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Press/Journalism (USA)

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In the United States, the press played a key role in shaping public opinion toward the First World War as it shifted from mediator to belligerent. Despite the existence of voices expressing reservations stemming from diverse political philosophies, and informed by ongoing debates about class, immigration and gender, newspapers adopted a largely consistent line that stressed the economic opportunities offered by the war. From April 1917 this coalesced – with coordinated support from official government propagandists – into an approach to “American” patriotism that was for the most part intolerant of dissent, with far-reaching consequences for the post-war culture and war journalism in the 20th century.

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Introduction

While the outbreak of the First World War in Europe took many in the [United States](#) by surprise, immediate reaction to the conflict was not horror. The population was accustomed to violence as an extension of national policy. In the intervening years between the American Civil War and the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, the United States sent troops to fight Native Americans in the West,

the Spanish in the Pacific and Caribbean, and to the Philippines and Mexico.

As newspapers and periodicals proliferated across the country in line with the establishment of civil infrastructure, readers were also able to consume wars abroad. The mix of constituencies served by national, regional and local [newspapers](#), as well as the specialist periodicals and pamphlets reaching newly arrived immigrants, ensured that wherever in the world military violence ensued, coverage would attract readers for personal, political and entertainment interests. Newspaper provided the news – often in syndication – but with clear editorial slants. Not everyone saw these developments as wholly positive. In 1914 Progressives placed a great deal of faith in the virtue of informed readers; in 1922 in his influential *Public Opinion*, [Walter Lippmann \(1889-1974\)](#) argued against the distortion of facts and the tendency for sentimentalism to outweigh rational thought and action in times of international crisis. He saw the press as a vital deterrent to the sensationalist and partisan tendencies promoted by mass culture. Whatever trepidations about future national policy, jingoism and the humanitarian costs of the war existed in the United States, it captured readers' attentions. In 1914 the largest crowds marking the outbreak of war convened on 4 and 5 August 1914 not in London, Paris or Berlin, but in New York City.^[1]

The Press and US War Culture

Historians have explained the conflict as a phased war, or a war of two halves divided – roughly – between mobilisation (1914 to 1916) and a more [total war](#) mentality (1916 to 1918). In the initial period, war culture in the United States hinged on the diplomatic ideal of the nation as the self-appointed mediator between the belligerent Great Powers, a position that President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) and much of [government](#), industry and the polity preferred to direct military intervention. Yet a mediatory position did not translate into strict [neutrality](#). Cultural affinities and – at least as important – economic speculation and investment tipped the scales in favour of the Triple Entente: throughout the war, the private sector bet heavily on the eventual defeat of the Central Powers.

Press coverage of the war reflected the country's regional, ethnic and racial diversity. The urban daily newspapers – focusing in particular, but not exclusively on the European fronts as the conflict's primary theatres – from 1914 reflected a general preference for the nation's eventual allies. Updates were provided by American reporters in [France](#) who often had greater access to the front than their European counterparts, who were forced to operate under their home nations' army's control. The vast number of articles printed in the United States detailing the behaviour of the German army in [Belgium](#) and Northern France reinforced popular notions about Prussian militarism. General fears of German hegemonic control of the Eurasian continent, shared by Anglo-American politicians as well as their constituents, seemed even more justified in light of the reported Belgian [atrocities](#). Coverage of diplomatic scandals like the much-discussed "[Zimmermann Telegram](#)" episode of February 1917 were mixed depending on the given newspaper's editorial position on the interventionist debate.^[2] Coordination with [British propaganda](#) efforts helped to elevate certain stories out of the fray – for example, the execution of [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#) and the [sinking of the Lusitania](#) – with [Charles](#)

[Masterman's \(1873-1927\)](#) Wellington House proving particularly apt at providing information and stories for journalists in the United States eager for copy. In May 1915 the *New York Times* published a two-page spread under the headline, "Prominent Americans Who Lost Their Lives on the *S. S. Lusitania*", including photographs of the dead;^[3] other papers across the nation followed suit.

