography of the

muckrakers. For decades, historians looked for a central essence and a cohesive “movement” out of the various pieces of the Progressive movement. Hofstadter saw the Progressive movement as a moralistic “status revolution” that united middle-class urban professionals with established political elites.³³ Robert Wiebe saw the Progressives as bureaucratic modernizers who developed professional standards and looked to the scientific method to tame the complexity of modern industrialism and create order.³⁴ Martin Sklar and James Weinstein saw progressivism as “corporate liberalism”—a disingenuous reform movement that was controlled by big business.³⁵ Despite the differences in interpretation, they all looked for a central essence that connected the disparate reformers.

In the midst of this search for the animating heart of the Progressive movement, Peter Filene wrote “An Obituary for ‘The Progressive Movement,’”³⁶ which challenged the idea that there was anything that could coherently be called “progressivism” or even a “movement.” Filene, along with

John Bunker,³⁷ John Kirby,³⁸ David Kennedy,³⁹ and Daniel Rodgers,⁴⁰ argued that the path forward lay in recognizing the differences within the Progressive movement, and trying to understand the shifting coalitions, as opposed to treating the Progressives as a unified force. To speak of a unified movement was “to wrap the entire period within an undifferentiated ideological embrace without saying anything about the diversity within the period.”⁴¹ Instead of a single Progressive movement, there were multiple movements taking place at the same time. After this historiographic shift, new interpretations emerged that emphasized pluralistic sources of power within the Progressive movement. “There are imperialists. There are immigrant political bosses and politically powerful farmers’ lobbies in addition to the corporate managers, social scientists, status-anxious members of the middle class, and bohemian cultural radicals,” wrote Rodgers.⁴²

Unlike the historiography of the wider Progressive Era, which shifted from a search for a central essence to a recognition of a plurality of interests and

approaches to reform, the historiography of the muckrakers still largely embraces an interpretation of a monolithic muckraking movement. Focusing on the common thread of investigative journalism has allowed us to gloss over the numerous journalistic differences within muckraking, just as early historians of the Progressive movement generalized about reform as opposed to recognizing the vast diversity between different types of reform. Writing about muckraking as if it contained a single approach to investigative journalism is the norm. The recognition of a plurality of approaches to muckraking has yet to take place. In many of the most influential books in journalism studies, the muckrakers are treated as a unified force. In *Deciding What’s News*, Herbert Gans wrote that modern journalism’s values emerged from the muckrakers of the Progressive Era. “The values [of the muckrakers] signify and maintain a proud chapter in American journalism, for during the Progressive period, journalists achieved a level of power and influence in American life” they have rarely held since.⁴³ Many

journalism historians would agree that the muckrakers deeply influenced American journalism and played an important role in many Progressive Era reforms, yet to speak about the muckrakers as a singular force, sharing common journalistic values, and having a singular influence, is misleading. While all muckrakers were involved in exposure and investigation, they differed, sometimes drastically, in *how* they exposed. Beyond investigating wrongdoing—which is an important commonality—they didn’t share similar journalistic means or similar political ends. To better understand both the Progressive Era and investigatory journalism, we should see muckraking as a tradition that is composed of diverse and often times clashing journalistic approaches, as opposed to a singular monolithic muckraking tradition. Just like the disparate strands of the Progressive movement, the journalists who have been labeled as muckrakers did not share a common understanding of who they were or what they wanted out of journalism.

I want to be careful not to overstate my critique of the

historiography of the muckrakers; few if any historians depicted the muckrakers as a completely undifferentiated mass, and every movement is made up of an array of groups and perspectives. Instead, my argument is that the generalized “muckraker” label has overwhelmed the significant differences that existed between the muckrakers. My point is not to reject the muckraker label, but instead it is to recognize that the dominant interpretations of the muckrakers have focused on their journalistic similarities, while only recognizing their journalistic differences in passing. This is understandable; to put the multitude of historical facts into some discernable order it is necessary for historians to generalize and label. Thomas Hobbes’ maxim, that “Nothing in the world is universal but names, for the things named are every one of them individual and singular,”⁴⁴ is worth keeping in mind, while still recognizing that labels and generalizations are necessary for historians to usefully discuss the past. Yet, after more than a century of describing the muckrakers as “crusading” (or “moderate”) journalists who wrote “pure sensationalism” (or “literary

realism”), we need to move beyond a single generalized term and a search for a central essence of the muckraking movement, and see muckraking as a pluralistic tradition that was (and is) composed of diverse and often times clashing journalistic approaches.

How (not) to create a deliberative and cooperative public opinion

Journalists do not simply uncover and transmit facts and other information to the public—their work is part of the process that gives facts meaning.⁴⁵ Journalists pass on an epistemology or a way of deciding what to believe about the world—a method for separating truth and falsehood—and a model for discussing and debating public affairs. As anyone who has been in an argument knows, there is a vast difference between someone who shares their ideas with humility, understanding, reference to supporting evidence, and an acceptance that there are multiple ways of looking at an issue, versus someone who is full of outrage and certainty, or someone whose ideas are so insulated by ideological dogma and the

language of partisan battle that they refuse to consider anyone else’s perspective. The reason it is important to distinguish between different types of muckraking is because using a single muckraker label ignores these differences in communication and their influence on public discourse.

As both Walter Lippmann⁴⁶ and John Dewey⁴⁷ have argued—in different ways—the character and quality of journalism is crucial for the politics and public opinion of any age. In “A Test of the News,” *Liberty and the News*, *Public Opinion*, and *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann was primarily concerned with the publics’ and journalists’ inability to form accurate pictures of the world, but he was also concerned with the method in which those pictures were formed. When journalists romanticize complex issues into simplified stories of good versus evil, or attempt to satisfy readers’ (or their own) whims and prejudices, Lippmann feared the public would incorporate a similar approach to their own thinking. Whether the character of public opinion was rigorous, Socratic, and self-examining, or whether it was undisciplined, self-aggrandizing, and full of

exaggeration and gross simplification, would depend, in part, on the method and tone of the press.⁴⁸

While Dewey was also concerned about the veracity of the information journalists shared, he was more concerned with the problem of how to develop a sense of community, and how to integrate an individual's identity and self-interest into the broader society. This was especially challenging in a diverse nation that stretched thousands of miles and was inhabited by hundreds of millions of citizens. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argued that journalists should not only supply the public with accurate, verifiable information, but should also help citizens from "different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups" and learn to see how their seemingly isolated interests were actually intertwined with broader social interests.⁴⁹ To overcome regionalism, tribalism, and absolutism in public opinion, journalists had the lofty task of facilitating a national dialogue that helped build understanding, tolerance, and cooperation between different groups. In *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey wrote,

the "Democratic method is ... public discussions carried on ... in legislative halls ... in the press, private conversations and public assemblies."⁵⁰ He argued that the more citizens participated in the democratic methods of "consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, [and] cooperative intelligence" then the greater their skill and capacity would be in these areas.⁵¹ "Majority rule" on its own, "is as foolish as its critics charge," wrote Dewey. It is through "discussion, consultation and persuasion" that it can become intelligent and compassionate, or at least less foolish and cruel.⁵² For a society to become democratic, citizens need to learn how to see the world from perspectives which are different from their own, and to develop the habits of deliberative and cooperative public discourse.

This is where the method of journalism becomes crucial. If journalists model a public debate based on name calling and outrage that is quick to place blame, and purposefully distorts the views of their opponents, then deliberative and cooperative public discussion becomes nearly impossible. Similarly, if journalists only share evidence that supports one

particular interpretation, even if it is done with civility, the public will still lack the knowledge to see an issue from another's perspective. When we group together, under the generalized term "muckraker," journalists whose approach, tone, epistemological outlook, and use of evidence was so drastically different, we fail to recognize the varied ways journalists can impact public opinion. Our limited terminology hinders our ability to discuss the type of journalism we had in the past or that we have today.

This paper is built around two main premises. The first, already stated, is that the type of journalism influences public opinion. Some forms of journalism breed tribalism and resentment, while others help us understand complex issues, or give us better insights into those who see the world differently. Journalists often give us the words we use to discuss political issues, and their tone and framing—whether angry and volatile, or moderate and respectful—are crucial for the solidarity and wellbeing of a society. Of course, it is not a one-to-one relationship, but the character of journalism influences the character of public

opinion. During the Progressive Era, what the public was reading influenced how they viewed the trust question, the labor question, the race question,⁵³ and a host of other issues ranging from urbanization and the commoditization of goods, to food and drug safety and the use of natural resources.

If the first premise has to do with the relationship between the type of journalism and the character of public opinion, the second has to do with the relationship between the language of history and public opinion. By this I mean that our understanding of journalism today is intertwined with our understanding of journalism history, *and* with the language that we have developed throughout history to talk about the role of journalism in society. Part of my argument is that historians have often failed to distinguish between radical ideologically driven muckraking, one-sided partisan muckraking, sensationalized self-promotional muckraking, and balanced muckraking that promotes a deeper and multifaceted understanding of an issue. All are housed under the *muckraker* label. If we agree with the first premise,

that the type of journalism impacts the type of public debate a society will have, then classifying different types of investigative journalism under the broad muckraker label hides essential journalistic differences that influence the quality of public debate and the strength of social cohesion.

Instead of seeing muckraking as a distinct type of journalism that is separate from other journalistic traditions—such as, respectively, the partisan press that emerged in the Colonial Era and the early republic, the more politically neutral press that began to take root with the rise of the “penny press” in the 1830s, the radical abolitionist press surrounding the Civil War, the yellow press in the late nineteenth century, and the more “objective” minded professional press that developed later in the twentieth century—I view remnants of these journalistic traditions as existing *within* the muckraking of the Progressive Era. There was *yellow* muckraking just as there was more restrained and neutral muckraking, which I have called *realist* muckraking, along with *radical* ideological muckraking, and partisan *prosecutorial* muckraking.

Four Shades of Muckraking: Realist, Prosecutorial, Yellow, and Radical

During the Progressive Era, muckraking that appeared in nationally distributed magazines addressed a need that had previously been fulfilled by local journalists and even citizens themselves. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, society was far more centered around the local community. While there were national and international issues, many of the problems citizens had to solve were local in origin. The economy was made up of small local businesses and a community’s politicians were reasonably accessible. If a politician absconded with the money for a new bridge, or if a butcher shop sold spoiled meat, it was relatively easy for citizens to figure out what went wrong. During the Civil War and in the decades after the war, the provincial nature of American society went through a rapid and aggressive transformation. A largely unregulated nation-wide economy developed after the Supreme Court prevented states from regulating interstate commerce.⁵⁴ Cities swelled as millions of people moved from

rural areas.⁵⁵ Within a matter of decades, the relative transparency that existed in small-town America had vanished. In its place were massive trust companies, commodity markets, sprawling cities, massive industrial factories, and a politics that was national instead of local. “The age could only be comprehended in bulk,” wrote Robert Wiebe.⁵⁶ Giant monopolies—located in big cities or even overseas—dictated terms to the public on everything from the cost of jute bagging and rope, to railroad rates and the price of sugar and oil. Society was no longer apparent to its itself—hidden from its citizens.⁵⁷ The vast impersonal forces that touched the lives of nearly every American were largely hidden from sight. “The facts have changed,” wrote John Dewey in 1916. “We are part of the same world as that in which Europe exists and into which Asia is coming. Industry and commerce have interwoven our destinies. To maintain our older state of mind is to cultivate a dangerous illusion.”⁵⁸

A critical question for Progressives, including the muckrakers, was whether democratic ideals could be transformed to fit an industrialized nation. That is, in this new

environment could the average citizen understand and make wise decisions regarding the issues that affected society? Muckraking attempted to function as the peoples’ eyes and ears in this new industrial age—allowing readers to imagine the massive oil refineries of Standard Oil, the meat packing plants of Chicago, the mines of Amalgamated copper, the hidden corporate structure and the backroom deals of trust companies, “the octopus” of railroads stretching all over the country, and a host of other distant and hidden forces.⁵⁹

The challenges of globalization, urbanization, and industrialization were not merely theoretical test for democracy, and muckraking was not born out of readers’ mild curiosities about the changes their country was going through. Many farmers, laborers, and small businesspeople were hurting and opportunity seemed to be shrinking. At the same time, a select few amassed astounding fortunes, greater than the world had ever known. It is no coincidence that muckraking and the Progressive Era followed the outrage of the failed Populist movement and the economic downturn in the mid-1890s.

