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820 Social Studies

A Different Side to Muckraking

Our country wouldn’t be what it is today if it weren’t for muckrakers. The peak of their popularity was in 1890 to 1920 during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, exposing the corruption of large businesses and monopolies. We’ve reached the twenty-first century, and the popularity of muckrakers has plummeted, but the belief still holds true. The one source to prove this is social media. Social media is mainly known for its job of allowing people to socialize. However, social media enables people to still report and expose corruption- just like muckrakers. In other words, social media enables people to do their muckraking online, meaning that it’s more efficient. Muckraking has evolved into the digital era because of this. Muckraking has the potential to be spread on social media, and the people who expose corruption or scandals are known as twenty-first century muckrakers. Muckraking and social media have a lot of similarities, but many differences as well. However, we do know one thing. There are so many people and businesses plagued by corruption and muckraking has become very important. Muckraking has evolved into social media, meaning that its popularity is spreading worldwide.

The Importance of Muckrakers:

The term “muckraker” was invented by Theodore Roosevelt to describe muckrakers during the Progressive Era. Muckrakers are a group of American writers who wrote very detailed and accurate journalistic accounts of political and economic corruption, and also social hardships. These were mainly caused by the power of big businesses in the ever expanding United States. Industrialization was very popular during the 20th century, and some businesses took advantage of that to gain power. People such as journalists, socialists, reformers, and authors couldn’t stand this, so they wanted to let the public know about this corruption and unfairness of businesses. According to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle newspaper[[1]](#footnote-0), it states, “‘muckraker.’ That name has been applied to the wrong kind of people. If we mean those who stalk around with a chip on their shoulders and try to stir up dissension and trouble. They are not to be admired. But the other class to which this term has been applied is that of the pure man who has clear enough vision to see the trouble in which other people are.” Although muckrakers weren’t always liked for what they had to say, especially not from the monopolies, they are the people who let the public know what is going on, and this quote supports this idea. Famous muckrakers are Ida Tarbell, who published articles in newspapers and magazines about John D. Rockefeller, and the Standard Oil Company. Upton Sinclair published a very popular book called The Jungle that exposed the conditions of a meat-packaging factory in Chicago. Jacob A. Riis was a photographer who depicted the lifestyle of the poor through his camera, and Lewis Hine who depicted the lifestyle of laborers through his camera. According to Bekkah Walker, popular magazines that were published during the Progressive Era were *Mcclure’s, Everybody’s, Pearson’s, and Collier’s.* These magazines exposed the evils of American society- political corruption, stock market manipulation, fake advertising, vice; wicked behavior, impure food and drugs, racial discrimination, and lynching; hanging someone usually on a tree. These are some of the widely known muckrakers who made an impact to the public. They are well known because of the major impact that they made. For instance, after Upton Sinclair’s book was published, the Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act. Jacob A. Riis and Lewis Hine showed the wealthier side how people lived and worked in the Lower East Side. The rich were thriving, while the slums were worsening. Muckrakers were people who exposed corruption to the public who didn’t get to see the real picture, and tried to reform America after all the corruption. Overall, muckrakers have an important role to play, and that helps the society to reform.

Muckraking in a Digital Era:

Muckraking has evolved from the old media, to the new media. The old media consists of newspapers, radios, television, or in short, media without the internet. The new media consists of the internet. Now that the internet is all the rage, twenty-first century muckrakers have brought them to the internet. Throughout the years, the popularity of investigative reporting has increased, and according to Vanderbilt University Sociology Professor Daniel Cornfield[[2]](#footnote-1), he states, “The advent of social media and everyday photography may be a new form of muckraking.” People have created movements online using hashtags to spread equality around. For example, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is a movement used to let the public know that Black lives matter, and to give voice to the public. Black Lives Matter helps show the public the injustice towards black men and women, as they expose police brutality for what it really is. This organization was launched by activists Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of a Black. Another important movement is the feminist movement. With famous celebrities such as Emma Watson and Oprah Winfrey leading this movement, they are changing the face of women, and women are finally being heard. Activism has never been more alive, and this is because digital technology allows that to happen. The truth is that many of the viral articles and stories are documented and saved by many journalists. Due to the new media, muckraking has evolved into the digital era.

Similarities:

Social media and muckraking are similar in many ways. Muckraking is all about exposing political corruption, while social media pulls from first-hand exposing the truth. These both have to do with exposing the truth about something, and each hold an investigative news element to them. For example, the famous book The Jungle by Upton Sinclair helped the government and the people of chicago by showing them what they put in the meat, and how unsanitary everything was. The factory that was trying to cover up how gruesome and disease-ridden it was but the truth came out due to Upton Sinclair. According to Obama[[3]](#footnote-2), “‘You can jail your opponents, but you can’t imprison their ideas,’ Obama said, referring to Russia's [imprisonment](https://cpj.org/2015/01/imprisoned-russian-journalist-sentenced-to-new-thr.php) of journalists and political dissidents. ‘You can control access to information, but you can’t lie about truth.”’ These examples state how many people don’t know the truth, but the truth cannot be hidden because there are people who rute out the evil such as Twenty-first century muckrakers, which supports the idea that they both have an investigative news element to them. Another similarity that social media and muckraking share is how both can exaggerate by incorporating propaganda or yellow journalism until things eventually get out of hand. For example, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer were publishers of famous newspaper companies in around 1890, but have been long-term rivals. The two newspaper companies that included yellow journalism to not only grab the reader’s attention, but to also gain popularity. This eventually got out of hand, and many problems had began to surface. One famous issue that occurred as a result of yellow journalism is the Spanish-American war. Hearst and Pulitzer portrayed the Spanish as “brutes” in political cartoons, and blamed the explosion of the USS *Maine* on the Spanish. This played a major role in starting the Spanish-American war. Just like muckraking, social media includes exaggeration too. For example, ISIS has been a non-stop issue that’s been talked about all over social media. The group of terrorists includes exaggeration to spread fear and express inferiority to the public. This includes videos of threats, killings, etc. Overall, social media and muckraking advocate the injustice that goes on, but can also stretch the truth and that is why they are both similar.

