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Running head: SENSATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE

The Mainstream Press: Then and Now

Has the Prominence of Sensational News Changed in 100 Years?

A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the Department of Communication

Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree in

Communication & Media Technologies

Kathleen Marchaesi

December 18, 2006

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Name of author: Kathleen Marchaesi

Degree: M. S. Communication & Media Technologies

Program: GPTM

College: Liberal Arts

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Abstract

The present research explores the levels of sensational news reporting in three distinct periods of journalism history by examining the largest mainstream newspaper in America, *The New York Times*, during the yellow journalism, jazz journalism and modern eras. The front pages of a representative sample of the newspaper were analyzed to determine the extent to which prominence of sensational news topics in the modern press differs from that of the yellow and jazz eras. The style of sensational reporting was examined to determine if the treatment of news has changed. The results of a content analysis indicate that readers are exposed to less sensational news today in the *Times* than in the same newspaper of the yellow and jazz eras.

The origin of what is known today in America as a modern newspaper reaches back to the print revolution of the early 1600s. The first American newspaper, *Publick Occurrences both Foreign and Domestick*, was published in 1690 by Boston printer Benjamin Harris. Newspaper publishing grew during the Revolutionary War and by 1800 most large cities had at least one daily paper (Dominick, 2005). Beginning in the 1830s with the birth of the mass newspaper, the daily became the main source of information for Americans.

As might be expected, the topics covered in the newspapers changed over the years, as did the style in which they were reported. The news of the 17th century provided a basic review of foreign and local events (Crowley and Heyer, 2003). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the stories reported in the newspapers reflected the significant cultural changes occurring nationwide. What was reported in the newspapers and the style in which it was written shifted around the turn of the 20th century from strictly factual or "hard news" to a combination of factual news and highly sensationalized accounts of events of the day. Several newspapers emerged as the 19th century closed and the new century began that paid little or no attention to factual news and focused their attention on "soft" news alone.

"Yellow journalism" and "jazz journalism" are linked in history to the wild nature of the press and its penchant to focus on crime, violence and sex. According to Campbell (2001) the etymology of the term "yellow journalism" is thought to characterize the rivalry between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Both men are notorious for their respective newspapers that reported outlandish and uncorroborated news stories in the late 1800s. Kanfer (1995) argues that an unabashed pursuit of economic gain led to the editor of the *New York Press* publicly dubbing their style "yellow journalism".

Conservatives expressed intolerance for Hearst's *New York Journal* and Pulitzer's *New York World* while the growing circulation of these papers was construed as evidence of the general public's desire to read sensational news.

Jazz journalism emerged shortly after the Hearst and Pulitzer era and, although given a different name, it is similar stylistically to yellow journalism. The newspapers of the roaring twenties, a decade referred to as the jazz Age, focused on shocking accounts of murder, sex and scandal. Although it had nothing to do with the genre of music, the style of reporting began to be commonly referred to as "jazz journalism". Other labels, including "gutter journalism" and "ballyhoo journalism" had been used to describe the reporting style of the 1920s. It wasn't until the late thirties that the new journalism found

an enduring epithet. Simon Bessie published a book in 1938, *jazz Journalism*, praising tabloids of the 1920s for accurately reflecting the spirit of the times. Media historians have since referred to journalism of the twenties by the title of Simon's work (Koski, 1993).

The history of the press indicates that following the onset of the Depression in 1929 the style of journalism evolved from the freewheeling tabloid style to a more serious "investigative style". The journalists of the yellow and jazz years are looked upon with disdain by media historians and contemporary critics and often criticized for their lapse of ethics (Emery, 1972).

Today the contemporary press is considered somewhat higher minded and more sophisticated than in the years of the yellow and jazz presses. The content of any newspaper of the late 20th century makes it immediately apparent, however, that there continues to be a fair amount of sensational news. A recent example was the coverage of Bill Clinton's White House indiscretions of 1997 leading to his impeachment. Many mainstream newspapers reported repeatedly on this topic in excruciating detail. Stein's study of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal revealed that even "mainstream, objective reporting reflected sensationalism, the use of piquant and highly clichéd language, and a lust for scandal..." (Pradines-Stein, 2005, abstract).

The term sensationalism has a broad range of definitions in the literature. According to Koski (1993) reports about crime and scandal, sexual details, excessive attention to human-interest stories, and exaggeration of sports events are considered sensational in the histories of early 1900s journalism. Stevens (1991) maintains that much of what is labeled sensational is news of crime. He contends that "newspaper accounts emphasizing thrills, horrors, shocks and alarms do not so much inform readers as allow them to share in the feeling of the actors in the real-life Grand Guignol" (p.5).

Using these definitions of sensationalism as a guide, the present research investigates the frequency and treatment of sensational news stories in three journalistic eras in one prominent newspaper. Specifically, does this mainstream newspaper of the modern era report more or fewer sensational stories than did the same newspaper, *The New York Times*, during the yellow and jazz journalism eras? In addition, the treatment of the sensational news stories was examined to determine if a difference exists between the modern era and the yellow and jazz journalism eras.

RQ1: To what extent are sensational news stories in the modern mainstream press (1995-2004) more or less prominent than during the

yellow journalism years (1895-1904) and the jazz journalism years (1920-1929)?

RQ2: To what extent is the proportion of sensational stories versus total news coverage different among the three periods?

RQ3: To what extent is the style of reporting sensational stories different in the modern mainstream press (1995-2004) than during the yellow journalism years (1895-1904) and the jazz journalism years (1920-1929)?

