

## Media and War

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**Representations of war in the media have changed drastically over time. Like the media representations of war, the American public's view of wars has also shifted over time; this is often a result of the media portrayals of war events. This paper examines the role of newspaper, yellow journalism, and sensationalism writing during the Spanish-American War on the American public's support for the war and juxtaposes this with television media accounts of the American war in Vietnam and how this created public disapproval for the war. Both had everlasting effects on US war policy for the future.**

### INTRODUCTION

Mass media is the main way that people receive information today, but the definition of mass media has also shifted over time. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass media consisted of radio and newspaper; in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass media shifted to mainly television and later, the internet. These forms of communicating information are especially crucial during wartime. The use of newspapers, run by moguls like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, conveyed war information during the Spanish-American War in 1898. These sources used an interesting tactic known as Yellow Journalism which essentially was a method of reporting that told stories for the sole purpose of entertaining people, no matter the level of veracity. This method was used to describe war stories in a way that created popular interest and national support for the Spanish-American War. By the Vietnam War, however, media technology had advanced, and television was now the primary distribution method. This allowed the people of the United States to witness the goings-on of the warfront and created a much more visual experience that had not previously existed for people at home. However, this way of showing the war created large public unrest throughout the United States as the brutality of the conflict became more publicized. This paper will explore the differences in media coverage of the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War. Furthermore, this research paper will underscore this theme so that the different ways in which each war was portrayed can become clearer. Finally, this topic will be used to attempt to conclude why the media representation of the Spanish-American War created massive public support for the war effort and why the media representation of the Vietnam War catalyzed public unrest.

### BOUNDARIES OF RESEARCH

The topic of media and war is quite extensive when looked at on a broad scale; however, because the argument of this paper is more focused on public response to media, it is necessary to define what limits will be set. First, the media representations of wars besides the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War will not be examined. This would only dilute from the topic at hand by including wars that were not as obviously reliant on mass media outlets. Both the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War represent two significantly dynamic moments in American media, which distinguishes these two wars from any other wars in which the United States was involved. Additionally, only media sources from the United States will be used for research as these were the main sources that Americans relied on for war-related information. Specifically for the Spanish-American War media, newspapers run by the tycoon William Randolph Hearst are very significant because Hearst was in large part responsible for creating yellow journalism, or at least popularizing it.<sup>1</sup> In terms of the Vietnam War, the use of television as a way to show the home front what was actually happening is vital to this discussion. Certainly the media coverage by American reporters on overseas assignments is one of the strongest sources for this information. Examining the historical background to each war is also going to be a crucial aspect of this argument. Without a historical background of each war, the argument may not be as clear. In all, the parameters discussed above will be important because they better define the topic at hand and allow for a more concise argument.

<sup>1</sup> David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence as a World Power* (Chicago, 2007)

## THE RISE OF YELLOW JOURNALISM

In 1897, a young man by the name of William Randolph Hearst had an idea that would lead him to become one of the most, if not the most important, newspaper mogul in history: yellow journalism. The birth of this idea is told through a story in which the young Hearst found human remains in the East River and “decided that his newspaper would beat the city’s police department... in discovering the culprit or culprits who had perpetrated this heinous crime.” Spencer continues: “the lurid descriptions of the [story] that appeared in *The New York Journal* pushed the limits of both credibility and social acceptability in those times. In a stroke of opportunism, the Yellow Press had been born.”<sup>2</sup> This type of press succeeded in evoking the emotions of readers through the use of colorful language and catchy headlines. The “invention” of yellow journalism was one that would stand through time.

Hearst had used the process of lithography to create this media sensation. This process consisted of applying ink “to a grease-treated image on the flat printing surface...by means of a special press or onto a rubber cylinder.”<sup>3</sup> Using pictures with words to create visual stories that could be delivered to the masses was crucial to the development of yellow journalism by Hearst and other newspapermen such as Joseph Pulitzer because it created a visual appeal that had not previously existed (in sources like radio). Hearst, Pulitzer, and others explored the idea of photojournalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which led to the eventual coverage of the Spanish-American War through newspaper. The goal of Hearst’s type of reporting was “to tell the best of stories unimpeded by minor problems created by fact” and to “excite the soul and sell newspapers”. Here lies the genius of yellow journalism: it works because the reports are sensationalized in a way that makes people *want* to read the newspaper. Furthermore, to Hearst, using yellow journalism to sell newspapers was often more important than having completely truthful stories.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the truth was frequently discarded in place of a more interesting headline or tidbit of

information.

