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Differences in newspaper bias and focus between the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News* During the Coverage of the Spanish American War of 1898

At the start of the year of 1898 a conflict that had been in the making for several years, between the Spanish empire and the up and coming United States, was soon to break out in to a war that would define both nations place in world politics for centuries to come. The issue began in the Spanish empire, which in 1898 controlled a large portion of the Philippines, Cuba, and a few other small islands around the world. These territories made Spain an empire that, although on the decline, still commanded respect. The United States of America was quickly gaining recognition as a global economic powerhouse with the military to support this new claim to power, but the U.S. pursued an isolationist foreign policy.

The island of Cuba was actively seeking its independence from Spain, and appealed to the United States for help. Even though the United States was approached for assistance, the government was wary of aiding Cuban forces because of the threat of war with Spain. Wealthy businessmen and politicians wanted war with Spain because they knew it would change foreign policy, by eliminating isolation. This new foreign policy would in turn allow the U.S. to protect their foreign investments and maximize their economic opportunities abroad. These men knew that they had to persuade the public in order to force a war, and thus a massive media campaign began in the United States in the year of 1897, changing the relationship between the media, government, and the American people permanently.

The *New York Times*, during the Spanish American War of 1898, set the standard for unbiased newspapers, but in Dallas, as evidenced by the *Dallas Morning News*, there were notable differences as a result of different target audiences. These differences and similarities can be seen by comparing the periodical coverage of three key events during the war; the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine on February 15, the formal declaration of war on April 25 and the agreement of ceasefire on August 12.

It is vital to understand that the *New York Times* was not an example of yellow journalism. New York had more newspapers than any other city in the world, each with different styles and target audiences. The most popular trend at the time was yellow journalism, which focused on exaggerating facts and misinterpreting the news in order to make articles more appealing, and consequently sell more papers. Newspapers with this focus used drawings and comics often, in order to get their point across, even to people who could not read.[[1]](#footnote-1) The *New York Times* was different because its focus was to inform readers who had some kind of knowledge of current events, and then let them decide on their own conclusions. It did not use images in any way, because it was not interested in selling to the illiterate demographic of New York City.

Before analyzing the similarities and differences between the coverage of each individual event, it is important to look at the general differences that existed between the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News* in 1898. The main difference existed in the general layout of the newspapers. The *New York Times* filled the pages with six to eight columns of articles, with very few advertisements to interrupt them. There was rarely a break in the words, and even headlines were not much bigger than the rest of the paper. The *Dallas Morning News* seemed to be much more reader friendly. Even though it was set up in the same column style, each page had large sections cut out for advertisements. The headlines were easily visible and clearly stood out. Also, the *Dallas Morning News* used pictures and drawings to augment a story. The best example can be found on the *Dallas Morning News* edition of Thursday, February the 17th, were there is a large depiction of the explosion of the Maine, rendered solely from telegraph description.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The other important difference between the two newspapers could be seen in the sources. The *Dallas Morning News* frequently cited other newspapers, primarily those in New York. They did not get most of the information on a firsthand account, but instead used bits and pieces from other periodicals in order to create their articles. The *New York Times* was much different in this aspect. Since this newspaper was located in the center of the media world at the time, the newspaper had much easier access to primary accounts. This newspaper rarely cited others, but obtained its information directly from the source. There were several cases where they cited foreign newspapers in order to ascertain foreign opinion, strategy, and movements, but other U.S. sources were never used. [[3]](#footnote-3)

These two differences, layout and sources, are important to consider before reading the articles because they bring with them several key implications. When considering the layout, the *Dallas Morning News* left less space to actual articles and information. This means that less content was going to be available to those readers, and information required a much greater selective process. The *New York Times* did not struggle as much with the same problem because it left most of its pages open to articles. This difference is clearly evidenced by the content of the newspapers. The *New York Times* tried to be unbiased and give the full story, from all points of view, without cutting out any important facts. It then left it up to the reader to determine his or her own conclusions. Of course, this does not apply to the editorial section, in which opinions were clearly stated and argued. The *Dallas Morning News* only had so much space to work with, so they were forced to cut out all of the evidence, or simply choose a side of the argument to discuss more, making the newspaper much more biased. More importantly, the Dallas Morning News was more biased because it reflected the culture in the region to which it was targeted.

