
The Rise Of Muckraking In The Progressive Era

During the years 1900-1916, it was the period of the Progressive Era. This was a time of economic growth due to a surge of production, population, and the expansion of the marketplace. Cities and farms grew simultaneously. The city was surrounded by the creative minds of artists, writers, and reformers. These individuals brought the community to life. The farms were able to recover their prices thus, agriculture in America entered the golden age. This period came with several enhancements in the society however, behind it all there was the presence of corrupt politics, business, meatpacking, and more. The journalist perceives that it's within the muck that the reality is commonly buried. This act was commonly known as muckraking which uses journalism to uncover the dark side of American life. This was an important aspect of the Progressive Era because it enlightened Americans about the filth and abuse that was taking place in the shadows of prosperity throughout society. As this information was released action was taken to repair the damage that has been done.

Many muckrakers were college-educated and they were fascinated by this journalistic side of writing. Some of the well-known muckrakers at the time were Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffen, Upton Sinclair, and Lewis Hine. These investigative journalists used many forms of media to capture the corruption. There were articles, books, and even photographs that conveyed to the people the terrors happening within the current state of the country. One of the earliest exposés was Ida Tarbell's piece, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* in 1902-1904. Tarbell used her experience to create the article as she grew up around this industry. This could be one aspect that made it successful among people. In this piece, she unveils the corrupt practices of the oil business industry, specifically the story of John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller began his business journey when he was about 23 years old. In 1858 he found a partner, M.B. Clark, who helped him start a business as they combined their savings. As he discovered many ways to improve the company, Rockefeller branched off creating the Standard Oil Company in June 1870. He was able to make the workings of the business more efficient and one way he achieved this was to obliterate any competition. He utilized unfair practices to achieve superiority which caught the attention of many. Tarbell mentioned that Rockefeller would lower his prices and then increase them when the competition has been destroyed. Other illegal practices similar to this, led the Supreme Court to conclude that they infringed the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1911. This act prevented the presence of monopoly practices. It was clear that Rockefeller's business was a monopoly and because of Tarbell's report, the company has been removed. She was able to save other companies in America because their biggest competitor has been eliminated. This enormous impact attracted more attention to the term muckraking during this time.

In the same year, Tarbell's expose released, Lincoln Steffens article, *The Shame of the Cities*. His piece came out on January 1, 1904, which exposed the way that the social elite gained financially from the deception of politics. Essentially, when there were issues in the city, the American people would blame it on politicians or target a specific group of people however, they really should hold themselves responsible. Steffen states, "The misgovernment of the American people is misgovernment by the American people." (4) Steffen wrote about numerous cities including St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and Minneapolis. The one city that stood out was Minneapolis because of how one person could corrupt an entire city. Minneapolis was left with no governor, that's until Albert Alonzo Ames came along. He was a doctor who everyone

decided to follow as a leader. Ames was respected by many people as he not only helped the sick but he was there for anyone that needed any assistance even if it was for something that was not legal. Through this popularity, he was chosen to be the mayor of Minneapolis. With the power of being mayor, he did many questionable things like release prisoners, allow gambling, and made women put up stores and the profit from this went to him and his administration. He also auctioned frauds and made women pay officers with money, jewelry, or gold stars. Women were also forced to pay a fine of every other month. Because Ames allowed all of these things to happen, the city began to attract criminals which change the city for the worse. It only took one person to cause chaos in the city. As this news broke out people began to become more concerned with politics and how their cities were being governed. Steffen's work also impacted the Progressive Era pushing forward and made the movement more notable as people got more involved in the unfair treatment that was happening.

Tarbell and Steffen created works that sparked the minds of the American people to get them thinking about what really lies behind the success of the environment around them. However, one of the most renowned muckrakers, Upton Sinclair, published *The Jungle*, disclosed the contaminated slaughterhouses and the production of rotten meat which angered the people. Sinclair possibly had the most influential impact as a muckraker during this time. His book follows the story of a Lithuanian immigrant, Jurgis Rudkus, through Chicago's Packingtown and he reveals the dangerous working conditions and the horror of the American food industry. One example that was presented was that the slaughtered pigs were to be examined for tuberculosis by a government inspector, who gets distracted quite easily and will allow pigs to pass by unchecked. These pigs could be packaged and sold to consumers but little do they know that they have the disease. This is one red flag that should've been caught earlier to protect Americans. During the winter season, the working conditions were terrible. The employees were working in a cold and dark space. There were also chemicals on the ground that would seep into their clothes and cause sores to grow and lead to other serious health conditions like coughing up blood. It would get to the point where it was difficult for them to move because this disease has completely taken over their bodies. As for the meatpacking, if the workers stumbled upon spoiled meat they would have to either package it or cut it up and make it into sausage. These were all signs of unsanitary practices and this had people shocked because the food that they have been consuming was not handled with care and was most likely contaminated with bacteria and disease. Sinclair's exposé led to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 which required federal inspection and sanitary handling of meat for interstate commerce. It also passed the Pure Food and Drug Act that prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of adulterated, misbranded, or harmful foods, drugs or liquors. The fact that Sinclair's book alone was able to have this much of an impact on America shows that investigative journalists had an important role in saving American lives.

Muckraking did not always take the form of written work, it was also seen in the form of pictures. Lewis Hine wasn't a writer but the photographs he took of child labor represented the inequality in the workplace. In this era, wages were decreasing so children began working to help their parents. Employers hired children because they would work for less and at times it was easier for them to handle the smaller equipment. As child labor continued these children couldn't live their childhoods as they were engulfed in their work. Their working conditions were dangerous as they developed health problems along the way. The work environment caused these children to develop curved spines and diseases like bronchitis. Having to experience these conditions as a child must take a toll on their physical and mental state. They even faced long work hours and this wasn't an ideal place a child should be spending their time. Lewis Hine felt that child labor

was an issue that needed to be taken head-on so he decided to drop his position as a teacher and become an investigative photographer. He captured images that represented the many problems of child labor. The photo "Boy Running 'Trip Rope' in a Mine, Welch, WV" is a great representation of the unsafe conditions these children are to work in. A child should not be put in this situation. They should be in school, receiving an education but instead, they were willing to put themselves in harm's way to help with the family income. He wanted his photos to ignite the people to take action to initiate laws. Hine took many more photos like these which showed the American people that this needs to be changed. In 1916, Congress passed the Keating-Owens Act that enforced child labor standards. For example, it established a minimum working age of 14 and a maximum of an 8-hour workday. However, this was seen as unconstitutional but many still saw an issue that needed a resolution. Eventually, they banned child labor and set working standards. Through these pictures, people were visually stimulated and realized that working during this time was dangerous. These children had good intentions but it wasn't worth the risk. Hine was able to present to the world this problem and rescue the lives of many American children.

All of these journalists made an impact on society. Muckraking in the Progressive Era was significant because, although there were many achievements made, behind it all was a society of danger and improper practices. These journalists released these secrets to the public and it made everyone realize that they weren't living the life they thought they were living. People were getting hurt, people were getting manipulated, and people were sick all because these businesses just wanted to get the job done even if it wasn't done correctly. The American people became more concerned about their surroundings and wanted to get more involved. Laws were passed and companies were shut down through the work of these journalists. Muckraking continues to this day. News outlets report on controversial issues and exposed those who are accused of a crime. No matter the case the truth will always find its way out.