1897
American Journalism’s Exceptional Year

This article directs attention to the remarkable developments of 1897 and argues that year merits recognition as a pivotal moment in the trajectory of American journalism. In presenting that case, the article pursues a methodological frame—a single-year study—that has been little tested in journalism history, a field that leading scholars have criticized for resistance to fresh ways of considering journalism’s past. The notable developments of 1897 included the appearance of perhaps the most famous editorial in American journalism, the diffusion of the enduring epithet “yellow journalism,” and a breakthrough in applying half-tone technology to daily newspapers. It was also the year of "a choice between rival visions for the future of American journalism that crystallized between the activist ethos of the New York Journal and the detached, fact-based antithesis of that genre, the New York Times."

When the American Newspaper Publishers’ Association convened its annual meeting in New York City in February 1897, the agenda included questions such as: “Should a newspaper furnish members of the editorial staff with stationery supplies, especially lead pencils?” “Do typewriters ‘lower the literary grade of work done by reporters’?” “What is the rule in regard to paying car fare for reporters on the local staff of newspapers?” While offering a glimpse into late nineteenth-century journalism, the topics were inadvertently deceptive. They contained no hint 1897 was unfolding as an important moment of transition in American journalism, and they offered scant allusion to the convergence of events and forces that would make this journalism’s exceptional year.

Eighteen ninety-seven was the year of publication of the most famous editorial1 in American journalism, the New York Sun’s timeless “Is There a Santa Claus?” It was the year when “yellow journalism” first appeared in print, a sneering pejorative that was swiftly diffused in the American press, and it brought a breakthrough in the use of half-tone photographs in main sections of large-circulation newspapers, a development that recast the appearance of daily American newspapers. It was the year of “jail-breaking journalism,” according to the Chicago Times-Herald, when William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal organized the rescue of a female political prisoner in Havana during Cuba’s insurrection against Spanish rule. It also was the year, some scholars say, of the first modern reference to “public relations” in the Yearbook of Railway Literature. And it was the year when cinema was emergent and when a motion picture camera was first taken to war, and it marked the origin of the Katzenjammer Kids, now America’s longest-running newspaper comic. 1

But more significantly, it was when a choice would crystallize between rival and incompatible visions or paradigms for the future of American journalism—a choice between the self-activated, participatory ethos of Hearst’s yellow journalism and the detached, sober antithesis of that genre, as represented by the New York Times and its lofty commitment to “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” Resolution of this clash of paradigms would take years and result ultimately in rejection of Hearst-style activism. But in 1897, the choice was clearly laid down.

That all of those developments41 were rooted in 1897 suggests more than coincidence; they signal the critical nature of the year as a remarkable if little-recognized transitory moment in American journalism. Tentatively perhaps, journalists in 1897 sensed that signifi-

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cant transformation was afoot. "Be the causes what they may," the journalist trade publication noted "the methods of journalism are at present changing. Whether they have yet reached the limit of that change ... is a question no man can answer."19 New practices and new devices certainly were being brought to newsrooms. The "signed article," for example, was recognized as "more and more common," representing "another departure in modern journalism," according to the general manager of the Associated Press.20 The Fourth Estate noted a "rapid introduction of the typewriter into newspaper offices" and declared: "Though it is unfortunately true that many of the best reporters fail to save enough to begin a bank account, yet there is no reason why any man earning a decent salary should not possess a typewriter."21

The extensive investment and capitalization required of large-city dailies—from typewriters to linotypes and high-speed presses capable of printing in color—prompted Lincoln Steffens to write: "The magnitude of the financial operations of the newspaper is turning journalism upside down."22

This article directs attention to the remarkable succession of events and developments during that crowded year, particularly those in New York City surrounding the emergent clash of paradigms of the Journal and the Times, and argues that 1897 merits recognition as a pivotal moment in the trajectory of American journalism. In presenting that case, the article pursues a methodological frame—a single-year study—that has been little tested in journalism history, a field that leading scholars have criticized for its "restrictions on methodological approaches"23 and resistance to "new and better ways to study [journalism's] past."24

While critiques of journalism history have not specifically identified single-year studies as representative of methodological freshness, such approaches have proven revealing in other contexts. Scott Heller has described them as "a manageable way to narrow the scope, deal in specifics, yet still work with a beginning, middle, and end."

Year studies, moreover, can offer insight into what may be considered familiar or even mundane topics. This article, for example, considers the emergence of the New York Times’ smug yet enduring motto, "All the News That’s Fit to Print," and notes that it first served as an advertising and marketing device before taking a permanent place on the newspaper’s front page in 1897.

Year studies also can be intriguingly flexible and inclusive. As Michael North, the author of Reading 1922, has usefully observed: "In the telling of history, ... a year can be used as a date, as if it were punctual and precise, or as a period containing a great many other dates."25 Such flexibility is apparent in the variety of recent single-year works examining the world on the cusp of modernity,26 the United States at a critical moment before its civil war,27 the nascent “American century,”28 and the post-World War I peace conference in Paris, among others.29

Year studies are not without their risks, however. The most pronounced is placing too much significance in a single year while ignoring the broader evolutionary context. Indeed, it would be erroneous to characterize the significant developments in American journalism in 1897 as products of sudden inspiration. Some certainly were. The New York Sun’s iconic Santa Claus editorial, according to an editor’s account, was written "in a short time."30

But other pivotal moments in 1897 clearly were the outcome of extended periods of experimentation. A telling example was the breakthrough in half-tone technology, specifically printing half-tones in the main section of newspapers published on high-speed presses. Such a process was believed impossible until the 1890s.31 The breakthrough came January 21, 1897, when the New York Tribune published a half-tone photograph of Thomas Platt, New York’s U.S. Senator-elect, on its front page.32 The portrait “startled New York” journalism, said the Fourth Estate, which characterized the development as “undoubtedly, a new step in the art of newspaper illustration.”33 The Tribune congratulated itself as “the first of all the metropolitan newspapers to make and print a satisfactory half-tone picture in its main sheet with its rapid, web perfecting presses, running at full speed, and using simply the regular everyday quality of printing paper.” The newspaper also asserted: “We do not say The Tribune’s half-tones cannot be improved. ... But the mechanical difficulty, hitherto deemed insuperable, has been at last overcome.”34 Within six weeks, the Fourth Estate reported a “distinct passion for half-tones” had “developed ... throughout the country.”35

