

# Journalism History

VOLUME 34 NUMBER 3

FALL 2008

# LIFE

**THE EXPLODING THREAT  
OF THE MIND DRUG  
THAT GOT OUT  
OF CONTROL**

## LSD



### **TURMOIL IN A CAPSULE**

One dose of LSD is enough  
to set off a mental riot  
of vivid colors and insights  
—or of terror and convulsions

DAVID ABRAHAMSON, JAMES BOYLAN,  
THOMAS B. CONNERY, AND JAN WHITT

## *The Jungle* at 100 A Century of the Journalism of Reform

*It has been just over 100 years since the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which certainly was a keystone in the arch of American's literature of reform. By means of a reconsideration at the work's centennial, these four essays explore a variety of historical issues: the origins and progress of the reformist impulse in U.S. journalism; the varied literary roots of American journalistic practices; the unresolved tensions between fictive and nonfictive writing; and the historiographic issues raised by the recent discovery of an unpublished, significantly longer version of the work. As an inspiration to all muck-raking journalists over the years, the seminal position of *The Jungle* in American letters is matched by few other works. It is hoped these essays will encourage a diverse conversation about the book, its causes, and its effects.*

### An Inconvenient Legacy *The Jungle* and the Immigrant Imperative

**T**he *Jungle* by Upton Sinclair appeared in 1906, a little more than 100 years ago. This essay will take a broad view of the work and its legacy, and my purpose is an ambitious one: to explore the possibility that there may be lessons in this masterpiece for us today about journalism in general and maybe even also about America. In no particular order, there are at least five aspects that might be worth examining.

Observation number one has to do with the role of what we today term long-form journalism. Before it was published in book form as a novel, *The Jungle* appeared in 1905 in serialized form in a periodical, *Appeal to Reason*, whose explicitly socialist agenda



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formed the core of its editorial mission.<sup>1</sup> With a \$500 advance from the magazine, Sinclair spent almost two months in south Chicago, doing the necessary shoe-leather reporting needed to get the details of the

physical and social realities which he used in the story.<sup>2</sup>

It may be stating the obvious, but for the last century or so the magazine form has been the keeper of the flame of long-form journalism. And it might be worth noting that this truism has held until perhaps in the last decade, when the Internet and the World Wide Web happened. It is certainly a reasonable avenue of inquiry to wonder what the future of long-form journalism—or perhaps its legacy—will be now that the Internet has such a central role in any definition of journalism. For example, what is happening to our fellow-citizens' attention spans? And how might the increasing social centrality of the Web affect them? It is often said that long-form journalism is the best place for the role of advocacy in journalism. If that is true, then what will be the future of advocacy?

In terms of the historical evolution of journalism, the twentieth century might some day be regarded as merely a passing, perhaps self-contradictory, moment. It might be characterized as something of a paradox: on the one hand, a fertile time for advocacy journalism and yet, on the other, an era with a widespread reverence for both objectivity and the short-form format. Can you imagine a future historian looking at this issue and perhaps seeing the twentieth century as somewhat aberrant? She might conclude that there was a 100-year period when journalism took certain forms, and then for various reasons those forms dissipated. Are we living at the end of a journalistic epoch? The beginning of a new one? I urge you to reach your own conclusions.

A second observation has to do with the role of sensationalism. *The Jungle* is filled, as we all know, with incredibly graphic details. There are factory workers who must use acid to remove the skins from the animals, and as a result their fingers are being eaten away by caustic chemicals. There are steaming vats of who-knows-what meat, and then we are told there also are dead rats in the vats. Furthermore, it is revealed the rats were poisoned before being added to vats. We also are told the factory buys rotten meat, which is then treated with chemicals such as borax and glycerin to mask the decay.

For a contemporary parallel of sorts, one might bring to mind the McDonalds Corporation's recent experience with the documentary film, *Super Size Me*.<sup>3</sup> It might be reasonable to wonder, since *The Jungle* appeared, how many hot dogs have not been eaten because of the book. But it is difficult to deny the fact—as the aphorism of local journalism has it: “If it bleeds, it leads”—that sensationalism is obviously part of the journalistic mix.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult, however, not to admire the fact that Sinclair was quite unhappy with the focus of the public's reaction to his work. Most seemed fascinated, almost obsessed, with the graphically lurid details of the world he described, while his purpose, the objective that he was seeking, was for the book to serve as a socialist call to arms. Yet the sensationalism seemed to overwhelm any sort of larger or more serious message that he intended to be found in the book. The only conclusion is that sensationalism works, no matter how much we might prefer a more rational approach. Perhaps the entire issue can best be understood as an example of the ultimate tension between what Camille Paglia called the Apollonian and the Dionysian,<sup>5</sup> and it can be argued that there are some circumstances which clearly call for the latter—and perhaps calling attention to the horrid factory conditions in the early 1900s was one of them.

A third observation concerns the nature of facticity. *The Jungle* was a novel, but it was based on real-world reporting. According to one biographer, Sinclair “moved about everywhere in the Chicago stockyards, talking and exchanging notes with scores of workers.”<sup>6</sup> I confess that I have something of an absolutist view about keeping the fiction out of nonfiction, or as Walt Harrington has so aptly put it, keeping the “non” in nonfiction.<sup>7</sup> A question, however, poses itself for *The Jungle*: Would it have been better as nonfiction? Ponder the following for a moment. Would it have been more successful? And thinking about contemporary reality, would a similarly fictionalized account today have more or less power?<sup>8</sup> Why do you think so?

