

The Evolutionary Role of American Media Throughout World War I & II

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Abstract

This study delves into the different influences of the media during the twentieth century. Throughout history, the media has served as a tool for communication to connect people globally. Most notably, the American media played an especially large role during this time, as its increasing influence shaped the public opinion of its citizens. In World War I, the media's portrayal of events led to a shift in sentiment from neutrality to a strong support for war, influencing President Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter the conflict. The establishment of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) further highlighted how the media was utilized to unite the public while also marginalizing German Americans through propaganda efforts or information spread to influence public opinion. Throughout World War II, the collaboration between the Office of War Information (OWI) and media outlets aimed at spreading Japanese propaganda, promoting racial prejudice, and supporting harsh measures against Japanese Americans, including internment and the deployment of the atomic bomb. This analysis illustrates that although the media was instrumental in rallying support for war efforts, it often did so at the expense of the truth and also marginalized communities. Consequently, stricter broadcasting ethics emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, this study dives into the changes within the American media following the war, highlighting significant developments in its approach and influence.

Keywords: Media, World War I, World War II, Vietnam War, Propaganda, Media Influence

1. Introduction

Since its inception, the media has held the power to capture the attention of large audiences and shape opinions, especially in times of urgency. During the twentieth century, the United States of America was involved in several major conflicts, such as World War I and II. Although each of these conflicts was unique in its own way, the role of the media was vital in uniting and inciting passions of the American public. For example, during the Spanish-American War in 1898, journalists attracted readers with sensationalist tactics like bold headlines, emotional language, and exaggerated stories. Journalists, such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, exposed Spanish brutalities in Cuba in the 1890s, stirring outrage among the American public. The rising sympathy for the Cuban cause ultimately influenced the United States' decision to enter into a war with Spain. Yet, this impactful role of the American media within society did not end with the Spanish-American War. Contrary to previous researches that have inadequately recognized the significant impact of the growing role that media played during this period on minority groups, this study hopes to expose and share the truth of the American media during World War I and II, as well as the developments since the turn of the century.

2. Media's Role in World War I

At the start of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson and the American media initially supported a strict stance of

neutrality. However, as the war progressed, the media expressed patriotic fervor and supported the war effort through positive portrayals of the war and the Allied cause. During the 1910s, journalists utilized editorials, news articles, cartoons, and posters to justify the Allies' war effort and to vilify the enemy. For instance, on May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank a passenger ship, the *Lusitania*, without warning in British waters, resulting in the death of 128 Americans (Bailey, 1935). Although the Germans believed they were justified in their attack, because the ship held war munitions for Britain, this event spread like wildfire through the media in the form of dramatic narratives, conspiracies, and hypotheses. The New York Times (Figure 1) referred to the event as “cold-blooded murder” and a “crime against civilization,” enraging Americans (The New York Times, 1915, p. 6).

The media proved to be influential in effectively sparking anti-German sentiments within the American public's opinion. “The sinking of the *Lusitania* had a more jolting effect upon American opinion than any other single event of the World War” because it swayed Americans to reconsider their position of neutrality (Trommler, 2009, p. 241). Given the conspicuous attention this attack received from the media, President Wilson, despite his initial stance on neutrality, issued a severe protest to Germany. As a result, the Germans agreed to abandon unrestricted submarine warfare in September of 1915 in order to avert a diplomatic break with the United States (History.com Editors, 2021).