Although the Tribune’s breakthrough was described by Wilson’s Photographic Magazine in 1903 as the start of a “wonderful revolution ... in the illustration of great metropolitan daily papers,”36 half-tones had appeared for years in illustrated weekly publications and in weekly supplements and special sections of newspapers. Their appearance in daily newspapers resulted from the sustained efforts of Stephen H. Horgan, the Tribune’s art manager,37 and from the recognition that half-tones offered greater timeliness and better fidelity than artists’ sketches, and cost less, too.38

As the Tribune’s innovation in half-tone technology suggests, the construct of a year study can capture or freeze-frame key moments in the trajectory of long-term change. This is not to say that no year other than 1897 could be considered as journalism’s exceptional year. Other candidates include: 1798 and the promulgation of the Alien and Sedition Acts, under which ten journalists eventually were con-
vicited; 1833 and the emergence (disputed by scholars) of innovative techniques of the penny press; 1972 and the Washington Post's disclosures about the Watergate scandal, a constitutional crisis that led to the resignation in 1974 of President Richard M. Nixon; and 1998 and the succession of well-publicized cases of ethical lapses and professional misconduct that shook American journalism. While each of those years is significant, even extraordinary, in American journalism, none appears to offer the variety of salient, pivotal moments that distinguished 1897.

That year, in broad respects, was characterized by a sense of vigor and welcome change in American life. A deeply unpopular president, Grover Cleveland, left office in March 1897 after presiding over four years of ruinous economic decline, or what the New York Herald called "the Slough of Despondency." Decreasing numbers of business failures and expanding farm exports signaled an economic recovery in 1897. In contrast with the four preceding years, the St. Paul Pioneer Press declared in an extravagant year-end assessment, "1897 was as the genial spring which follows the long, cold, dead winter, and sets afoot the currents of a new life in stream and tree and plant."

Midsummer 1897 brought confirmation of fabulous-sounding gold strikes in the Klondike, in Canada's sub-Arctic Yukon Territory, setting off North America's last great gold rush. A cycling craze, offering the allure of both speed and liberation, neared or reached a peak in 1897. Century runs—excursions of 100 miles—had become so popular as to be unremarkable, the Philadelphia Inquirer declared. "The bicycle has coaxed us all out of doors," the New York Herald observed. "This glorious exercise, followed by a glorious appetite three times a day and sound sleep at night is making us all over again." The cycling craze would subside with the emergence of the automobile, which in 1897 left indelible impressions. "The horseless carriage," the New York Tribune declared at year's end, "has apparently come to stay." A year-end review in the Cincinnati Enquirer noted: "Horseless carriages have ceased to be the butt of the cartoonist's pencil and the joke writer's pen. In three great cities of the world—London, Paris and New York—motor carriages have become such a familiar sight as to be an object of curiosity to none but country visitors." Presciently, the New York Tribune suggested at the close of 1897 that the world was "probably on the threshold of more stirring scenes and more important changes than have occurred in the year now closing." Within months, America had entered the world stage, projecting its military power in Asia and the Caribbean during a brief war that ejected Spain from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. The exceptionality of 1897 was becoming evident by the time the Publishers' Association met in New York. At the end of January 1897, just days after the Tribune printed its landmark half-tone, the New York Press published the evocative yet scathing sneer—"yellow journalism"—to impugn the aggressive and invariably self-promoting "new" journalism of Hearst's Journal and Joseph Pulitzer's New York World. The pejorative spread rapidly and lives on as an epithet for journalistic misconduct of all kinds. But rather than receding in embarrassment, the journal took the insult as a compliment. It embraced yellow journalism and noted in 1898 that "the sun in heaven is yellow—the sun which is to this earth what the Journal is to American journalism." Although that claim was typically self-congratulatory, the Journal had done much to merit such a characterization in 1897, which was a year of remarkable, if often controversial, exploits and successes.

By late 1897, the Journal proclaimed it had developed a new kind of journalism, one infused with an activist ethos that "does not wait for things to turn up" but cut through the inertia of bureaucracy to "get things done." This, the Journal declared, was the "journalism of action," and it represented the "final state in the evolution of the modern newspaper." The "journalism of action" enabled a newspaper to "fitly render any public service within its power." This offered a clear choice for the future—a paradigm of agency and engagement that went beyond gathering, printing, and commenting on the news.

The brashness inherent in the "journalism of action" reflected the spirit of the late 1890s, especially the sentiment of "épater le bourgeois" (to shock middle class values). Its dynamism corresponded well to what John Higham has called the "clamorous vitality" of fin-de-siècle America. What's more, the "journalism of action" reflected the fin-de-siècle fascination with the "new," an adjective widely applied at the time to connote exceptional modernity. "Not to be 'new' is, in these days, to be nothing," Henry D. Traill, a British journalist and literary critic, wrote in The New Fiction, a collection of essays published in 1897. "'New' is found expression in Art Nouveau, the New Woman, New Politics, New Hedonism, New Drama, and the New Journalism (a term that critics began using interchangeably with "yellow journalism")). The Journal characterized itself as the exceptionally modern newspaper, asserting: "From a news point of view, there are two classes of papers in New York—the Journal and all the others."
incompetence and indifference to secure legal injunctions to block suspected "grabs" and "giveaways" in the award of municipal transportation and utilities contracts. In December 1897, it recounted its successes in such efforts, proclaiming on its front page: "The Journal Stops: Gas Franchise Grab in Brooklyn, Trolley Franchise Grab in Brooklyn, Death Terminal of the Bridge, Dilatory Work on Fifth Avenue, $10,000,000 Light Monopoly in New York." The accompanying article declared: "Having devised and developed the journalism that acts," the Journal will be found constantly fulfilling the particular duty it has taken unto itself—acting when public service requires; acting in the way to accomplish beneficent results.