Yellow journalism was important at this time because it provided a way for the public to form an almost unanimous opinion about the upcoming war with Spain which ultimately spurred a more aggressive war policy. Often, government policy goes through several channels before becoming finalized. One of these channels, though, can frequently include the public. In cases such as the Spanish-American War, the American public’s opinion was a large factor in deciding to go to war against Spain in 1898. Historian Ben Procter writes “the president (McKinley) was not about to jeopardize, much less ruin, his chances for reelection in 1900 (by going to war with Spain)...McKinley finally decided to give way to the popular will. On April 11 (1898) he urged armed intervention to free Cuba, and two weeks later...Congress passed a war resolution.”<sup>5</sup> This type of correlation between public opinion and national policy is not exclusive to the Spanish-American War. A contemporary example includes the state of California’s use of ballots. “Any California voter can put an initiative or a referendum on the ballot” to be voted on by the state population”<sup>6</sup>. This means that any proposition that a voter deems important can be put on the state ballot to possibly be voted through to become a legislative measure. It is important to note that this most often occurs in cases of social policy as opposed to foreign policy, war policy, etc. While ballots like the state of California offers are not identical to how public opinion affected the United States legislators’ decision to go to war with Spain in 1898, it supports the claim that public opinion can indeed affect policy.<sup>7</sup>

## THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

President William McKinley of the United States led the nation into war against Spain over the Caribbean island of Cuba in 1898. At the time, Spain had suffered the loss of several of its New World colonies. Countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, among others, had experienced independence wars in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This left Spain with one of its last New World

2 David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: the Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power* (Chicago, 2007), p. 1.

3 “Lithography,” Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/343748/lithography>

4 The term “Yellow Journalism” came from “The Yellow Kid,” which was a comic strip in both Joseph Pulitzer’s and William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers. The comic strip consisted of a “Yellow Dugan Kid” who wore a yellow costume. This coincided with both Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s use of sensationalism. The University of Virginia’s has a further explanation of the coining of this term at [xroads.virginia.edu/~ma04/wood/ykid/yj.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma04/wood/ykid/yj.htm).

5 Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Early Years, 1863-1910* (New York, 1998), p. 119.

6 “California Secretary of State,” [http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections\\_j.htm](http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_j.htm).

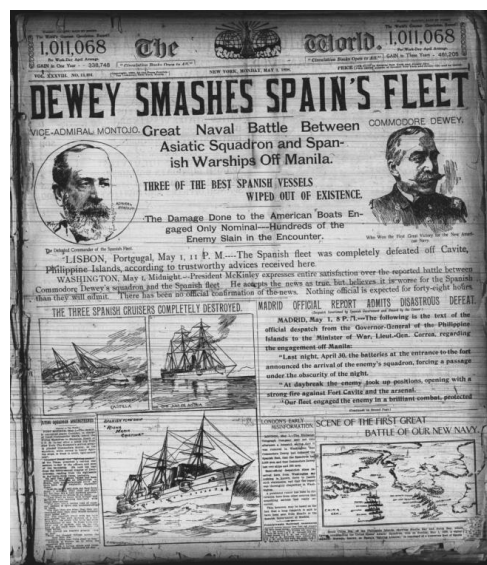
7 Other sources that discuss the topic of public opinion affecting national policy include Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar., 1983), pp. 175-190. Burstein, “The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda,” and Jeffrey R. Lax and Justin H. Phillips, “Gay Rights in the States: Public Opinion and Policy Responsiveness.”

colonies, Cuba. When uprisings began in Cuba, the United States took notice because the President and other leaders had political interests in the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> As soon as the United States became involved in the conflict between Spain and colonial Cuba, newspapers that relied on yellow journalism took notice.

