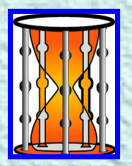
TO STIR THE POT - OR CALM THE TEMPER?

Born of Victorian tastes, two "outsiders" whose approaches to journalism still echo today

Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Pulitzer

"Each can be the conscience of the other"

By Frederic A. Moritz



TIMELINE

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The special place of The Christian Science Monitor in journalism history comes in part from its emergence in 1908 as a "reformist" influence -- at a time sensational "Yellow Journalism" seemed to dominate American newsrooms.

Even today the tension between The Monitor's approach and that of "yellow journalism" echoes in many of the fiercest debates over American journalism.

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), the "discoverer of Christian Science," founded The Monitor in 1908, in part, to combat the influence of "the yellows" and the attacks of Pulitzer newspapers upon her. At the beginning of the twentieth-century Mrs. Eddy was a highly controversial figure. She drew sometimes virulent attack from the pen of Mark Twain.

By the time Mrs. Eddy established The Monitor, the "yellow press" were well established as profit makers and crusaders for political and social causes with sensational headlines and lurid appeals to the emotions. "Yellow Journalism" is best known through the national chains of William Randolph Hearst, (1863-1951) and Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911).

The writer, a non-Christian Scientist who worked for The

Monitor from 1971 to 1984, at first accepted the established view that "Yellow Journalism" was a journalistic excess, a nationalist, sensational force which tended to drag public discussion down.

Today this writer views "Yellow Journalism" as both a problem and a solution, as in part a "progressive" foundation block for the modern human rights reporting.

Several years of research, first in the newspaper microfilms of Penn State libraries, then a visit to the Pulitzer archival collection at Columbia University, led in this unexpected direction.

At the Columbia collection there were original notes of Pulitzer newspaper front page planning meetings, as well as staffers' written explanations as to why they chose to cover certain stories, dispatch certain correspondents.

It was a familiar "story" -- looking for impact, looking to boost newspaper sales, looking to defeat the competition, looking to win fame, looking to spotlight the issues of the day.

True, "the yellows" were emotional, boastful, profit seeking, nationalistic, and sensational. Even as they covered the world, they sometimes promoted a racially tinged view of the "White Man's Burden." Still, they were often aggressive, often enterprising in their reporting. If they sought to shock, they also were a watchdog and a conscience.

"Yellow Journalism" could be a powerful reform force, spotlighting social injustice -- even while being crass, emotion mongering, and sometimes pro-war. "Yellow Journalism" is sometimes credited with helping to bring

about the Spanish-American War of 1898. "The yellows" prided themselves on their ability to sometimes outrage their readers, to influence governments of their times.

The cartoon character known as "The Yellow Kid," as developed by R. F. Outcault, symbolized competing mass circulation dailies associated with Yellow Journalism. See W. Joseph Campbell's What's Good About Yellow Journalism, as well as his introduction to Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies See Journalism and the Spanish American War

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James Creelman, a pioneer in exposing war atrocities, first in China, then in Cuba, wrote for two "yellows," first Joseph Pulitzer's New York World, then William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal. The competition between Hearst and Pulitzer helped shape both the strengths and

weaknesses of "Yellow Journalism." Wrote Creelman in his memoirs, on the period before war with Cuba:

> ***"It may be that a desire to sell their newspapers influenced some of the yellow editors, just as a desire to gain votes inspired some of the political orators. But that was not the chief motive; for if ever any agency was thrilled by the consciousness of its moral responsibility, it was yellow journalism in the never-to-be-forgotten months before the outbreak of hostilities..." (See Creelman, James, On the Great Highway, Lothrop Publishing Company, Boston, 1901, Chapter 9, p.176.)***

James Creelman: foreign correspondent

EACH CAN BE THE CONSCIENCE OF THE OTHER

The Monitor (CSM), like The New York Times (NYT),

stood for a different kind of reform, a kind of journalistic self-purification which rejected the excesses of "the yellows," with their often sensational appeal to the masses, their theatrical headlines, their emphasis on the "horrid" or kinky. The Monitor and The Times placed a major emphasis on what they did NOT cover, what they screened out. One aim was to preserve their credibility: the sense that when they reported something, it could be believed.

Both strains of journalistic expression can be found in today's American media. The creative tension between the two helps keep journalism vital. Each can be the "conscience" of the other.

From the beginning the CSM was elite, appealing to the highly educated, rather than to the urban "masses," including the literate but "uneducated" immigrants often targeted by "the yellows." The rise of cities shaped media appetites in the years following the Civil War.