This bias in the *Dallas Morning News* was only strengthened by the question of sources. Since the *Dallas Morning News* did not receive much primary information, its content was prone to have mistakes and bias, either directly from the authors who chose only certain information to use in their own articles, or as a result of using information of a secondary nature. The authors had the freedom to choose what sources to use, and the reader never knew the difference. Even though the *New York Times* could have done the same thing, it is less likely because of the fact that primary sources were used the most. This does not mean that they did not pick and choose which sources to use, but at least it was much easier for the reader to determine where the information was coming from and if it was a well-informed article. Readers of the *New York Times* noticed the difference, as evidenced by a letter written to the editor by W. H. O’Grady, a New York resident who desired to discuss the Pope’s involvement in the war. O’Grady, among other things, wrote the following; “I would like to see an editorial in your splendid paper on this subject, treated not in the intolerant spirit of Harper’s Weekly of twenty years ago, but with that fairness and logic for which you are noted.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The first major point of the war under scrutiny was the explosion of the U.S.S. Maine. The United States gunship was entering Havana harbor on a friendly stop in order to resupply and communicate with Spanish authorities on the island. Late in the night, a huge explosion occurred under mysterious and unknown circumstances and the ship sunk soon after, killing hundreds of American soldiers. Over the next few days, this event was all across the media, including the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News*.

The *New York Times* was thorough and unbiased in its coverage of the U.S.S. Maine explosion, covering both sides of the argument with credible sources. The main goal of this periodical was to inform the public and not use yellow journalism as a tool to increase sales, as many New York newspapers did at the time. To accomplish this goal, the *New York Times* searched for as many concrete facts as they could. In their February 17th edition, The Times discusses the total number of victims, which totaled 253, giving their names, ranks, and place of birth.[[5]](#footnote-5) After the writers laid down the facts, a complete description of the events ensued. Straight from the headlines it is clear that the main message is that the cause is in no way known for sure, and that any talk is only speculation at best. Navy experts are set on record as believing the tragedy to be an accident, as one article describes; “There was but one sentiment expressed at the navy yard this morning in relation to the disaster to the battleship Maine. It was a feeling that it was due to accident and to no other cause.”[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other hand, naval constructor Bowles, who had an intimate knowledge of the U.S.S. Maine, was cited as believing the explosion to be caused by some outside force. “The explosion, I am convinced, was due to nothing in the ship, but was caused by some external force.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This tendency to argue for both sides continued all throughout the paper.

Other important aspects surrounding the tragedy, like international and American public reaction, were also well covered in the *New York Times*. Spanish reaction was discussed without an accusatory tone. Several articles in the February 17th edition not only mention the help and regret received by the Spanish, but also quote Spanish newspapers, laying in evidence the feeling of remorse that most of the Spanish public felt over the disaster. [[8]](#footnote-8) On the home front, the paper tried to encourage its readers by writing about the survivors as if they were heroes; “…The officers and men who were left alive behaved themselves like American sailors, stuck by their ship and comrades, and were brave, cool, and efficient in the presence of dreadful and sudden disaster.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Flags were ordered to be at half-mast all across the country, and the paper did its part in promoting this presidential order.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The editorial section of the *New York Times* outlined the general educated opinion, which was not as aggressive as yellow journalism in other periodicals would suggest. The editor clearly argued that only a foolish man could believe that the Spanish government sanctioned the attack, and that if there were any Spanish involved at all, they were radicals acting against their government, for which a whole country could not receive the blame. The editor also called for the government to build more ships in order to strengthen the navy and discourage any possible rivals from military action. Finally, there was a call for the readers to stay level headed, “not allowing themselves to become excited by criminally sensational newspapers or otherwise”. [[11]](#footnote-11)

The *Dallas Morning News* was more biased than its northern counterpart, clearly laying more blame on the Spanish and setting up the tone for war in the near future. In the *Dallas Morning News* edition of Thursday, February the 17th there was a much more obvious side to which the authors were leaning after the destruction of the U.S.S. Maine. The first headline clearly laid out the direction of the rest of the paper, “By a Torpedo,” a sentiment repeated in most of the articles. [[12]](#footnote-12) The second page of the newspaper was full of direct quotes from men who believed the tragedy to be a purposeful attack by the Spanish. Senator Butler from North Carolina, Senator Morgan from Alabama, Senator Mills from Illinois, retired Admiral Belknap, and Commander Montgomery all had articles in the paper, in which they argued that the explosion was not an accident at all.[[13]](#footnote-13) There was even an article that attempted to discredit the accidental explosion theory, stating that “every precaution was taken” and that “these facts make it extremely difficult to account for the explosion as an accident.” [[14]](#footnote-14) The *Dallas Morning News* then discussed how young Texans were enlisting all across the state, preparing for “the inevitable war soon to come.”[[15]](#footnote-15) There was talk of war all across the state, and the periodical only served to promote the feeling even more. The paper never once stated that the cause was most definitely a purposeful Spanish attack, but even though the last article left final judgment up to the divers, it was well implied all throughout that the Spanish were guilty and war could be the only outcome.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The second mayor point of comparison during the Spanish American War of 1898 was the formal declaration of war. Spain was first to declare war, on April the 22nd, feeling as if they had done everything possible to avoid conflict, but that the U.S. was only prolonging peace long enough to strengthen its navy. The U.S. followed with its own declaration of war a few days later, on April the 25th, with a battle plan already in place and the confidence, hope, and desire to finish the conflict quickly.