It should be noted that some contemporary sources disagree. Historian David Spencer argues “to assert that these two journalistic enterprises (Hearst’s *The New York Journal* and Pulitzer’s the *World New York*) were capable of dragging a reluctant nation into battle is both misleading and erroneous.”<sup>9</sup> While newspapers exploited the Spanish-American War in order to sell newspapers, they were not responsible for bringing the United States into the war by popularizing it. Nevertheless, this essay argues that the media was an integral source that influenced public opinion about both the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War; after all, popular opinion often affects policy decisions as was previously mentioned and in this case there was an overwhelming desire for revenge against Spain because of the sinking of the *U.S.S. Maine*, an instance which will later be discussed in greater detail.

Yellow journalism newspapers helped bring a “reluctant nation” into the Spanish-American War. One historian argues that while the United States was not exactly reluctant to go to war with Spain, media sources like Hearst’s *The New York Journal* contributed to national support. These sources argue “All such pent-up emotions would thus emerge, then burst forth, in what Hearst orchestrated as an American ‘crusade’ for Cuban independence against ‘Spanish tyranny’.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, one could argue that public mobilization for the Spanish-American War was not too difficult. After the Civil War, which

pitted half of the United States against the other half of the country, it makes sense that the population at large would be quick to find a foreign enemy (which in this case was Spain). Pulitzer and Hearst exploited the idea that the United States was ready to unite against another country by running front page news stories such as “NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE.”<sup>11</sup> With news headlines such as this, the population developed a pseudo-mob mentality that determined Spain to be a public enemy. The people of the United States, the legislators, and President McKinley felt it necessary to delve into a war with Spain under the cover of supporting Cuba while also focusing on revenge.



Another instance of yellow journalism influencing the public and resulting in the government taking greater measures to defeat Spain includes an article from *The Globe* (shown above) entitled “DEWEY SMASHES SPAIN’S FLEET: Great Naval Battle Between Asiatic Squadron and Spanish Warships Off Manila.”<sup>12</sup> This headline indirectly allowed people to unite against Spain by showing support for the naval success of the United States. Yet another example of this type of headline comes from the same source (shown below) and is titled “GREAT SEA VICTORY FOR AMERICA! Vengeance for the Maine Begun! Spain’s Asiatic Fleet Burned and

8 Further information about the events leading up to the Spanish-American War can be found in other readings such as Kenneth E. Hendrickson’s book *The Spanish-American War*, 2003, A.B. Feuer’s work *The Spanish-American War at Sea Naval Action in the Atlantic* (1995), Kathryn Gay’s book entitled *Spanish-American War* (1995). The information in this essay about the events of the Spanish-American War is explained on a minimal basis as the detailed events of the war are not necessary for the overall argument of the paper. Also, political interests in the Caribbean included exports of sugar and other natural resources that were valuable to the United States.

9 David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: the Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power* (Chicago, 2007), p. 11, 124.

10 Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Early Years, 1863-1910* (New York, 1998), p. 96. Other sources that provide information about the intentions of yellow journalism by William Randolph Hearst include the following: James McGrath Morris, *The Rose Man of Sing Sing: a True Tale of Life, Murder, and Redemption in the Age of Yellow Journalism* (New York, 2003) and Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst Final Edition, 1911-1951* (Oxford, 2007)

11 “William Randolph Hearst, Yellow Journalism, & The Spanish-American War: Two Perspectives for the Classroom,” <http://www.ushistoryscene.com/uncategorized/hearstyellowjournalism/>.

12 NYPL Digital Gallery, [http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1917206&imageID=psnypl\\_grd\\_525&word=Montejo%2C%20Patricio&s=3&notword=&d=&c=&f=2&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=1&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=1](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1917206&imageID=psnypl_grd_525&word=Montejo%2C%20Patricio&s=3&notword=&d=&c=&f=2&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=1&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=1)



Sunk!”<sup>13</sup> The newspaper portrayed headlines that boosted national morale and increased support for the Spanish-American War.



It is clear that yellow journalism provided a window for the American public to become fully enthralled by the Spanish-American War. What started out as a war to help Cuba retain some sort of autonomy from Spain shifted into a war of vengeance and finally a rally of the American people to support the government’s efforts in the Spanish-American War.