Muckraking gave readers a backstory for how and why these social and economic changes were taking place. As Walter Lippmann wrote, muckraking “arose because the world has been altered radically, not because Americans fell in love with honesty” and exposure.⁶⁰

The start of the muckraking movement is typically traced back to the January 1903 issue of *McClure's Magazine* when Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, and Lincoln Steffens wrote articles on corruption in business, labor, and government, respectively.⁶¹ In an editorial, editor S. S. McClure identified the common element in the three articles, writing that all could have fallen under the title “The American Contempt of Law.”⁶² The three articles had much in common. Not only did they all expose corruption, but each of them identified documentary evidence, avoided the melodramatic “red-hot invective” that was common to that era,⁶³ took a detached tone, and told multi-sided stories that represented diverse points of view.

As sales of *McClure's* swelled, more than a dozen other national magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Collier's*, *Everybody's*, *The Independent*,

Pearson's, *Hampton's*, *Success*, *The American Magazine*, *Leslie's*, *Appeal to Reason*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *World's Work*, *Review of Reviews*, and *The Arena*, started putting resources towards the “literature of exposure.” From 1903 to 1912 there were approximately 2,000 investigative journalism articles published.⁶⁴

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann famously wrote that we “live in the same world, but we think and feel in different ones.”⁶⁵ One of the many reasons we perceive the world differently is because we get our news from different journalists, each of whose method of storytelling is unique, and this influences the way we construct reality. In a society where citizens’ experience public affairs firsthand, there will be differences between perspective and interpretation, but our senses—namely our eyes and ears typically work in similar ways to each other’s. But, as citizens’ understanding of their society became more mediated through journalism and other forms of mass communication, the consequences of different types of journalism became more significant. It is not only a different picture of reality that is passed on to readers, but a

different set of news values and a different type of epistemology—or method of making sense of the world—that is passed on. News values and epistemology are rarely explicit features of a news story, but are instead indirectly passed on to the public through the way a news story is told.⁶⁶ “By selecting, highlighting, framing, shading, and shaping in reportage” journalists “create an impression that real people—readers and viewers—then take to be real and to which they respond in their lives,” wrote historian Michael Schudson.⁶⁷

Some muckrakers, who I classify as *realist muckrakers*, followed the moderate and evidence-based style of Tarbell, Baker, and others at *McClure's*. They presented multiple perspectives, avoided editorializing and explicitly inserting their personal values and opinions into their reporting, and shunned attack journalism, name calling, sensationalism, or the direct advocacy of a specific policy, party, or ideology. They placed understanding an issue ahead of advocating for change. The realist muckrakers could be seen as the forebears of the more professional journalists of the mid-20th century who tried to follow an “objective”

journalistic method, though the realist muckrakers were more dramatic storytellers, placing them closer to the tradition of literary realism.⁶⁸

Prosecutorial muckrakers, many of whom were trained as lawyers, included journalists Mark Sullivan and Samuel Hopkins Adams. Unlike the realists, the prosecutors did not claim neutrality or disinterestedness, and instead openly sought to convince the reader to adopt a particular perspective. They made personal attacks and were largely one sided in their presentation of evidence. While the prosecutorial muckrakers were often partisan, they were far more independent and honest than many of the journalists of the party press era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the prosecutorial muckrakers could be understood as more educated and financially independent descendants of the partisan journalists of the early republic.

Yellow muckrakers such as David Graham Phillips and Thomas Lawson wrote with a hyperbolic sensationalism and knack for publicity that came out of the “yellow journalism” of the

Pulitzer and Hearst era of the 1890s. They ridiculed their opponents, filling pages with name calling. Sometimes their charges were backed up with verifiable evidence, and at other times the charges were simply asserted without evidence. For the yellow muckrakers, greed was a “cannibalistic money-hunger,” governmental corruption was sinful “treason,”⁶⁹ and poverty was the “strangled, mangled, sandbagged wrecks of human hopes.”⁷⁰ The yellow muckrakers mixed emotionally charged language with popular prejudices and a touch of self-promotion.⁷¹

Radical muckrakers such as Charles Edward Russell and Upton Sinclair advocated like ideological activists or preachers. Like the yellow muckrakers, they often used overblown language and stretched their conclusions beyond the reach of their evidence, but the radicals were guided by a firmly-held ideology.⁷² They used their ideology to make sense of the information they uncovered, and they wrote with a moral certainty and zeal that had similarities to the abolitionist journalism in the decades before the Civil War.

The purpose of identifying four types of muckraking instead of one is not to replace a historiographic framing based on one central essence with a historiography of four central essences. Instead, I will follow the advice of philosopher Karl Popper, who argued that historians should avoid altogether a search for a central essence and instead look for external patterns that can be measured empirically.⁷³ Each type of muckraking is the result of looking at observable features in a piece of journalism. A journalist’s epistemology and values “are rarely explicit and must be found between the lines—in what actors and activities are reported or ignored and in how they are described.”⁷⁴

The following section attempts to uncover the epistemological values that are implicitly passed on to readers by some of the most influential muckrakers from the Progressive Era. The four types of muckraking were developed by looking at the most prominent muckraking articles and books, and analyzing the differences between the method, language, use of evidence, and style of each, and then inductively categorizing the

muckrakers into four types. The archetypes were selected because they best exemplified the differing epistemologies and methods of each type of muckraking. In these four categories, I am not looking for what is purely unique about each journalist, but in the words of Edward Hallett Carr, “what is general in the unique”⁷⁵ or what distinguishes one category of muckraker from the next.

While focusing on the differences between each type of muckraking, I don’t want to sand off inconvenient imperfections to give the illusion that each journalist fits perfectly into my typology. This is why I have included examples of muckraking that didn’t fit a given classification—for instance, I highlight the select articles where Tarbell and Baker let their opinions come to the forefront and muckraked more like prosecutorial muckrakers as opposed to realists.

My analysis of each muckraker and their work is guided by questions related to a journalist’s method, tone, and epistemological outlook. Does the journalist share evidence that justifies their conclusions, or does he or she simply tell a story

without pointing to verifiable evidence? How does the journalist evaluate the relative sturdiness of documentary evidence (when it exists)? Does the journalist cite more neutral expert opinions, or the opinions of self-interested political elites? Are unsubstantiated rumors given central prominence? Whose perspective is shared and how is it shared? Are alternative perspectives given a fair hearing? What sort of language is used—passionate and angry diatribes or more disinterested and moderate language? Does the journalist share her or his own opinions or do they stay more detached and neutral? When the journalist shares her or his opinion, is it done explicitly or is it disguised as fact? Are opinions boldly stated with certainty or are they presented as one possible interpretation among many? Does the journalist provide a solution to the problem she or he has presented, or is it left up to the audience to decide what should be done? Does a journalist explicitly probe or question their own conclusions? Is a conclusion about what a story means stated before the evidence is given, or does the evidence precede the conclusion?

And, does the journalist help the reader understand an event or an individual, or does she or he try to persuade the audience to adopt the journalist’s beliefs? The way questions like these are maneuvered, not only shapes the

way a reader imagines an event, but also reveals the *type* of journalism that is being practiced. Below is an outline of the main characteristics in my analysis of the muckrakers.

Language	Justification	Perspective	Confidence	Solutions	Apparent Purpose
Passionate, extreme, name calling	Opinion without pointing to verifiable evidence	One-sided, simplistic (good vs. evil)	Closed-minded certainty, conclusions are expressed as if they were the only legitimate interpretation	Journalist provides solutions to the problems they have described.	Persuade audience
Dispassionate, moderate, respectful	Verifiable evidence, probing strength of evidence	Multi-sided, complex, nuanced	Open-minded, acknowledges limits, shares opinions with humility	It is left up to the audience to decide what should be done about the problem.	Understand an issue

REALIST MUCKRAKERS

Throughout her life Ida Tarbell couldn’t help but question her beliefs. After learning about the scientific method as a student, she began to doubt her faith in Christian creationism. She would not jump to a conclusion even when considering an issue that

directly affected her life, such as whether women should have the right to vote. With a hint of agony over her position on woman’s suffrage, she asked: “Why must I persist in the slow, tiresome practice of knowing more about things before I had an opinion?”⁷⁶ Biographer Kathleen Brady

described Tarbell's journalism as following a "scholarly method" that resembled "the historian's pedantry, the journalist's instinct, and the friendly guile of one seeking help."⁷⁷ Everett E. Dennis wrote that Tarbell was "a more rigorous and systematic journalist than almost anyone before or since," and she "brought the rigor of scientific inquiry and a penchant for facts and accuracy."⁷⁸ This questioning mindset sent Tarbell on a five-year investigation of Standard Oil for *McClure's Magazine* that yielded nineteen articles, totaling over 700 pages.

While other muckrakers, like Henry D. Lloyd had written about Standard Oil in a one-sided and moralizing fashion,⁷⁹ Tarbell attempted to understand Rockefeller and his oil monopoly, and only reluctantly—and humbly—passed judgment. Tarbell's refusal to openly take sides led to criticism from some reformers. Lloyd, who had written a scathing history of Standard Oil a decade earlier, began telling people that she had been duped by Standard's corporate publicity. In another instant, Mark Twain joked that she had been bought off by Rockefeller after Tarbell published the findings of an independent

lawyer she had hired to evaluate the legal cases against Standard. The lawyer found that in one instance related to the accusation of Vacuum Oil Works, the judge who indicted Standard Oil had been wrong.⁸⁰

Tarbell routinely cited specific technical and financial information, drawing on thousands of pages of federal and state investigations, legal filings, and court transcripts, and quoted from authoritative sources, such as the Hepburn Committee. She even worked with Standard Oil executive Henry Rogers, who provided her with information in order to represent Standard's perspective.⁸¹ "The more we talked, the more at home I felt with him and the more I liked him [Rogers]" wrote Tarbell. "Finally we made our compact. I was to take up with him each case in their history He was to give me documents, figures, explanations, and justifications—anything and everything which would enlarge my understanding."⁸²

In "The Rise of the Standard Oil Company," Tarbell chronicled Rockefeller's upward mobility from a fruit-seller on Cleveland's docks to the head of the largest oil monopoly in the world. Writing

with thoughtfulness and even signs of respect, Tarbell portrayed Rockefeller as a talented and disciplined businessman who, with a “steadfastness of purpose,” relished achieving the highest efficiency in all aspects of his business.⁸³ Where other muckrakers, such as Sinclair, Phillips, Lawson, and Will Irwin waxed poetically about the unquenched greed of a politician or a businessman, Tarbell dispassionately explained how Rockefeller “pointed out in detail and with gentleness, how beneficent the scheme really was” to the independent oil refiners he was incorporating into his trust. Within three months of consolidating Cleveland’s oil industry, Rockefeller had taken over twenty-one of twenty-six refiners and controlled one-fifth of the oil refining in the United States.⁸⁴

Throughout her journalistic narrative Tarbell was able to bring out the intensity and the anger that independent oil refiners felt toward Rockefeller, but not at the expense of demonizing the oil trust or the railroads. In Tarbell’s January 1903 article, “The Oil War of 1872,” she carefully explained to readers that Rockefeller “knew

that the railroad was a public carrier, and that its charter forbade discrimination”—they were required to charge all freight the same rate—but “he knew that the railroads did not pretend to obey the laws governing them, [and] that they regularly granted special rates and rebates to those who had large amounts of freight.”⁸⁵ While Lloyd (1894)⁸⁶ and Russell (1905)⁸⁷ filled pages with vitriol and condemnation of the railroad rebates as an evil conspiracy, Tarbell made clear that “in all branches of business the heaviest buyer got the best rate” and Rockefeller simply bargained with the railroads “as you could with a man carrying on a strictly private business depending in no way on a public franchise.”⁸⁸

Tarbell was ultimately critical of Rockefeller’s use of the rebates, and of his failure to apply his Christian morality to his business practices. But she did not demonize him. She instead offered a justification for his cutthroat business practices: “Mr. Rockefeller knew that if he did not get rebates, somebody else would” as they “were for the wariest, the shrewdest, the most persistent. If somebody was to get rebates, why not he? This point of view was no

uncommon one. Many men held it.”⁸⁹

Tarbell also tried to understand the railroad’s perspective, passing on their claim that the railroads only agreed to the rebates because they were told that all oil refiners would be allowed to join Rockefeller’s trust. Tarbell’s inclination was to bring out complexity and share multiple perspectives, as opposed to preaching a clear-cut story of good versus evil.