Rationale

The history of communication provides important information regarding its technological, cultural and social impact on people. This researcher is particularly interested in newspaper reporting in the late 1800s and first few decades of the 20th century as these were colorful times in American journalism history. Major changes in mass culture were occurring at the turn of the century and the stories of forbidden speakeasies, hard-boiled gangsters and America's move to become a world power are fascinating to me. The images of the very public battle between mainstream and sensational papers are humorous and cleverly created. The antics of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer are

intriguing as they began a "new journalism" that remains with us to some extent today. This interest in Hearst and Pulitzer led this researcher to question whether today's journalistic style is much different relative to the notion of peddling sensational news for profit.

From a scholarly perspective, a content analysis of sensational news coverage in three distinct time periods in American journalism provides information about whether the years of yellow and jazz journalism, as presented in the history books, were truly unique. Many media historians "dismiss the jazz age papers as an anomaly, an embarrassing blip" in journalism (Bickett & Packer, 2004, p.363). It is unknown whether the press of the yellow and jazz years was, in fact, more prone to report sensational stories than is the press of the 21st century. Quantitative studies comparing the sensational reporting of the yellow, jazz and contemporary periods are limited (Campbell, email correspondence, December 2005) and additional research will add to the body of knowledge. Specifically, the research will either support or contradict the historical record that the period between 1890 and 1930 was unique in its over reporting of sensational news by comparing the topics and treatment of news in the same newspaper between 1995 and 2004.

The notion of news and its proper reporting has been an issue hotly debated throughout history. What the press reports is important to societal development as people learn about their neighbors, towns, country and the world via the news. Dorman (2004) believes that the media shape American values. A comparative analysis of sensational journalism in the contemporary press versus the yellow and jazz years will give us an era specific perspective on people's exposure to sensational news. The present research assesses whether sensational news reporting in America is very different today than it was 100 years ago.

Literature Review

The concept of sensational journalism has been well studied by scholars. Many opinions exist on what constitutes sensationalism in the news and why it continues to be a popular topic of journalists. The supporting literature chosen for this study includes a range of quantitative and qualitative empirical data studying journalism over a 300-year period. The literature is presented in three categories. The first section is an analysis of defining characteristics of sensational journalism. Campbell (2001) provides an in depth understanding of the enduring nature of sensational news and its key elements. The second section encompasses a

broad look at why people read sensational news (Stevenson, 1964) clearly distinguishing between “conservative” and “sensational” newspapers.

Davis and McLeod (2003) focus on why people value sensational news as well provide evidence that news topics have essentially remained the same over the last 300 years. The last section is a detailed example of 20th century sensational journalism. Kalb (1998) provides solid evidence that sensational journalism does exist in the 20th century mainstream press in a review of the extensive press coverage of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal.

The notion of longstanding sensational news is confirmed in Campbell’s (2001) in depth study of yellow journalism. He conducted a research study on newspapers covering a 100-year period as existing literature could not be found attempting to systematically determine to what extent “the salient features of yellow journalism have been incorporated into the content and appearance of American newspapers” (p. 152).

Seven leading U.S. newspapers were analyzed throughout the 20th century. A content analysis of the front page of each newspaper for a period of two weeks at 10-year intervals was conducted. The newspapers in the study included four “conservative titles”, two that were considered

more “sensational” and one classified as a “mix”. The study is based on what were the key features of yellow journalism including aspects of typography, graphic illustrations, and content (Campbell, 2001).

Results of Campbell’s (2001) study revealed that elements of yellow journalism continue in mainstream contemporary American newspapers. Most notably, typographic characteristics were adopted from the yellow press and remain widely used today. The content of the yellow press, such as self-promotion and prominence of reports of “trivial news”, were not carried over to modern times in the newspapers examined in this study. As one might expect, the more conservative papers, such as *The New York Times*, were the least likely to adopt the more sensational content of the yellow press.

Campbell (2001) asserts that “the most reprehensible elements and excesses of yellow journalism have been cast aside and some of its more imaginative contributions live on...” (p. x). While the study is extremely well organized, thorough and well presented, it considered only front pages of newspapers and analyzed content only at 10-year intervals. The interval limitation may have skewed the results since events considered

monumental, such as the crash of the stock market in 1929, occurred during a year studied.

Stevenson (1964) conducted a study on what he calls "readability" of newspapers. For purposes of the study, readability was considered one characteristic of sensationalism. Stevenson makes a clear distinction between sensational papers and conservative newspapers. During the late 19th Century, Hearst's *New York Journal* was notorious for reporting sensational content while *The New York Times* was considered the more staid, conservative paper. The objective of Stevenson's research was to test the historical interpretation of the performance of newspapers in terms of one attribute – sensationalism.

Six newspapers were studied by Stevenson (1964) – three sensational and three conservative. Newspapers in the conservative group were those that stressed responsibility of the press and the development of mature journalism and truth. Sensational papers were those that turned toward emotional appeals to attract readers and relied on reporting sensational stories. Samples of the readability levels in the two groups of papers were taken between 1872 and 1960.

The results of the study showed that the newspapers in the conservative category showed no significant change in readability throughout the 88-year period. Readability scores for those newspapers in the sensational category rose sharply during the period of yellow journalism indicating an ease of understanding of the text. After the peak of yellow journalism a trend began in the readability scores toward the level of the conservative newspapers. The readability levels become closer between the two types of publications but are never equal. This indicates that differences in readability are less pronounced than in the past but still clearly exist. "The study lends support to the assumption that readability is closely related to sensationalism" (Stevenson, 1964, p. 204). Charts showing the readability of both types of papers clearly indicate that readability rose and fell during times of sensational reporting and was more apparent in sensational papers.

