

Journalism in the 1920s

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The 1920s were a revolutionary time in American history. Women and African Americans began to have more social freedom, while gang wars erupted in the streets all over the nation. The country was lead by Old Guard republican presidents who believed in a laissez-faire style of ruling and passed bills that marked the end of the Progressive Era. In addition to social and political changes, people were inventing new technologies and buying them on margin, causing a brief period of bliss for urbanites before the Great Depression hit in the 1930s. One movie that captures important aspects of the 1920s is *The Untouchables*. Although the movie is centered around the government agents who were catching Al Capone, it provides an interesting perspective on the news reporting of the decade. The reporters in the movie are depicted as pot-stirrers who publish sensationalist stories that are full of false information, helping neither the gangsters nor the agents. However, this is not an accurate representation of all journalism in the 1920s. News reporting expanded to use radios, empowered women and African Americans and helped maintain sentiment of the Progressive Era. Despite the sensationalist headlines that have plagued nearly every decade, the press was a vital part of the 1920s and does not need to be viewed as useless.

RADIO

In the early 1920s, radios became popular in the United States. To grow the new industry and sell as many as possible, marketers brainstormed advertising strategies. One of the most effective strategies that is still used today was portraying life without a radio as bleak and pointless. It was common practice for radio companies to use this strategy to sell their product because they could also use it to target groups of people. During the 1920s, farmers were struggling economically. They lived in isolated homes and had very little money that they could afford to spend on new

gadgets. Advertisers used this to their advantage and started selling radios by comparing people who did not already have radios to farmers. Because of this strategy, people living in urban areas felt pressured to purchase a radio because they did not want to fall behind the times or be associated with farmers. Additionally, more farmers bought radios under the pretense that it would improve their quality of life. When marketers used this strategy, they did not know the social effects it would have. During the 1920s, there was an amplification of the differences between people living in cities and farmers. Without radio technology and marketing strategies, the city dwellers would not have had a picture of what rural life was like and vice versa.¹ Apart from advertising radios themselves, radios helped create another new industry because they could be used to advertise other products.

In the modern-day, hearing advertisements on the radio, seeing them on TV, and reading them in newspapers has become mundane. Yet in the 1920s, radio advertising had not become popular. Once radios were commonly used, with 570 stations in the country by the end of 1922, companies started looking to advertise. By the beginning of the 1930s, the radio stations that survived the market crash included advertisements because they kept them in business.² This development of advertising was new to American culture, as the industry had not previously expanded outside of newspapers. The system was called commercial broadcasting and was not popular among everyone. Noncommercial broadcasting, radio without advertisements, was used by university radio stations who chose to be nonprofit.³ Ultimately, most noncommercial stations

¹ Patnode, *What These People Need is Radio*, 287

²Hugh R. Slotten, *Radio's Hidden Voice: Noncommercial Broadcasting, Extension Education, and State Universities during the 1920s* (*Technology and Culture* 49, no. 1 (2008): 1-20), 2

³Slotten, *Radio's Hidden Voice*, 3. There is a lack of information on noncommercial broadcasting in the 1920s because they were not very popular and radio segments could not be saved like newspaper

either went out of business or had to start advertising. Because of this new advertising industry that emerged in the 1920s, the modern world is covered in advertisements. As the new technology of the time, radios changed the news reporting landscape for traditional newspapers.

As radios became a popular news source in the 1920s, newspapers had to adapt to the changing technology. The solution for newspapers to not go out of business was to practice synergy, a technique for businesses that uses different types of media to appeal to different audiences. In the 1920s, newspapers practiced this by creating corresponding radio stations for their papers. William Randolph Hearst, a famed sensationalist, pledged that he would have a radio station everywhere that he owned a paper.⁴ If newspapers had not adapted properly, the current practice of providing news on all types of media would not exist, and there would be a lack of archives because radio recordings were not preserved in its earliest days. In recent years, newspapers have made the same adaptations that they did in the early 1920s. Now, the news is available in paper form, radio, television, online, and on apps. This guarantees that news is accessible to all generations in their preferred format with the same information and that newspapers stay in business. And similar to online news today, radio broadcasting was controversial in the 1920s.

Looking back on the rapid spread of radios in America, it is easy to see the pros and cons of their invention. At the time, however, many were passionately for or against the new technology. In 1926, science editor E.E. Free published an argument piece in *The Forum*, "It is

clippings can be. However, many historians believe these noncommercial, nonprofit radio stations were involved in a reform movement that used radios. It has been assumed that these stations would spread urban middle-class values, similar to the advertisements on commercial stations.