Differences:

Although there are many similarities between muckraking and social media, there are some major differences. Muckraking has a longer and much more meaningful history behind it than social media. For example, muckraking emerged from muckrakers, and muckrakers hold a lot of history. The Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, etc. They bring back memories about monopolists, big companies, journalism, or what mainly occurred during those time periods. The tools also seem less sophisticated than what social media can provide today. Many even refer to muckraking as “old-fashioned” as a result of the tools. Muckrakers used paper, pencils, and relied on their hearing and sight. As seen here, the technology that muckrakers had during this time wasn’t very advanced. Social media, however, doesn’t hold as much history as muckraking. It emerged from the internet, which was built for efficiency. It has limitless tools such as cameras, phones, video cameras, etc. This has not only improved efficiency, but made information more reliable. The techniques that are accomplished for muckraking are because of social media. For example, recording evidence relating to corruption is a technique that many twenty-first muckrakers use because it can be used as evidence for a claim, or just because they have social media, and is being used to their advantage. These are some of the major differences between muckraking and social media.

Polarization on Muckraking and on the Media:

Muckrakers were the type of people who believed in social justice and equality. Their primary function, however, was to make the public aware of the problems going on in the society. This led to many reformers and journalists taking action by writing books, spreading news, protests, etc. But this mainly led to the creation of muckraking. Monopolies at the time were very angry and irritated at this since the muckraking would be aimed at them. Ever since the new media was invented, muckraking went viral as it has been accessed by people all over the world, exposing any social injustice they could find, leading to more frustration. Ever since muckraking got on social media, many predicaments have been made. For example, if someone gots into a spirited debate, they would get stressed and seem as if they were being challenged. According to Charlie Munger[[4]](#footnote-3), chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, he says, “When you start shouting orthodox ideology out, what you’re doing is pounding it in, pounding it in, and you’re gradually ruining your mind.” This quote means that as more comments are added into the debate, it’s like adding fuel to the fire, thus leading to people becoming more irate. The new media is polarizing people as it gains power and the popularity. Similarly to muckrakers and monopolies, the muckraking would drive the monopolies insane, and as they became more livid, muckrakers only add fuel to the fire to achieve their main function. By polarizing the monopolists, muckrakers and the idea of muckraking gains more power and popularity. The polarization between muckrakers and social media are similar because the relationship between muckrakers and monopolies have evolved into the relationship between social media and the people.

Social Change:

As the popularity of muckrakers started dying down after the Progressive Era, many of the exposing and uncovering didn’t. Twenty-first century muckrakers were able to muckrake and spread their news through newspapers, books, television, or in short, the old media. Twenty-first century muckrakers are now exposing corruption through social media because of its efficiency, accessibility, and the new media. Before social media was invented, muckrakers were very limited as to how far the news could travel, and even if it did travel far enough, it would take a while for others that are living far away to reach it. In short, Muckrakers have always tried to muckrake through what was available during that time such as books, newspapers, television, magazines, etc. The news were very limited in terms of the efficiency of spreading, and the muckrakers themselves didn’t have the best resources such as cameras, computers, etc. However, when social media appeared, it put an end to most of the limitations regarding accessibility. It even provided more accurate information for the public. Social media guaranteed a more efficient way of exposing corruption. Because of this, muckraking is gaining popularity, and with social media, articles are being posted, helping twenty-first century muckrakers support their claim, or contribute to any ideas. However, social media didn’t always change for the better. There is still this conflict that erupts daily on social media between people, whether it be about an article posted relating to the topic of muckraking or personal issues, it still occurs and it’s not going to end. It pounds into people’s minds, which leads to the polarization between twenty-first century muckrakers and social media. Overall, many changes were made between social media and muckraking.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, muckraking has evolved into social media due to the many similarities, even though there were some differences. Muckraking has entered the digital era, and with that, comes limitless freedom on the new ways of exposing political corruption. The new media and old media plays a large role in this, and with the use of hashtags, many voices of the public is heard. The evolution of polarization between muckrakers and monopolies have evolved, and are now between social media and the public. With the new media, there are countless ways to spread news, only passing on the idea of muckraking elsewhere. Although the popularity of muckrakers isn’t too high since the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the muckraking hasn’t stopped due to social media. Twenty-first century muckrakers are only growing stronger each day, and with social media just a reach away, it’s easy to say that muckraking has evolved into social media.

1. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/53149809/> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. <http://www.newseuminstitute.org/2015/07/03/the-new-watchdogs-muckraking-in-a-digital-era/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/obama-united-nations-internet-misinformation/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. <http://bigthink.com/wikimind/youre-being-polarized-how-social-media-strengthens-your-beliefs-good-bad> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)