Stevenson's (1964) study suggests that people like sensational news and find it easy to read and absorb. Davis and McLeod (2003) consider people's fascination with sensational news over a 300-year period to assess whether the character of news has changed over three centuries. A content analysis included sampling 736 front-page news stories sorted

into 12 distinct categories. Newspapers from eight countries were sampled during the time period 1700 – 2001. Six time periods were identified and analyzed by dividing the three centuries into 50-year increments. Times of war and other major events were excluded from the study as were newspapers that focused on outlandish tabloid content in order to provide “a normal range of news topics” (p. 210).

The results of Davis and McLeod’s (2003) study indicate the same general topics emerged in news stories from each of the six time periods. Topics such as reputation, altruism, “cheater detection” and treatment of offspring were consistently seen across the 300 year period. The authors argue that the stability of the topics over time suggests they “have not been socially constructed on the basis of time or local cultural values” (p. 214). They propose that sensational topics trigger an evolutionary tendency by human beings to be alert to information that leads them to potential mates. This basic desire to procreate, the authors posit, is what drives people’s need to gather as much information about others as possible – which includes reading sensational stories.

Davis and McLeod (2003) utilized a content analysis for analyzing the front pages of newspapers published from 1700 to 2001. The method

used followed standard procedures in identifying the population and utilizing random sampling techniques. The data they present show the prevalence of stories in each of the 12 sensational categories has remained similar over three centuries throughout the world. This supports the authors' assertion that sensational topics are not socially constructed nor are they time or place bound. The final conclusion – the evolutionary rationale of why people value sensational news – does not present any corroborating scientific evidence and appears to be based on conjecture.

The public seems to have always been motivated to seek out and read sensational news stories. The objective of Stevens' (1991) study was to find out who read the papers and why during three periods in America. The subject and time periods of his study directly relate to the present research. The review looks at sensationalism in the 1830s, 1880s and 1890s (yellow era) and the 1920s (jazz era). The author's study focuses on the New York City press – a hotbed of sensational newspapers between 1830 and 1930.

Readership of myriad sensational news in New York City was not limited to uneducated people much to the disdain of the higher-minded elite. Although many people won't admit to reading sensational

newspapers, studies show readership of these newspapers transcends social classes (Murphy, 1984). "The better educated always have been chagrined about lowbrow publications that dish up sex, crime and scandal," argues Stevens (1991, p .4). News reportage was fairly consistent over the three periods noted in Stevens' study with a focus on topics such as disasters, murders, and scandals.

Stevens' (1991) findings are not surprising. In fact, his reportage of news readership and content in New York is very consistent with other accounts of sensationalized reporting between 1830 and 1920. Although it was much maligned by media critics and historians, more people read the sensational papers than "hard news" issues. What is interesting about the study is the reason that Stevens' puts forth for the people's fascination with sensational news. Stevens suggests the public wanted to be shocked by sensationalism in order to confirm its own sense of virtue. "We are fascinated but simultaneously appalled at our own fascination" (Stevens, p. 4).

The aforementioned studies indicate that sensational news coverage has remained fairly consistent over the past three hundred years. Kalb (1998) takes a micro-look at scandalous news coverage by presenting a

modern case study of how the press has changed the traditional way it reports news to the public. The author uses the Lewinsky/Clinton scandal to clearly link the lapse of professionalism by journalists to profit motives of the newspapers.

Media historians consistently accuse yellow and jazz journalists of inventing stories and reporting uncorroborated events. Kalb (1998) points to the actions of the press in the first half of 1998 as "a period far more cynical than that previous low point in American journalism, the McCarthy era" (p. 1). While his analysis is in narrative format, he provides details on the amount and type of sensationalized reporting engaged in during the Clinton scandal and provides explanation for what he calls the "new news".

After several weeks of coverage in early 1998 of the alleged Clinton affair, Kalb (1998) points out that even the respected *Wall Street Journal* began reporting on the scandal. On February 4, 1998 two investigative reporters for the *Journal* wrote a story about information they had obtained about a White House steward having told the grand jury that he observed Clinton and Lewinsky alone together in the Oval Office. The reporters tried checking their story with the White House but did not wait for a response. The *Journal* posted the story on its Web site and prepared it for publication

in the paper the next day. By the time the story appeared in the paper the details had changed. The Washington bureau chief admitted to publishing the story without verifying sources because he heard ABC was also on the story and "he wanted to beat them" (Kalb, p.20):

According to Kalb (1998) the "very nature of journalism has been altered. Never before has this been more apparent than during the early coverage of Monicagate" (p. 24). The author assigns the term "new news" to what emerged from the press in early 1998. He compares it to eras of previous news reporting and says it is more sensational and profit-driven than ever before. Other characteristics of the "new news" noted by Kalb include "a fluffy lightness to the presentation of serious information and a predisposition to emphasize sex and sensationalism in an appeal to higher ratings and circulation" (p. 14).

Kalb's (1998) statement regarding the characteristics of the "new news" of 1998 is strikingly similar to descriptions in the literature of the yellow and jazz years. The case study format he presents is an exhaustive review of the actions of the press during 1998 and is well organized and includes credible references.

The literature reviewed for the present research looks at sensational news coverage from a number of different perspectives. A consistent theme among the literature is that sensational news has existed for many years and people desire to read it. Certain periods in journalism history, such as the "yellow and jazz eras", have received deafening criticism for their focus on sensational news reporting. Campbell's (2001) research indicates that while certain characteristics of the yellow press have been carried over to modern mainstream newspapers, sensational content is not one of them. In sharp contrast, Kalb (1998) posits that "seldom in history has the performance of American journalism been lower than in the first half of 1998" (p. 1). He cites modern mainstream newspapers as having broken the rules of traditional journalism by reporting stories without checking accuracy and reliability.

