



American Journalism >

Volume 13, 1996 - [Issue 1](#)

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Pages 5-20 | Published online: 24 Jul 2013

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George Seldes: Propaganda Analyst, Press Gadfly

By Patrick Daley

George Seldes' propaganda criticism, in which he tried to give the public a critical attitude toward news and alert journalists to the need for reform in their profession, has been misplaced within a mass society theory that shows audiences as passive receivers.

From 1911 through the middle of the century, progressive muckrakers produced a body of consistent press criticism. This propaganda analysis,¹ as J. Michael Sproule calls it, attacked economic press royalists who benefited from advertisers' promotion of a consumer mentality, reduced diversity through the rationalization of journalistic routines and conventions, and hindered democratic enlightenment with the publication of corporate and governmental public relations and propaganda as news. Historians of American journalism — Lee, Mott, Emery, and Tebbel — cite propaganda analysts such as Upton Sinclair, Will Irwin, Oswald Garrison Villard, Silas Bent, and George Seldes as highly opinionated and sometimes valuable press critics, but they devote little space to their specific points of view.²

This inattention has denied both academicians and the public access to important press criticism and its most consistent theme: the failure of the press to serve the public in its participatory democratic functions. Recent scholarship, however, has resurrected this propaganda analysis and its intellectual foundations from a "distorted memory."³

1. J. Michael Sproule, "Progressive Propaganda Critics and the Magic Bullet Myth," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 225-246.

2. See Alfred McLung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 735-737; Edwin Emery, *The Press and America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972); John W. Tebbel, *The Compact History of the American Newspaper* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969).

3. Sproule, "Progressive Propaganda Critics and the Magic Bullet Myth"; James W. Carey, "Commentary: Communications and the Progressives," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 264-282; Hanno Hardt, *Critical Communication Studies: Communication History and Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Additional information

Notes on contributors

The author is an associate professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire.

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