⁴Michael Stamm, *Newspapers, Radio, and the Business of Media in the United States*, (*OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 1 (2010): 25-28), 26

difficult to make out a convincing case for the value of listening to the material now served out by American broadcasters." Free goes on to describe how radio itself could be used for good, but broadcasters appealed too extensively to people's need for sensationalism.⁵ While Free is exaggerating in this commentary, it is accurate that sensationalistic news was prevalent on all media at the time, abusing technology that could have been useful for public education. Contrary to Free's opinion, General James Harbord argued that the advent of radio improved democracy in the country. Because people were able to hear politicians speak, they were more informed and more likely to vote. It also created more interest in politics, as people could listen to the radio as opposed to reading a newspaper.⁶ While both opinions are valid and logical, radio was ultimately beneficial to American society because it created another place for businesses to advertise, educated citizens, set precedents to be followed for at least a century, and simply provided a new form of entertainment for American citizens.

EMPOWERMENT

In the 1920s, some news sources used their social power to empower oppressed groups like women and African Americans. To do this for African Americans, the newspaper *The Chicago Defender* inspired jazz musicians to play for broader audiences, and shed light on the social prejudices that were holding them back from reaching the same levels of fame as other

⁵E.E Free, *Radio's Real Uses*, (*The Forum* March 1926), 1

⁶James G. Harbord, *Radio and Democracy*, (*The Forum* March 1929), 4

white musicians.⁷ One Defender writer and ardent supporter of jazz musicians, Dave Peyton, wrote:

Friendship must be cast aside. It is the reckon-ing hour for our musicians. We have ballyhooed along for the past 10 or 12 years fooling ourselves. We have played music as we think it should be played without trying to find out if we are playing it correctly. So few of us have the time to visit the grand symphony orchestras, the deluxe picture houses and other places where things musically are done correctly.⁸

Peyton intended to encourage jazz musicians to gain success by conforming to the white culture of the 1920s and performing in orchestras. While this perception is skewed, as Peyton was led to believe that there is a right and wrong when it comes to music, he still publicly encouraged African Americans to be successful in the music community. By doing so, he voiced his support for their growth and empowered them to reach further. Another way that these oppressed groups benefited from news reporting was by writing it themselves.

Ione Quinby was one of the few female reporters of the 1920s. Despite being the only woman working as a reporter for the *Chicago Evening Post*, she was able to make a name for herself covering crime around the city. Quinby was not respected by her male coworkers, they made fun of her for wearing a hat, and make jokes about whether her bangs were sewn to it. She felt pressured to lie about her age and pretended to be ten years younger than she was. The people she had lied to did not find out until she had died.⁹ All of these hardships that Quinby had

⁷Chadwick Hansen, *Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30*, (*American Quarterly* 12, no.4 (1960): 493-507). Because this piece is about jazz styles, not journalism, it can be analyzed to find the underlying argument that journalists could help African Americans.

⁸ Dave Peyton, *Opportunity*, (*The Chicago Defender* 1928)

⁹Genevieve G.McBride and Stephen R. Byers, *On the Front Page in the "Jazz Age": Journalist Ione Quinby, Chicago's Ageless "Girl Reporter"* (*Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 106, no. 1 (2013): 91-128) 91- 92

to overcome because she was a woman were likely reasons that more women were not involved in the news industry, making Quinby well known because she was one of the few women who chose journalism. If it weren't for women like Quinby who took chances in the industry, women may have continued to be underrepresented in journalism through the 21st century.

Another woman who was involved in journalism was Elizabeth Meriwether- Pollards, who wrote under the pen name Dorothy Dix.¹⁰ Dix was a columnist who wrote about life as a woman. She was featured on the woman's page of the *Ogden Standard* in 1920, where she wrote the segment, "Being a Woman." In this piece, Dix poetically describes life as a woman. She opened with a scene of children, a group of boys with one girl. The boys were talking about their aspirations of becoming doctors and generals and then told the one girl that she can never do any of these things because she was a woman, and they believed women did not have important roles. Dix proved them wrong and used her authority as a paid female writer to shed light on life as a woman.¹¹ Because she used her platform to give men a perception of how women lived, and united women by making them feel accomplished even if they did not have paid jobs, Dix empowered women.