Method

Population and Sample

The data for this study was drawn from *The New York Times* newspaper during the periods 1895-1904, 1920-1929 and 1995-2004. This paper was selected for two reasons. First, it is a mainstream newspaper that was published during the three time periods therefore allowing content comparison. Second, it is ranked the top daily newspaper in the U.S. in terms of circulation and today has national readership.

A content analysis was conducted of 126 front pages of the *The New York Times* for the three ten-year periods of this study. The decision to analyze front pages is based on the assumption that the most important stories are placed on the front page of a newspaper. Garcia (1997) suggests that the front page positions stories in a particular hierarchy and "gives a fast list of what those producing a paper deem the important contents" (para. 2).

A two-constructed week sampling technique was used. The front pages of the newspapers in the study were analyzed at intervals of eight days until 14 days were reviewed for each one-year period (see Appendix D). This approach is effective in identifying representative

samples of newspaper content without over sampling (Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993). Random sampling may distort the data by over sampling certain days of the week. For example, Sundays have the largest circulation and tend to have extensive news coverage compared to a weekday issue that typically is a "thinner" news day. The constructed weeks approach identifies an equal number of days of the week for analysis without disproportionate weighting given to any day. According to Riffe et al., two constructed weeks "are sufficient to allow reliable estimates of local stories in a year's worth of newspapers" (p. 139).

Operationalizing Variables

The number of total stories for each front page was counted. This establishes the total news coverage for each front page in the sample. Each story was then evaluated to determine whether or not it was sensational. Guidelines and definitions were provided to identify and classify sensational stories to ensure consistency among coders (see Appendix E). This establishes the number of sensational news stories for each front page in the sample.

Next, the number of sensational stories for each front page and the total stories for each front page are used to calculate the percent of total stories for

each front page that are sensational. This metric provides a measure of the relative level of sensational news versus other news.

The column inches for each sensational news story were measured and standardized to the modern day six column format (see Note 1). This establishes how much actual space was devoted to sensational news stories. This metric provides a second measure of the relative level of sensational news versus other news. Stevens (1991) uses the standard column inch measure in his analysis of the amount of sensational news reporting that occurred in New York newspapers during the early 1900s.

Six descriptors were chosen to measure sensational news treatment. The six descriptors used for the story assessment were professional, responsible, startling, dramatic, tasteful, and emotional. These descriptors were chosen based on Tannenbaum and Lynch's (1960) research on the concept and measurement of sensational news. Tannenbaum and Lynch's method was used by Koski (1993) in his research on news reporting during the jazz journalism era.

Given that assessing the style or treatment of new stories is a somewhat subjective measure, utilizing Tannenbaum and Lynch's scale allows this variable to be operationalized by choosing where the story falls on a three point scale and

assigning a number. A numeric rating from one to three was assigned for each descriptor. The lower the rating the coder assigned the less sensational the writing style (see Appendix C). Guidelines and definitions were provided for each descriptor to assess the sensational treatment of stories to ensure consistency among coders (see Appendix E). This evaluation provides a measure of the writing style of sensational news stories.

A numeric rating from one to three was also assigned to the headline for each sensational story. The lower the rating the coder assigned the less sensational the headline. This evaluation provides a measure of the writing style of the headlines for sensational news stories. A separate measurement was performed on the headline because it is used to attract the reader's attention and may not be consistent with the writing style of the story.

Procedures for Collecting Data

Newspapers for the study were accessed electronically at St. John Fisher College utilizing the ProQuest Historical *New York Times* database. Data were recorded both on individual paper coding sheets and electronically. Once all of the coding was complete the data was entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

There were two instruments designed for collecting the data for the study. Specific categories identified for collecting data from the *The New York Times* front pages included total number of all news stories, number of sensational stories and the topic of the sensational stories. A coding sheet was created to collect the data (Appendix B). Campbell's (2001) research identified news topics that were deemed sensational and this researcher utilized a modified version of them. The topics identified as major categories of sensational news included crime (e.g., murder, rape/sexual assault), suicide, domestic disputes and celebrity/society news. A category for "all other crime" was included for miscellaneous crime-related topics.

In addition to collecting data on the number and type of sensational news stories, the style or treatment of the story was also rated and recorded. The first two descriptors, professional and responsible, are basic tenets that any respectable journalist should follow and were included as an overall measure of the writer's style. The other four descriptors, unstartling, undramatized, tasteful, unemotional are typically associated with objective, "hard news" reporting. As such, a rating of "one" for "professional" would indicate the coder highly agrees with the

fact that the story is written in professional manner. At the other end of the scale, a story considered by the coder as "unprofessional" would score a "three" indicating that the coder highly agrees with the fact that the story is written in an unprofessional manner. This method allows this researcher to operationalize the variables and assign a quantitative measure to the style of the news reporting.

Two coders collected the data. Inter-coder reliability, or the consistency of coding across coders, was measured by comparing a second coding of the original data to the original findings several weeks after the initial coding took place. The re-code results were largely found to be consistent with the original findings. Depending on the variable, results ranged from 100% agreement to 92% agreement. One outlier showed a 71% agreement (in total sensational story count); however, the sample size was very small. The procedure included random selection of 10% of the front pages examined by Coder #2 and ratings were checked for consistency against ratings of Coder #1. A random number generator in Microsoft Excel was used to select the front pages to be re-coded.

This procedure was also followed to check Intra-coder reliability, or the consistency of content coding by each individual coder. The

intracoder results for both Coder #1 and Coder #2 were found to be consistent with the original findings. Depending on the variable, results ranged from 100% agreement to a low of 94% agreement.