Attacks on non-combatants and commerce, and [Germany's](#) eventual confirmation on 1 February 1917 of [unrestricted submarine warfare](#) as its official policy, allowed many journalists and cultural commentators to unleash their full moral judgement on the Central Powers. This contributed to a shift in public opinion, resolved but never fully united behind the United States declaration of war. As the country moved from mediation to mobilisation in support of what Wilson – ever-conscious of specific language, and wary of triggering a backlash against possible entanglements abroad – carefully and consistently termed its "associates" (as opposed to "allies")^[4], sacrifice and overt patriotism emerged as the preferred register for press coverage of the war.

Cultural and public opinion had been softened by years of positive and largely voyeuristic coverage that included personalised accounts of Americans abroad who witnessed or participated in the fighting.^[5] The war had, to date, been consumed and debated at a relatively safe distance from the fighting, but this did not resolve the practical issues of direct military engagement; neither the army nor the navy were strategically, logistically or materially prepared for the task they now faced.^[6] Journalists, focusing on stoking patriotic sentiment now that the nation was actually at war, deflected attention away from the challenges inherent in the United States' newly belligerent position, and the risk that British and French armies might not be able to hold the line on the [Western Front](#) as they awaited the promised infusion of troops.

Censorship and Journalism during the War

Lippman's ideal of the press in war was for responsible journalists to temper and rationalise public emotion in light of complex international relationships and realities, not to amplify sectionalist or reactionary opinions.^[7] His view was directly at odds with [George Creel's \(1876-1953\)](#) view of the role of mass media. Creel, an investigative journalist appointed by Wilson in April 1917 to head up the United States Committee on Public Information (CPI), considered it his duty to convince the public that "intervention in the European war was not at variance with America's tradition but was an affirmation of it."^[8] He characterised his role as a "plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising."^[9] Creel drew on his experience of aligning messages across a variety of formats increasingly deployed by the modern American media: the CPI placed advertisements in magazines and newspapers, distributed pamphlets, sponsored roadside billboards and electric signs, encouraged filmmakers to produce patriotic [films](#), and worked closely with journalists to supply their own and Allied [propaganda](#).^[10]

Positive viewpoints of the war – as a political and trade advantage to the nation, alongside the large

Wilsonian humanitarian purpose – were reinforced through coordinated formats and design in the daily newspapers: in editorials, usually appearing on the front page, which served to contextualise the news and visual content of the newspaper that followed. The quick conversion to a uniform position emerged in part as a result of journalists' natural affinities for the Entente cause, in part in response to what readers seemed to want, and finally resulted from journalists and cultural commentators – now heavily reliant on daily news releases and government-generated information – echoing one another as general support for, and fascination with the war deepened.

Censorship of the visual artefacts of war alongside sensitive print information and dissent did occur. However, Creel noted that he was able to pass a fair amount of material on to journalists serving a voracious public, skirting attempts by the army and navy to “sit in arbitrary judgement” over what eventually appeared in print because Wilson intervened on his behalf whenever these more conservative and traditional institutions attempted to assert too much control over the transmission of information.^[11] In practice this gave Creel, CPI and the press even more material to play with in an increasingly partisan and patriotic environment that – to some extent anticipating, but explicitly after the declaration of war – discouraged public dissent. The Espionage Act of June 1917, followed by the Sedition Act of May 1918 further discouraged private and public statements against the war.

The most effective censorship was self-censorship, or coherence around a particular point of view. In 1914 big-city newspapers across the country quickly coalesced around the viewpoint that, even if the war represented a terrible human tragedy, it also presented a great economic opportunity. In the words of the *Chicago Tribune*, “War May Bring Big Boom to US: Exporters, Shippers, Farmers and Clothes Makers Face Windfall,”^[12] as well as to assert a dominant position in South American markets as European competitors ceded ground. A survey of twenty four papers sampled from across the United States in August 1914 found that sixteen – including the *New York American*, the most widely-read paper in the country with a circulation of 739, 844 in 1914,^[13] as well as the *New York Tribune*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Herald*, the *Philadelphia Record*, the *Philadelphia Evening News*, the *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, the *St Louis Republic*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* – all focused on the war's unique commercial opportunities. Four publications saw “some possibilities” but also urged some restraint, and four – the *New York Times*, the *Boston Post*, the *New Orleans Times Picayune* and the *Washington Star* – presented the war as a “real tragedy” on either moral or economic grounds.^[14] Even these four soon changed their tone, maintaining a more positive viewpoint throughout the war, and becoming concertedly and vociferously patriotic from 1917. Whether they achieved a full swing in public opinion remains debatable: for instance, in the south, while many middle and upper class and urban whites responded to the military call, the rural poor – black and white – remained ambivalent.^[15]