After the formal declaration of war, the *New York Times* devoted its entire April 27th edition to war coverage, once again attempting to inform its readers, but clearly showing nationalist pride and a deeply rooted suspicion towards Spain. The Wednesday morning paper was full of war related articles, even when it dealt with local issues. The most obvious example was the front page article that discussed the explosion at a local powder mill, a tragedy to be sure, but an event that could easily have been an accident. The *New York Times* quickly attributes this “accident” as direct sabotage by the Spanish, since there was a large group of them who lived in a nearby town. There was never any real evidence, but the simple fact that there were Spaniards nearby was enough to lay the blame on them.[[17]](#footnote-17) Further ahead in the paper there was a large section devoted to local impacts of the war. The price raise on flour and paper was well explained, and readers were told to expect smaller loaves of bread.[[18]](#footnote-18) The blockade on Cuba completely cut off imports of tobacco, and until new trade was established elsewhere, The Times warned readers that tobacco was going to be very scarce.[[19]](#footnote-19) Finally, any mail to Spain was prohibited by the Postmaster General, after an episode in Louisiana in which a letter was seized with information on American coastal defenses in the Mississippi area.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The *New York Times* was very confident about the prospect of war with Spain. Even though they were not singing victory before it actually happened, the general feeling from the paper was that of superiority and an assured victory. The Times quoted naval officers who said; “…the war has found the Spanish Navy entirely unprepared with any intelligent plan of operations” and believed the Spanish to be overcautious and avoiding any direct confrontation. [[21]](#footnote-21) College students were publicly asked not to enlist, because there were already more volunteers than deemed necessary.[[22]](#footnote-22) Even foreign newspapers were used to convey the same feeling of superiority. The London Daily News went on record as saying that the blockade of Cuba was nearly impossible to break, and that Spain was staying away from any direct battles because American Naval superiority was well noted.[[23]](#footnote-23) Spanish media ridiculed McKinley for his slow response, but their military and financial circles feared his policy, knowing that it would cripple Spain’s finance and undermine their power.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The editorial section of The Times supported the war but criticized its funding while also warning against a possible surprise attack from Spain. The main topic during the editorial was the borrowing that the U.S. government was doing to support the war. The editor believed that the war should have been tax funded, because “It is our war, we should be willing to pay for it.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Already the consequences of borrowing money from foreign governments could be seen, and the media was trying to call attention to the problem in order to avoid it altogether. The editorial ended with a warning to the Navy. Spanish radicals were already known to be very discontent with the course the war was taking, and it was believed that in order to calm them down, the Spanish Navy was going to attempt a surprise attack and win a victory any way possible.

The *Dallas Morning News* highlighted the coming of the war as an answer to public outcry against the Spanish. Once again, the first headline clearly outlined what the paper was all about. “And Hostilities Begin” was the first title on the April 22nd edition, the same day war was declared. [[26]](#footnote-26) The paper quickly stated how war had finally arrived, and that all those who had been shouting for it, had it in their hands at last. Any Spanish who had been sympathetic to America were highlighted; most of whom resigned shortly after war began. Among those who resigned were the Spanish foreign minister and the whole Cabinet.[[27]](#footnote-27) Since these few “trustworthy” Spanish were gone, it was now assumed that there should be no mixed feelings towards that country. Adding to the general dislike against the enemy, local tragedies in Texas were also blamed on the Spanish, as what happened in New York. Ships in Galveston were delayed because of torpedo launch failures, and the press was quick to blame it on Spanish treachery. Experts argued that it could have been a simple matter of wear, which happens quickly at sea, but it was much easier and more newsworthy to suspect Spanish sabotage.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The *Dallas Morning News* also spent most of its pages praising the United States military action. Only a day after war had started, the U.S. had already captured three Spanish ships, and this was the main focus for the periodical on Saturday, April the 23rd. This edition highlighted the battleship New York’s capture of a huge Spanish ship and over 1000 men, discussing how this could very well be a precedent for how the war was going to pan out.[[29]](#footnote-29) The blockade of Cuba was discussed in detail, and the paper even included drawings of the most prominent Spanish forts on the island, ridiculing their antique defenses. Finally, the periodical detailed the movement of all the major U.S. ships, stating their objectives and possible confrontations.[[30]](#footnote-30) Clearly the newspaper was not overly concerned about the outcome of the war, or this sensitive information would not have been so easily revealed.