Tarbell’s July 1903 article “The Real Greatness of the Standard” was not a sarcastic title. The article described Standard Oil as employing men of “intelligence and superiority” who competed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their department. She shares glowing accounts of Rockefeller’s greatness, citing W. H. Vanderbilt, who told the Hepburn Commission that he “never came in contact with a class of men as able as they [the Standard Oil men] are in their business.”⁹⁰ Nearly the entire article is devoted to Rockefeller’s business greatness.

While it is clear that Tarbell believes in business conducted on the basis of fair, ethical, and lawful competition, her criticism of

Rockefeller and Standard Oil highlighted specific wrongdoings, namely the rebate, which gave Standard Oil its advantage over every other oil refiner. She was also willing to attempt to share perspectives different from her own in a way that clarified the disagreement.⁹¹

Very often people . . . who are willing to see that Mr. Rockefeller has employed force and fraud to secure his ends, justify him by declaring, ‘It’s business.’ That is, ‘it’s business’ has come to be a legitimate excuse for hard dealing, sly tricks, special privileges. It is a common enough thing to hear men arguing that the ordinary laws of morality do not apply in business.⁹²

In the concluding article of the series, published in the October 1904 issue of *McClure’s*, Tarbell did write as a cautious advocate for change. She questioned those who viewed business as being outside the realm of morality, and worried what this view would do to the broader ethics of the nation: “The freight clerk who reports the independent oil shipments for a

fee of five or ten dollars a month is probably a young man, learning his first lessons in corporate morality,” wrote Tarbell. She was appalled that “so large a body of young men in the country are consciously or unconsciously growing up with the idea that business is war and that morals have nothing to do with its practice.” In the concluding paragraphs of the nineteen-part series, Tarbell engaged in careful and understated advocacy. “What are we doing to do about it? . . . We the people of the United States . . . must cure whatever is wrong in the industrial situation, typified by this narrative of the growth of the Standard Oil Company.”⁹³

Long after her series had been compiled into a best-selling book, Tarbell recalled in her memoir that “Everybody in the office . . . began to say, ‘After the [Standard Oil] book is done you must do a character sketch of Mr. Rockefeller.’ I was not keen for it.”⁹⁴ Despite her hesitation, she did it anyway. In her July and August, 1905 two-part character study of Rockefeller, Tarbell deviated from her restrained, humble, and good-natured muckraking. While she did praise

his intelligence, thrift, and work ethic, there was an uncharacteristic meanness to the profile.

Particularly in the second article, she ridiculed Rockefeller’s age: “the oldest man in the world—a living mummy.” She scrutinized his physical appearance: “the big cheeks are puffy, bulging unpleasantly under the eyes.” And she speculated about what his physical appearance said about his character: “the lips are quite lost, as if by eternal grinding together of the teeth—set on something he would have . . . Mr. Rockefeller may have made himself the richest man in the world, but he has paid.”⁹⁵

Shortly after the articles came out, Tarbell expressed some regret. The whole character sketch was “repugnant . . . to me personally,” she wrote. But she was convinced that Rockefeller’s personal power and influence over public affairs warranted a deeper scrutiny of his character. “It was just one of those things that had to be done; there seemed to be no way for me to get around it,” she wrote. “A man who possesses this kind of influence cannot be allowed to live in the dark. The public not only has the right to know what sort of man he really

is; it is the duty of the public to know.”⁹⁶

In the character sketch and in the October 1904 conclusion to the Standard Oil series, Tarbell crossed the boundaries that objective journalism sets between facts and values. While she made some attempt in these articles to balance her disapproval of Rockefeller with praise for his more admirable qualities, she momentarily and hesitantly veered out of the realist muckraking and into the style of the prosecutorial muckrakers.

Nonetheless, when taken as a whole, the vast majority of Tarbell’s journalism was full of moderation, humility, and understanding. The expressed purpose of journalism for Tarbell was “making the matter in hand a little clearer, a little sounder for those who come after” and not for projecting her solutions on to the public. Instead of boldly seeking to remake the world based on what she had learned, Tarbell questioned the universal wisdom of her own understanding: “In our eagerness to prove that we have found the true solution,” Tarbell wrote in her memoir, “we fail to inquire why this same solution failed to work when tried

before—for it always has been tried before, even if we in our self-confidence do not know it.”⁹⁷ To the extent that Tarbell used her journalism to promote reform, she did so cautiously, without feigning certainty that she had all the answers.

Her balanced approach is evident from the journalism she took up after her series on Standard Oil was complete. She set out to share with readers some of the positive aspects of American industrialism. Writing in *The American Magazine*, Tarbell detailed the success of industrialists like Thomas Lynch of the Frick Coke Company and wrote with deep respect for Henry Ford’s business practices. While these articles did not have nearly the impact of Standard Oil articles, they show that she wanted readers to have a balanced view of industrialism.⁹⁸

Later in life, Tarbell wrote that many Progressives “wanted attacks” and “had little interest in balanced findings.” Echoing Roosevelt’s muckraking speech, she wrote that, “in the long run, the public . . . would weary of vituperation” and if reformers “were to secure permanent results the [public] mind must be

convinced.”⁹⁹ When Roosevelt complained that “lurid” journalism would “damage ... the public mind” and that “hysterical sensationalism” was the “poorest weapon ... to fight for lasting righteousness,” he and Tarbell were in full agreement.¹⁰⁰

There is near consensus among historians that Tarbell’s journalism was rigorous, fair, moderate in tone, and of the highest quality. John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zucherman wrote that Tarbell’s “research was thorough, her writing sober, and the end result was an inexorable march of facts that showed how Standard Oil conducted its business. But she was also fair.”¹⁰¹ Peter Lyon, the biographer of *McClure’s* editor, S. S. McClure, wrote that Tarbell’s journalism was “the best-grounded, most careful, most substantial” of all the muckrakers. Another biographer, Robert C. Kochersberger Jr. described Tarbell as a “sociologist,” sometimes her work was “drowning in facts” but it displayed an “objectivity and professional detachment.”¹⁰² Nonetheless, Tarbell has been classed under the same muckraking label as one-sided,

attacking, melodramatic, ideological, muckrakers.

If the essence of the realist muckrakers was to place *understanding* a phenomenon ahead of *persuading* the reader to adopt a particular belief, then Ray Stannard Baker was the ideal realist muckraker. His approach was typified in an exchange with the radical Jack London, who wanted to convince Baker to become a socialist. Baker replied that he could not accept any ideology since he had “only begun to look at the world” and wanted “to see it all more clearly and understand it” before he came to any conclusions. “The difference between us,” wrote Baker, “lay probably in the fact that he wanted to reform me, and I did not want to reform him.” Instead of persuading, Baker saw his job as helping people understand each other so “they can live together peaceably, even in a crowded world.”

What seemed to me then the supreme problem confronting mankind was the art of living in a crowded world. The part I could best play in it as a writer ... was to become a “maker of understandings.” I was to

help people understand more clearly and completely the extraordinary world they were living in—all of it, without reservations or personal prejudices—and in the process to make them understand one another, which I considered the fundamental basis for the democratic way of life.¹⁰³

Baker was not entirely immune from sensationalism and incivility. His early journalism for the *Chicago Record* covering Coxey's Army—the 1894 march of unemployed workers—ridiculed Jacob Coxey's and Carl Brown's protest as “the laughing stock of the nation.” But, over many weeks of covering the march, Baker slowly learned to see the protest as a more serious and legitimate expression of “dissatisfaction among the laboring classes” and a “movement [that] must be looked on as something more than a huge joke.” It appears that Baker learned to see the oddball protestors with sensitivity and care; in his private notebooks around this time, Baker wrote, “The more a nation is civilized, the more generously it listens to the voice of the minority.”¹⁰⁴

After months of covering Coxey's Army, Baker began writing articles about British journalist and reformer William T. Stead and Stead's popular book, *If Christ Came to Chicago*. With moral outrage, Stead criticized the wealthiest men in Chicago, comparing them to the moneychangers of the New Testament. Stead wrote with sweeping certainty. “I always jump to conclusions: I never ponder,” he told Baker.¹⁰⁵ Baker reflected on their difference in styles:

I was not at all satisfied with Stead's answers to the problems he saw so clearly, nor yet Coxey's. It did not seem to me that either of them understood what the fundamental conditions really were, or the difficulty of meeting them. I did not [understand them] myself.¹⁰⁶

In series of articles for *World's Work*,¹⁰⁷ Baker met with labor organizers, Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debs, and John Mitchell, and he visited labor meetings and picket lines. He also met with financiers J.P. Morgan and Charles Schwab and “worked hard and long to try to understand, thoroughly and

honestly, what they were trying to do and why, and what things looked like to them.”¹⁰⁸

The conflict between capital and labor created a conflict in understanding within Baker:

As a reporter I could and did set down, as facts, what I saw: but I could not, in the least degree, make up my mind what ought to be done ... At times I found my sympathies going out strongly to the starving strikers in Pullman, ... What other remedy had they to meet injustice and oppression except to strike? ... And yet, when I saw huge mobs running wild, defying the officers of the law, attacking non-union workers, putting the torch to millions of dollars worth of property—I was still more perplexed.¹⁰⁹

In *Liberty and the News* (1920) Lippmann argued that journalists had taken over the role of “thinking” for the public and sacrificed truth and fairness in order to persuade the public. Instead of being disinterested carriers of information, journalists made political calculations on the

possible impact of their story, and then cherrypicked their evidence and exaggerated their interpretation in order to influence public opinion. He thought they put their own conceptions of “national interest” ahead of trusting the public with a wide and varied description of events. This appears to be true for other types of muckraking, but the nuanced, multi-sided journalism of realist muckrakers defied this pattern of discourse by trusting the public with as full a picture of the facts as they could obtain. Baker, Tarbell and other realists believed there were no absolutes in interpretation, and to imagine that one’s interpretation was irrefutably perfect, leaving no space for no other explanations, was either shortsighted or self-interested.

PROSECUTORIAL MUCKRAKERS

The prosecutorial muckrakers, unlike the realist muckrakers, didn’t seek neutrality and they were not interested in accommodating a wide variety of perspectives. Instead, they openly took sides and strongly advocated for their positions. Mark Sullivan, Norman Hapgood, C. P. Connolly, Samuel Hopkins

Adams, Louis Brandeis (in his articles for *Harper's Weekly* on J.P. Morgan's "money trust"),¹¹⁰ William Hard, and to an extent, Henry D. Lloyd¹¹¹ followed the prosecutorial method of muckraking, building a case on a one-sided arrangement of evidence. Sullivan, Adams, Hapgood, Brandeis, and Lloyd also had training as lawyers and their muckraking reflected the fact-based, but strategically selected stories a prosecutor would tell a jury.

Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1893) was a fierce moral indictment of Standard Oil, built on well-documented evidence. Where Tarbell held her judgments lightly and presented a wide variety of perspectives, Lloyd was one-sided and vilified Rockefeller, stating that he and his associates were "sincere as rattlesnakes" and lacked "the imagination to concern the pain they inflict." Their profits were "the winnings of speculators in bread during famine—worse, for to make money [they] make the famine."¹¹² Over 536 pages laced with painstaking argument, Lloyd made the case that Standard Oil was guilty of crimes against the public.