Some sense of the nature of the fighting, and the scale of the tragedy did reach readers in the United States. Individual articles detailed the war's disastrous effects on individuals. For example the *New York Times* published a piece entitled “West Orange Volunteer Hurt,”, discussing the psychological

damage wrought by the experience of combat on one local volunteer,^[16] along with a later article – “War’s Amazing Effect on Nerves of Soldiers” – hinting at the psychological and public health legacy of the conflict.^[17]

More concerted, political efforts also attempted to galvanise class and gender-based dissent in civil society and in the press. Organisations like the Women’s Peace Party Cohort, and later the People’s Council of America for Democracy and Terms of Peace (which became the People’s Council of America) – the only anti-war organisation created after the United States entered the war in 1917 – running out of New York attempted to bridge suffragette and socialist causes to advance the cause of pacifism. Yet, despite links in ideology, groups like the pro-war American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, which received funding from the CPI, carried out a nasty campaign against the Council. This included publicity in local and national newspapers, threatening members, causing disturbances at meetings, and ultimately convincing governors of Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin to withdraw offers to host the Council autumn 1917 assembly.^[18] The *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times* covered the eventual meeting that took place in Chicago at the beginning of September, mocking the women involved with their “squeaky” voices and “Feminine indignation” that was “fanned into a fury.”^[19] With such press and labour forces aligned against them, the Council’s attempts to reach a wider audience were predictably limited.

Overall there is very little evidence of a widespread antimilitarist perspective with its requisite champions in the United States press during the war.^[20] Progressive publicists, who might have been expected to temper anti-German sentiment, from the outbreak of the war publicly leaned toward the Entente cause, expressing a preference that “does not seem to have been strictly ideological, but rather to have been based upon emotional and cultural attachments.”^[21] Despite recognition of its parliamentary achievements – identified by one writing in the *New Republic* in October 1915 as “a country where labor won comfort and security, where privileges and obligations were held in true correlation”^[22] – the perceived excesses of Germany’s ruling military class allowed progressives to join the patriotic chorus without compromising their ideological positions.^[23] The small number who adopted a critical line found limited support. The writer [Randolph Bourne \(1886-1918\)](#), a former student of the influential philosopher and reformer [John Dewey \(1859-1952\)](#), fell out with his former teacher over United States entry into the war. Dewey subsequently had Bourne ousted from the board of *The Dial*, along with the *Atlantic Monthly* one of the few remaining journals willing to publish Bourne’s critical articles (Bourne later died of influenza).^[24]

Ethnic and Regional Influences and Divisions

Once war was declared, everyone was expected to work for victory, whatever their age, race, sex or ethnic backgrounds. Regional reporting worked to reinforce national stories and policies. Local newspapers covered the activities of local elites as they worked on draft boards, attempting to provide sufficient manpower for what was initially a comparatively small standing army. Positive

stories about soldiers recruited from all sections of the melting-pot were published, even as others worried about whether or not the new immigrants would make good soldiers. In the end, immigrants from forty-six countries would join to make up 18 percent of the army, which served as a strong “Americanizing force” for the soldiers and their families.^[25] Not all soldiers received equal attention: the heroics and sacrifices of African American soldiers, segregated and largely confined to non-combat, support roles – excepting units like the black troops who saw action during the autumn of 1918 – were covered in African American newspapers,^[26] but were largely underreported in the mainstream press, reflecting the deep racism of Wilson’s administration and the broader nation.

Articles in national and local newspapers urged women and children to support men in uniform as well as impoverished Allied counterparts with headlines appealing to regional and national audiences alike: “Children Line Up to Defeat the Huns” in the *Los Angeles Times*^[27] and “Women to the Farmer’s Rescue: The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Must Be the Hand to Feed the World” in *Leslie’s Weekly Illustrated Newspaper*.^[28] Underneath the surface, however, readers negotiated many different pathways to patriotism and service based on their particular backgrounds. Journalists to some extent recognised this: for example, in the South, newspapers initially called to attention concerns about cotton exports, no doubt remembering the not yet distant experience of the American Civil War, where cotton stores sat rotting on steaming wharves, providing a block to British attempts to mediate in the conflict.^[29] East Coast newspapers emphasised the naval war, and in particular attacks on the merchant fleets. Midwestern journalists printed stories about opportunities to sell grain abroad.