Indeed, the media garnered enough power to sway even the president's position on the war. On March 1st, 1917, a secret diplomatic message issued from the German Foreign Office to Mexico was intercepted by British intelligence. The published interception was the Zimmermann Telegram—the German's offer to recover Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico for the Mexicans, in exchange for entry into the war—that several newspapers across the country exposed. Revelations of such a deal infuriated Americans and bolstered support for the American declaration of war. Just a month earlier, Germany abandoned its prior agreement and returned to their policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in an effort to defeat the British before the US could mobilize and land troops in Europe (The National WWI Museum and Memorial, n.d.). The media emphasized the attacks on American ships, once again, throughout February and March 1917. The media crafted Germany's mistakes to shape a pro-war American public opinion, which turned out to be necessary. Consequently, President Wilson, who ran for reelection in 1916 with the motto “he kept us out of war,” shifted his position as the American public's support for WWI grew with the media's exposure. Without a doubt, the media's influence transformed the American public opinion, changing President Wilson's stance to support the war effort. Consequently, Wilson went before Congress and asked for a formal declaration of war. After gaining approval from the House of Representatives, with 373 votes of approval and only 50 votes in opposition, President Wilson led the US into the war (Gompert et al., 2014). Ultimately, the US declared and approved its entry into the war on April 4th, 1917.

The media's role continued to expand with the US war efforts. Just nine days after Congress approved the war, President Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) through Executive Order 2594. Led by George Creel, the CPI consisted of the Secretary of State, Secretary of War, and Secretary of the Navy. The committee expanded and had more than twenty subdivisions throughout its existence. The primary goal of the CPI was to promote a positive image of the American war effort and to galvanize public support, particularly through the media. This objective involved countering any anti-war sentiment and portraying the U.S. and its allies in a favorable light while demonizing the enemies, particularly Germany. The CPI utilized a wide range of media to disseminate its messages. For instance, the CPI distributed 75 million pamphlets and leaflets that explained the causes of the war, the reasons for U.S. involvement, and the need for public support (Vaughn, 1979). Also, the committee spread posters through advertisements in newspapers that featured themes of patriotism, duty, and the need for sacrifice, while also vilifying the Germans through catchphrases like “Halt the Hun!” and “Destroy this Mad Brute!” (Figure 2) with fear invoking images.

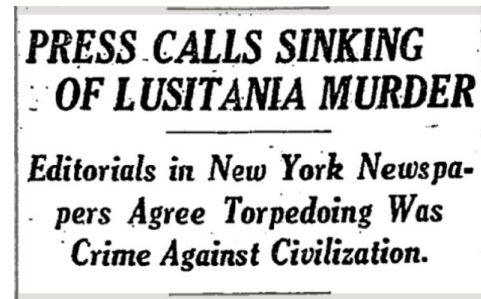


Figure 1: Headline from the New York Times (1915)



Figure 2: Poster from the Library of Congress (1918)

Over the course of World War I, the US produced more war posters than all the other nations combined (The National WWI Museum and Memorial, 2022). Most notably, the committee worked closely with newspapers and magazines to publish over 6,000 articles, editorials, and advertisements in order to sell the war effort (Vaughn, 1979). The committee even secured the cooperation of newspapers to censor stories. Government officials' statements of the duty for "every citizen [to] declare himself American--or traitor" were spread throughout the news (Gerard, 1918). German Americans were ostracized, leaving them conflicted between their sympathy for their homeland and loyalty to the US.

Unfortunately, Creel's CPI's successful unification of the American people's opinion came at the expense of the German culture in America that became marginalized. The names of schools, foods, streets, and towns were intentionally changed to conceal their German roots, and music written by German composers such as Richard Wagner and Felix Mendelssohn was removed from concert programs (Library of Congress, n.d.). The German language was also heavily impacted because, in 1915, about 25 percent of high schoolers in America studied German, making it the most studied modern foreign language in the country. However, Germany had been so stigmatized that by the end of the war, just 1 percent

of schools taught the language (Siegel and Silverman, 2017). Consequently, after the war, the CPI's methods raised concerns about government propaganda and the suppression of dissent, as their disregard for facts and the generation of deep anti-German sentiment radiated throughout the country.