Another prosecutorial muckraker was C. P. Connolly, who wrote about the activities of Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger, in what became known as "the Ballinger Affair." Connolly's likeness to a prosecutor was evident in the illustration on the cover of *Collier's Weekly* which showed an indictment bill issued by the "Court of Public Morals" in the case of "The American People against Richard A. Ballinger."¹¹³ In the article, titled the "Ballinger-Shyster," Connolly accused Ballinger of trying to push through ownership claims on behalf of J. P. Morgan for some of the most valuable mineral deposits in the world for a paltry \$10 an acre. Connolly presented evidence to show the guilt of the accused but offered little defense.

Mark Sullivan's campaign in *Collier's* against the "Czar" of the House, Speaker Joseph Cannon, was, in Sullivan's own words "blatantly partisan." Sullivan also led an attack to change the rules that governed the House. During the debate over the rule change, a Cannon ally said on the House floor, "This movement [to change the House rules] does not originate in the House of

Representatives... [but instead at] the behest of a gang of literary highwaymen who are entirely willing to assassinate a reputation in order to sell a magazine.” Sullivan reflected in his memoir, with a bit of discomfort, that “whatever Cannon and the standpatters did was evil,” and “whatever the insurgents did was good.”¹¹⁴ Like other prosecutors, Sullivan did not provide readers with a multi-sided understanding of the politicians or businessmen he exposed and instead presented one-sided evidence that supported his conclusions.

Even though the prosecutorial muckrakers took sides, they still placed evidence ahead of emotion, sensationalism, and ideology. They followed a restrained structure that resembled, to a degree, the confines of a courtroom. The future Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis’ series of articles on the “Money Trust” for *Harpers Weekly* strongly fit the prosecutorial mold. He arranged his evidence to fit his indictment against J. P. Morgan and his bankers. Brandeis charged that Morgan had purposefully restricted competition in a host of industries by investing “other

people’s money” in companies Morgan owned and controlled, while at the same time telling these investors he represented their interests. To make this argument, Brandeis drew heavily on expert testimony, frequently quoting the Pujo Committee.¹¹⁵ Brandeis’s writing offered little or no defense on the side of Morgan and associates.

If *McClure’s* was the main forum for realist muckrakers like Tarbell and Baker, then *Collier’s* was the publication for prosecutorial muckrakers.¹¹⁶ *Collier’s* editor Norman Hapgood reflected in his memoir that “the opportunity to get into a fight has always been one of the temptations most difficult ... to resist”¹¹⁷—a sentiment that would be at odds with a realist muckraking editor like S. S. McClure who cared more about telling an interesting story. The prosecutors could also be labeled as editorial muckrakers, for many of them, like Hapgood and Sullivan, often worked on the opinion side of their magazines, as opposed to the news side. Their goal was not to share their broad understanding with readers; they didn’t take their evidence to independent authorities and they

didn't attempt to separate their opinions from the facts they presented. Instead they sought to convince readers to adopt their perspective and support their proposed reforms.

YELLOW MUCKRAKERS

In *Drift and Mastery* (1914), Lippmann commented, in a chapter titled "The Themes of Muckraking," that "The sense of conspiracy and secret scheming which transpire is almost uncanny. 'Big Business,' and its ruthless tentacles, have become the material for the feverish fantasy of illiterate thousands thrown out of kilter by the rack and strain of modern life." Lippmann saw some, but not all, forms of muckraking as playing to popular prejudice against big business. "Even though the most intelligent muckrakers have always insisted the picture [of mass conspiracy] was absurd," wrote Lippmann, it still gained popularity and became a staple of muckraking.¹¹⁸ One of the most prominent prompters of conspiratorial thinking was Thomas Lawson.

Lawson was the quintessential yellow muckraker of the time. His articles were a mixture of emotionally charged

and exaggerated language, dramatic conspiracy, salesmanship, and personal attacks on his enemies, with only a pinch of verifiable evidence. Where a realist muckraker like Tarbell wrote about a well-documented conspiracy like the railroad rebate in terms that demystified it, Lawson blurred the line between evidence, myth, drama, and opinion.

After a bitter falling out with Standard Oil over their joint venture in Amalgamated Copper, Lawson turned on his former associates. First, he spread rumors by placing ads in newspapers warning "every holder of Amalgamated stock to sell his holdings at once before another crash comes." In the midst of his campaign against Standard Oil, the editor of *Everybody's* approached Lawson to write a "true confession," exposing the inside world of big business. Lawson agreed to write the story if *Everybody's* agreed to spend \$50,000 advertising the series. Like the yellow journalists who wrote for Pulitzer and Hearst in the 1890s, Lawson was well aware of the influence of promotion and propaganda, writing "My one instrument is publicity ... It is the

most powerful weapon in the world.”¹¹⁹

In “Frenzied Finance,” Lawson described a series of rules that Standard Oil lived by; these included to “keep your mouth shut” and make all profitable deals in the name of Standard Oil and all questionable deals in the name of a dummy corporation; never butt heads with the government for, “Our government is by the people and for the people, and we are the people and those people who are not us can be hired by us,” and “Always do right. Right makes might, might makes dollars, dollars make right, and we have the dollars.”¹²⁰ Lawson did not say how he came up with these rules, and they appear to be more a concoction of Lawson’s dramatization than some sort of secret rules. Even if true, the source of the rules is kept uncertain, hiding the evidential basis of Lawson’s charges.

Lawson’s article emphasized the personal characteristics of Standard Oil’s executives, but surprisingly John D. Rockefeller was given only a few lines as the “ideal money-maker” and being “machine-like” in character. In one article Lawson spent the better part of fifteen-hundred

words describing Henry Rogers as “the big brain, the big body, the Master of ‘Standard Oil.’” The description of Rogers is oddly poetic and glorifying, with Rogers appearing “as tall, as straight, as well-proportioned, and as supple as one of the beautiful American Elms.” Lawson’s lavish description appeared to veer into dubious and unusual territory, spending almost an entire page describing Rogers eyes (e.g., the “fiery red and that glinting yellow which one sees only when at night the doors of a great, roaring furnace are opened,” or the “pure blue of a cloudless late summer afternoon sky when the bees hum and the locusts’ drone blend with the smell of the new-mown hay”). Lawson framed this odd description by saying that when Rogers came in contact with “the intoxicating spell of dollar making ... he passes under the baleful influence of ‘The Machine,’” and with a “cannibalistic money-hunger” becomes a “ravenous creature, pitiless as a shark, knowing of no law of God or man.”¹²¹ The lack of evidence and this sort of exaggerated imagery would be almost unthinkable for both realist and prosecutorial muckrakers.

In the final pages of Lawson's article, he did turn to more prosecutorial style when he described five symbolic investment "floors" of Amalgamated Copper. The ground floor is where stock was created by the company at a value of \$39,000,000; only Henry Rogers and William Rockefeller (no mention of John D. Rockefeller) were allowed to buy at this level. A floor a few million dollars higher was available to the next class of Standard Oil partners, and so on up until the public investors, who were allowed to buy based on a valuation of \$75,000,000, believing they getting in "at the ground floor." This was the crime: "The public was compelled to pay \$36,000,000 profit to a few men."¹²²

One newspaper wrote that Lawson's charges had a "curious mixture of truth, exaggeration and misrepresentation."¹²³ Regier wrote that Lawson "undoubtedly wished to pay off an old score" and may have even used "the sensation [of] his articles ... to advance his personal interests in the stock market."¹²⁴

In the August 1903 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, George W. Alger wrote a critique of the

current "literature of exposure." The article appeared as Lawson's "Frenzied Finance" was shocking readers far and wide, and *Everybody's* published Russell's series, "The Greatest Trust in the World" about the "Beef Trust," and *Appeal to Reason* was serializing *The Jungle*, and Tarbell's uncharacteristically mean-spirited character study of Rockefeller was published in *McClure's*. The high-brow and elitist Alger had previously written on the harmful social aspects of "yellow journalism"—its "arrogant boastfulness, mawkish sentimentality," its "use of intimidation rather than ... persuasion," its "persistent and systematic distortion of value" and its "vulgarizing influences on its readers."¹²⁵ Alger saw many of the similar techniques being applied to the literature of exposure. In a comment that almost surely was directed at Lawson, he wrote that "Titus Oats and his plot live again in the amazing historian of modern finance"—a reference to an English priest who concocted a fake a story of a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate King Charles II.¹²⁶ Alger went on to write:

These writers do not belong to that class of social critics whose purposeful and devoted studies of economic conditions, of the history of business systems, have given us so many suggestions of ways and means for progress.... For [they] expose, not the opportunities which create temptations, but the individuals who succumb.¹²⁷

Alger feared what this yellow exposure would do to public opinion:

As every teamster knows, there is a limit to the amount of extra effort which can be got out of a horse with a whip.... It is as important to the community as it is to the individual that its capacity for being shocked with itself should remain unimpaired. Nothing worse can happen to it than to have its moral cuticle hardened by much drubbing. The inherent defect with much of the literature of exposure is that it exists merely for the shock it gives, and is of no further profit to the community.¹²⁸

This statement was fittingly applied to Lawson and other yellow muckrakers. It also applied to some prosecutorial muckrakers who attacked individual politicians and corporations without saying much about the broader political and economic system. It also fit Tarbell's uncharacteristically mean July, 1905 character sketch of Rockefeller. But Alger's critique did not capture Tarbell's nineteen articles on Standard Oil. Tarbell focused on specific instances of wrongdoing, but as opposed to simply bashing Rockefeller, she repeatedly pointed to the broader economic conditions and the "opportunities which create temptations."¹²⁹

Alger's unease with the more outlandish forms of the literature of exposure was similar to Tarbell's belief that "vituperation" and sensationalism would get in the way of lasting progress.¹³⁰ Alger worried that "As our appetite grows jaded and surfeited, the stories become more sensational so as to retain our attention."¹³¹ This would produce both a moral decline and a dumbing down of the culture. Similarly, later in life, Tarbell would write:

We were classed as muckrakers, and the school had been so commercialized that the public was beginning to suspect it. The public was not as stupid as it sometimes seems. The truth of the matter was that the muckraking school was stupid. It had lost the passion for facts in a passion for subscriptions.¹³²

Lawson's yellow muckraking saw public opinion as something to be excited and manipulated as opposed to educated. In a private letter to one of the editors at *Everybody's*, Lawson shared, perhaps with some sarcasm, his opinion of the public: "What do I owe to the gelatine-spined shrimps? What have the saffron-blooded apes done for me?" Adding, "Forgive me . . . but the people, particularly the American people are a joke."¹³³ This quote may give some indication of why he chose sensational publicity over even-handed storytelling. After reading Lawson's articles, it's not clear whether Lawson is pulling back the curtain or giving a purposeful distortion of what is behind the curtain.

When Roosevelt gave his muckraker speech, he told journalist Lincoln Steffens that his criticism had not been aimed at Steffens, or his colleagues at *McClure's*, but had instead been directed at David Graham Phillips and his hugely controversial series "The Treason of the Senate."¹³⁴ In an attacking and exaggerated style Phillips assailed more than a dozen Senators in his popular series running in *Cosmopolitan*. The majority of Phillips' attacks did not go far beyond boldly stated generalizations about "the System" or "the Interests." Phillips attempted to justify his lack of specific evidence by blaming the public's attention span. In what is nearly the opposite of Tarbell's painstaking and careful approach to muckraking, Lawson wrote that "To relate the treason in detail would mean taking up bill after bill and going through it, line by line, word by word" and "few among the masses have the patience to listen to these dull matters," wrote Phillips. The popularity of Tarbell's nineteen-part series indicated that Phillips was mistaken about his low expectations for the masses.¹³⁵

In his article on Senator Aldrich, Phillips filled pages with emotional and far-sweeping platitudes, but he did eventually hone in on a specific issue—the tariff. He claimed Aldrich changed the language of the 1890 tariff bill to enrich the sugar trust by over three million dollars a year. Phillips’ strongest use of evidence came in the final pages when he shared the testimony of, somewhat ironically, a Senator who called for an investigation into why U.S.-made goods were one-quarter to 100 percent more expensive in the U.S. than abroad: “‘our’ borax, a Rockefeller product, costs seven and a half cents a pound here and only two and a half cents abroad” and “‘our’ nails, a Rockefeller-Morgan product, sell here for four dollars and fifty cents a keg and abroad for three dollars and ten cents.”¹³⁶ In these few pages, Phillips muckraked like a prosecutor—presenting specific and authoritative evidence—but this was a fraction of his article.

