

Yellow Journalism

The term *yellow journalism* is used to criticize journalists and their publications. It implies they use poorly sourced material, misleading headlines, overly fancy prose, faked interviews, scare tactics and questionable science.

The term implies that the publication is seeking the attention of the least educated or most uninformed members of society through its apparent interest in underdogs. It may be anti-elitist, praising the wisdom of the common man when compared with the ideas and practices of “the establishment,” including the medical and financial establishments, scientists and government.

Yellow journalism further implies that the journalists are more interested in gaining fame making money—by gaining readership or selling ads—than they are in accuracy, in informing their audience or discussing serious ideas and trends.

The Historical Yellow Journalism

The term was used by the editor of a rival paper (Edwin Wardman of the New York Press) in 1897 to describe the journalism practiced by Hearst’s *Journal* and Pulitzer’s *World*. He may have been referring to the two competing “Yellow Kid” comics.

The competition between Hearst and Pulitzer was heightened by their competition for department store advertising. The more eyes a paper could deliver to its advertisers, the more ads they could attract. When Pulitzer’s paper dropped its price to a penny to match the cost of *The Journal*, it was counting on advertising revenue to finance its operation.

Though both papers used screaming headlines, gory crime stories, and phrases like “depraved mobs” and “savage fury,” both papers also continued to produce solid, well-researched journalism as well.

The Decline of Yellow Journalism

Both the *World* and *The Journal* had endorsed unsuccessful democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and 1900. Both had been highly critical of William McKinley. When President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, opponents and rivals of Hearst pointed to columns by Hearst’s columnist Ambrose Bierce and editor Arthur Brisbane that seemed to call for the assassination of McKinley, saying Hearst’s yellow journalism drove the assassin to the crime. Hearst’s political ambitions were destroyed by the accusations.

Pulitzer also retreated from the excesses of yellow journalism as the new century began. His paper returned to its crusading roots and regained popular respect.