

## Defining "Yellow Journalism": Competition with Hearst

The Pulitzer name remains popular today because it is associated with the most prestigious award in American journalism. Yet many historians revile the award's benefactor with charges of irresponsible reporting and sensationalism. The Pulitzer name is most often linked in textbooks with that of William Randolph Hearst, a Californian who assumed control of the *Journal* in 1895.

Hearst burst onto Park Row, the New York street lined with newspaper buildings, and immediately began to shake things up. The ironic and tragic elements of the story cannot be ignored. The *Journal* was founded in 1882 by Albert Pulitzer, Joseph's brother. Albert sold the paper at a profit, and it continued with a modest circulation until Hearst moved to New York and purchased it. Surely, Hearst would have bought another paper had the *Journal* not been for sale, but Joseph had to live with the fact that the newspaper which became his chief competitor had originated within his own family. The two brothers became estranged over time, as Joseph considered his sibling rash and frivolous.



William Randolph Hearst

The irony does not end there; both Joseph Pulitzer and Hearst were outsiders when they came to New York. Their papers appealed to the same elements of the city that had previously been ignored by the press. Women, labor leaders, Democrats, immigrants and the poor found articles that held their interest and represented their political views.

Hearst's purchase of the *Journal* began one of the most dramatic periods of competition in journalistic history. He did not spare any expense in reaching his goal of increased circulation. He lowered the *Journal's* price to one cent, expanded the number of pages, and then dipped into his family's finances to support his bold moves. Much of his success came by imitation of Pulitzer. Hearst took the striking headlines of the *World* and made them larger and bolder. Trivial stories which compelled suspense and interest not only appeared on the front page of the *Journal*, they dominated it.

Early in 1896, Pulitzer began to pay serious attention to the newcomer. In January, Hearst enticed Richard Felton Outcault, the artist who drew the popular comic strip, "The Yellow Kid," to move to the *Journal*. The strip was named for the main character's colorful robes. Pulitzer's use of a color comic strip in the *Sunday World* was an innovation at the time. In addition to stealing Felton, Hearst managed in the same month to convince Pulitzer's entire Sunday staff to work for the *Journal*.

This constituted a coup on Park Row, and a dash of poetic justice. Pulitzer, although he was an established veteran in 1886, had originally stolen many of his staff members from other papers when he came to New York. His code name for the audacious publisher, "Gush," only begins to describe the animosity he felt toward the upstart. Hearst, at thirty-three, almost seemed a younger version of the forty-eight year-old Pulitzer. However, Pulitzer was never a man to resign in defeat. He hired George B. Luks to continue producing "The Yellow Kid" at the *World* even though its creator had left. The competition between Pulitzer and Hearst, each with his own brightly-colored comic strip, sealed their fates together and provided future historians with the convenient title of "yellow journalism."

Rivalry in the newspaper business generally results in a more informed public. Editors are compelled to become more innovative, and reporters must perform more research to scoop their competitors. Unfortunately, the financial and emotional stakes were too high in 1896 for Pulitzer or Hearst to consider losing. Both men had to contend with their tremendous egos and a public whose appetite had been whetted for sensation. Newspaper readers were begging for a scandal, regardless of the consequences, and that is what the *World* and the *Journal* delivered.

The Cuban insurrection would become the event that lowered the *World's* reputation forever as it sunk to compete with Hearst's *Journal*. The *Journal* fervently declared its support for the local revolutionaries against the tyranny of their Spanish rulers. Hearst even refused to carry news from Spanish sources, declaring only rebel informants could be trusted. Such a basic breach of journalistic objectivity offended the more conservative newspapers, but it made for exciting reading. People flocked to the newsstands to read the *Journal's* rebel accounts, which described the conflict in the simple language of the Spanish villain and the Cuban hero.<sup>23</sup>

The *World* could have acted responsibly and depicted the clash accurately for its readers. However, the rising circulation rates of both the *World* and the *Journal* during this period of jingoism show that the drama made money for these newspapers, and the competition was too tight to throw the money away. Both papers lowered their standards so much that they routinely carried news items directly off the pages of their rivals.

Using an old journalistic trick, Hearst caught the *World* in the act. An article appeared in the *Journal* in 1898 describing the death of Colonel Replie W. Thenuz, whose name was a refashioning of the phrase, "We pilfer the news." The next day, Pulitzer's paper carried the item, being bold enough to add specific dateline information to make the story appear authentic.<sup>24</sup> The *Journal* celebrated the gaffe for over a month while the *World* maintained a "pained silence" on its blunder.<sup>25</sup>

The explosion of the American battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor on February 15, 1898, ensured that the U.S. would not be content to watch the Cuban spectacle from the bleacher seats any more. Two hundred and sixty crew members died in the blast, and a Navy board of inquiry examined the cause of the explosion. Many New York newspapers, including the *Times*, *Tribune*, *Herald* and *Evening Post*, counseled patience and peace for the time being. However, both the *World* and the *Journal* jumped on the jingo bandwagon, concurrently publishing a "suppressed cable" that said the explosion was not an accident.<sup>26</sup> The cable was later discovered to have been manufactured.<sup>27</sup>

The effect of the rabble rousing by the two largest newspapers in New York cannot be underestimated. The *World* claimed to have sold five million copies the week after the *Maine* disaster.<sup>28</sup> The public clamor for President McKinley to declare war was enormous as a result of the tainted reports in the papers. And though the Spanish-American War proved "splendid" from a military standpoint, it did not hold up to contemporary moral scrutiny.

Unfortunately, the *World* would be linked forever in history with Hearst's *Journal* under the banner of "yellow journalism" for the role it played in exacerbating the conflict. However, the conscious disregard for the facts was an aberration for Pulitzer, and his later correspondence revealed that the episode haunted him for the rest of his life.

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Yellow Journalism

Directions: After reading the article answer these questions.

1. Why do historians dislike the name “The Pulitzer” for the name of the highest award in journalism in America?
2. Why were Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s newspapers so successful?
3. What tactics did the *Journal* and *World* use to increase circulation?
4. What is “yellow journalism?” How did the name develop?

5. Describe the mistakes the editors at the *World* made with their news coverage. How did it lead to its demise?

6. What effect did the *World's* reporting on the USS Maine have on the nation? Years later, how did Pulitzer feel about it?