Indeed the CSM has sometimes been viewed as an expression of genteel upper class Protestant reformism. Even though Eddy was sometimes ridiculed by the mainstream Protestant establishment, she was locked in conflict with Boston's Catholic establishment, and many of the readers of "Yellow Journalism" were Catholic immigrants.

The Monitor's establishment followed close on the reformism associated with (the "new" ownership of the NYT by Adolph S. Ochs, (1858-1935) publisher of The Chattanooga Times. Ochs acquired controlling ownership of The Times and installed himself as publisher in 1896. Under his leadership the NYT rejected the emotional sensationalism of "Yellow Journalism," expanded its circulation, restored its crumbling finances, and elevated

itself to an icon of respectability and credibility epitomized by the slogan:

"All the news that's fit to print."

Like the "new" New York Times, The Monitor stood for a more elevated discussion of public issues, seeking to supply context and perspective. Unlike "Yellow Journalism," it tended to screen out emotion and gripping, graphic portrayals of how "ordinary people" lived. It was sometimes seen as a paper of "the head," not "the heart." That is the Monitor slogan coined by Mary Baker Eddy:

"To injure no man, but to bless all mankind."

To Monitor admirers this emphasis on issues rather than personalties seems high minded. To critics it sometimes seems to mask a lack of journalistic risk taking which is necessary to criticize, investigate, "take on" powerful people.

One example of how an emphasis on issues rather than personalities could be powerful journalism came in The Monitor's coverage of "McCarthyism."

Richard L. Strout, a non-Christian Scientist who joined The Monitor in 1921, spotlighted abuses of Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy in a firm but non personal manner. The Monitor's approach set a high standard at a time many media were intimidated and fearful of being labeled pro-Communist.

Covering McCarthyism: How the Christian Science Monitor Handled Joseph R. McCarthy, 1950-1954 (1999) by distant relative Lawrence N. Strout, documents the

story, based in part on Richard Strout's personal papers. Selections from this book are available online.

A 1971 oral history interview with Richard L. Strout, who also wrote a column for years as "TRB" for the The New Republic magazine, is available online at the Truman Library.

OPPOSITES WITH THINGS IN COMMON

The church driven reformism of Mary Baker Eddy and the profit driven "Yellow Journalism" of Joseph Pulitzer ironically complemented each other, even though they were opposites.

Like Mary Baker eddy, "Yellow Journalism" was a product of the Victorian Age, but it sought to sell papers not by hiding shocking reality, but by prominently displaying it for entertainment value, much like the public hangings of Victorian times.

Both Eddy and Pulitzer were internationalists differently shaped by similar events. Both were "outsiders" who sought the respectability of coming "inside." Both saw journalism as a potentially uplifting force in public discourse. Each followed a different path.

Eddy, the New Englander from rural New Hampshire. founded a very American but emerging international religion with its roots in the faith healing experimenters of the 1860's. She hoped a newspaper would protect her image, and promote her controversial new religion. Her concept of uplift reflected the Victorian upper-class approach of hiding, of covering up, of keeping out of newspapers the graphic shocking things which might be

seen to be in poor taste.

Pulitzer, the Hungarian Jewish immigrant adventurer who fought in the Civil War, reflected the vast changes the post Civil War period of immigration and urbanization brought to American life. He hoped to build mass circulation by sensationally entertaining and by sometimes spotlighting the brazen abuses of criminals and public officials of the time.

The "Yellow Journalism "of Joseph Pulitzer ran exposees of Mary Baker Eddy, who later founded The Monitor in part to defend herself against Pulitzer. Ironically, the Hearst papers, in competition with Pulitzer, tended to "defend" Mary Baker Eddy.

OUTSIDERS SEARCHING FOR RESPECTABILITY

Beneath their differences, Pulitzer and Eddy shared a deep desire for respectability. Both started outside the mainstream -- and were "knocking" to get in.

Eddy was often mocked as a charlatan or eccentric, and Pulitzer, once an Hungarian immigrant youth taunted as "Joey the Jew" in the slum streets of St. Louis, was sometimes seen as a crusading, yet profit seeking outsider, a "foreign" Jewish publisher building a nationwide chain by pandering to the sometimes "foreign masses."

Ironically The Monitor in its quest for respectable acceptance often cites its Pulitzer awards, the award endowed by Pulitzer in his 1904 will and begun after his 1911 death in 1917 in his quest for respectability. This honor is dispensed at Columbia University, now a center of intellectualism for many Jewish American students and

scholars, but once a traditional bastion of respectability for America's Protestant intellectual elite.