Validity for the study may be verified as the procedures for sampling, collecting data, and categorizing sensationalism have been utilized by researchers in various studies cited in the literature review. Campbell (2001) used the constructed week method for sampling and collected data by analyzing the front pages of newspapers and recording the results on content coding sheets. The categories for sensationalism (Appendix B) have been chosen by this researcher from topics presented in past research conducted by Campbell, Tannenbaum and Lynch (1960) and Davis and McLeod (2003). In addition, Koski (1993) used a modified version of Tannenbaum and Lynch's semantic differential scale as a measurement to complete his research on jazz journalism and the extent of sensational reporting in Missouri daily newspapers the 1920s.

Data Analysis/Results

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and t-tests were used for the data analysis consisting of the following:

- Calculating the mean values for each metric for each of the three periods of study.
- Comparing the mean values to determine whether statistically they are the same or different.

A total of 1,808 stories were reviewed and 249 of them identified as sensational. The study results for all variables are consistent and demonstrate that sensational news coverage in the modern day *New York Times* is less than in either the yellow or jazz eras. Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1

Summary of Results

Era	Total Front Page Stories	Sensational Front Page Stories	Sensational Stories % of Front Page Stories	Sensational Column Inches Per Front Page	Sensational Column Inches % of Front Page	Mean Treatment Score per Sens Story
Yellow	999	150	15.0%	18.6	15.9%	8.9
Jazz	489	81	15.1%	17.7	15.1%	10.9
Modern	320 ¹	18 ²	5.6% ³	6.9 ⁴	5.9% ⁵	10.9 ⁶

- (1) Analysis of variance (df = 125, F critical 3.07): F = 169.8, p<0.000
 (2) Analysis of variance (df = 125, F critical 3.07): F = 58.2, p<0.000
 (3) Analysis of variance (df = 125, F critical 3.07): F = 22.7, p<0.000
 (4) Analysis of variance (df = 125, F critical 3.07): F = 11.9, p<0.000
 (5) Analysis of variance (df = 125, F critical 3.07): F = 11.9, p<0.000
 (6) Analysis of variance not appropriate

	Modern vs. Yellow	Modern vs. Jazz
T-Test		
p value <		
(1)	0.000	0.000
(2)	0.000	0.000
(3)	0.000	0.000
(4)	0.000	0.000
(5)	0.000	0.000
(6)	0.005	0.995

The mean number of front page sensational stories in the modern era is 0.4. Sensational stories represent 5.6% of the total number of stories on the 42 modern era front pages evaluated. The mean number of front page sensational stories in the yellow era is 3.6. Sensational stories represent 15.0% of the total number of stories on the 42 yellow era front pages evaluated. The mean number of front page sensational stories in the jazz era is 1.9. Sensational stories represent 15.1% of the total number of stories on the 42 jazz era front pages evaluated. A two-tailed t-test shows a significant difference between the modern era and the yellow era ($p < 0.000$) and between the modern era and the jazz era ($p < 0.000$) for both the number of front page sensational stories and sensational stories as a percentage of front page stories.

Sensational news coverage as a percentage of total news coverage is an important metric. Clearly the variance between the modern era and the yellow era (5.6% vs. 15%) and the modern era and the jazz era (5.6% vs. 15.1%) supports the contention that less sensational news is being reported today in *The New York Times* than in either past era. These results provide the answers to research questions one and two:

RQ1: *To what extent are sensational news stories in the modern mainstream press (1995-2004) more or less prominent than during the yellow journalism years (1895-1904) and the jazz journalism years (1920-1929)?*

RQ2: *To what extent is the proportion of sensational topics versus total news coverage different among the three periods?*

Also providing answers to research question two is the analysis of sensational story column inches for each front page. The mean number of front page sensational story column inches in the modern era is 6.9. Sensational story column inches represent 5.9% of the total number of column inches on the 42 modern era front pages evaluated. The mean number of sensational story column inches per front page in the yellow era is 18.6. Sensational story column inches represent 15.9% of the total number of column inches on the 42 yellow era front pages evaluated. The mean number of sensational story column inches per front page in the jazz era is 17.7. Sensational story column inches represent 15.1% of the total number of column inches on the 42 jazz era front pages evaluated. A two-tailed t-test shows a significant difference between the modern era and the yellow era ($p < 0.000$) and between the modern era and the jazz era ($p < 0.000$) for both the number of sensational story column inches per front

page and sensational story column inches as a percentage of total front page column inches available.

Sensational story column inches as a percentage of total column inches is another important metric. Clearly the variance between the modern era and the yellow era (5.9% vs. 15.9%) and the modern era and the jazz era (5.9% vs. 15.1%) supports the contention that less front page space is devoted to sensational news today in *The New York Times* than in either past era. These results provide additional answers to research question two and are consistent with the results of the analysis of the number of sensational stories.

The style (or treatment) coding was based on a three point scale to score each sensational story and the headline (see Appendix C). The means were calculated for the aggregate score for all stories in each of the three eras. Table 2 summarizes the results.