Unlike the realist muckrakers attempts to understand their antagonist’s perspective, Phillips wrote that Aldrich “must laugh as he watches the American people meekly

submitting to this plundering.” He closed the article with a personal attack, attempting to prod the reader’s anger:

Has Aldrich intellect? Perhaps. But he does not show it No, intellect is not the characteristic of Aldrich—or any of these traitors. . . . A scurvy lot they are, are they not, with their smirking and cringing and voluble palaver about God and patriotism . . . He must laugh at us, grown-up fools, permitting a handful to bind the might of our eighty millions and to set us all to work for them.¹³⁷

While there is every indication that the corruption that Phillips was writing about was real, Phillips’ highly emotional and frenzied tone brought much scorn, including from his fellow muckrakers. The prosecutorial muckrakers at *Collier’s* saw Phillips’ articles as “one shriek of accusations based on the distortion of such facts as were printed, and on the suppression of facts which were essential.” He made “reform odious.” His muckraking was:

sensational and money-making preying on the vogue of the ‘literature of exposure,’ which had been built up by the truthful and conscientious work of writers like Miss Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens and Ray Stannard Baker.¹³⁸

Ida Tarbell also looked at Phillips journalism as intrinsically different from her own, writing “Mr. Phillips always put into his discussion an emotion and an imagination which we did not indulge ourselves much at *McClure’s*.”¹³⁹ The difference between a yellow muckraker like Phillips and a realist like Tarbell is the difference between an angry and sweeping editorialist and a careful and neutral investigator. If we agree that this journalistic distinction matters then using the same “muckraker” label for both fails to tell us what we need to know about the journalism of the Progressive Era.

THE RADICAL MUCKRAKERS

Radical muckrakers, like the yellow muckrakers, often used overblown language and stretched their conclusions beyond the reach

of their evidence, but the radicals’ muckraking was guided by their ideology and they wrote to bring about a revolution. Many historians have interpreted the muckrakers as being moderate middle-class professionals,¹⁴⁰ yet one of the most famous and influential muckrakers was Upton Sinclair, an emotional and eccentric socialist.

Sinclair stood out from other muckrakers not only because his most famous muckraking text was a novel,¹⁴¹ but also because of his bohemian lifestyle and his personal extremes. He lived more like an eccentric artist than an investigatory journalist, writing in isolation for fourteen hours a day in a frenzied manner. Sinclair wrote with the belief that literature could save the world, and for that he was willing to sacrifice himself and others around him. He lived with his wife and young son in an isolated cabin in New Jersey, and one winter night Sinclair awoke to find his wife sobbing with a revolver in her hand: “she had been trying for hours to get up the courage to put a bullet into her head,” wrote Sinclair. He would later write of the ordeal, “all such scenes were

practice for the future writing of *The Jungle*.”

For three months I worked incessantly. I wrote with tears and anguish, pouring into the pages all that pain which life had meant to me. Externally, the story had to do with a family of stockyards workers, but internally it was the story of my own family.¹⁴²

The Jungle chronicled the life of the Jurgis, a Lithuanian immigrant who arrived in America strong, smart, and ambitious, but was ground to a pulp working at the Chicago stockyards. Jurgis eventually discovered socialism and recognized the reason for his failures—a corrupt and exploitive capitalist a system.

Far from keeping facts and values separate, as the realist attempted to do, or keeping emotion constrained behind documentary evidence like the prosecutors, Sinclair’s values and emotions were his central inspiration—the force which gave facts and his writing meaning and purpose. His muckraking was unapologetically subjective. He wrote from a place that was unique to him and driven by his

personality and values—specific facts were somewhat of an afterthought to his emotionalism and passionate advocacy of socialism. This was clearly evident in Jurgis’ political awakening. Broken and homeless, Jurgis wandered into a socialist meeting in search of a place to sleep. He was awakened from his slumber, both literally and metaphorically, by the power and sincerity of the socialist message.

‘Workingmen—comrades! Open your eyes and look about you! You have lived so long in the toil ... that your senses are dulled, your souls are numbed, but realize once in your lives this world in which you dwell—tear off the rags of its customs and conventions—behold it as it is, in all its hideous nakedness! Realize it, realize it!’¹⁴³

The socialist speaker told of millions of “wage slaves” around the world “living in misery and squalor” while the “masters of these slaves ... riot in luxury and extravagance.” The capitalists did this, not through superior productivity but by corrupting the government, which maintained the

privileges of the wealthy through the exploitation of workers.¹⁴⁴

Sinclair and other radical muckrakers were not interested in exposing a few bad characters, or advocating for a few moderate reforms that could improve the existing economic system. They wanted to bring the system down. In *The Brass Check*, Sinclair turned his investigative eye on American journalism, not to show that some journalists had been bought off by the rich, but to castigate the entire capitalistic news industry. He would have agreed that “The mass media have never given powerless Americans the necessary information to link the ubiquitous rotten apples to the structure of the barrel.”¹⁴⁵

As a muckraker, Sinclair can be understood dualistically; when the subject of his pen was capitalism or socialism, he was emotionally charged, highly ideological, and at times imprecise, simplistic and sweeping. But he also could be seen, perhaps secondarily, as a first-rate investigator who uncovered specific facts about the meat industry. While researching *The Jungle*, Sinclair spent seven weeks living among the stockyard workers of Chicago. While his

goal was to tell the story of “wage slavery,” he also described, somewhat incidentally, the revolting conditions of Chicago’s industrial slaughterhouses. In graphic detail, Sinclair wrote about diseased cattle being turned into canned beef, with boils covering their bodies that would “burst and splash foul-smelling stuff into your face.” Diseased hogs were turned into sausage and sold to consumers, including meat riddled with “tuberculosis” and “ptomaines—deadly poisons—which cooking would not kill.” Sinclair found that knowledge of selling condemned meat was “an everyday, matter-of-fact thing among the men,” but no one would testify because of fear they would be “blacklisted” and “never hired in Packingtown again.”¹⁴⁶

Between Sinclair’s two different muckraking styles, the passionate provocateur-investigator who presented specific information about the nation’s meat appears far more effective than the radical revolutionary, who prescribed wide-sweeping solutions with the goal of cutting down capitalism. It was not Sinclair’s socialist vision that stirred the nation; it was his factual statements about the

nation's meat that produced tangible change.

The Jungle was a shocking success. President Roosevelt received 100 letters a day. Sinclair set up an "amateur publicity office" and "gave interviews and wrote statements for the press" until he was "dizzy." Sinclair wrote: "It seemed to me that the walls for the mighty fortress of greed were on the point of cracking; it needed only one push, and then another, and another." About six months later "The Pure Food and Drug Act" was passed.¹⁴⁷ That a radical socialist writer could be responsible, in part, for the creation of a moderate and bureaucratic reform, offers clues into the complicated relationship between journalism and public opinion. Though Sinclair was unhappy with the moderate reform,¹⁴⁸ many historians have considered "the law a direct product of his muckraking."¹⁴⁹

Before *The Jungle* was serialized in the socialist magazine *Appeal to Reason*, it was offered to *Collier's*. Both Robert Collier and Norman Hapgood thought there was big commercial potential, but they rejected it because Sinclair's radical muckraking didn't fit with

the journalistic style at *Collier's*. Hapgood argued (with a bit of exaggeration of his own) that *Collier's* had:

a method that is sensation, but it is our own special kind of sensation. It is the sensationalism of telling the exact truth about important things—as exact as science itself. Sinclair's sensationalism is of a more familiar type, the sensationalism of exaggeration, . . . of saying, if there is blood on the floor of a slaughterhouse, that it is an inch thick, when it isn't. I'm afraid if we start down that path we shall lose the distinct outlines of the character we have built up.¹⁵⁰

Roosevelt may have had Phillips in mind when he gave his muckraking speech, but no muckraker fits the description of a "wild preacher of unrest" more than Sinclair.

Conclusion: Democratic culture and the language of journalism

Why is it important to recognize the different varieties of muckraking that existed in the Progressive Era? There are both

historiographic and contemporary political reasons. Historically, interpreting the muckrakers as containing different types of journalism not only adapts itself better to the wide array of facts about the muckrakers' journalism, but it also opens up new lines of inquiry.¹⁵¹ For instance, perhaps the end of the muckraking era might be partially explained because of changes in the character and quality of muckraking itself. Perhaps Roosevelt and Tarbell were correct when they said that “to secure permanent results the mind must be convinced” for sensational journalism would eventually make the public “weary of vituperation” (Tarbell) and “violent emotionalism” would lead to a “spasm of reform” and then “exhaustion” (Roosevelt).¹⁵² By paying closer attention to the values, methods, and epistemology within journalism, we may be able to better understand the successes and failures of reform movements.¹⁵³

The contemporary reason is related to the recent multi-decade increase in partisanship and incivility. To understand this recent degradation of democratic culture in the U.S., we would

benefit from paying closer attention to the ways that journalism can increase polarization, extremism, outrage, and group-think. And conversely, how other types of journalism can promote understanding, moderation, and acceptance of pluralism. A closer recognition of the epistemologies, methods, and tones within journalism can help us understand the ebb and flow throughout history of tribalism and dogmatic absolutism in public opinion. As journalism becomes more adversarial—that is more radical and yellow, and to a lesser effect, prosecutorial—it naturally becomes more partisan and divisive, which pushes the broader culture in a similar direction. As much as we may value hard-hitting oppositional investigative journalism, the more adversarial journalism becomes the more it can resemble partisan debate, and the easier it can be dismissed by unthinking political tribalism. We've seen this recently as politicians neutralize inconvenient scientific research and well-documented investigative journalism, not through reason and evidence of their own, but by appealing to partisan loyalties and attacking the messenger.¹⁵⁴ The

need for investigative journalism is as critical as ever, but if we want to avoid investigative journalism from being seen as another form of partisanship, we would benefit from a closer attention to the tone, language, method, and underlying epistemology that journalists use in their stories.

In turn, the language and labels scholars have often used to discuss journalism and journalism history has too often been ineffective at distinguishing between “hysterical sensationalism” and “stern sobriety and truth.”¹⁵⁵ We understand by contrast. We cannot easily recognize the moderation and understanding in the journalism of a realist like Baker, without recognizing the radicalism of a Sinclair, or the sensationalism of a Phillips. We need precise terms to help us make that distinction. While a shift in language and framing probably will not bring about an immediate change in culture or in politics, as George Orwell stated, “one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.”¹⁵⁶

To acknowledge the role of the present in historical interpretation is not to fall into the

trap of “presentism” and judge the past based on today’s social values. Historians have acknowledged that, in some respects, all history is contemporary, for no historical facts speak for themselves until they are selected by the historian and placed into a context that gives the facts meaning. As Robert D. Johnston wrote, “When historians fight about Progressivism ... they are struggling over the basic meanings of American democracy” which, if we directly accept the influence of present events on historical interpretation, “we would not only advance the study of the past but ... we might improve the practice of our current politics as well.”¹⁵⁷

If the quality of a debate is directly related to the clarity of the terms that are used, then some of the terms we have developed regarding the role of journalism in society have not positioned us well to have a clear and fruitful discussion. This problem stretches beyond the use of the term muckraker. Before continuing to make a case for why we should avoid the generalized muckraker label, and instead add the qualifying designation: realist, prosecutorial, yellow, and radical, I’d like to briefly consider two

other terms we have used to evaluate journalism in order to make a broader case for why we need to adopt more precise terms.

