



FIRST AMENDMENT IN HISTORY

YELLOW JOURNALISM: WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST (1898)

RESOURCES

- <http://www.pbs.org/crucible/headlines.html>
- http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendl_speechs8.html
- <http://www.spanamwar.com/Hearst.htm>

ACTIVITY

The Founders saw freedom of the press as a natural right and an indispensable means of promoting good government. Free newspapers keep leaders honest and the citizenry engaged. The First Amendment forbids prior restraints, and in order to ensure the unfettered flow of information, newspapers are insulated from penalties even when they print information that turns out to be false, as long as they do not act recklessly or maliciously.

“Yellow Journalism,” refers to sensational and melodramatic journalism. This term was first applied to the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst in the late 1800s. (The term “Yellow Journalism” referred to a color comic strip called “The Yellow Kid.” The ink would often smear onto other parts of the page, prompting some to say that Hearst not only colored the comics, he also colored the news.)

Hearst was particularly interested in the Spanish-American War. Cuba wanted independence from Spain, and the U.S. was sympathetic to the Cubans. Hearst ran stories about Spanish brutality in his newspaper. There were indeed many real instances of Spanish abuses. But some of Hearst’s photographs were manipulated, and articles made exaggerated charges of “Spanish cannibalism” and “inhuman torture.”

The American battleship *U.S.S. Maine* was sent to Cuba to protect American citizens on the island. Less than a month later, the *Maine* exploded, and 266 Sailors and Marines were killed. Hearst’s paper immediately placed blame on the Spanish, though they had no evidence for this charge. The paper focused on the incident constantly, devoting up to eight pages a day on the subject. The public responded with demands for retribution against Spain. President McKinley asked Congress for authorization to intervene in Cuba on April 11, 1898. On the 17th, the headline of the *Journal* read, “*War? Sure!*” The following day, Congress voted to declare war. Historians point to the Spanish-American War as the first press-driven conflict, in that the constant sensational headlines and photographs fueled the public’s passion and demands for action.

The US government did not get attempt to censor Hearst’s newspaper or punish him for his practices. In a society with a free press, journalists like Hearst who have the power to shape public opinion and even drive foreign policy may test citizens’ commitment to the First Amendment. Ultimately, it is up citizens to discriminate among news sources and weigh their credibility. As Thomas Jefferson said, “I am persuaded myself that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army. They may be led astray for a moment, but will soon correct themselves...The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

QUESTIONS

1. What is yellow journalism?
2. What yellow journalism practices appeared in William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper?
3. Why do historians point to the Spanish-American War as the first press-driven conflict?
4. Can you think of modern examples of “yellow journalism” such as manipulated photographs or exaggerated reporting?
5. How does the First Amendment’s protection of a free press ensure that the press is responsible only to citizens, rather than government?



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ANSWERS

1. Yellow journalism refers to sensational or melodramatic reporting.
2. Hearst ran altered photographs and stories with exaggerated charges of Spanish abuses. He also ran headlines demanding that Congress act to declare war on Spain.
3. Hearst's constant attention to the topic – even devoting up to 8 pages a day in his newspaper – probably fueled the public's passion and demands for action.
4. Answers will vary.
5. The First Amendment protects newspapers and other media from being punished for what they print. It protects papers which print information that is untrue, as long as the reporters and editors did not act recklessly or maliciously. This means that the final judgment as to the accuracy and worth of a news source rests with the public. Government censors cannot stop papers from bringing information to the public.