While not ignoring the swagger and excesses of the "journalism of action," the Journal trade publication identified the strength and popular appeal of the Journal's method: "It is the freshest news brightly presented, the sham sharply punctured and, above all, the feeling . . . that behind and through the paper there beats a warm, generous, human heart alive to the troubles and miseries of humanity and anxious to alleviate them." Considerable hope was attached to the Journal's campaign. The "journalism of action" was seen as "honest, fearless, unpurchaseable journalism," according to Henry A. Crittenden, a reform-minded commentator, in the Journal. He added: "It is not too much to say that the vital interests of the national progress and of the civilization demand that Mr. Hearst and the new journalism shall win in this titanic battle against trusts and corruption.

While no doubt owing a modest debt of inspiration to the World and its "stunt journalism" of the 1880s and early 1890s, the "journalism of action" most strikingly evoked an 1880s British notion of "government by journalism." The principal advocate of "government by journalism" was William T. Stead, a central figure in Britain's "new journalism" movement and the editor in the late 1890s of the Review of Reviews. He was a breathtaking description of powerful media effects, in which the journalist applied decisive influence. "Every day," he wrote in 1886, the journalist "can administer either a stimulant or a narcotic to the minds of his readers.

Stead was quite certain of the effective power of the press, which he maintained was made more profound by an increasingly literate populace. He wrote:

I have seen Cabinets upset, Ministers driven into retirement, laws repealed, great social reforms initiated, Bills transformed, estimates remodelled, programmes modified, Acts passed, generals nominated, governors appointed, armies sent hither and thither, war proclaimed and war averted, by the agency of newspapers. There were of course other agencies at work; but the dominant impulse, the original initiative, and the directing spirit in all these cases must be sought in the editorial sanctum rather than in Downing Street.

Stead was keenly aware of the New York Journal's activism and, notably, congratulated the newspaper for its "splendid deed of knighthood" in organizing the jailbreak in Havana in October 1897. "No more worthy use can be made of the sceptre of modern journalism than this," he declared, adding the "Journal has added a laurel to journalism of which every journalist in the world has a right to feel proud.

In resurrecting and expanding upon Stead's vision, the Journal's activist paradigm projected a sense of new energy and new possibilities in 20th-century American journalism. Hearst's principal rivals at the time—Pulitzer of the World, James Gordon Bennett Jr. of the Herald, Whitelaw Reid of the Tribune, and Charles A. Dana of the Sun—were older by at least fifteen years and their newspapers were better established than the Journal. The notable exception was Adolph Ochs of the Times who was, like Hearst, a newcomer to New York City journalism. In 1897, Hearst was thirty-four and in his second full year as the Journal's publisher; Ochs was thirty-nine and in his first full year at the Times. The latter was cultivating a rival vision for American journalism. This was an emphatically counter-activist paradigm of authoritative, detached, news-based journalism that found expression in the motto, "All the News That's Fit to Print.

The motto, which Ochs moved to the top left corner of the Times' front page on February 10, 1897, has been a source of enduring comment and fascination over the decades. The Wall Street Journal has fittingly termed it the "leitmotif not merely for the Times, but also, by a process of osmosis and emulation, for most other general-interest papers in the country, as well as for much of the broadcast media." Interests, the leitmotif for American journalism was used first as an advertising and marketing device. Perhaps the earliest appearance of "All the News That's Fit to Print" was in a small advertisement in the Fourth Estate in mid-October 1896. It also was displayed in advertising that month on a large electric sign in Madison Square.

The motto first appeared on the Times' editorial page on October 25, 1896, the day the newspaper announced it would pay $100 to the person who proposed in ten words or fewer "a phrase more expressive of the Times' policy" than "All the News That's Fit to Print." The contest elicited thousands of suggestions. Among the entries sent on postcards were: "Full of meat, clean and neat," and "Clean, crisp, bright, snappy; read it daily and be happy." Others—such as "All the News Worth Telling" and "All the News That Doesn't Scare People Want"—were decidedly unimaginatively derivative.

As the contest went on, the Times altered the stakes, saying it would not abandon its motto after all but would still pay $100 for the best suggestion. It tried to characterize the contest's unmistakable self-promoting quality as really an exercise in high-mindedness: "In asking its readers to suggest a phrase that would aptly set forth its policy of publishing a clean and decent newspaper, the Times has set
the people of this city to thinking upon the subject of newspaper decency in a more attentive and specific way than has been their custom.” A committee from the Times staff narrowed the entries to the 150 best, and these were submitted to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of The Century magazine. He selected the prize winner: "All the world's news, but not a School of Scandal.”

What the Times came to call its "covenant to print" All the News That's Fit to Print represented another option for the future of American journalism. As the motto was meant to suggest,97 the Times represented everything that the Journal was not. It published no multicolumn headlines, no dramatic layouts, no color comics, no front-page illustrations, no participatory journalism. The Times lacked the resources of the Journal and seldom competed in 1897 with the latter's enterprise in expensive, far-flung newspapering. But the Times did emerge that year as a moral counterweight to the excesses of yellow journalism, challenging more often than other New York City newspapers the wisdom, ethics, and even the legitimacy of the Journal's ambitious forays into activism. In its frequent censure, however, the Times often seemed a predictable scold.

The transitory nature of 1897 was underscored in October of that year by the death of the "pope" of American journalism.98 Charles Dana, the erudite but ill-tempered editor of the New York Sun who had been a force in American journalism for fifty years. By 1897, he was seventy-eight years-old and among the last of the nineteenth century's prominent, old-time American editors.99 His death may not have been deeply mourned; indeed, the Fourth Estate said that he had "hosts of admirers and legions of enemies." Dana and the Sun were nothing if not adamantly resistant to the typographical innovations of the late nineteenth century. The old editor, one contemporary wrote, "set his face firmly against any of the 'freaking' and other devices which have converted so many American newspapers into curiosities of typographical delirium tremens." He likened himself to "an old-fashioned expert" and was more hopeful than prescient in predicting in an 1894 lecture at Cornell University that illustrations in newspapers would prove "a passing fashion."100 He conceded to never having taken a liking to the linotype "because it didn't seem to me to turn out a page as handsome, in a typographical point of view, as a page set by hand."101

In Dana's last months, the Sun lent enthusiastic support to two widely publicized clumsy attempts to restrain what the newspaper termed the "leperous new journalism."102 One effort was a noisy campaign in early 1897 to expel the Journal and World from social clubs, reading rooms, and libraries across metropolitan New York. The other was legislation that sought to forbid unauthorized publication of caricatures in newspapers in New York state. Although both campaigns ended in quiet failure, they revealed how the transitions in American journalism troubled and unnerved not only journalists who were traditionalists but many politicians as well.