Appealing to civilians, “Land Army” campaigns highlighted local efforts. In addition to praising the initiatives of children the *Los Angeles Times* drew attention to its particular successes with the “Garden Movement” and “Garden Army,” with the CPI’s Division of Pictorial Publicity working with the United States Food Administration to provide posters urging food conservation. These posters were printed in a variety of different languages in an attempt to appeal to new immigrants, provided they were the “right” sort: they were printed in Yiddish to serve Jewish immigrants of German descent, but not in German to serve German and Austro-Hungarian communities, who were often vilified in the popular press.^[30] For many Jewish Americans, the Bolshevik revolution helped to allay concerns about supporting autocratic Russia. Publications printed in Yiddish, German and English that had published material provided by the German Foreign Office critical of the Entente, shifted to reflect a more overtly positive line, mirroring the broader United States press from 1917.^[31]

Some ethnic groups and newly arrived immigrants found not only their community publications, but their persons under attack, particularly in 1917 and 1918. When Japan joined the war, Japanese-Americans faced a sustained campaign in the *Los Angeles Times* warning against Pacific infringement, playing to long-standing racial prejudices.^[32] German-Americans found themselves in a particularly difficult position,^[33] with the national press encouraging patriotic citizens to keep a close eye trained on potentially subversive neighbours. Some worked actively to counter what they

felt was an unfair attack on their former homeland. In 1914 [George Sylvester Viereck \(1884-1962\)](#), who had been born in Munich, founded the English-language newspaper *The Fatherland*, adding to the list of targeted publications published during the war. Working to counter the “amazing volume of anti-Teutonic prejudice,” on the one hand he adopted a more appealing line of arguing for recognition of the German people’s “struggle for existence against Cossack aggression.” He also dismissed “[atrocities](#)” like the burning of Louvain by arguing that it was necessary to instruct other would-be non-combatants to stay out of the fight.^[34] Needless to say, the latter garnered limited support.

Such publications became not only unpopular but increasingly dangerous to publish following adoption of the Espionage and Sedition Acts in 1917 and 1918, respectively. Irish-Americans, despite their swelled numbers and, they felt, justified grievances in light of British repressions back home and their long-standing fight for self-determination, came under fire. The United States Post Office banned five Irish-American newspapers during the war. At the same time, the mainstream press reprinted unsubstantiated rumours about Irish/German plots and encouraged vigilante violence.^[35]

Conclusion

Throughout the war, the United State press presented a tacitly positive view of the war, and the potential benefits it offered to the nation. Once the United States formally entered the war, the press continued to assure readers that direct military intervention would, undoubtedly, lead to an Entente victory, and more importantly, would provide an opportunity for the United States to set the terms for the peace. These practices – amplified to appeal to different audiences – continued throughout the war, helping to ensure a relatively unified public opinion as well as a narrow interpretation of “American” patriotism. The press in the United States did not operate in isolation: theirs was an aligned effort in which they mirrored, echoed and amplified the opinions and prejudices of powerful local, regional and national constituencies – not least the United States government.

Only upon reflection, in the late 1920s and 1930s, did popular accounts and opinions about the war start to turn. Eventually, many journalists who had published articles supporting the war and the nation’s entry into it – along with their readers – came to believe that they had not been presented with a full picture of the war’s complex causes and potentially troubling legacies, and of what was required of the nation in the medium and longer term to ensure a just and lasting peace. Despite the great export that was Wilsonian democracy,^[36] expectations that had been inflated by the press and mass media during the war were not fulfilled. This would have direct consequences for the international order in the interwar years, and would heavily influence the approach of United States press to reporting, censorship, self-censorship and propaganda in the Second World War.