Over the last century, the dominant journalistic ideal has been “objectivity,” which historian Michael Schudson described as the strict separation between facts and values, facts being defined as verifiable statements about the world and values defined as an individual’s subjective “conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be.” The belief in objectivity is not based on the belief that journalists as individuals are objective. Quite the opposite, it is based on the belief that individuals are *not* objective, which necessitates a method of objective reporting to help journalists overcome their own subjectivity.¹⁵⁸ The belief in objectivity wrote Schudson, “is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust of ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation”¹⁵⁹ As an abstract concept, this is clear enough, but as a practical measure for evaluating journalism, “objectivity” has failed to be a useful term for public debate. It has failed because every piece of journalism, when measured against the ideal of objectivity, is found to

be lacking. While verifiable facts about the world do exist, any news story requires a journalist’s value judgement to select which facts to include in a story and how to arrange those facts. Facts require interpretation and interpretation requires value judgments. Just as historians are intrinsically part of history—they write about events that shaped the world in which they live—journalists are part of the society they write about. A complete separation between the investigator and the thing being investigated is an illusion. Of course, scholars recognize that objectivity is a methodological ideal, and we can try to measure how close a piece of journalism gets to that ideal, but that nuance has not made its way into public discourse. This leaves us relying on a term that expresses a standard that is unachievable. Without a set of precise intermediary benchmark terms that journalists can actually live up to, even the highest quality investigative journalism can be, strictly speaking, accurately criticized as failing to live up to the ideal of objectivity. This leaves us with false equivalences and a frustrating public discourse that

fails to help the public understand the ideals of journalism.

Just as “objectivity” is not an effective term for distinguishing between different types of journalism, many scholars have argued that the term “fake news” is an ineffective term, because it conflates numerous issues.¹⁶⁰ Sometimes “fake news” refers to Russian propaganda. Sometimes it refers to domestic political disinformation. “Fake news” can refer to the “internet shell game”—a strategic mix of true stories intertwined with false stories for the purpose of confusing the public.¹⁶¹ At other times “fake news” refers to completely outlandish rumors or conspiracy theories. President Donald Trump has used the term to undercut news coverage that he thinks is unfair or harmful to his own interests, or that uses anonymous sources. Fake news can also refer to exaggeration or sensationalism, or to simple misinformation—reporting errors that are later corrected by newsrooms. Using a single term to describe multiple and distinct journalistic issues clouds our understanding of problems and harms our ability to find and

communicate meaningful solutions.

Just as opponents of reform used the muckraker label to brand all investigative journalists as hysterical, lurid and unreasonable, much of the distortion around the term “fake news” is the result of deliberate acts by political operatives. As Orwell warned, “political chaos is connected with the decay of language” and “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity.”¹⁶² The debasement of language can have a profound and lasting impact on a society, for when we continue to use terms that do not have precise meanings or do not make the distinctions we need them to make, we run the risk of turning a serious debate into confusion and nonsense. The terms “fake news” and “muckraker” are both generalized labels that fail to distinguish between different types of journalism. When we can distinguish between different types of muckraking by using different qualifying terms—such as realist, prosecutorial, yellow, and radical—and when we can discuss the failures in journalism without using the blanket term “fake news,” and instead use more precise terms, such as: “implicit

and explicit bias,” “foreign propaganda,” “sensationalism,” “spin,” and “reporting errors”—then we enhance our ability to diagnose problems and come up with useful solutions. The clarity of our language and the clarity of our thought are intertwined, and clear thinking is a necessary part of political renewal.

The point of this paper is not to create rigid categories, but to illuminate the differences in the type of journalism the muckrakers created. There are some muckrakers who do not fit neatly into any of the four categories. Lincoln Steffens’ earlier muckraking on municipal corruption fits roughly with the realists—offering a detailed, detached, and somewhat aloof, narrative about crime in Minneapolis, St. Louis, and elsewhere.¹⁶³ But after Steffens was criticized for failing to offer solutions to the corruption he exposed, he muckraked more like a prosecutor, promoting successful anti-corruption reformers in a series of articles and in the book *The Upbuilders* (1909).¹⁶⁴ Later in his career he became more revolutionary. After his 1919 trip to the Soviet Union Steffens famously stated “I’ve

seen the future and it works”¹⁶⁵—a statement that is more in line with the radicals.

Proving the effect of different types of journalism on public opinion is beyond the scope of this article, but a major premise of this article is that journalists not only pass on information, but also pass on an epistemology—a method or orientation for understanding what’s true in the world. In *A Preface to Politics*, Walter Lippmann argued that the way the public was educated on public affairs was far more important than the success or failure of any specific reform. “What matters the method” the reformer will cry, “provided the reform be good? Well, the method matters more than any particular reform,” wrote Lippmann.¹⁶⁶

With a clear eye, Lippmann saw that representative democracy and self-government were not guaranteed to be moral, just, and wise. Majority’ rule can be just as cruel, corrupt, and arbitrary as a king’s rule. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville feared that the tyranny of majority opinion would be the downfall of America,¹⁶⁷ Lippmann wrote that “pure” democracy—based on the unrestrained will of the majority—

“is really brute, inchoate democracy” that creates the “foundation of absolutism.” If questions of public importance were decided via a popularity contest carried out through the mass media, the loudest and the most charismatic demagogues and propagandists would likely to dominate.¹⁶⁸ Intelligent and fair self-government required the people to “rule in a particular way.” No “system of checks and balances would in itself insure freedom and good government” and “nothing could save the nation” from the ills of democracy, or any other form of government, “except the restraint imposed by the virtue of its citizens.”¹⁶⁹ The “supreme social principle is moderation in all principles,” wrote Lippmann. In order to bring about this “change of the public philosophy” he called on journalists and political leaders to adopt “the ancient wisdom of the humanists—that excess is the essential characteristic of vice and that in all truth, beauty, and goodness there is proportion, moderation, and restraint.”¹⁷⁰

Based on this principle of moderation, the realists and the prosecutorial muckrakers served a

democratic culture better than the yellow and radical muckrakers. When Tarbell tried to explain Rockefeller’s perspective, or when a prosecutorial muckraker like Mark Sullivan, restrained his critique to the evidence he could verify, they were practicing a form of moderation. The same could not be said of the ideologically driven muckraking of Sinclair, or the brash outrage of Phillips.

In addition to moderation, Lippmann believed that to begin to see even a small part of the modern world clearly, we had to rely on independent scientifically guided specialists to decipher the complexities of society. Those findings had to be shared in sober and precise language. For, under the clearest of circumstances, our interpretations of social events were far from certain. “The least hampered minds, the most imaginative and experienced men, can only stumble through to partial explanations,” wrote Lippmann.¹⁷¹

This attitude of humility, which Lippmann saw as essential for a wise and just democracy, was not manifest by many, or even most, muckrakers. The yellow muckrakers employed exaggeration, drama, and certainty.

The radical muckrakers also expressed great certainty about their political ideology. Neither were moderate. The prosecutorial muckrakers—sobered by a commitment to evidence and restraint in language, were moderate, but they still expressed certainty as they sought to persuade their readers of the guilt of their antagonists and the correctness of their solutions. They wrote with the air of sureness, and withheld the facts and interpretations that undercut their conclusion. The realist muckrakers, like Tarbell and Baker, came closest to Lippmann's ideals of a moderate, humble, and meticulously professional press.

Ultimately, Lippmann wanted the investigative fact-finding work to be done by independent specialists who followed the exact rigors of the scientific method, and were removed from both politics, business, and other constraints of journalism. On this account, all muckrakers, including the realists, fell short. Tarbell and Baker were generalists, not specialists; Baker wrote books and articles about labor strikes, railroad propaganda, race relations, environmental policy, and a comprehensive

biography of Woodrow Wilson, not to mention his writing under the pen name David Grayson, which covered a wide range of musings about nature, society, and companionship. Tarbell wrote about business corruption as well as industrial innovation, the tariff, and wrote biographies of Napoleon and Lincoln. Their methods were less rigorous than a social scientist following the scientific method, but their neutrality, impartial language, examination of an issue from multiple perspectives, openness to alternative interpretations, and vigilant adherence to evidence, resembled the values of science more closely than the yellow, prosecutorial, or radical muckrakers.

While no journalist can entirely live up to the ideals of scientific objectivity, this does not mean the journalist who attempts to be fair and independent and the journalist who strategically crafts a story to manipulate readers are the same. While Tarbell's and Baker's realist muckraking was not divorced from their personal values, their writing attempted to represent multiple values and stretch beyond any single

perspective by giving a fair hearing to all the stakeholders.

John Dewey is often framed as standing in opposition to Lippmann's ideas about journalism, but he agreed that how the public came to its conclusions, and the rigidity in which a conclusion was held, was of critical importance to democracy. In a society composed of astounding diversity, encountering someone who interprets the world differently was, and is, a fact of modern life. Whether those encounters would be combative and divisive or cooperative and build understanding depended, in part, on the type of public discourse that was modeled by journalists.

Seeing what was happening in Germany before and during World War I, Dewey feared that the American public could get caught up in a similar ridged and uncompromising absolutist ideology, which he thought had infected the Germans. "Philosophical absolutism may be practically as dangerous as matter of fact political absolutism," wrote Dewey. To strengthen our social bonds, he believed we had to turn our national diversity into something the public recognized

as a strength—to "make the accident of our internal composition into an idea." This would require a commitment to "promoting the efficacy of human intercourse irrespective of class, racial, geographical and national limits" and a dedication to the "processes of cooperation in the great experiment of living together." Dewey went on to write, "We have to recognize that furtherance of the depth and width of human intercourse is the measure of civilization."¹⁷²

To create this ideal, Dewey believed journalists—along with educators and public intellectuals—should facilitate public inquiry, discussion, and debate, and help the public accept the reality of cultural pluralism—that different groups were inevitably affected in different ways, and would naturally form different explanations and interpretations.¹⁷³ Journalism, along with other venues for democratic debate, should help us expand our individual conception of self-interest into a recognition of our common interests, and promote tolerance and understanding.

Ray Stannard Baker's conception of the role of

journalists as being “makers of understanding,” fits well within Dewey’s political philosophy. Both saw the role of journalism as helping the public understand what life was like for their fellow citizens. Much of Tarbell’s writing also fit with this ideal. With deep respect for the democratic process and an appreciation for diverse public opinion, Tarbell wrote that our individual ideas:

must sink or swim in a stream where a multitude of human experiences, prejudices, ambitions, ideals meet and clash, throw one another back, mingle, make that all-powerful current which is public opinion—the trend which swallows, digests, or rejects what we give it. It is our indifference to or ignorance of the multiplicity of human elements in the society we seek to benefit that is responsible for the sinking outright of many of our fine plans.¹⁷⁴

As the distance between cause and effect expanded and social problems became more complex, Dewey and Lippmann both grappled with how to adapt

democratic ideals—including the rationality and morality of the people, the average citizens’ role in self-governance, and the free competition of ideas—to this new reality. Journalists who made their case by forcefully stating a conclusion without sharing the evidence behind their conclusion were, in essence, asking readers to accept an epistemology based on faith, not evidence. An epistemology based on faith, authority, or willful manipulation, undermine the Enlightenment values that grounds democratic theory. The yellow muckrakers like Lawson and Phillips often failed to share the evidence behind their conclusions, and instead implicitly relied on the audiences pre-existing skepticism of business tycoons and political elites. If evidence is minimized and a citizen’s preexisting beliefs and prejudices become their primary epistemological justification, then personal and group biases are elevated above a shared set of facts and a common rationality. When this happens, it is not surprising that journalism becomes more partisan, ideological, and divisive.

Like Dewey, Lippmann believed that an effective

democracy required certain cultural and structural conditions. For Lippmann democracy was at its best when different individuals and groups were effectively represented over a span of time and space; “time” meaning that democracy wasn’t based on the “hypnosis of the moment,” but reflected public opinion as it adapted to the past, present, and the future; and “space,” intimating that representation shouldn’t be based on the entire, aggregated nation, but on a variety of groups of different sizes and locations (i.e. both neighborhood, city, county, district, state, and national representation). Both Dewey and Lippmann believed that democracy required the development of a culture that took the long view and that helped people see beyond their immediate time and space. To navigate differences in opinion both believed that we had to temper our opinions “with scientific humility”¹⁷⁵ and recognize that dogmatic beliefs were harmful to a diverse nation. In a democratic society, it makes a great difference whether opposing groups respectfully disagree or whether they hate and demonize each other. Dewey believed that

journalism should be one vehicle where citizens learn how to understand and respectfully interact with those whose views were different from their own. Arguably, the realist muckrakers helped develop a culture based on respectful debate, while the prosecutorial, yellow, and radical muckrakers moved society closer to a politics of partisanship, tribalism, and ideological rigidity.