The Newark Free Public Library was the first institution to ban what the Sun called "the chronicles of crime, lust and of general nastiness."103 The library's trustees voted on February 4, 1897, to cancel subscriptions to the Journal and the World and remove back issues of the newspapers from the library's files.104 By May 1897, the Journal and World had been banned by nearly ninety institutions,105 including the Century Club in New York, the New York Yacht Club, the Harlem Branch of the YMCA, the Montauk Club of Brooklyn, the Flatbush Young Republican Club in Brooklyn, public libraries in Bridgeport and New Haven, Connecticut,106 and the reading room at Yale University Library.107 The inchoate protest, which faintly evoked the "moral war" against James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald in 1840,108 withered by mid-year 1897. In its energetic and enterprising newspapering, the Journal (and, to a lesser extent, the World) effectively overwhelmed the protest because the newspaper's successes in 1897 were too interesting to shun, too engaging to boycott for very long.

The boycott was spreading in metropolitan New York about the time the state legislature began considering a measure to prohibit publication of portraits and cartoons without the subjects' written consent. The legislation proposed fines of $1,000 and jail terms of up to one year, and it was aimed unequivocally at the perceived illustrated excesses of the Journal as well as of the World. The measure was sponsored by the state senate's mirthless Republican leader, Timothy E. Ellsworth, who gained a reputation of never having smiled in public.109 What came to be called the Ellsworth Anti-Cartoon Bill won approval in the state senate110 before dying without a vote in the lower house.111

Most New York City newspapers condemned the measure. The Times characterized the Ellsworth Bill as "an ill-contrived sort of trip-hammer for crushing a loathsome but rather puny reptile, which it might miss after all while smashing a lot of harmless if not useful things that might fall in its way."112 The Journal, which justifiably claimed it "made more extensive use of pictorial journalism than any other" newspaper, said its 500,000 daily circulation was evidence that readers preferred illustrations with their news and thus wanted no part of the Ellsworth Bill.113 Journalism trade publications assailed the measure as "a shield for unscrupulous politicians against deserved criticism"114 and an incontrovertible "abridgement of the power of the press."115

But Dana's Sun, which largely eschewed cartoons and other illustrations, favored the legislation as "a wholesome, enlightened, and proper measure."116 It declared:

No one can now be summoned into public view without the certainty of having not merely his portrait flouted to the rabble, but of having the same subjected to every conceivable distortion and deformity. No more outrageous assault upon the privacy of a citizen can be devised than is implied in these infamous publications. Their purpose and effect is to hold him up to ridicule by the most vulgar and offensive expedients; to prejudice him permanently in the eyes of the community at large, and to wound with undisguised brutality the sensibilities of his family. If there ever was an evil that called for whole restraint by law, it is surely this.117

While ill-considered and almost certainly unconstitutional, the Ellsworth Bill signaled an urgency in sorting out the ferment roiling American journalism in 1897. This ferment has not been adequately recognized or analyzed by scholars. Michael Schudson has perhaps come closest to identifying and assessing the forces that made the period so enduringly significant. But he interpreted those forces narrowly, distilling them to a dichotomy of "journalism as information" and "journalism as entertainment."118 The New York Times, he said, represented the former, and the New York World was the latter. A class consciousness infused his argument. He said the Times' information orientation appealed to "wealthier people in New York,"119 while the World's storytelling approach appealed to the "working class reader."120

While intriguing, Schudson's analysis is rigid and, in the end, unpersuasive. The dichotomy of journalism as information versus journalism as entertainment is imprecise and not mutually exclusive. The World was known to devote considerable resources to reporting
was dismissive in characterizing the *Journal*. Yet his argument was unassailable: The *Journal* had become the country’s boldest, most energetic, most-talked-about newspaper. Its impressive string of successes in 1897 began in the spring with coverage of the brief war between Greece and Turkey for control of Crete. The *Journal* offered what it termed “a veritable kinetoscope picture of the scene of war,” publishing reports from no fewer than a dozen correspondents, including two women and Stephen Crane, author of *Red Badge of Courage*. In June 1897, the *Journal* arranged for Mark Twain to report from London on Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee. The association with Twain allowed the *Journal* to puncture rumors about the writer’s supposedly failing health and to publish his famous though often-distorted comment: “The report of my death was an exaggeration.”

The *Journal’s* crowded year was not without embarrassing lapses, such as the newspaper’s erroneous, graphically illustrated report in February 1897 about the strip-search of a Cuban woman aboard a U.S. passenger steamer. The article was written by Richard Harding Davis, who reported that Spanish authorities boarded the steamer, the *Olivette*, as it prepared to leave Havana and searched several passengers for contraband. Among the passengers was a young Cuban woman named Clemencia Arango, whose brother was a leader in the insurgency against Spanish rule. The article was ambiguous about who had conducted the search, but an accompanying illustration by Frederic Remington depicted leering, male detectives clustered around a naked woman. The *World* punctured the *Journal*’s sensational report, quoting Arango as denying that men had strip-searched her. That task, she said, had fallen to a matron, an “inspector.” Davis, in a letter to the *World*, blamed Remington for having drawn “an imaginary picture” and insisted his dispatch had not said that men had conducted the search. In any event, the discredit story underscored for critics a sense that the *Journal* was unreliable and prone to publishing “fakes” and other thinly documented reports.

But the *Journal* soon shook off the embarrassment of the strip-search story. By summer 1897, its activist ethos was producing stunning results. The newspaper deployed a phalanx of reporters in late June and early July to solve the mystery of a dismembered torso that washed up in the East River. The *Journal* and the *World* locked in frenzied competition to unravel the whodunit, competition which the *Journal* swiftly won but which the *Times* found in excruciating bad taste. “Let the enterprise, the public spirit, the ingenuity, and the ‘newness’ of this latest accomplishment of The *Journal’s* kind of neuromatological journalism be frankly admitted; and then let us hope the subject will soon be dropped,” the *Times* said, adding, “There has been nothing in the development of this case from the beginning that could be read without disgust.” To be sure, the *Journal’s* accounts of the case—“a murder, most foul, deliberate, mysterious and terrible”—were filled with grisly detail. But the wider significance was in the *Journal’s* sleuthing and its activist role in solving the East River murder mystery.