3. Media's Role in World War II

Two decades later, the American media continued to influence the public by imposing its prejudiced stance against another group: Japanese Americans. In World War II, similar to the First World War, the United States shifted from an initially neutral and isolationist stance to a more interventionist role as the Allies became more involved with the Axis powers. The US provided indirect support through economic and financial assistance, until the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On December 7th, 1941, Japan, an Axis power, attacked a US Naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, resulting in the deaths of 2,403 Americans (The National WWII Museum, 2001). Making headlines across the nation, the attack sent shockwaves of fear and anger, and the US government quickly declared war the very next day. The direct attack on American soil rallied the country around the flag, unifying the nation to facilitate support for the war. With Americans rallying behind the government and the military, young men voluntarily signed up for the military, and within one month, 134,000 Americans enlisted in the armed forces (The National WWII Museum, 2001). Such mobilization was only possible, once again, due to the media's dissemination of slogans like "Avenge Pearl Harbor!"

Nevertheless, the media utilized this attack to sway the public's opinion during World War II by emanating a one-sided, anti-Japanese perspective. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI) to develop information programs to update the status and progress of the war effort, as well as war policies, activities, and aims of the U.S. government. However, the OWI also coordinated with media outlets to ensure that anti-Axis propaganda, especially against the Japanese, was widespread and consistent. This included guidelines on how to depict the enemy and what themes to emphasize. Headlines and stories in newspapers and magazines often used sensationalist language to portray American dominance like "Jap Fleet Smashed By U.S." (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Headline from the Chicago Tribune (1942)

The media selectively reported on atrocities committed by Japanese forces to incite fear and anger, while downplaying or ignoring similar actions by the Allies. This selective nature ensured that the public only received one-sided coverage. Beyond that, the OWI cooperated with the media to incorporate advertisements within forms of media, like newspapers and magazines. The OWI spread racist propaganda posters as advertisements that often depicted the Japanese as subhuman or barbarous. Common themes included portraying Japanese soldiers with exaggerated, grotesque features, such as slanted eyes, buck teeth, and exaggerated facial expressions to make them appear menacing and savage. Some advertisements even depicted the Japanese as animals, such as rats and snakes, and commonly referred to them with the derogatory term “Japs” (Figure 4).

Moreover, Hollywood cinematic productions cooperated with the government to spread patriotism by glorifying Americans. Movies became a popular and important part of American culture as the silent-talkies gave way to movies produced with sound by Hollywood studios. During the 1930s, weekly cinema attendance rose to 80 million people, representing approximately 65 percent of the American population (Butsch, 2001). Thus, the OWI worked closely with Hollywood studios, such as Warner Bros. and Disney, to produce films and cartoons that supported the war effort and featured anti-Japanese themes, using humor and caricatures. The office provided scripts, themes, and guidelines to ensure that movies depicted the Allies favorably and encouraged support for the war. Before each movie, theaters showed short films and documentaries that were produced and distributed by the OWI to promote patriotic activities. This message subtly infiltrated into the minds of the unsuspecting Americans of all ages and backgrounds. The seemingly innocuous message of good versus evil that spread through popular comic book characters like Superman, Batman, and Captain America, depicted the villains as Japanese, who were often portrayed with exaggerated, offensive features and characteristics. The biased depictions helped to justify the Americans’ harsh treatment of Japanese Americans.