Table 2

Summary of Results – Mean Style Ratings

Era	Headline	Professional	Responsible	Startling
yellow	2.12	1.31	1.33	1.39
jazz	2.44	1.44	1.44	2.27
modern	2.39 ¹	1.56 ²	1.61 ³	2.28 ⁴
T-Test p value <				
	modern vs. yellow	modern vs. jazz		
(1)	0.158	0.580		
(2)	0.245	0.378		
(3)	0.140	0.330		
(4)	0.000	0.865		

Summary of Results – Mean Style Ratings (continued)

Era	Dramatized	Distasteful	Emotional	Aggregate Totals ⁹
yellow	1.80	1.40	1.53	8.77
jazz	2.25	1.38	2.10	10.89
modern	1.89 ⁵	1.56 ⁶	2.06 ⁷	10.94 ⁸
T-Test p value <				
	modern vs. yellow	modern vs. jazz		
(5)	0.604	0.076		
(6)	0.383	0.260		
(7)	0.004	0.600		
(8)	0.005	0.995		

(9) Excludes the headline

The results of the style/treatment of the stories were unexpected. In the modern era, the mean aggregate score of the six descriptors (minimum = 6, maximum = 18) was 10.9. In the yellow era the mean aggregate score was 8.8 and in the jazz era it was 10.9. A two-tailed t-test showed there was a statistical difference ($p < 0.005$) between the modern era and the yellow era. Not surprisingly, stories in the yellow era were, overall, rated higher on the "sensational" scale than in the modern era. The two notable exceptions that showed significant differences were the ratings for the "Startling" and "Emotional" descriptors. The mean score for the "Startling" rating in the yellow era was 1.4 while the modern era stories showed a mean of 2.3 ($p < 0.000$). The mean score for the "Emotional" rating in the yellow era was 1.5 versus a mean score of 2.1 in the modern era ($p < 0.004$). Contrary to the general belief by scholars and historians that the "yellow years" were the high point in sensational news reporting, the present research shows that sensational stories in the modern era sample were written in a more startling and emotional manner than those in the sample from the yellow era.

Another unexpected result shows that there was no difference between the modern era and jazz era ($p < 0.995$) in the style or treatment of

the news. As mentioned above, the aggregate scores for the ratings were identical.

In the modern era, the mean aggregate score of the six descriptors was 10.9 (minimum = 6, maximum = 18). In the yellow era the mean aggregate score was 8.8 and in the jazz era it was 10.9. A two-tailed t-test showed there was a statistical difference ($p < 0.005$) between the modern era and the yellow era. However, results showed no statistical difference in the writing style of the news between the modern era and jazz era ($p < 0.995$). These results provide answers to research question three.

RQ3: To what extent is the style of reporting news relative to sensationalizing stories different in the modern mainstream press (1995-2004) than during the yellow journalism years (1895-1904) and the jazz journalism years (1920-1929)?

Discussion

The results of the present research indicate that the modern era has less sensational news coverage in *The New York Times* than either the yellow or jazz eras. This marked difference could be the result of myriad political, social and economic changes in America over the past century.

One major occurrence that may have affected the reduction in sensational stories in *The New York Times* may be the result of a concerted effort to implement a standard for a socially responsible press. In the 1940s, the Commission on Freedom of the Press issued detailed direction on press operations in America. The primary objective was to identify general principles by which the press should operate in a changing society (Anderson, 1977). Shortly thereafter the concept of social responsibility theory was introduced and a trend began toward this new ideal. The concept developed out of normative theory reactions about how things should be; however, Anderson notes that this emphasis has changed over time depending on the orientation of the person interpreting the information. Some, he says, "seek to describe an evolving media- society relationship while helping guide the process toward a social responsibility ideal" (p.33).

After years of deliberation about how to best achieve a free American press that ably serves a democratic society, the Hutchins Commission issued recommendations that the press accepted. The five basic tenets of the report called on the press to follow a code of responsibility in their reporting that includes truthfulness in covering the day's events, provides a forum for citizens, is representative of all groups in society, reflects the values of society, and

provides full access to the day's intelligence. A major concern of the Hutchins Commission was how to put these guidelines into practice. This struggle continues today as "objections to irresponsible performance and expressions of the moral obligations of journalists have been articulated many times in our past" (McIntyre, 1979, p.54).

Peterson (1956) cites the obvious fact that many publishers in the early 20th century "were not likely to concern themselves with the ethical aspects of their calling" (p.82). By the middle of the century, however, the trend was shifting and there was a growing regard for setting higher standards in reporting. The author attributes much of this to the fact that schools of journalism began to be formed that taught not only techniques but responsibilities as well.

Despite efforts to ensure responsibility in journalistic practice it seems that people's fascination with sensationalism has proven to be a strong adversary of accomplishing this ideal. From the 1890s into the 1930s much of the press continued to operate with one purpose in mind – to sell as many newspapers as possible without consideration for how they did it. Clearly the public wanted to read sensational news stories as evidenced by the marked increase in newspaper sales for the issues that carried front page sensational news. Newspapers figured out quite quickly what appealed to people and, in the interest of increasing

circulation, went after it without much thought to the nature of the subject.

Allen (1931) reports that newspaper owners and editors found that whenever a trial or disaster took place they sold more papers if they focused all of their efforts on those particular stories. And Kalb's (1998) analysis of news reports by the mainstream press during the Clinton scandal supports the notion that "sensationalism sells."

This fact leads to another possible explanation of why *The New York Times'* coverage of sensational news is less in the modern era than in the yellow or jazz eras. There were large numbers of newspapers for sale in the early 19th and 20th centuries. In the 1920s many new tabloid papers emerged – a page about one-half the size of a normal newspaper page. The writing style was simple and short and the papers were known for their lavish use of pictures (Dominick, 2005).

This newfound competition for readership may have compelled mainstream newspapers to follow this new popular method of news reporting. *The New York Times*, although the most conservative of the yellow and jazz eras, had to appeal to broader interests in order to retain readership. According to Emery's (1972) assessment *The New York Times* eventually followed suit in the early years and began reporting stories that fell outside of the legitimate news

category. There was clearly a direct competition during the yellow and jazz journalism eras that does not exist today between the tabloids and mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times*.