While the specific divisions threatening democracy have changed since the Progressive Era, when a society becomes so divided that citizens refuse to recognize their common humanity, or no longer believe they have common interests with their fellow countrymen and women, then the stability that democracy requires is threatened. We need to recognize different types of muckraking because of the divergent influences each have on public opinion. Weighing multiple sides of an issue and considering one’s own values and then forming a belief is fundamentally different than refusing to reflect on alternative perspectives and pre-judging the morality or intelligence of those you disagree with. There is an essential insight in Roosevelt’s fear

that a “gross and reckless” form of journalism would “create a morbid and vicious public sentiment.”¹⁷⁶ Whether society is held together or pulled apart

depends, at least to a degree, on the type of journalism that is prevalent, and the type of public opinion that develops.

Notes

- 1 James L. Aucoin, *The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).
- 2 “Roosevelt on the Muck Rake Brigade,” *Times-Picayune*, Apr. 15, 1906.
- 3 Theodore Roosevelt, “The Man with the Muckrake,” *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1906.
- 4 Roosevelt, “Man with the Muckrake.”
- 5 Mark Neuzil, “Hearst, Roosevelt, and the Muckrake Speech of 1906: A New Perspective,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73 (Spring 1996).
- 6 David Graham Phillips, “Treason of the Senate,” *Cosmopolitan*, March, 1906.
- 7 For instance, *New York Times*’s headline read, “President On Muckrakers: Condemns Indiscriminate Assaults On Public Men,” and had a prescient sub-heading: “Easy to Twist President’s Words.” *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1906.
- 8 David Chalmers, *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), 14.
- 9 Fred J. Cook, *The Muckrakers: Crusading Journalists Who Changed America* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 9-10.
- 10 Irving Dilliard, “Foreword: Six Decades Later,” in *Muckraking: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. John M. Harrison and Harry. H. Stein (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 1.
- 11 There are numerous other examples of historians describing Roosevelt’s muckraker speech as if it was a one-sided attack on all investigative journalists. Robert Miraldi wrote that Roosevelt made a speech “attacking ... muckraking writers.” Jackson Learns wrote that Roosevelt “criticized investigative journalists as ‘muckrakers.’” Cecelia Tichi described Roosevelt as applying the “muckraker” label to Tarbell, Baker, and Steffens, and the whole “cohort of literary social critics.” Jackson Learns, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 307. Robert Miraldi, *Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism’s colliding traditions* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 7. Cecelia Tichi, “Exposé and Excess,” *American Literary History* 15, no. 4 (2003): 822.
- 12 David A. Copeland, *The Media’s Role in Defining the Nation: The Active Voice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 129-130.
- 13 Roosevelt, “The Man with the Muckrake.”
- 14 Edwin E. Slosson, “The Literature of Exposure,” *The Independent*, Mar. 22, 1906.
- 15 On classifying the muckrakers, Lippmann also stated: “Muckraking is full of the voices of the beaten, of the bewildered, and then again it is shot through with some fine anticipation. It has pointed to a revolution in business motives; it has hinted at the emerging power of

labor and the consumer.” Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 25-27.

16 David Hackett Fischer called this historical tendency the “fallacy of essences.” He writes that it is common in historiography because the idea of a central essence “supplies a sense of completeness and it encourages a sense of certainty,” which, even if it is false, is psychologically satisfying. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 68-69.

17 Charles Edward Russell, *Bare Hands and Stone Walls* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933), 140.

18 Cornelius C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 10-11, 123-127.

19 Louis Filler, *The Muckrakers: Crusaders for American Liberalism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), 4-5. Many others have viewed the muckrakers as Filler has, contrasting the “stodgy” journalism of the 19th century to the “solid factualism of muckraking” of the Progressive Era, including Robert E. Spiller, et al., *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 965.

20 Phillips, “Treason of the Senate.”

21 Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines: 1885-1905* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 492. John Tebbel, *The Life and Good Times of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Dutton, 1952), 150-51.

22 J. Herbert Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan: The Ideas Behind American Journalism* (New York: Longman, 1990), 271-274.

23 Other historians have noticed the broad differences in types of muckraking. Matthew Schneirov saw important differences between two muckraking magazines, *McClure’s* and *Cosmopolitan*. Doris Kearns Goodwin did not specifically define muckraking as containing different types of journalism, but in a brief section she cited Filler when she wrote “The president’s attack on the muckrakers reflected . . . his exasperation with the proliferation of increasingly sensational and shoddily investigated exposure journalism [that] had been slowly building. Although the ‘masters’ at *McClure’s* typically invested months and even years of careful research in the studies, a host of less meticulous and principled ‘imitators’ had followed in their wake.” Matthew Schneirov, “Popular Magazines, New Liberal Discourse and American Democracy, 1890s-1914,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 16 (2017): 121-142. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 482.

24 Robert Miraldi, *Muckraking and Objectivity, Journalism’s Colliding Traditions* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 17-19.

25 There have been other attempts to “redefine” muckraking. Kathleen L. Endres wrote an essay in *American Journalism* that argued historians have placed too much emphasis on white male muckrakers and should recognize the muckraking contributions in women’s magazines, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Delineator*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Endres also advocated for distinguishing between muckraking that provided solutions, versus muckraking that was merely descriptive of a social problem. Kathleen L. Endres, “Muckraking: A Term Worth Redefining,” *American Journalism*, 14, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1997): 333-335.

- 26 Arthur S. Link, and Richard McCormick, *Progressivism* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1983), 24.
- 27 Ida M. Tarbell, "The Golden Rule in Business," *The American Magazine*, Oct. 1914 to Sep. 1915.
- 28 Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 185-186.
- 29 Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle: The Autobiography of Ray Stannard Baker [David Grayson]*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 41-42.
- 30 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 185-186.
- 31 Arthur Weinberg and Lila Weinberg, *The Muckrakers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 288.
- 32 John Kenneth Turner's revolutionary zeal also included arms smuggling for Mexican rebels. Linda Lumsden, "Socialist Muckraker John Kenneth Turner: The Twenty-First Century Relevance of a Journalist/Activist's Career," *American Journalism*, 32 (Sept. 2015): 282-306.
- 33 Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*.
- 34 Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).
- 35 Martin J. Sklar, "Woodrow Wilson and the Political Economy of Modern United States Liberalism," *Studies on the Left* 1 (1960). James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in The Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
- 36 Peter Filene, "An Obituary for "The Progressive Movement," *American Quarterly* 22 (1970): 20-34.
- 37 John D. Buenker, "The Progressive Era: A Search for a Synthesis," *Mid-America* 51 (1969): 175-93.
- 38 Jack T. Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1972), 3.
- 39 David M. Kennedy, "Overview: The Progressive Era," *Historian* 37 (1975): 453.
- 40 Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 113-132.
- 41 Filene, "An Obituary for "The Progressive Movement," 33.
- 42 Daniel T. Rodgers, "Capitalism and Politics in the Progressive Era and in Ours," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13 (July 2014): 380.
- 43 Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1980), 204.
- 44 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I (originally published in 1651, republished by New York: Penguin Classics, 2017), iv.
- 45 "To edit is to interpret, to speak is to define, to communicate is to structure reality." David Paletz and Robert Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 22.
- 46 Walter Lippmann, and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News: An Examination of the News Reports in the *New York Times* on aspects of the Russian Revolution of special importance to Americans, March 1917-March 1920," *The New Republic*, Aug. 4, 1920. Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914); *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920); *Public Opinion* (New York, Macmillan, 1922); and, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

- 47 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927, reprinted 1988).
- 48 Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 68.
- 49 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 147.
- 50 John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), 128.
- 51 Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 175.
- 52 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 207. In the words of the modern Dewian Michael Sandel, democracy requires “a way of life that fosters communication and deliberation among citizens,” that culminates in “intelligent collective action.” Michael J. Sandel, “Dewey Rides Again,” *New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1996/05/09/dewey-rides-again/>
- 53 As Maurine H. Beasley has argued, racism, lynching, and the treatment of African Americans were rarely the focus of muckrakers' investigations. *Collier's* even featured the occasional article that tried to justify the lynching of blacks. There were some notable exceptions, such as Ray Stannard Baker's writing for *McClure's* and his series “Following the Color Line” for *American Magazine*, but he dealt with segregation and lynching in a way that largely avoided the ethical dimensions and instead focused on the economic and social nature of racism. Baker doesn't attack segregationists as racist, or un-Christian, and his article is noticeably absent of strong statements about immorality of lynching. Baker's reporting on race was described by historians Arthur and Lila Weinberg as “cold, scientific, reportorial logic.” Weinberg & Weinberg, *The Muckrakers*, 214.
- Maureen Beasley, “The Muckrakers and Lynching: A Case Study in Racism,” *Journalism History* 9, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1982): 86-91.
- 54 Richard Franklin Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.
- 55 When the Constitution was written, the U.S. was a nation of around 4 million—700,000 of which were slaves—and 95% lived on farms or in small towns. By 1850s the percentage of Americans who were farmers had declined to around 64% of the workforce—by 1900 it was at 37%. Philip Abbott, *Political Thought in America: Conversations and Debates* (Itasca: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1991), 106-107, 184.
- 56 Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 40.
- 57 Michel Foucault makes this point in *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
- 58 John Dewey, “The Schools and Social Preparedness,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 10: 1916-1917 Period*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 193.
- 59 Hofstadter wrote that the muckrakers “were able, as very few of the practitioners of exposure had been able before, not merely to name the malpractices in American business and politics, but to name the malpractitioners and their specific misdeeds, and to proclaim the facts to the entire country.” They told a story about how “America worked” at a time when the public was trying to get a sense of the nation beyond their city or state or region. The “muckrakers pictured state settings that everybody recognized but that nobody had written about – oil refineries, slums, the redlight districts, the hotel rooms where political deals were made.” He argued that the muckrakers realism, grounded by a description of specific people in specific places, fostered the pragmatic thinking of the Progressive era.

“Reality was . . . rough and sordid. It was hidden, neglected, and off-stage. . . . Reality was the bribe, the rebate, the bought franchise, the sale of adulterated food.” Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 186, 199, 201.

⁶⁰ Lippmann expanded on this point: “Muckraking flared up at about the time when land was no longer freely available and large-scale industry had begun to throw vast questions across the horizon. It came when success had ceased to be easily possible for everyone.” Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 25.

⁶¹ Filler, *The Muckrakers*, 83.

⁶² S. S. McClure, “Editorial: Concerning Three Articles in This Number of *McClure’s*, and a Coincidence That May Set Us Thinking.” *McClure’s Magazine*, Jan., 1903.

⁶³ Baker, *American Chronicle*, 185.

⁶⁴ Filler, *The Muckrakers*, 23.

⁶⁵ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 14.

⁶⁶ Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).

This was echoed sociologist Gaye Tuchman—the journalistic “act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality.” Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 12.

⁶⁷ Schudson, *Sociology of News*, 2.

⁶⁸ Literary realism, made famous by William Dean Howells, was an approach to both fiction and non-fiction that attempted to depict reality without embellishing or romanticizing, and typically featured characters who were nuanced and complex as opposed to pure good or evil. Richard Hofstadter (1955) was the most prominent scholar to draw the connection between muckraking and realism. Since then, scholars have continued to explore the link. In Raymond Seidelman’s chapter titled “Science as Muckraking: The Cult of Realism,” he described progressive political science as a “critical unmasking” and framed the work of Arthur F. Bentley and Charles Beard, respectively, as being part of a scientific muckraking tradition. Maxwell Bloomfield saw realism in muckraking as influencing realism in American theater. J. S. Maloy described the methods of muckraking realism as “a road not traveled” in academic political science, and as a way to connect social science research to a broader political culture. He conceived of political scientists and muckrakers (he focused solely on Ray Stannard Baker and Lincoln Steffens) as having similar goals and following compatible methods of empirical fact finding and critical analysis, while rejecting partisan propagandizing and echo chambers. Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*. Raymond Seidelman, *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015). Maxwell Bloomfield, “Muckraking and the American Stage: The Emergence of Realism, 1905-1917,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 66 (Spring 1967). J. S. Maloy, “Political Realism as Anti-scholastic Practice: Methodological Lessons from Muckraking Journalism,” *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2020): 28, 30-31.