**THE VIETNAM WAR**

As opposed to the pioneering journalism efforts in the Spanish-American War, photojournalism and television dominated the coverage of the Vietnam War. At the beginning of the campaign in Vietnam, the American people were told that operations were going according to plan. Communism was being kept at bay in the East Asian country. However, many times, the government was controlling what was being shown to the American public. For instance, “an insecure Diem (South Vietnamese president) ordered news of a failed military operation suppressed,” which meant that information about anti-communist losses were being withheld. Historian William Hammond goes on to explain “the good image of the United States seemed at risk in South Vietnam. Not only would the enemy make propaganda of any official American acknowledgment that the US was assuming a more aggressive role in the war, there were also the American people to consider.” Already, US officials were attempting

to maintain the strong image of the country by omitting details that could possibly damage this national representation.

Although excluding war details may have seemed like a way to keep the American public at bay, this essentially backfired for the United States government. US leaders:

“were uncertain that the American people would accept the increase in casualties that a decision to stay [in Vietnam] might entail. As a result, they set about preparing the strongest possible political and military case for future action against North Vietnam while attempting to draw no more attention to the subject than necessary.”

The decision to withhold information about the war would lead to one of the largest anti-war movements the United States had ever seen. As the war trudged on, the use of filmed reports became more prevalent. Such reports depicted instances of US soldiers bombing, shooting, and setting fire to civilian areas of Vietnam as precautionary measures against communists.<sup>14</sup> This sort of violence was deeply frowned upon by the American public and created large waves of anti-war sentiment.

In addition to the United States attempting to limit what war stories made it into the news, the importance of television cannot be overstated. Historian Daniel Hallin states “that by the mid-1960s television had become the most important source of news for most of the American public, and beyond that, perhaps, the most powerful single influence on the public.”<sup>15</sup> Also, the visual power of television over print made an extensive impact on the public’s opinion of the Vietnam War. While newspapers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contained war stories about sinking Spanish ships and the United States succeeding in helping Cuba, the television coverage of thousands upon thousands of corpses, both Vietnamese and American, impacted the American public on a much deeper level. Hallin writes “because it is a visual medium, television shows the raw horror of war in a way print cannot.”<sup>16</sup> One such photo has since become an iconic representation of the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Americans saw photos such

14 William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, (Kansas, 1998), p. 2, 19, 61.

15 Daniel C. Hallin, *the “Uncensored War:” The Media and Vietnam*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 106.

16 Daniel C. Hallin, *the “Uncensored War:” The Media and Vietnam*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 109.

13 PBS Yellow Journalism Headline Gallery, <http://www.pbs.org/crucible/headlines.html>

as the one shown below of young children being affected by the fighting.<sup>17</sup>



*Vietnamese civilian children running from napalm bombs*

The dissent movements that sprung up throughout the United States during the Vietnam War represented an era of distrust and distaste for the US government’s decisions surrounding the Vietnam War

Aside from the extremely visual representations of the goings-on of the Vietnam War through photojournalism and television, public unrest was likely a result of a generation of outspoken youths. While the Spanish-American War provided an outlet for almost the entire nation to unite, the Vietnam War provided a way for smaller groups to unite against the war. In essence, the media coverage of the Vietnam War “threw everything into focus, and brought the war to an end by forcing the American people to confront reality.”<sup>18</sup>

**POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR AMERICAN SENTIMENTAL CHANGES BETWEEN WARS**

The search for an answer as to why public opinion was in support of the Spanish-American War and why public unrest was rampant during the Vietnam War is a large endeavor that cannot possibly be explained in a paper of this scope. However, it is still important to attempt an explanation. It is clear that the media itself played a large role in public opinion. Yellow journalism was a new development that allowed newspapers to reach numerous people and explain stories or persuade readers to believe one thing over another. This is not surprising as it was Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s original goal to increase readership numbers for a larger profit by publishing sensationalized

stories. For instance, the example of *The New York Journal’s* article entitled “Destruction of the War Ship Maine was the Work of an Enemy” (shown below), persuaded readers of the *Journal* to rally against a single cause: fighting Spain.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps another reason that yellow journalism was so important in creating momentum for public support of the Spanish-American War was because at this point in time, the United States had only experienced small-scale wars (outside of the Civil War). By 1898, the largest war the people of the United States had experienced was the Civil War, which was of course horrific; still, the nation had become united again during reconstruction and the idea of a common enemy (Spain) was one that took hold. Historian Ben Procter argues:

Many Americans in the 1890s also exuded a certain restless energy, an increasing appetite for challenge, together with a need to extend their growing pride of nationalism. And why? Possibly, young men had listened too longingly to romantic stories by Civil War veterans, who were enamored with the valor and heroism of individuals in battle, while overlooking the bloody slaughter of soldiers and the anguishing misery of defeat.<sup>20</sup>

17 “The Historic ‘Napalm Girl’ Pulitzer Image Marks Its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,” <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/06/the-historic-napalm-girl-pulitzer-image-marks-its-40th-anniversary/>  
 18 William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, (Kansas, 1998), p. 294.

19 William Randolph Hearst, *Yellow Journalism, & The Spanish-American War: Two Perspectives for the Classroom*,” <http://www.ushistoryscene.com/uncategorized/hearstyellowjournalism/>.  
 20 Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Early Years, 1863-1910* (New York, 1998), p. 95.



This example may be exaggerated by arguing that people were *excited* by the idea of war, but its overall point is understood; public morale was high with the promise of fighting a war against a foreign nation, as opposed to an internal conflict such as the Civil War. Instead, the country wanted to unite under a single cause. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer just happened to capitalize on this national unity by sensationalizing it. The same type of argument can be made about the public unrest that was prevalent during the Vietnam War.

To this day, the Vietnam War is one of the only wars that the United States lost. In the 1960s and early 1970s, American youths were going through a cultural revolution that resulted in free thinking and active resistance.



*Vietnam War protesters marching*<sup>21</sup>

The public's critical thinking was catalyzed by showing these counter-culture individuals what was actually happening in Vietnam on television and through photographs.

Also, the Vietnam War had occurred after the World Wars which may have contributed to public protests of the war. The horror of both World Wars was still in the recent past of the United States by the time the Vietnam War had begun. This fact may have been a significant reason for much of the public not wanting to participate in another large-scale war, especially one that was serving as a proxy war against the spread of communism during the Cold War. Furthermore, President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized the shortcomings of fighting such a grand war on the opposite side of the world. This alone could have been a factor in decreasing public support for the war. During the Spanish-American War, most American leaders

were completely on board with the President and Congress' decision to go to war with Spain. This difference is yet another factor that could explain the rise in support for the Spanish-American War and the lack of public support for the Vietnam War.

## CONCLUSION

The Spanish-American War marked one of the first instances where the United States was acting as a world power in order to defend a less powerful nation, Cuba, from an imperial country, Spain. Public support was widespread for this war. This research paper explains how yellow journalism contributed to the public support of the Spanish-American War. Historian Ben Procter notes that Hearst "understood the American psyche—an ingrained competitiveness that exalted athletic prowess" which could explain why the United States was so adamant about supporting the war effort against Spain.<sup>22</sup>

At the start of the Vietnam War, many American leaders believed that allowing the public to know minimal details about the war would create support for the war effort as it had in previous wars such as the Spanish-American War. However, the Vietnam War was different in many ways, one of which includes the medium of displaying the war. Television and photojournalism had become the main forms that the war was shown to the public. This however created chaos throughout the United States as the public realized the terrible atrocities that were being committed in the fight against communism in East Asia. Instead of only receiving the good news about destroying enemies, the public was seeing all aspects of the war. Additionally, the timing of the Vietnam War came at a time where counter-culture and rebellion were rampant. This did not help public opinion of the war. Finally, the lack of a single enemy or specific plan for revenge (as was present in the Spanish-American War) led many to question the United States' presence in Vietnam. To say one factor was solely responsible for creating large-scale public support for the Spanish American War and catalyzing an anti-war movement during the Vietnam War is presumptuous; however, it is evident that the modes of media used to inform the public about each respective war was a defining factor.

21 "The Political Pixie," <http://thepoliticalpixie.wordpress.com/2013/05/25/why-the-usa-lost-the-vietnam-war/>

22 Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Early Years, 1863-1910* (New York, 1998), p. 96.