Within three days of the body’s discovery in the East River, the *Journal* identified the victim as William Guldenaupepe, a masseur at a Turkish bath, and directed authorities to two murder suspects, the victim’s former lover, an unlicensed midwife named Auguste Nack, and her new paramour, Martin Thorn. Key to the *Journal’s* detective work was tracing the oil cloth in which the torso was wrapped to a dry goods dealer in Queens, New York. The *Journal* broke the case “in a manner so speedy and certain,” the *Fourth Estate* said, “that it is a question whether the press is not a more terrifying Nemesis to evildoers than the officers of the law.” Nack and Thorn soon were indicted. Nack, who testified at trial against Thorn, was sentenced to

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nine years for manslaughter, and Thorn was convicted of first-degree murder and executed.139

Even more daring, and certainly more ethnically dubious, was the Journal's "forcible liberation"140 of Evangeline Cisneros in October 1897. In one of the most extraordinary episodes in journalism history, Karl Decker, a correspondent for the journal, spirited the eighteen-year-old woman from prison in Havana, where for more than a year she had awaited trial on murky charges141 of conspiring against Spanish rule. Her imprisonment, the journal maintained, was emblematic of Spain's routinely harsh treatment of Cuban women.

Once out of jail, Cisneros was hidden in Havana for two days and then, dressed as a boy, smuggled aboard a steamer to New York.142 The journal organized a rousing outdoor reception at Madison Square to welcome Cisneros and Decker, who had returned separately, aboard a Spanish-flagged vessel.143 Tens of thousands turned out144 for what the journal called "the greatest gathering New York has seen since the close of the [Civil] war" in 1865.145

The journal declared the Cisneros rescue the greatest journalistic coup of this age,146 an episode that confirmed the logic of its activist paradigm. It further stated on the day that Cisneros arrived in New York:

Action—that is the distinguishing mark of the new journalism. It represents the final state in the evolution of the modern newspaper. The newspapers of a century ago printed essays; those of thirty years ago—the "New journals" of their day—told the news and some of them made great efforts to get it first. The new journal of to-day prints the news, too, but it does more. It does not wait for things to turn up. It turns them up.147

A newspaper's duty, the journal maintained, must not be "confined to exhortation." Rather, when "things are going wrong it should set them right, if possible." The Cisneros case, it said, represented a "brilliant exemplification of this theory."148

The rescue also was, in effect, a case of the journal pursuing its own foreign policy, a development the Times deemed utterly indefensible. The rescue, the Times said, "was without the shadow of legal excuse," and it warned that "if acts like this are to be committed, international relations become impossible, and war is the only condition in which nations can exist."149 The Times suggested, without offering supporting evidence, Spanish authorities connived in the escape and raised doubts about Cisneros' disguise. "The most adroit and experienced performers on the stage rarely succeed in this effort, and usually they fail to a ludicrous degree," the Times said. "A glance should have told the Spanish detectives [checking identities of passengers boarding the steamer] the secret of this amateur masquerader" dressed as a boy.150

Significantly, no other New York newspaper was as searching, critical, or indignant as the Times in its reaction to "jail-breaking journalism."151 But the Journal brushed aside the criticism. For days after Cisneros' arrival in New York, the journal published excerpts from newspaper editorials saluting its exploit.152 The commendations came from across the United States and thus suggested broad interest in the journal's activist paradigm.

The Journal filled the void of government inaction as 1897 closed by organizing a New Year's Eve celebration to mark the consolidation of the five boroughs of New York City. Officials had planned no special event to celebrate the occasion. William Strong, the outgoing mayor and an opponent of consolidation, suggested a mock funeral would be a more appropriate commemoration. Having none of that, Hearst stepped forward to organize153 what the Journal called a "great carnival"154 and what the Fourth Estate hyperbolically described as the "most remarkable undertaking ever conceived by any American newspaper."155

By any measure, the New Year's Eve celebration was an extravagant close to the Journal's triumphant year. Even the New York Sun complimented the Journal for organizing and underwriting the event.156 The Journal spent at least $25,000157 (the equivalent today of about $500,000) to save "Greater New York from having come into being without a salvo of guns or a single public expression of the importance of the occasion."158 Weather conditions made for an awful night as rain turned to ice and snow in the waning hours of 1897. Even so, it was unquestionably the Journal's moment: The parade and the festivities went on with no small amount of self-promotion. As Fourth Estate reported:

The heavens were brilliant with serpentine flames and blazing stars and bursting bombs, while red and green and yellow and blue fire was burned by the barrel. Searchlights, dozens of them, played every now and then an aurora borealis act ... Read the Journal's ads danced up and down the neighboring buildings and on the clouds. Ads of the paper were everywhere and in all the popular places. There was a procession of floats and bands and militia, with their calcium lights ... Of course there was lots of advertising in this, but it was of a good sort, and we comment upon it for that reason. The Journal had pledged itself to do something and it surpassed itself. That is a good way for a newspaper to become popular ... It carried off its enterprise in a manner that defied horribly adverse weather and delighted a vast multitude. ... We offer our congratulations to William R. Hearst.159

At the close of 1897, the Journal undeniably was America's ascendant newspaper. It had repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness and appeal of its journalism by injecting itself conspicuously into civic matters and even into foreign affairs. It had shown that it could bring speedy resolution to untidy matters, as demonstrated by the East River murder mystery, the Cisneros jailing, and the New Year's Eve celebration of an amalgamated New York City. Moreover, the Journal had received plaudits from its keenest rivals, including Pulitzer and the New York Sun. Other observers attached no small hope to the Journal's eagerness to take on corrupt and powerful political and economic interests.

