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Presstime

November, 2001

SECTION: COMMENTARY; Pg. 36

LENGTH: 1133 words

HEADLINE: **What's Good About Yellow Journalism**

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HIGHLIGHT:

To hike readership, learn from Hearst and Pulitzer

A little more than 100 years ago, New York City was home to a fierce, if little-remembered newspaper boycott. Its objective was nothing less than the ruin of the leading practitioners of a flamboyant brand of journalism. The struggle was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful, but its outcome offers timeless lessons for American publishers.

The boycott took shape in winter 1897 as public and university libraries, reading rooms, and social clubs in and near New York City banned two battling competitors: William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer's New York World. They were together derided as vile, shameless, frivolous and morally bankrupt by more conservative rivals including the New York Press, the New York Sun, The New York Times and the New York Tribune. The Press seized an evocative term to disparage the Journal and World—a phrase swiftly adopted as the boycott's rhetorical centerpiece.

That phrase was "yellow journalism."

Then, as now, yellow journalism was shorthand for journalistic misdeeds, especially the lurid, sensational treatment of news. But as practiced in the late 1890s, yellow journalism was more complex than merely sensational. A careful, dispassionate study reveals that it was a distinctive and imaginative genre, less malevolent than commonly understood.

Yellow journalism was characterized by:

- Frequent use of multicolumn headlines, including Page One banners.
- Front-page treatment for a variety of topics, including the local and national politics, war, international diplomacy, sports, and society.
- Generous use of illustrations, photographs, graphics and maps.
- Willingness to experiment with layouts. Sometimes, the front page of the Journal was dominated by a single article and outsized illustration.
- The tendency to rely on anonymous sources, notably in dispatches of leading

reporters.

- Eager indulgence in self-promotion, particularly calling attention to reporting accomplishments. Self-promotion also was evident in crusades against monopolies and municipal corruption.

Yellow journalism had its faults. It was impenitent, reluctant to acknowledge lapses in reporting. It indulged in oddball material such as one article titled, "Is the Sun Preparing to Give Birth to a New World?"

But in appearance and, to some extent, in content, the yellow press represented a provocative departure for mainstream American journalism. The Journal and the World were the most popular of New York City's newspapers, claiming daily sales well into six figures. Conservative counterparts were alarmed and appalled by their looks, content and popularity. Those reactions help explain their robust support for the boycott.

The Sun and Press cheered efforts by "decent institutions" to ban yellow journals. While amorphous in leadership, the boycott for a time projected a sense of momentum. By May 1897, nearly 90 facilities in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York had, the Press reported, "quarantined their members and patrons" from the menace of yellow journalism.

In the end, however, the boycott dissolved in quiet failure. It was a self-limiting protest - there was no next step after imposing the ban. The protest also had an unintended effect: Readers began buying their own copies of the Journal and the World, providing a small stimulus to sales. But in large measure, yellow newspapers overwhelmed the boycott because they were more energetic, more enterprising and more interesting to read than were the practitioners of what the Journal called "old foggy journalism."

The success of the yellow press against the boycott offers intriguing insights for U.S. dailies of the early 21st century. Some of the practices of late-19th-century yellow journalism evoke suggestions for enhancing readership made to publishers this year by the Impact Study conducted by the Readership Institute of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. Those similarities include offering a variety of local, national and international reporting; recognizing the importance of customer service; and not hesitating to promote content.

The yellow press was eager to extend its appeal to readers across the socio-economic spectrum. Journal editors recognized that great newspapers had to be "broad and catholic in character," offering readers "the world in miniature." The Journal and the World publishers spent heavily gathering news, sending correspondents across the country and around the world. The Journal figured it spent the equivalent of \$ 15 million covering the Spanish-American War. It is difficult to read the yellow journals of New York City and not be impressed by their enterprising spirit.

The yellow journals also were conscientious about reader service. They timed press runs to meet trains leaving New York City. Journal managers made sure that readers

vacationing in New England during summer 1897 had same-day access to Sunday editions. They sent Valentine's greetings to would-be female readers, recognizing that women were making most household purchases.

The yellow press also tapped eagerly into emergent technologies, investing, for example, in presses that printed multiple colors. Those presses gave rise to color comics, an immediate and lasting success. The Journal, moreover, reportedly was the first New York City newspaper to use the automobile for circulation.

Nor were yellow journals reluctant to promote themselves. They were relentless, sometimes over the top, in calling attention to their reporting achievements.

Yellow journalism scarcely could be called boring, uninspired or predictable -- the sort of criticism that sometimes rises about contemporary U.S. newspapers. While the yellow press faced harsh critics, its techniques were widely emulated. By 1900, yellow journalism had spread to newspapers in Boston, Cincinnati, Chicago, Denver and San Francisco.

Some features characteristic of the genre live on, notably colorful layouts and multicolumn headlines. Newspapers of the early 21st century resemble in appearance the yellow press of 100 years ago more than they do the era's gray, conservative rivals.

Although the boycott of 1897 failed, detractors of yellow journalism did succeed in maligning and marginalizing the genre. Their most unshakeable indictment of yellow journalism was that overheated reporting forced the United States into an unwanted war with Spain in 1898. But such a view is myth: The war had far more to do with Spain's repressive colonial policies in Cuba than it did with the contents of the yellow press. But the myth endures, defaming yellow journalism while offering a convenient if entirely misleading parable about the power of the news media.