⁶⁹ David Graham Phillips, “Treason of the Senate: Aldrich, Head of it All,” *Cosmopolitan*, Mar., 1906.

⁷⁰ Thomas Lawson, “Frenzied Finance: The Story of Amalgamated,” *Everybody’s Magazine*, Aug., 1904.

⁷¹ Other historians have written about the connection between yellow journalism and muckraking. Kristen MacLeod, for instance, wrote of the “sensationalist discourse of ‘yellow

journalism' and its reform-minded offshoot, the muckraking movement." John Durham Peters wrote: "The histories of muckraking and sensationalism are intertwined. The raw truth could be as sensational as the wildest story.... Muckraking sought to 'expose' the hidden, in both the photographic and pornographic senses of that word." Kristen MacLeod, *American Little Magazines of the Fine de Siècle: Art, Protest, and Cultural Transformation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 252. John Durham Peters, "Satan and Savior: Mass Communication in Progressive Thought," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 259.

72 Radical muckraking could also be called ideological muckraking. To recognize the method and epistemology of a journalist, the specifics of an ideology (socialism, laissez-fair capitalism, etc.) are less important than the role ideology plays in shaping a journalist's writing. While the radical muckrakers of the Progressive Era were all socialists, the important thing to recognize is that ideology guided or framed nearly everything they wrote. They made sense of their reporting through their faith in an explicitly held ideology.

73 Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston: Routledge, 1957), 23-30.

74 Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 39-40.

75 Edward Hallet Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 80.

76 Ida M. Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 30, 85.

77 Kathleen Brady, *Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 123, 99.

78 Everett E. Dennis, foreword to *More Than A Muckraker: Ida Tarbell's Lifetime in Journalism*, ed. Robert C. Kochersberg Jr. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), xii.

79 See Henry D. Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1894).

80 Brady, *Ida Tarbell*, 123, 129.

81 S. S. McClure, *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 239.

82 Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work*, 215.

83 Ida M. Tarbell, "The Rise of the Standard Oil Company," *McClure's Magazine*, Dec., 1902.

84 Ibid.

85 Tarbell, "The Oil War of 1872," *McClure's Magazine*, Jan., 1903.

86 Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*.

87 Charles Edward Russell, "The Greatest Trust in the World," *Everybody's Magazine*, Feb., 1905.

88 Tarbell, "Rise of the Standard Oil."

89 Ibid.

90 Ida M. Tarbell, "The Real Greatness of the Standard," *McClure's Magazine*, July, 1903.

91 Tarbell, "Real Greatness of Standard Oil."

92 Ida M. Tarbell, "The History of the Standard Oil Company: Conclusion," *McClure's Magazine*, Oct., 1904.

93 Ibid.

94 Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work*, 234.

95 Ida M. Tarbell, "John D. Rockefeller: A Character Study, Part 2," *McClure's Magazine*, Aug., 1905.

96 Ida M. Tarbell, "John D. Rockefeller: A Character Study," *McClure's Magazine*, July, 1905.

97 Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work*, 399-400, 206. I've cautiously used memoirs in this paper to see how different muckrakers defined their own journalism, and to look for other clues

about their broader epistemological outlooks. Like all historical texts, memoirs should be interpreted with a critical eye, for even the most honest and revealing memoir is still no more than the expression of one individual who is anything but a neutral spectator.

98 Tarbell, "The Golden Rule in Business."

99 Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work*, 242.

100 Roosevelt, "The Man with the Muckrake."

101 John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zucherman, *The Magazine in America: 1741-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 108.

102 Robert C. Kochersberger Jr., introduction to *More Than A Muckraker*, xxiv.

103 Baker, *American Chronicle*, 139

104 Michael S. Sweeney, "The Desire for the Sensational: Coxey's Army and the Argus-eyed Demons of Hell," *Journalism History* 23 (1997): 119-120.

105 Baker, *American Chronicle*, 32.

106 Ibid.

107 Ray Stannard Baker, "How Labor Is Organized," *World's Work*, Aug. 1902.

108 Baker, *American Chronicle*, 165.

109 Ibid., 38-39.

110 Brandeis is far better known as a Supreme Court Justice, but he wrote a series of articles on J.P. Morgan's "money trust" for *Harper's Weekly* that fit well within the prosecutorial muckraking approach. Brandeis' articles were later assembled into the book: Louis D. Brandeis, *Other People's Money: And How the Bankers Use It*, (New York: The McClure Publications, 1913).

111 Henry D. Lloyd could also be understood as a radical muckraker, instead of a prosecutorial muckraker, as he advocated for a cooperative socialist commonwealth, but his writing was full of hundreds of footnotes citing verifiable evidence, and he was more ideologically flexible than die-hard socialists like Sinclair and Russell (i.e. Lloyd was also an advocate of free trade). Lloyd's use of evidence was also more in line with the prosecutorial muckrakers, but his exaggerated language and his quasi-socialist ends were consistent with the radical muckrakers.

112 Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, 500, 508.

113 Filler, *The Muckrakers*, 336.

114 Mark Sullivan, *The Education of an American* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1938), 254-255, 261.

115 Brandeis, *Other People's Money*.

116 *McClure's Magazine* also published prosecutorial muckraking, including some of Connolly's articles, but in general *McClure's* was less attacking and partisan.

117 Norman Hapgood, *The Changing Years: Reminiscences of Norman Hapgood* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930), 106.

118 Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 24.

119 Weinberg & Weinberg, *The Muckrakers*, 261-262.

120 Lawson, "The Story of Amalgamated," 15.

121 Ibid., 17-19

122 Ibid., 20-22.

- 123 “Mr. Lawson and Others,” *The Independent*, Dec. 29, 1904, in *The Independent, Volume 57, July—December, 1904*, (New York: Independent Publications (1904), 1,514.
<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=BKUeAQAAMAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA762>.
- 124 Reiger, *The Era of the Muckrakers*, 130
- 125 George W. Alger, “Sensational Journalism and the Law,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1903.
- 126 George W. Alger, “The Literature of Exposure,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Aug. 1905.
- 127 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 128 *Ibid.*
- 129 *Ibid.*
- 130 *Ibid.*, 242.
- 131 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 132 Tarbell, *All In A Day’s Work*, 298.
- 133 Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume V: Sketches of 21 Magazines 1905-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 79-80.
- 134 Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 581.
- 135 Phillips, “Treason of the Senate: Aldrich.”
- 136 *Ibid.*
- 137 *Ibid.*
- 138 *Collier’s Weekly*, Nov. 17, 1906.
- 139 Ida M. Tarbell letter to Louis Filler, published in Louis Filler, *Voice of Democracy: A Critical Biography of David Graham Phillips* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press: 1978), 75.
- 140 Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 196.
- 141 Other muckrakers wrote fiction, like Frank Norris, *The Pit* (New York: Doubleday, 1903).
- 142 Upton Sinclair, *American Outpost: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932), 61, 123-237, 158.
- 143 Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 324.
- 144 *Ibid.*, 326.
- 145 Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*, 167.
- 146 Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 207-209.
- 147 Sinclair, *American Outpost*, 166-173.
- 148 Sinclair’s disparaging remarks about the Pure Food and Drug Act have been backed up by meat processing experts and historians, such as Alan Toulon, who saw publicity and advertising undermine the law’s regulations on the meat processing industry. Alana Toulon, “‘Old Methods Not Up to New Ways’: The Strategic Use of Advertising in the Fight for Pure Food After 1906,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (2019): 461–479.
- 149 Weinberg & Weinberg, *The Muckrakers*, 206.
- 150 Hapgood, *The Changing Years*, 171.
- 151 I don’t in any way mean to disparage the two dominant explanations for the end of the muckraking movement—that banks and advertisers pulled funding from muckraking magazines and that journalists lost legitimacy when they joined the government propaganda department at the Committee for Public Information during WWI. These are well documented interpretations for the end of muckraking, but it is also possible that realist

muckraking was overwhelmed by yellow and radical muckraking, as Tarbell and Roosevelt feared would happen.

152 Tarbell, *All In A Day's Work*, 242. Roosevelt, "The Man with the Muckrake."

153 The relationship between investigative journalism and the success of a reform was explored using an anthropological approach by David L. Protes, Fay Lomax Cook, Jack C. Doppelt, James S. Ettema, Margaret T. Gordon, Donna R. Leeff, and Peter Miller, *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991).

154 This point was made by Michael S. Sweeney in the 2006 Presidential Address of the American Journalism Historians Association, when he criticized unthinking opinion journalism for oversimplifying complex problems and "substituting punditry and pugnacity for constructive public discourse" that pushed readers to stop thinking for themselves and "merely parrot expressions." Michael S. Sweeney, "Everyman His Own Historian—Not! A Defense of Our Profession—And a Plea for its Future: AJHA Presidential Address, Oct. 6, 2005, San Antonio Texas," *American Journalism* 23 (2006).

155 Some scholars have emphasised the contemporary relationship between tone of journalism and its impact on public opinion. See Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

156 George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1968), 139.

157 Robert D. Johnston, "Re-democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1 (Jan. 2002): 68-92.

158 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014), 10.

159 Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 5.

160 Numerous scholars and journalists have rejected the imprecise term "fake news," including: Claire Wardle, "Fake News. It's Complicated," *First Draft*, Feb. 16, 2017, <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/>. Daniel Funke, "Reporters: Stop Calling Everything 'Fake News,'" *Poynter*, Aug. 29, 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/reporters-stop-calling-everything-fake-news/>. George Lakoff on *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Feb. 17, 2017. The point was made by multiple participants at the 2018 John Breaux Symposium on "fake news" (May 3, 2018, Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University, Washington D.C.) and in the subsequent report *An Anatomy of Fake News: History, Populism, Partisanship, Technology, and Solutions*, ed. Tim V. Klein, (Baton Rouge: Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, 2018). Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2018).

161 Michael Lynch, "Fake News and the Internet Shell Game," *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2016.

162 Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 139.

163 Even in the early articles, as James J. Connolly has pointed out, Steffens favored action over reflection, and promoted individual reformers like Joseph Folk. Steffens' initial lack of emphasis on specific solutions was partly due to his simplistic formulation of the public interest as a monolith that had grown apathetic, and just had to be awakened. Lincoln Steffens, *Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1904), 8. James J. Connolly, "The Public Good and the Problem of Pluralism in Lincoln Steffens's Civic Imagination," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4 (Apr. 2005): 125-147.

164 Lincoln Steffens, *The Upbuilders* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1909).

165 Dimitri S. von Mohrenschildt, "Lincoln Steffens and the Russian Bolshevik Revolution," *The Russian Review*, 5:1 (1945): 31. The quote is sometimes recorded as "I've been to the future and it works."

166 Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 68.

167 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899).

168 Walter Lippmann, *The Good Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938), 255.

169 Walter Lippmann, "Today and Tomorrow: The American Idea," *Herald Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1954.

170 Walter Lippmann, "Today and Tomorrow: The Departure of the Lindberghs," *Herald Tribune*, Dec. 28, 1935.

171 Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 156.

172 John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* [1915], in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Vol. 8: 1899-1924: Essays and Miscellany in the 1915 Period and German Philosophy and Politics and Schools of Tomorrow*. ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 203-205.

173 John Dewey, "Logical Conditions of a Scientific Treatment of Morality" [1903], in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Vol. 3: 1903-1906.*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 3-4. Tim V. Klein and Elizabeth Fondren, "The Lippmann-Dewey 'Debate': Roles and Responsibilities of Journalists in a Democratic Society" in *Journalism's Ethical Progression: A Twentieth-Century Journey*, ed. Gwyneth Mellinger and John P. Ferré (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 45-72.

174 Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work*, 400.

175 Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 106.

176 Roosevelt, "The Man with the Muckrake."

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