Such recognition signaled that the Journal's activist paradigm had inspired more than faint or passing interest among journalists and civic reformers by the close of 1897.160 The "journalism of action" was by no means an idle notion. Others had taken favorable note of its success and the Journal declared the "journalism that does things has come to stay."161 It further vowed: "We expect to see great results flow from this work. The immediate results [in 1897] are important in themselves, but the ultimate effects will be greater yet."162

But the promise of the "journalism of action"—that a newspaper could and should "render any public service within its power"163—falttered and ultimately failed to become a defining standard for American journalism. There are several explanations. For one, activist journalism was expensive and few newspapers could or would match Hearst's lavish spending.164 Not even Hearst's reservoir of financial support was limitless.165 Moreover, activist journalism was not always or routinely applicable. The Journal's successes in 1897 demonstrated that the "journalism of action" was most effective when confronting official indifference, incompetence, or corruption. But such conditions emerged episodically, and exploiting them often proved better suited to long-form magazine articles to which journalists could...
devote extended periods in researching and writing. The muckraking movement of the early twentieth century demonstrated this.

Additionally, the Journal's overhyped coverage in 1898 of the destruction of the U.S. battleship Maine in Havana harbor and the run-up to the Spanish-American War tainted activist journalism. Rather than searching and bold, Hearst's journalism seemed intemperate and extreme. The Journal's pre-war exaggerations, especially its unequivocal and thinly sourced accusations of Spanish complicity in the Maine disaster, allowed the Times to sneer: "The grotesque inventions of the yellow journalist's fancy must still produce tumultuous excitement among stable boys and scullery women, but they now interest intelligent people only by their weird deformity." The notion took hold that the Journal had brought about an unnecessary war. It was an enduring though mistaken interpretation that tended nonetheless to discredit the "journalism of action."

Perhaps most significantly, "the journalism of action" effectively became a platform for Hearst's political ambitions during the years after the Spanish-American War. The Journal's campaigns against private ownership of municipal utilities and corrupt officials took on a politicized dimension as Hearst became a figure in national politics. By 1902, editorials appeared in the Journal signed by "W.R. Hearst, President of the National Association of Democratic Clubs." Perhaps the politicizing of the "journalism of action" was inevitable, given Hearst's ambitions, but it did little to enhance the paradigm's appeal.

Although the "journalism of action" was unable to consolidate the promise of its impressive successes in 1897, the appeal of activism has never entirely passed from American journalism. That impulse resurfaced most recently in the "civic" (or "public") journalism movement of the 1990s, which envisioned the news media as a problem-solving force, especially in rejuvenating participatory democracy in the United States.

If the Journal's activist paradigm became cloudy and suspect in the years after 1897, the Times' climb to preeminence in American journalism soon accelerated. Ochs' decision in October 1898 to trim the Times' price from three cents to one cent, which was a desperate move evidently intended to prevent the disclosure that its circulation figures were inflated, helped ensure the newspaper's emergence in New York's crowded newspaper market. The price cut further differentiated the Times from its rivals, a process that had begun with its frequent critiques of the Journal's activism in 1897. The Times' self-described "covenant" of offering "All the News That's Fit to Print"—its enduring epistle to activist yellow journalism—also helped establish the counter-activist standard for American journalism.

This article, in directing attention to the exceptional and pivotal moments in American journalism during 1897, has shown that the year's exceptionality warrants keener recognition by scholars. It also signals the merits of single-year studies as a methodological frame for considering decisive periods in American journalism.

NOTES

2. This is not to say that the Publishers' Association concerned itself solely with trivial issues at its meeting in 1897. The agenda included questions of incorporating the association and exploring ways of ascertaining claims of newspaper circulation. Other agenda items were: "What benefits if any come from the publishing of special editions, like 'Christmas Number,' 'Fourth of July Number,' 'Bicycle Number,' etc.?" and "What is the present status in reference to colored supplements, books, pictures, music, art and fashion supplements, and all other circulation schemes?" See "Bulletin 408A."
3. For such characterizations of the editorial see, for example, Geo Beach, "Shop Talk at Thirty: 'Yes, Virginia,' 100 Years Later, Provides Enduring Reminder of Print's Power," Editor & Publisher, Dec. 20, 1997, 48.
4. "Is There a Santa Claus?" New York Sun, Sept. 21, 1897. The editor's author, Francis P. Church, was identified at his death in April 1906. The Sun said in an editorial: "At this time, when the sense of personal loss is strong upon us, we know of no better or briefer way to make the friends of the Sun feel that they too have lost a friend than to violate custom by indicating him as the author of the beautiful and often republished article affirming the existence of Santa Claus." See untitled editorial comment, New York Sun, April 12, 1906.
7. See Burton St. John III, "Public Relations as Community-Building, Then and Now," Public Relations Quarterly 43 (Spring 1998): 34. The reference to "public relations" appears in the preface of The Yearbook of Railway Literature (Chicago: Railway Age, 1897).
8. Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907 (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 107. He identifies cinema's "novelty year" as the period from late April 1896 to May 1897.
11. The year 1897 is famous for an often-recounted anecdote that almost certainly is apocryphal—William Randolph Hearst's purported vow in a telegram to the artist Frederic Remington, that he would "furnish the war" with Spain. If such a message had been sent, it would have been in mid-January 1897, at the end of Remington's brief assignment to Cuba to cover the insurrection against Spanish rule. For a detailed analysis about why the anecdote almost certainly is apocryphal, see W. Joseph Campbell, Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 71-95.
14. "The Typewriter," Fourth Estate, July 29, 1897, 6. It accounts described the typewriter as "positively necessary" in most newsrooms and noted: "The rapid introduction of the typewriter into newspaper offices is largely due to the fact that it is of the most positive value in connection with the typesetting machine. The typewriter means practically perfect copy that can be readily distributed in small "takes." Similarly, the journalist declared: "There is no modern invention except, perhaps, the bicycle, which has so evidently filled a long felt want and taken its position in the economy of modern business life as the typewriter." See "Bye-the-Bye," The Journalist, May 29, 1897, 45.
15. J. Lincoln Steffens, "The Business of a Newspaper," Scribner's, October 1897, 448. The Fourth Estate reported in July 1897 that the country's "largest linotype battery" was at the New York Herald, which had fifty-two machines; the World had fifty-one linotype machines and the Journal had fifty. In all, Fourth Estate said, 4,150 linotype machines were in use at 600 locations in North America. See "The Linotype," Fourth Estate, July 29, 1897, 2.
16. Margaret A. Blanchard, "The Osification of Journalism History: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century," Journalism History 25, 3 (Autumn 1999): 110. Blanchard also cited a "need to broaden our horizons as to what research approach will yield the most accurate pictures of our mediated world."
17. Ibid., 111. Blanchard's appeal renewed and extended a critique that dates at least to 1974 and James W. Carey's "The Problem of Journalism History," in Journalism History 1, 1 (Spring 1974): 3-9, 27. Carey said that the "study of journalism history remains something of an embarrassment" and argued that scholars in the field "have defined our craft both too narrowly and too modestly and, therefore, constricted the range of problems we study and the claims we make for our knowledge." For a somewhat more optimistic assess-

