



Political Rivalry and the Press

In the early years of this nation, there were political and social rivalries that shaped the nature of the community and government. One of these rivalries was between Benjamin Franklin, the owner of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, and Andrew Bradford, the owner of *The American Weekly Mercury* newspaper. When Franklin formed the Union Fire Company in 1736 to protect the belongings of homes on fire, Bradford formed the Fellowship Company in 1738 to compete with Franklin. Their rivalry continued and helped develop and shape our urban life. These volunteer fire companies organized into a political force.

Early leaders had their own newspapers to push their agendas when they wrote about scandals and false stories. The early press was ruthless to their adversaries. Benjamin Franklin described the Germans as gorillas and had funny pictures in his newspaper. Later, President Abraham Lincoln would be described in newspapers with that same image. The press was very partisan in its reporting.

Later during the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction, Southern society was trying to deal with the new political, social and economic changes. Reformers in the West and South reacted to the falling farm prices and began to organize. One of the organizers in the South was a publisher named Thomas Edward Watson of Georgia. He advocated the enfranchisement of the Freeman. This agrarian reform movement morphed into the Populist Party.

The problem was that Northern farmers, Western farmers and Southern farmers all had a common cause but different conditions. Thomas E. Watson gained popularity and was elected to local office and later ran as the vice-presidential candidate on the Populist ticket in 1896 and president in 1904 and 1906. The Democratic party controlled the vote in the Southern states. Watson was a lawyer, an author and a publisher who had competition in the news media. As his popularity declined, his views shifted to the disenfranchisement of the Freedmen and anti-Semitism. His paper came out against Leo Frank, a Jew accused of murder, only after Watson's rival printed a story to whip up the public mood. The movement of Thomas to bigotry included an attack on Catholics to fall in line with the major political party in the South. The rivalry in newspapers helped drive opinions for or against an issue.

This issue of newspapers and the public opinion can be seen in the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. It addresses the issue of influence and corruption in politics. The story is about political corruption, yet it is the press that allows the corruption to exist. Investigative reporting did not stop the weight of the press from coming down on the hero who stood alone defending the people. He is only saved by the guilt felt by his fellow senator who finally confesses to his part in the corruption.

Investigative reporting was given a shot in the arm with the muckrakers of the Progressive period. Later, when films and radio expanded the image of the reporters digging into the problems hidden within cities and businesses, reporters were the last defense to the First Amendment. Journalism was portrayed as more than reporting and writing about things. Reporters were crusaders against corruption. John Peter Zinger became a hero of the press along with others that took on the powerful and won.

Personal views and beliefs still influence the reporting. So, even if things change, they do stay the same.

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