Limitations of the Study

The study involves analyzing the front pages of only one newspaper. Although the front page provides a good measure of the content of the key stories, information in other newspaper sections is not considered in the total amount of sensational news coverage. In addition, the fact that only one paper, and a mainstream paper at that, was used limits generalizing the results.

Another limitation is measuring sensational news is not an exact science since it does involve "coder judgment" of what is or is not sensational. This limitation was addressed by utilizing two coders and assessing the reliability of the results.

An additional limitation may be found in that sensational news, as defined for this study, excluded war reporting and economic and natural disasters.

Finally, the sample years for the study include only three for each ten year period – the first, the middle and the ending years. Although this

covers the entire decade of each era, it is a limitation as only three years out of ten were analyzed and the sample was not random.

Future Research

The questions posed in this study were borne out of an interest by this researcher to determine if Americans are now exposed to more, less or the same amount of sensational news as in the past. The present research examined three different eras to arrive at the conclusion that we are reading less sensational news in the largest mainstream newspaper in America. A baseline has been established for these specific times. However, there is a gap of three quarters of a century that might shed some interesting light on the issue of news coverage. It would be useful to look at the decade when the social responsibility movement was strongest. The Hutchins Commission issued a 130-page report in the mid-40s to address the issue of Freedom of the Press and social responsibility. Was there an immediate effect? While the social responsibility groups appear to have defined a basic direction for the media, there continues to be a struggle among professionals to put it into practice. This is evidenced by Kalb's (1998) review of the handling of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal and his assertion that the "new news" is quite reminiscent of "yellow news".

Another area for future research would involve conducting a content analysis similar to the present research involving a much larger sample size. In order to project the results across a broader population of mainstream newspapers the research might include *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*. It would be interesting to determine whether the reporting of sensational news in the yellow, jazz and modern journalism eras follows a pattern that is the same or different than what was found in the present research on *The New York Times*.

Another subject for future research would be to look at the effects of news on people. Specifically, are people more sensitive to reading the details of the sitting American President's sexual dalliances than they are the coverage of the devastation to New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina? What effects does the constant viewing of negative details on the country's leader's sex life have on people's viewpoints of America? How does the broadcasting of images of devastation and human suffering, 24 hours a day and seven days a week, affect people's day-to-day attitudes?

Conclusions

The results of the present research further support the contention that the yellow and jazz eras were unique in journalism history in their

focus on sensational news. Media historians typically refer to the period between 1895 and 1930 pejoratively. It is a time, they say, newspapers used any tactic possible to lure readers to buy papers. "They twisted the facts of each day into whatever form seemed best suited to produce sales," argues Emery (1972, p.350).

This analysis of the prominence of sensational news stories, as well as the treatment of that news, in three distinct periods provides interesting insights into the reporting of sensational news in *The New York Times*. It provides evidence that news reporting by this mainstream newspaper has changed significantly between the time of the yellow and jazz years and modern times. The present study concludes that 21st century individuals are reading fewer sensational stories in *The New York Times* than in those "lusty, fiercely competitive, intolerant times" of yellow journalism (Campbell, 2001, p.8) and jazz journalism. However, the research results also indicate that the modern *New York Times* continues to report some sensational news and does it in a more startling and emotional manner than in the years when sensational reporting is thought to have been at its peak – the years of yellow journalism.

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Appendix A

Key Word Searches:

News coverage, sensational journalism, American journalism, tabloid newspapers, history of journalism, news and society, yellow journalism, jazz journalism, American press, sensational press, hard news, soft news, responsible journalism, ethical press

Indexes and Abstracts Searched:

Com Abstracts Date Coverage: 1966 - present

Psychology Abstracts Date Coverage: 1887 – present

Dissertation Abstracts: 1861 to present -Abstracts since 1980; Thesis abstracts since 1988

Ebsco/Academic Search Elite: Indexing, 1984 - present; Full text 1985 -present.

ERIC: 1966 - present

ABI/INFORM: 1991 to present

ArticleFirst: 1991 to present

Elsevier: 1995-present

Bibliographies

Tabloid Journalism: An annotated bibliography of English-language
sources

Journal Websites:

Journalism Quarterly

Appendix B

Content Analysis Coding Sheet (1)

Date of Newspaper: _____

Total Number of Stories on Front Page: _____

Total Number of "Sensational" Stories _____ Total Inches _____

Total Number of "Non-Sensational" Stories _____ Total Inches _____

~Check appropriate box and record column inches in adjacent box~

Topic (Note Headline in box below)	S1	CI1	S2	CI2	S3	CI3
1. Crime						
-Murder						
-Rape/Sexual Assault						
-White Collar Crime						
-Celebrity Crime						
-All Other Crime (specify) _____						
2. Suicide						
3. Domestic Disputes						
4. Celebrity/Society News						
5. All Other (specify) _____						

Coding Notes:

- Choose only ONE topic per story
- Total Column Inches include headline, subhead line, photos and text

Appendix C

Sensational Journalism *STYLE* Coding

Content Analysis Coding Sheet (2)

Date (only needed if not indicated on reverse): _____

Topic (as identified in Coding Sheet 1) _____

Scale for Sensational Judgments:**HEADLINE:**

Unsensational	1	2	3	Sensational
---------------	---	---	---	-------------

STORY:

Professional	1	2	3	Unprofessional
--------------	---	---	---	----------------

Responsible	1	2	3	Irresponsible
-------------	---	---	---	---------------

Unstartling	1	2	3	Startling
-------------	---	---	---	-----------

Undramatized	1	2	3	Dramatized
--------------	---	---	---	------------

Tasteful	1	2	3	Distasteful
----------	---	---	---	-------------

Unemotional	1	2	3	Emotional
-------------	---	---	---	-----------

TOTAL STYLE SCORE (STORY): _____

Coding Notes: Please circle the number that most accurately represents your assessment of the writing *style of the Headline and each story previously coded*.