A unique aspect of the *Dallas Morning News*, in covering the beginning of hostilities, was the addition of the Cuban reaction and the law of neutrality. The newspaper had several articles that discussed the readiness of over 60,000 Cuban men who wished to fight and gain the islands independence. These men provided a huge tactical advantage and were seen as an asset for the U.S. military.[[31]](#footnote-31) Additionally, over half a page discussed the international laws of neutrality. These laws were important to remember because the Spanish fleet was located in Portuguese territory, a country that had already declared themselves neutral. The Morning News warned that if the situation continued for much longer, war with Portugal could very well have become a possibility.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The Spanish American War did not last long. After a few months of scattered fighting, and with the help of neutral France, a ceasefire was signed. This event occurred on August 12, and is the next major event of the war under comparison. Both the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News* covered the event, and even used some of the same exact quotes due to the lack of information.

The *New York Times* did not focus on the ceasefire itself, as there was not much to report, but instead focused on the effects of the war and highlighted American bravery and heroism. The first several editions of The Times, after August 12, only discussed which prominent political figures had a chance of being chosen to take part of the peace committee. These members were not going to be revealed until right before the peace talks, so speculation did not do much good.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Instead, the articles in the *New York Times* that related to the war in any way focused on its effects. First, the effects on the American people were discussed, with senators being quoted on how this war taught the country about the power of the navy and the importance of being united behind a single cause.[[34]](#footnote-34) The exact amount of money spent on the war was revealed, and plans to lessen the amount of troops also became available to the public. Second, the effects on Spain and Cuba received some attention in the paper. Local media in Madrid was used in arriving to the conclusion that Spain was relieved to put an end to the hostilities.[[35]](#footnote-35) Specific numbers were also employed in order to prove that the mortality rate had greatly decreased “from 103 to 37 daily” and the postal system would soon be greatly upgraded. [[36]](#footnote-36)

An important focus of the Times editions surrounding the end of the war was that of American bravery. Page three of the Sunday edition, dated August 14, devoted a whole column to the account of a Spanish officer who witnessed the Battle of El Caney. This officer spoke of the American soldiers as great warriors, saying that they “fought like lions” and that “their gallantry was heroic.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Another article published a letter sent by Major Markley, who praised the 71st Regiment, a volunteer section, for its heroism during the war.[[38]](#footnote-38) Clearly the *New York Times* was trying to praise and honor its nation’s warriors.

At the time of the ceasefire, The *Dallas Morning News* did not report on local effects, but instead focused on the Philippines and the possible war between Great Britain and Russia. Even though the news of the ceasefire was covered, it was not the main focus behind the paper. Only a letter from President McKinley was published, in which he pronounced his relief with the end of the war and commended American troops and citizens for such an effective campaign.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The *Dallas Morning News* emphasized international issues. The possible annexation of the Philippines received most of the attention. The islands went on record as wanting to join the union, but they still belonged to Spain. In order to avoid more conflict, Spain was willing to sell the islands to the U.S. The paper had several articles that included a favorable opinion on this purchase, although most of the “experts” that were sighted did not want annexation.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The other issue that received most of the printing space in the *Dallas Morning News* was the rising conflict in China, between Great Britain and Russia. The paper quoted over eight other periodicals in England and China. All of them evidenced an extreme dislike for the British Prime Minister and his strategies of dealing and business in China. The periodicals blamed him for a conflict, which in their opinion was not only regrettable, but inevitable.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Over three major events of the Spanish American War of 1898, the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News* showed similarities and differences, but the different layouts and sources contributed with regional differences to make periodicals that were clearly different. The *New York Times* focused on unbiased reports that exposed both sides of an argument. This periodical had a greater tendency to report local incidents, and stayed away from any drawings or illustrations of any kind in order to avoid the yellow journalism that was rampant in New York. The *Dallas Morning News* also attempted to expose accurate information, but clearly showed a greater tendency to pick a specific side and support it more. This newspaper focused more on international conflict and consequences, using a few illustrations in order to make a more appealing paper. One was not better than the other. Each newspaper had differences that made it more appealing to the different readers they were each marketing to, reflecting differences in the American North and South.

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