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The notion that the penny press emerged in 1833 and reshaped American journalism has been disputed by historians, notably by John Nerone in "The Mythology of the Penny Press," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 4 (1987): 376-404. He wrote: "The penny press is properly understood as a mutation in one class or species of newspaper, rather than as a revolution in editorial policy and business strategy. The innovations associated with the penny press are functions of forces external to the papers themselves rather than the results of unique personal initiative."

Some analysts have rejected the decided media-centric view that the Washington Post's reporting brought down the Nixon administration. The roles of Congress and the federal courts in compelling testimony and the production of evidence were far more decisive to that outcome. See Edward J. Epstein, Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism (New York: Vintage, 1975), 19-32.

The well-publicized ethnic lapses that year included the dismissal of two columnists for the Boston Globe for citing fictitious characters in their work; the Cincinnati Enquirer's illegal intercept of corporate voicemail messages in its investigation of the Chiquita banana company; and the disavowed "Operation Tailwind" report by CNN, which charged U.S. military forces in 1970 with using deadly nerve gas against defectors in Laos. Nineteen-ninety-eight also was characterized by often-frenzied reporting about President Bill Clinton's sex-and-lies scandal with a White House intern.


The cycling craze "reached its high point in 1898," according to Richard Harmond in Ibid., 250. However, newspaper reports in 1897 suggested the popularity of cycling only increased from the year before. See, for example, "The Growth of the Cycle," Philadelphia Item, June 4, 1897.

"The Wheel Annihilates Distance," Philadelphia Item, May 11, 1897.

"The Bicycle," New York Herald, March 5, 1897. The Herald's commentary was prescient in suggesting that "there is something better than the bicycle in the future; possibly a horseless carriage which will convert all into globe trotters in companies of ten, or possibly a balloon or flying machine will enable us to loaf among the stars. We are grateful for what we have, but, like Oliver Twist, we should like a little more."


Traxel, 1898, 317.

For a discussion about the emergence and diffusion of the term "yellow journalism" in early 1897, see Campbell, Yellow Journalism, 25-49.

*A Large Observer of a Large Thing,* New York Journal, May 13, 1898.


*See More Journal News Triumphs,* New York Journal, May 6, 1897. The Journal editorial said "the difference between the new journalism and the old" was that old journalism was "satisfied to sit still and wait for things to come to it; the Journal reaches out for news and regards the whole world as its field for its efforts."

As Holbrook Jackson wrote, "Young bloods of the period delighted to épater le bourgeois, as the phrase went, and with experience a new kind of art came into vogue: the art of the shocking." See Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century (1922; reprint, New York: Knopf, 1972), 126.

John Higham aptly invoked the phrase to describe the dynamism characteristic of American political and social culture in the 1890s. See John

63 See Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, 21-22.
67 See, for example, "Aid the Cold and Hungry; Journal Hears the Cry and Opens a Relief Fund," New York Journal, Jan. 27, 1897.
70 Ibid.
71 "What We Want," The Journalist, May 1, 1897, 12.
72 Henry A. Crittenden, "Mr. Hearst and the New Journalism," The Journalist, Dec. 4, 1897, 34.
73 The Journal's anti-corruption campaigns in the years immediately after 1897 won similarly high praise. Disclosures about the corrupt Ice Trust in 1900 prompted the editor of New York's Town Talk gossip sheet to write: "The Journal's exposure and pursuit of the criminal officials who betrayed the people in the interest of the Ice Trust will stand for many years as one of the most splendid and useful achievements of the modern newspaper." Quoted in David Nasaw, The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 151. For a brief discussion about the Ice Trust scandal of 1900, see Campbell, Yellow Journalism, 3-4.

74 See, notably, the escapades of Nellie Bly, including her around-the-world adventure in 1898. The World's forays into activist journalism never were as frequent, successive, or flamboyant as were the Journal's during 1897.
77 Stead, "Government by Journalism," 662.
78 Ibid., 664.
85 "For the Times Motto." 1896.
88 "The Motto Competition."
89 "The Prize Motto Selected," New York Times, Nov. 22, 1896. The other finalists were: "Always decent, never dull;" "The news of the day, not the rubbish;" and "A decent newspaper for decent people."
91 "The Times' motto also has been characterized as "a war cry, the slogan under which the... Times fought for a footing against the formidable compeition of the Herald, the World, and the Journal. What it meant, in essence, was that the Times was going to be as good a vehicle of news as any of those papers, and that it would be free from their indecency, eccentricity, distortion or sensationalism." See Elmer Davis, History of the New York Times, 1851-1921 (1921; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1969), 199-200.
92 A.B. [Arthur Brisbane], "Hon. Charles Anderson Dana," The Journalist, May 15, 1897, 26. Brisbane wrote: "If the newspaper business were religious, which it isn't, Mr. Dana would be the pope."
94 "Profession or Trade?" Fourth Estate, Oct. 28, 1897, 4.
95 "The Death of Editor Dana." 1897.
96 Charles A. Dana, "The Making of a Newspaper Man," published in Dana, The Art of Newspaper Making: Three Lectures (New York: Appleton, 1895), 98. Dana also said of newspaper illustrations: "I don't believe so many pictures are going to be required for any great portion of the next century."
97 Dana, "The Making of a Newspaper Man," 74. Despite such reservations, Dana was well versed in the innovations and developments in newspaper technology of the 1890s, a period that he referred to as "the age of experiment." See Dana, "The Making of a Newspaper Man," 96.
98 "Leprous New Journalism," New York Sun, Feb. 27, 1897.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid. See also "Fresh Journals Reprobated," New York Times, March 3, 1897.
102 These and other similar decisions were reported on the front page of the Sun. See "World and Journal Put Out," New York Sun, March 7, 1897; "World and Journal Cast Out," New York Sun, March 9, 1897; "World and Journal Cast Out," New York Sun, March 11, 1897; "World and Journal Kicked Out," New York Sun, March 14, 1897; and "World and Journal Shut Out," New York Sun, March 17, 1897. See also "New Journalism Removed," New Haven Evening Register, March 22, 1897.
104 This observation was made by, among others, Hy B. Turner in When Giants Rule: The Story of Park Row (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 128.
105 See "Down on Cartoons," Troy Press, Feb. 25, 1897. The Troy newspaper said Ellsworth was "the one member of the legislature who has the reputation of never having smiled in public," adding, "If he could see a few cartoons of one Timothy Edwards Ellsworth of Lockport perhaps his physiognomy would broaden into an occasional smile." Other newspapers characterized Ellsworth as the servile agent of Republican machine politics. See, for example, "Soldier of Politics," Buffalo Morning Express, Feb. 11, 1904.
106 See "Want the Press Muzzled," New York Herald, April 7, 1897. The state senate's vote in favor of the Anti-Cartoon Bill was 35-14.
108 Untitled editorial comment, New York Times, April 7, 1897.
110 See "The Ellsworth Bill," The Journalist, April 24, 1897, 67. The Journalist also stated: "It must be admitted that newspaper art has improved wonderfully within the past ten years, but it still would seem that portraits are published, not because they look like anybody, but because, in the minds of the editors, they ornament the papers."
112 Untitled editorial comment, New York Sun, April 9, 1897.
113 "A Bill to Suppress Outrage," New York Sun, Feb. 27, 1897.
115 Ibid., 90-91.
116 Ibid., 90.
118 For a description of the World's move to de-emphasize sensation in its report, see untitled notes of the World's news stall meeting, Nov. 28, 1898, Joseph Pulitzer papers, container 2, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