Apart from getting involved in newspapers, women also started to see advertisements catered to them in the 1920s. The same women's page that includes the column by Dix also has an advertisement for garters for children. Since taking care of children was ordinarily a woman's job, the ad was cleverly placed on the women's page, and included quotes from mothers praising

¹⁰Mary Pollard Clark, *The Meriwether- Pollards*, (*The William and Mary Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1927) 223-224), 224

¹¹ "Women's Page," (*The Ogden Standard*, 31 March 1920)

the particular garter.¹² As women found more independence due to the right to vote, companies would gain business by appealing to women because they were a brand new marketable demographic. The soap brand *Lifebuoy* also used this strategy of catering to women but used a slightly different technique. *Lifebuoy* encouraged women to buy soap by describing the dangers of children having dirty hands, such as spreading germs and odors.¹³ Similarly to the ad for garters, this emphasizes that women were caretakers for the children, and therefore in charge of choosing the right products for them. This is not traditional empowerment because it does not outwardly encourage women to find new roles, nevertheless, it serves as a mild motivator for women to get out of the house. Previously, women had made their products without help from others, so advertisements that gave them options were an encouragement to experiment with new ideas and step out of their traditional roles. While very few newspapers outwardly praised women or African Americans, some did. Furthermore, these oppressed groups were able to use news sources to find encouragement to continue to fight, something that they would continue to do for the next century.

PROGRESSIVES

The Progressive Era began with Theodore Roosevelt's presidency and came to an end when Republican Warren G. Harding came into office in 1921. Throughout the 1920s, Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover returned to the Old Guard Republican tendencies and did not practice social or economic reform. For Progressive Era reporters such as Christopher Powell

¹²“Women’s Page”

¹³Lever Brothers Company, *Teachers and Mothers are Allies in Fighting Dirt, (Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1923)

Connolly, this meant either finding a new audience or adapting to the social changes that came with the 1920s. Connolly had been a muckraker in the early 1900s and was a staunch supporter of Roosevelt, even through his failed Bull Moose campaign. When the Old Guard Republicans came into power, Connolly decided to end his muckraking career. Connolly reportedly refused to write about the Teapot Dome scandal in 1923, which is astonishing because it was the biggest scandal of Harding's presidency. In 1924, Connolly exchanged letters with a fellow reformer who had also quit the muckraking business. They shared gratitude for stepping down from muckraking careers, as they could observe the world from a quieter standpoint without feeling pressured to write controversial pieces that resulted in criticism.¹⁴ While Connolly was one of the many muckrakers who ended their careers due to the end of the Progressive Era, others continued to write reform pieces--they just had to find new ways to do it.

One major event that was covered by the press in the 1920s was the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925. High school teacher John Scopes was charged for teaching evolution, an act that was against the Tennessee law. This was the first major trial that was reported, and many chose to keep their non-fundamentalist opinions out of pieces to avoid controversy. One news source that did this was the still-famous *New York Times*. They published a segment in July of 1925 with the basics of the Scopes Trial. This served as an early source of truly neutral news; the article does not try to persuade readers either way.¹⁵ By remaining neutral, *The New York Times* provided simple news, but people were craving complex stories that challenged their ideas. Two progressive reporters who lived in Georgia were horrified when they heard of the law that

¹⁴David Swibold, *The Education of a Muckraker: The Journalism of Christopher Powell Connolly*, (*Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 53, no. 2 (2003): 2-19), 18-19.

¹⁵ *Who's Who and What's What in Scopes Trial*, (*The New York Times*, 11 July 1925)

banned teaching evolution. However, when the couple covered the Scopes Trial, they were hesitant to outwardly express their views because they were not fundamentalists. After about a week of waiting to publish coverage of the trial, the reporters finally discussed the trial on Scopes' side, taking evolution to be true. To their surprise, they received more praise than criticism.¹⁶ Because progressives, especially those living in the South, were afraid of being ridiculed for not being fundamentalists, they rarely spoke their opinions. The Scopes Trial press coverage serves as evidence that progressive opinions did survive into the 1920s, people were just afraid to voice them.

News reporting of the 1920s was an important aspect of the decade because it used the new radio technology, empowered the oppressed, and gave progressives a means for reconnecting. Without these changes that were made in the 1920s, news today would be wildly different. If newspapers had not adapted to new technology the way that they did, there would be no variety in the media that people use to get their news. If writers like Peyton had not publicly encouraged Jazz musicians to try new things, people today would not be able to see the opinions of people in the 1920s. Without women like Quinby and Dix, the news industry could still be run by men. Most importantly, reformers started voicing their own opinions publicly, which lead to modern-day organizations that can focus on reform and have supporters. All in all, journalism of the 1920s should not be viewed as shallow, as it was a vital component in forming modern American society.

¹⁶ Gregory C. Isby and Linda L. Haris, *Georgia Reporters at the Scopes Trial: A comparison of Newspaper Coverage*, (*The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (1991) 784-803), 786- 788

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