WHEN NEWS JUDGMENTS COLLIDE

For years The Monitor has been known for it non-sensational, analytical style of writing which tends to emphasize issues over personality. The Monitor in its earlier days won strong notice for international coverage at a time when American media often seemed "isolationist."

It developed a thoughtful, analytical tone in part because of its rejection of emotionalism, in part because the religion became international, and in part because much of its audience was far from the Boston home office. Unlike other city dailies, The Monitor could not rely upon newsboys and newsstands to circulate the morning newspaper after one late night or rolling late deadlines allowing for full coverage of the day's events. Late morning and early afternoon deadlines were necessary to print and distribute the paper early enough to get it aboard trains and ships for distant readers around the country and overseas.

Editors asked reporters to write "standup" copy which might seem insightful even though written "early" and read several days later. The Monitor quickly rejected the classic "inverted pyramid" wire service style of "what, when, how" for thematic leads followed by analytic coverage emphasizing "how, why and what next."

The Monitor's copy often took on slower, more "essay" like qualities which sometimes characterized newspaper journalism before the speed of the telegraph allowed correspondents to file immediate news in the concise and timely "inverted pyramid" style. Copy filed by fast

telegraph helped "the yellows" compete for sensational and immediate overseas news -- much as satellites and cell phones help today's cable networks "jump on" overseas wars and human rights abuses.

Ironically other American newspapers have sometimes "followed" in The Monitor's footsteps by relying more heavily on analysis and trends reporting. This is partly because newspapers can no longer match the speed and immediacy of radio, television, and the internet.

Monitor news judgment tends to be the reverse of traditional American journalism, which stresses conflict, personalities, danger, doom, and "hype." The CSM tends to turn news judgment on its head by downplaying emotion, conflict, personalities, to project a more hopeful optimistic, academic, perhaps sheltered view of the world. The Monitor tends to see the world as "half full," rather than "half empty."

In a sense The Monitor foreshadowed some of today's TV journalism which leaves behind the traditional news approach of concentrating on what happened and focuses instead on "talking heads" speculating on "what next?" One difference is that the TV approach seeks out dire predictions to sketch the "apocalyptic," while The Monitor's "what next" emphasis is usually, but not always, far more soothing.

Mary Baker Eddy's CSM continues to view the world from a lofty "place on the hill." It leaves "populist" muckraking to others.

A calm temper and moderation were its messages to Joseph Pulitzer's New York World. Those are its continuing messages to the world.

WHEN SCANDAL CAN BE NO "COMMON DENOMINATOR"

From the beginning The Monitor experienced the tensions inherent in targeting both a local Boston area audience and an international readership spread around the nation and the world.

It is the ability to bridge gaps between vastly different audiences which helps a media become truly "mass."

Like many of today's news media, The Monitor faced the challenge of finding a "common denominator" which could transcend different tastes and interests of vastly different audiences. Unlike other mass media, it could not turn to sensational celebrities, scandals, graphic entertainment, or crime coverage to bridge this gap and build mass circulation.

From the beginning The Monitor aimed its copy at both Christian Scientists and non-Christian Scientists. That mission presented a tricky balancing act.

The dual goal was: first to inform and guide Christian Scientists while protecting them from the negative excesses of secular media; and second to elevate the respectability of Christian Science by increasing circulation and building credibility in the non-Christian Science world.

The Christian Scientist audience was often educated, reasonably affluent with home oriented middle brow tastes. By contrast non-Christian Scientist readers were often extremely highly educated, intellectuals, academics and government officials drawn to The Monitor by its specialized overseas coverage. The religious composition of The Monitor's audience has varied over time, sometimes

almost as even as fifty-fifty.

Monitor editors often faced the dilemma that if they steered toward the interests of Christian Scientist readers, they might alienate and lose non-Christian Scientists readers. Yet if they reached out to increase circulation among non-Christian Scientists, they might alienate the Church or readers of the Christian Science faith.

It is this inherent structural dilemma which has helped prevent The Monitor from going "mass." With a modest circulation often hovering around the 100,000 and varying over time, it survived because of the support of Christian Scientists and the subsidy of the Church.

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The Monitor is and has always been a Church newspaper, with a secular orientation. It is thus not credible or complete or unbiased in its coverage of issues reflecting Church views or interests.

It retains strong credibility on many other things, partly because its news judgment tends to be cautious and balanced -- and partly because of the traditional and well established high professionalism of its full time staff and the many talented special correspondents or "stringers" who contribute to it from overseas.

Its legacy of calming the tempers survives.

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