Observation number four is concerned with what might be called the reformist impulse in American journalism. If importance is related to impact, *The Jungle* was an extremely important work. It was widely credited with leading to the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, one of the early pieces of reformist legislation of the Progressive Era. Indeed, in the view of some, the book was

one of the sparks of the Progressive movement. Michael Schudson, for example, in discussing the rise of professionalism in the early twentieth century, credited work such as *The Jungle* as a turning point in American journalism.<sup>9</sup>

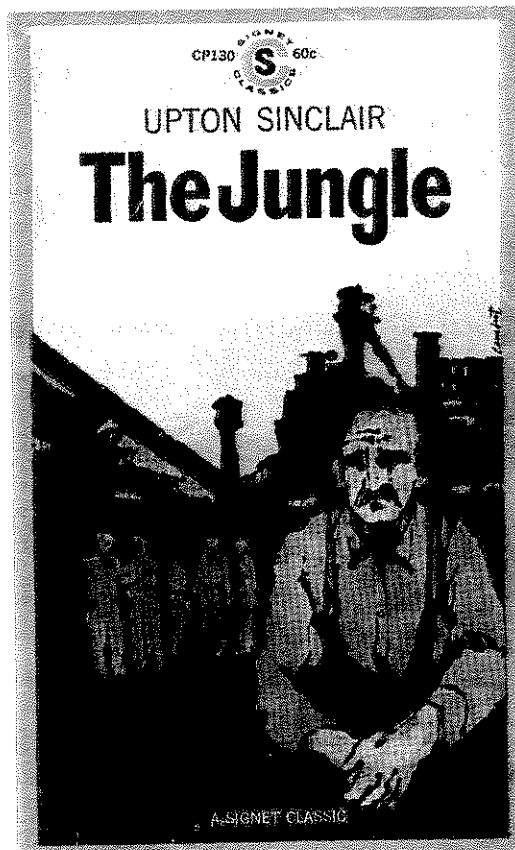
It can, in fact, be argued that journalism's essential reformist impulse is a somewhat unique American notion, certainly when compared to most European journalism. The legitimacy of journalism's role in speaking truth to power—or, in the oft-quoted words of Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley, to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”<sup>10</sup>—as well as a number of other progressive currents in the American press, exist today in large measure due to the public reaction to the abuses revealed during the era of *The Jungle*. And if we are to look for more contemporary examples, we can note the role of the press in the civil rights movement, which was eloquently documented in Gene Roberts' and Hank Klibanoff's *The Race Beat*,<sup>11</sup> or the way in which Seymour Hersh's revelations about Abu Ghraib played a role in changing the public perception of what many have come to regard as our misadventure in Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

Which leads to a fifth observation. Given all of the above, my last point might be termed, as stated in the title of this essay, “The Immigrant Imperative.” It could perhaps be the most important lesson of all of *The Jungle*. And it may be the most relevant because, in the contemporary political climate, it is especially applicable. Beyond *The Jungle*'s exemplary role as an exposé, the work is a call—a plea, actually—for what, in the discourse of today, we would term inclusion. In a society such as ours, so inarguably built on successive eras of immigration, Sinclair's story from a century ago about Jurgis and Marija and Atanas and Kotrina will always have a special resonance.

It has to be because as Americans that is who we are. Our families, all of our families, came from somewhere else. If we acknowledge that, then, with your permission, I would suggest that we have no choice but to try to work towards a more pluralistic, a more tolerant, and a more connected future. It is my hope, therefore, that if we can understand that, then perhaps some of the current debate raging today about immigration can be somewhat better informed, in small part by the spirit of a work written slightly more than 100 years ago.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1897 by Julius Wayland and co-edited by Fred Warren, *Appeal to Reason* magazine was a champion of the socialist cause, often publishing excerpts from books by Tom Paine, Karl Marx, and Edward Bellamy. In addition to Sinclair, notable contributors included Jack London, Mary “Mother” Jones, Stephen Crane, Helen Keller, and Eugene Debs. At one point, the magazine had the fourth highest circulation of any U.S. weekly, topping three-quarters of million shortly before World War I. The magazine ceased publication in 1922 in the midst of the Red Scare period. For more on the publication, see John Graham, ed., *Yours for the Revolution: The Appeal to Reason* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); and Fred D. Warren, *The Fighting Editor: Warren and the Appeal* (New York: Beekman,



1974).

<sup>2</sup> While there are numerous biographies of Sinclair, three are worthy of mention: Leon A. Harris, *Upton Sinclair, American Rebel* (New York: Crowell, 1975); Kevin Mattson, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006); and Anthony Arthur, *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Super Size Me*, directed by Morgan Spurlock, Kathbur Pictures, 2004. For further argument on the same issue, see Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); and Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson, *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> One of the more thoughtful works on the origins of journalistic excess is John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Rabindra Nath Mookerjee, *Art for Social Justice: The Major Novels of Upton Sinclair* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 38-39.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Harrington, "The Writer's Choice," *River Teeth* 5 (Spring 2004). A reprint of the essay is at [http://www.ialjs.org/IALJS\\_Literary\\_Journalism\\_Newsletter%202.1.pdf](http://www.ialjs.org/IALJS_Literary_Journalism_Newsletter%202.1.pdf) (accessed on Dec. 1, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The success of another recent piece of fact-based fiction, with its ability to touch audiences around the world, also comes to mind. See Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism* 2 (August 2001): 149-70.

<sup>10</sup> Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936) wrote a nationally syndicated newspaper column using the satirical voice of fictional "Mr. Dooley," an outspoken and somewhat caustic first-generation, Irish-American bar owner. For more details on the "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" quotation, see <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2852> (accessed on Oct. 21, 2007). An interesting biography of Dunne is Charles Fanning, *Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley: The Chicago Years* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).