As the media’s coverage fueled the American war effort, it had devastating impacts on Japanese Americans. The media fueled fear and paranoia by depicting the Japanese Americans as potential spies or saboteurs. However, the “vast majority [of Japanese Americans] were loyal to America” and “pathetically eager to show this loyalty” (Sundquist, 1988, p. 541). According to a 1941 intelligence report gathered by Special Representative of the State Department Curtis B. Munson, who investigated the loyalty of Japanese Americans in accordance with President Roosevelt’s order, Japanese Americans were loyal Americans. Munson’s report portrayed the stories about espionage and sabotage as often exaggerated or fabricated to justify restrictive measures against Japanese Americans. Furthermore, after the US joined the war, about 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced to relocate to internment camps, under the leadership of General John L. DeWitt. General DeWitt claimed that “A Jap’s a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not” and the Japanese Americans were subject to harsh mistreatment under his supervision (Murray, 1997, p. 320). For instance, Japanese Americans were separated from their families, had their bank accounts frozen, were forced to leave their property, and faced harsh living conditions in internment camps (Sugiman, 2007). It has been estimated that Japanese Americans lost around 400 million dollars in property when they returned from the internment camps (The National World War II Museum, 2018). Such treatment, along with the media that largely supported the internment of Japanese Americans, marginalized the Japanese Americans. Articles and editorials often framed internment in a positive light, minimizing the human cost and civil liberties violations involved. Hence, the media’s constant portrayal of the Japanese as the villain made Americans feel justified in their subhuman treatment of the Japanese, veiling the victimization that this minority group had to endure.

Towards the end of the war, the US faced an important decision as Japan refused to surrender and desired to fight until the end. As a result of the American scientists’ tireless work in the Manhattan Project, they had successfully



Figure 4: Poster from the United States Information Service (1941). Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

developed in 1945, the first atomic bomb, which they believed would end the war and achieve peace. Earlier propaganda during the war had depicted Japanese forces as brutal, influencing public perceptions and hardening attitudes towards Japan. The US government also portrayed the use of atomic bombs as a necessary and justified measure to hasten Japan's surrender and President Harry S. Truman claimed that the bomb would save half a million lives (Miles, 1985). The media largely echoed this narrative, emphasizing the devastation caused by Japanese aggression, and the need to end the war swiftly. The American public who were exposed to primarily the media were generally oblivious of the potentially harsh impacts. As a result, about 85 percent of Americans supported the bombings, despite severe warnings from numerous scientists due to the bomb's harsh radiation effects on the people and environment (Atomic Heritage Foundation, 2014). Most prominently, Leo Szilard, one of the leading scientists on the Manhattan Project, drafted a petition against the use of the bomb. In his petition, he emphasized that the "danger [was] averted" since Germany had already been defeated and that "attacks on Japan could not be justified" (Szilard, 1945, p.1). J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Los Alamos laboratory, also expressed his concern as the bomb was "lethal enough for perhaps a billion deadly doses" and would "give off lethal radioactivity" (Bernstein, 1995, p. 141). Despite these warnings, the US ultimately decided to drop an atomic bomb on the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, resulting in the death of over 150,000 Japanese citizens (Sherwin, 1995).



Figure 5: Headline from the New York Times (1945)

The deployment of the atomic bomb led to catastrophic consequences, especially given the emission of radiation by the bomb. The failure to exhaustively study the long-term effects, including cancer and several biological defects such as "anencephaly, cleft palate, polydactyly, and syndactyly," came at the expense of civilian lives (Radiation Effects Research Foundation, n.d.). Despite the countless deaths, the US Army initially undermined the Japanese claims of radiation exposure and accused their claims as propaganda to elicit sympathy. General Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project, used "government sponsored American medical teams in Japan" and claimed that "less than 8 percent of all Japanese fatalities" came from radiation (Yavenditti, 1974, p. 234). Most prominently, General Groves and the US government utilized censorship to prevent information about the consequences of the bomb and its development from spreading to the American public, manipulating the media. For instance, General Groves recruited William Laurence, a leading journalist at the New York Times, to downplay the

effects of the atomic radiation in exchange for pay. On the front page of the September 12, 1945 newspaper (Figure 5), Laurence refuted the "Japanese Propaganda" and claimed that the force of the atomic blast caused devastation, not the radiation. In this way, the media functioned, once again, to provide a biased viewpoint, favoring the government.

4. The Evolution of Media Ethics After World War II

After the role of American media during World War I and II, the press saw significant changes in the subsequent decades, including the development of more defined ethical standards. The extensive use of propaganda, sensationalism, and government collaboration during these wars led to widespread criticism, prompting calls for greater accountability and transparency in journalism, as well as the need for a more independent and ethical media.