1 = VERY, 2 = NEUTRAL, 3 = VERY

One sheet will be completed for EACH story

Appendix D

Sensational Journalism

Two Constructed Week Sampling Technique

For every other year in each ten-year period, a month was randomly selected to begin the two week constructed sample. For example, for the first year of 1895, March was randomly chosen and we began the sampling on the first Monday in March of that year which was March 4. Using Riffe, Aust and Lacy's (1993) process, choosing the next day of the constructed week will be at an interval of eight days bringing us to Tuesday, March 12. The rest of the sample construction would proceed as follows at eight day intervals until a total of 14 issues are identified: Wednesday, March 20, Thursday, March 28, Friday, April 5, etc.

If December was chosen as the starting month for a particular year, we proceeded into January of the *same year* to identify a total of 14 issues.

Appendix E

Sensational Journalism

Content Analysis Coding Instructions

Each front page of *The New York Times* will be analyzed for the following periods: 1895 – 1904, 1920 – 1929 and 1995 – 2004 beginning the first Monday in one (randomly selected) month each year. A total of 14 issues will be analyzed for EACH year in eight-day intervals. Using yellow Journalism as an example, the first year of the era (1895), the middle year (1900) and the last year (1904) identified with the time will be analyzed.

For each story read the first five paragraphs and determine if the topic is sensational. Stories to be coded sensational include the categories identified on Coding Sheet #1. Other topics judged to be sensational would be counted as such and recorded in the "Other" categories with a notation of the topic.

After this process is completed, the total number of ALL stories will be recorded at the top of the sheet.

Definitions:

A sensational story is defined as a news story treatment that has one or more of the following characteristics (Koski, 1993):

- ❑ Exaggerated sensory details
- ❑ Needlessly emotionally charged subject
- ❑ Wild dramatization
- ❑ Language intended to shock, startle, thrill or excite

Guidelines for Style Coding:

Professional:

A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events.

Responsible:

Having a capacity for moral decisions and, therefore, accountable; capable of rational thought or action:

Unstartling:

Does not provoke sudden shock or astonishment.

Undramatized:

Presented without exaggeration or melodramatic wording

Tasteful:

Free from what is tawdry or unbecoming of a professional journalist.

Unemotional:

Facts are reported in an objective, rational manner without being extravagantly demonstrative.

The total number of inches for all sensational and non-sensational stories will be measured and recorded. This will NOT include the measurement for inches continued on another page.

Using the scale provided, a level will be assigned for the treatment of all stories coded as sensational. The three-point scale consists of six descriptors at opposite ends of a spectrum (for example, professional vs. unprofessional). Return to each story that was coded as sensational and circle a number from one to three that most accurately describes your judgment of the writing style of the story. A number will be circled for each of the descriptors.

Appendix F

Years/Days of Front Pages Included in Content Analysis*

1895	1900	1904	1920	1925	1929	1995	2000	2004
3/4	6/4	4/4	2/2	6/1	1/8	8/7	1/8	5/3
3/12	6/12	4/12	2/10	6/9	1/16	8/15	1/16	5/11
3/20	6/20	4/20	2/18	6/17	1/24	8/23	1/24	5/19
3/28	6/28	4/28	2/26	6/25	2/1	8/31	2/1	5/27
4/5	7/6	5/6	3/5	7/3	2/9	9/8	2/9	6/4
4/13	7/14	5/14	3/13	7/11	2/17	9/16	2/17	6/12
4/21	7/22	5/22	3/21	7/19	2/25	9/24	2/25	6/20
4/29	7/30	5/30	3/29	7/27	3/4	10/2	3/4	6/28
5/7	8/7	6/7	4/6	8/4	3/12	10/10	3/12	7/6
5/15	8/15	6/15	4/14	8/12	3/20	10/18	3/20	7/14
5/23	8/23	6/23	4/22	8/20	3/28	10/26	3/28	7/22
5/31	8/31	7/1	4/30	8/28	4/5	11/3	4/5	7/30
6/8	9/8	7/9	5/8	9/5	4/13	11/11	4/13	8/7
6/16	9/16	7/17	5/16	9/13	4/21	11/19	4/21	8/15

*For 1929 and 2000 the sample was started on a day other than Monday yet followed the two week constructed sample format

Notes

¹Additional calculations for data collection

In order to properly report column inches a number of calculations were performed. All 126 front pages of the sample were printed on 8 ½ by 11 inch paper. Given that during the three eras of the present research *The New York Times* had different numbers of columns, an adjustment was made for this fact as well as the reduction factor as all front pages were printed at 8 ½ by 11 inches. After this researcher contacted *The New York Times* to confirm the physical dimensions were unchanged since the inception of the paper the following measurements/calculations were conducted:

1. Measured length of one column on an actual size *New York Times*.
2. Measured length of one column of 8 ½ x 11 printouts of front pages.
3. Divided the full size paper column length by column length of the 8 ½ x 11 page (number one divided by number two above). This result is the magnification factor.
4. Standardized the column widths to modern day: 6/7 (yellow journalism), 6/8 (jazz journalism) and 6/6 (modern).
5. The length of the column measured on the 8 ½ x 11 printouts, multiplied by the magnification factor, multiplied by the column inch adjustment equals total standardized column inches.

²The author is referencing the front page of a printed newspaper as an introduction to discussing issues relating to the front page of a Web paper.