I remember when I first read that both George Raft and Ronald Reagan auditioned for the lead in one of my favorite movies, “Casablanca,” and Reagan was supposedly a studio favorite. My gut reaction was, “Wow, how different the great classic movie might have turned out—a dud, maybe.”

That’s the same reaction I had to many of the historical tidbits offered in W. Joseph Campbell’s new book, The Year that Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms. For example, Campbell explains how the New York Times was debating in 1897 whether to adopt the following new motto: “Full of Meat, Clean and Neat” or “All the World’s News, but not a School for Scandal” (p. 96). I wonder how politically correct liberal vegetarians would react to that meat motto today.

I also wonder what would have happened if Joseph Pulitzer’s 1897 opinion of Adolph Ochs’s newly refurbished New York Times had become the norm. Campbell quotes Pulitzer as describing the Times that year as a “derelict of journalism” and a “money-losing instrument of trusts and monopolies” (p. 97). Pulitzer said because the Times was taking its marching orders from trusts, insurance companies, and monied interests, “the shadow of death is settling slowly but surely down upon” the paper (p. 97). Where would journalism be today if that shadow had indeed strangled the Times, as Pulitzer boldly predicted? Or what if Ochs hadn’t slashed the Times’s price to a penny that year in a desperate move to boost circulation? He did so just a few steps ahead of a disgruntled bookkeeper who was threatening to reveal that Ochs had been lying and inflating his paper’s circulation figures for quite some time (p. 98).

Further, how would journalism be different if famed muckraker Lincoln Steffens had won what Campbell described as a major press war that year. In this war, Steffens insisted newspapers could only survive if they gave up money-grubbing commercialism, stopped pandering to advertisers, and instead adopted an “anti-journalistic literary paradigm” (p. 99). Steffens maintained that journalism should offer a literary refuge, where poets, novelists, short-story writers and essayists could find an “electric,” and eclectic home, devoted to discussions of art, life and literary styles (p. 100). Steffens said stories should be written “so humanely that the reader will see himself in the other fellow’s place”; further, Steffens instructed his staff to “find the charm and beauty and significance of commonplace men and women” (p. 103). As Campbell points out, it sounds vaguely like the literary “new journalism” movement of the 1960s.

Thus, Campbell argues quite effectively in this book that 1897 was indeed a pivotal year for the news business—a period when, clearly, journalism could have gone in several distinctly different directions, including adopting more of the “activist journalism” of William Randolph Hearst and Pulitzer, the serious if somewhat stodgy New York Times style of objectivity, or the literary style of Steffens. Hearst was pretty far out there on the activist/yellow journalism scale. For example, he had no qualms about hiring a reporter to break a Cuban political prisoner out of a Cuban jail in 1897 and then parading this beautiful female escapee on the New York high society circuit. But most students of journalism history already know a lot about the flamboyant Hearst and his competitor in the crime of yellow journalism, Joseph Pulitzer. What is interesting about Campbell’s book is the way the author shines a historical light on Steffens, a man who has been hailed for muckraking but ignored in most journalism history texts as they describe 1897 journalism.
Steffens is probably best known as one of the fathers of muckraking. He gained national prominence in magazine exposes, such as his "Shame of the Cities" series between 1902 and 1912. But Campbell adds to Steffens’ legend by insisting quite convincingly that Steffens played a dramatic and important role in 1897 by serving as city editor at the New York Commercial Advertiser. In that role he rejected journalistic conformity and conventional norms and instead offered some alluring alternatives.

Campbell’s book is worth the price of admission all by itself for the author’s description of Steffens and his impact on journalism. But there are many more reasons to read this book, including Campbell’s ability to offer a time machine through his vivid writing that transports readers right into the middle of the sights, sounds and smells of 1897 New York City. Further, there is the appealing prospect of Campbell showing by example how journalism history can and should offer more in-depth studies of a whole year at a time. In this case, as Campbell amply demonstrates, there was an abundance of memorable journalistic events happening within a twelve-month span. For example, the New York Sun published that year what is probably the most famous newspaper editorial of all time, “Is there a Santa Claus?” In addition, the New York Times finally settled on and unveiled its famous motto, “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” And the longest-running newspaper comic strip, “The Katzenjammer Kids,” debuted. In addition, the first half-tone process was applied to a high-speed newspaper-printing web, paving the way for the regular use of photos in newspapers. Meanwhile, public libraries in New Jersey and New York debated whether to remove both Hearst’s and Pulitzer’s yellow newspapers from their shelves, setting off a debate over the proper ethical standards for journalism.

As Campbell points out, one-year studies are quite popular in other fields of history. But until now they have not been heavily used in journalism. 1897 proved to be a fertile field for journalistic history, and other journalism historians perhaps will be willing to follow Campbell and dissect other important turning point years in the future. There is 1902, for example, when magazine muckraking inexplicably blossomed at the same time in about a half dozen magazines. Or, alternatively, there is 1954 when the press seemed to rebel en masse against Joe McCarthy. Another fertile time to study is 1968 when Martin Luther King was shot, followed a few months later by Robert Kennedy. In the wake of all the violence, the press, after years of straight-laced conservative coverage of most cultural events, seemed suddenly to be enthralled with covering hippies, yippees, Black Panthers, and other alternative lifestyles.

Some reviewers have said Campbell’s book about 1897 can perhaps calm those who are anxious about the fate of journalism today. The argument is that just like in 1897, journalism is presently facing a time of tremendous turmoil. At the end of 1897, journalism emerged from the fire of turbulent times with a better product, tested by change and competition. But that seems a little too pat of an answer for today’s predicament. That’s because no matter how bad the ethical lapses of the press were in 1897, Campbell amply demonstrates that people read newspapers then, if only to see what latest outrage Hearst and Pulitzer were involved in. It seems that people in 1897 had an innate curiosity about the ever-changing world around them, and newspapers, hate them or love them, provided information, entertainment, and scandal—in short, something to talk to the neighbors about.

However, it’s hard to use history as a way to reassure ourselves that the press will eventually find a way to connect to the current “me generation” that bowls alone, exists in cyberspace, plays video games, and once in a while watches Jon Stewart on late-night TV. But young people today are, sadly, avoiding traditional newspapers and news by the millions. I invite historians to read Campbell’s book and then let the debate begin over the similarities and difference between 1897 and 2007.

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