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Notes

1. ↑ [New York Times](#), 5 and 6 August, 1914.
2. ↑ See Boghardt, Thomas: *The Zimmermann Telegram. Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War*, Annapolis 2012.
3. ↑ [New York Times](#), 16 May 1915.
4. ↑ See Cooper, Jr., John Milton: *Woodrow Wilson. A Biography*, New York 2009 and Hutchinson, Hazel: *The War the Used Up Words. American Writers and the First World War*, New Haven 2015 for discussions of Wilson's deployment of language and literature.
5. ↑ See Rose, Kenneth D.: *The Great War and Americans in Europe, 1914-1917*, Abingdon 2017.
6. ↑ Trask, David: *The Entry of the USA into the War and its Effects*, in: Strachan, Hew: *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*. Oxford 1998, pp. 239-252, pp. 243-245.
7. ↑ See Lippmann, Walter: *Public Opinion*, New York 1922.
8. ↑ Vaughn, Stephen: *Holding Fast the Inner Lines. Democracy, Nationalism and the Committee for Public Information*, Chapel Hill 1980, pp. 83-4.
9. ↑ George Creel, quoted in Coben, Stanley: *Reform, War and Reaction. 1912-1932*, Columbia 1972, p. 92.
10. ↑ See Creel, George: *How We Advertised America*, New York 1920; Mock, James R. and Larson, Cedric: *Words That Won the War. The Story of the Committee on Public Information*. Princeton 1939. For specific information on the coordinated film campaign, see DeBauche Midkiff, Leslie: *Reel Patriotism. The Movies and World War I*. Madison 1997.
11. ↑ Roeder, Jr., George H.: *The Censored War. American Visual Experience During World War II*, New Haven 1993, p. 10.
12. ↑ [Chicago Tribune](#), 10 August 1914.
13. ↑ See N.W. Ayer and Sons, *American Newspaper Annual and Directory*.
14. ↑ O'Brien, Phillips Payson: *The American Press, Public, and the Reaction to the Outbreak of the First World War*, in: *Diplomatic History* 37/3 (2013), pp. 446-475, pp. 456-57.
15. ↑ See Keith, Jeannette: *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*, Chapel Hill 2004.
16. ↑ [New York Times](#), 31 January 1916.
17. ↑ [New York Times](#), 25 March 1917.
18. ↑ Hyman Alonso, Harriet: *Gender and Peace Politics in the First World War United States. The People's Council of America*. In: *The International History Review* 19/1 (1997), pp. 83-102, p. 93.
19. ↑ [New York Tribune](#), 1 and 2 September 1917.
20. ↑ O'Brien, p. 446.
21. ↑ Thompson, J.A.: *American Progressive Publicists and the First World War. 1914-1917*. In: *The Journal of American History*, 58/2 (1971), pp. 364-383, p. 367.
22. ↑ [New Republic](#), IV (30 October, 1915), p. 343.

23. † Thompson, pp. 367-8. See also Wynn, Neil A.: *From Progressivism to Prosperity. World War One and American Society*, New York 1986.
24. † Menand, Louise: *The Metaphysical Club*, New York 2001, p. 405-406.
25. † Laskin, David: *Ethnic Minorities at War (USA)*, pp. 5-6, in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10081, online: http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/ethnic_minorities_at_war_usa (retrieved 1 March 2017).
26. † See Jordan, William G.: *Black Newspapers and American's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, Chapel Hill 2003.
27. † *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May, 1918.
28. † *Leslie's Weekly Illustrated Newspaper* 3264 (1918).
29. † See Foreman, Amanda: *A World on Fire. An Epic History of Two Nations Divided*, New York 2010.
30. † Tunc, Tanfer Emin: *Less Sugar, More Warships. Food as American Propaganda in the First World War*, in: *War in History* 19/2 (2012), pp. 193-216, pp. 204-206.
31. † Jones, Maldwyn A.: *The Limits of Liberty. American History, 1607-1992*, Oxford 1996, pp. 422-3.
32. † O'Brien, p. 469.
33. † See Keller, Phyllis: *States of Belonging. German-American Intellectuals and the First World War*, Cambridge, MA 1979.
34. † George Sylvester Viereck, quoted in Horne, John / Kramer, Alan: *German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial*, New Haven 2001, p. 253.
35. † See Mulcrone, Michael Patrick: *The World War I Censorship of the Irish-American Press*. Ph.D Thesis, University of Washington, 1993. See also Walsh, Maurice: *The News from Ireland. Foreign Correspondents and the Irish Revolution*, New York 2008, and in particular Chapter VI: *An Old World Fight. American Journalists in Ireland*.
36. † See in particular Manela, Erez: *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*. Oxford 2007, for the fullest account of the take-up of Wilson's democratic rhetoric and philosophy.

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