119 Ibid., 46.

120 The New York World in March 1897 estimated the Times’ circulation at 19,000. See “The Derelicts of Journalism,” New York World, March 28, 1897. Tifft and Jones wrote that the Times in July 1898 was printing 25,000 copies a day but selling fewer than 10,000 copies in Manhattan and a small number in nearby areas. See Tifft and Jones, The Trust, 53.


122 See “The Journal’s War Correspondence,” New York Journal, April 30, 1897. Some correspondents evidently were local residents who filed only occasionally. Even so, the lengths to which the Journal covered the Greece-Turkey conflict anticipated the intensity of its reporting from Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1898.

123 One of the female correspondents was Stephen Crane’s companion, Cora Howworth Stewart, who wrote under the byline “Imogene Carter.” See Michael Robertson, Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 142.


129 Remington drew the illustration based on Davis’ report, which was ambiguous about whether male detectives were present during the search. The illustration appeared on page 2 of the New York Journal on Feb. 12, 1897.

130 “Tale of a Fair Exile.” Arango stated in the World’s report that she had not been “ill-treated, except [for] the humiliation of being stripped by a strange woman.” She was unequivocal in saying “no men were admitted into the rooms nor could they have seen into them.”


132 “The Noisy Detectives’ Work,” New York Times, July 1, 1897. The Times speculated that “the grossness and needless explicitness of this kind of news reporting must have a demoralizing influence upon the younger generation.”

133 The comment was attributed to a coroner’s physician named O’Hannon.


135 See, for example, “Beheaded, Cast Into the River,” New York Journal, June 27, 1897. The Journal argued: “To show crime in its ... most revolting aspects is to perform a service to law. To bring a murderer to justice is to discharge a great public duty.” See “The Journal and the Nack Case,” New York Journal, Nov. 11, 1897.


138 “Enterprise Means Success,” Fourth Estate, July 15, 1897, 4. The Journal was characterized by self-congratulatory, declaring “But for the Journal the arm of the law would have been palsied.” See “The Journal and the Nack Case.”

139 See Stevens, Sensationalism and the New York Press, 93-94; and Gross, Masterpieces of Murder, 238.


141 The Spanish accused Cisneros of plotting to kill a senior military officer, but the Journal claimed she was defending herself from the Spanish officer’s unwelcome sexual advances. The Times suggested that it was possible both versions “were quite true so far as they went,” which was an entirely plausible interpretation. See “Personal,” New York Times, Aug. 28, 1897. The Journal mounted a petition drive during the summer of 1897 in a failed attempt to force Spain to release Cisneros.

142 The jailbreak and flight of Evangelina Cisneros was aided in no small measure by Havana-based U.S. diplomatic personnel and their associates. For an account about their previously undisclosed roles in the case, see W. Joseph Campbell, “Not a Hoax: New Evidence in the New York Journal’s Rescue of Evangelina Cisneros,” American Journalism 19, 4 (Fall 2002): 67-94.

143 Cisneros and Decker, The Story of Evangelina Cisneros Told by Herself, 116-17.


147 “The Journalism that Does Things.”

148 Ibid.


152 See “Jail-Breaking Journalism.” Most New York newspapers avoided editorial comment about the exploit, no doubt reluctant to give the Journal even more attention.


156 Untitled editorial comment, Fourth Estate, Dec. 30, 1897.


158 Cited in “Pyrotechnical Journalism,” Fourth Estate, Jan. 6, 1898, 6.


161 For example, the Augusta Chronicle in Georgia described the Journal as “a pioneer in progressive journalism. Its radical departures cause criticisms, but the Journal goes on conquering and to conquer.” The Journal reprinted the commentary on its editorial page. See “A Pioneer in Progressive Journalism,” New York Journal, July 21, 1897.

162 “The Journalism of Action.”


164 “The Journalism of Action.”

165 This point also was made by Ted Curtis Smythe in The Gilded Age Press, 1865-1900 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 192.

166 For references to Hearst’s financial resources during his first years in New York City journalism, see Nasaw, The Chief, 98, 146.


168 For an early statement of this enduring but misleading argument, see Brooke Fisher, “The Newspaper Industry,” Atlantic Monthly, June 1962, 751.

169 Hearst became head of the National Association of Democratic Clubs in 1900, won a seat in Congress in 1902, and unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for president in 1904.


172 See Tifft and Jones, The Trust, 54-55.