One influential post-World War II effort to redefine media ethics stemmed from the Hutchins Commission in the 1940s. Led by Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* and *Life* Magazines, and Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, the commission called for the media to serve the public interest and provide fair reporting. The Hutchins Commission stressed the need for responsible journalism, urging the press to not just report the facts, but also avoid sensationalism and biases that could distort public perception. In their final 1947 report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, they emphasized the press' social responsibility in developing and stabilizing modern society. Due to the press' great influence, "a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's event in a context which gives them meaning" is very important for the public (Hutchins Commission, 1947, p. 102). According to this social responsibility,

the press has a moral obligation to consider the overall needs of society when making journalistic decisions in order to benefit the greatest good. Although there had been an understanding of journalism "codes of ethics" for decades, the commission's report explicitly stipulated the journalists' duty. Considered as a landmark analysis, the report marked a pivotal reassertion of modern media's role in a democratic society.

For example, during the 1950s McCarthyism, initially, many journalists disseminated Senator Joseph McCarthy's unsubstantiated and aggressive accusations against communism within the U.S. government, contributing to a climate of fear and paranoia across the nation. However, journalists like Edward Murrow began to challenge McCarthy and his lies. Murrow's 1954 "See It Now" broadcast famously critiqued McCarthy's fear-mongering and stated that "what sets me apart from Senator McCarthy is my devotion to the principles upon which this nation rests—justice, freedom and fairness," (Murrow, 1954). Murrow set a new standard for journalistic courage and ethics, emphasizing the need for fact-based, responsible reporting. His broadcast became popular across the nation. Murrow's courage spearheaded a distinct form of journalism, opening a new chapter in the media industry.

Another defining moment in the evolution of media ethics occurred during the Vietnam War, the first televised war. At the beginning of the war, the American people and the media demonstrated strong support for the war, which fought the spread of communism. However, by the late 1960s, progress stalled, and the American government had few pieces of good news to share. As a result, journalists embarked on journeys to Vietnam in order to broadcast live updates from the war for the American people, which became known as investigative journalism. Most famously, Walter Cronkite, an anchor for CBS and deemed the "most trusted man in America," traveled to Vietnam and reported with coverage from the frontlines during the Tet Offensive, a battle that the Americans won but suffered heavy damages (Rollins, 1984, p.429). After extensive investigations through visits to battle grounds and interviews with soldiers and civilians, Cronkite exposed the American government for their lies and for hiding the truth of the harsh war from the American public. On February 27th, 1968, Cronkite famously stated "to say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion," (Cronkite, 1968). These simple words sent a shock across the nation. Anti-war protests began to fuel around the nation as citizens cried for their sons to be returned home. As a result of this exposure, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated that "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America," and announced that he would not seek re-election in the following month. Cronkite's actions showed the true power of the American media as well as a shift from the teamwork between the media and government used throughout World War I and II.

Furthermore, with the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, classified government documents revealed significant discrepancies between what the U.S. government had told the public and the truth. These documents, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, revealed that the U.S. government had systematically lied about its involvement and progress in the Vietnam War to the American public. These papers were published in the New York Times as well as other newspapers, at the expense of compromising military strategies, causing major public and political uproar. Despite criticism for exposing the U.S. government, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the newspapers in *New York Times Co. v. United States*, affirming that the media had a duty to inform the public about the truth, even at the risk of undermining national security.

5. Conclusion

The American media played a powerful role throughout World War I and II. The press had the power to capture the attention of citizens across the nation and influence public opinion, but sometimes at the cost of the truth. However, post-World War II demonstrated a shift in American media ethics. The media began to place an emphasis on a code of media ethics and took pride in their responsibility to inform the citizens. Today, in this digital age, new ethical challenges have emerged, but the lessons learned from World War I and II continue to shape our modern efforts to promote responsible journalism.

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