

George G. Foster's Urban Journalism as an Antecedent to Muckraking

Abstract

This paper examines the writings of George G. Foster in antebellum New York. It analyzes his particular style of social commentary and press criticism as early forms of alternative journalism and muckraking. A review of primary and secondary sources determines that although presented in a more literary, non-fiction style, Foster's writings demonstrate an analytical and expository approach to journalism that existed long before the most famous muckrakers changed American print culture. By focusing on the work of the largely understudied journalist and litterateur George G. Foster in the context of society, culture, and the press during the mid-nineteenth century, this study demonstrates that such early alternative forms of reporting should be viewed as a compelling journalistic endeavor that engaged both society and the press. Ultimately, Foster's exposés, as printed in the *New York Tribune* and later in his books, were aimed at raising the public's consciousness about the need for moral and social change, and served as a precursor to muckraking.

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Recognizing the historical significance and authenticity of city reporter and litterateur George G. Foster's antebellum writings helps identify early forms of muckraking, press criticism, and the development of alternative journalism as a form of social commentary. Foster can be studied as one of the early literary journalists, alongside fellow writers such as Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, and Henry Mayhew, and his non-fictional approach in observing and recording the vices and virtues of New York City during the mid-nineteenth century is readily identifiable with the genre of urban journalism. The genre itself can be defined as one serving to effectively comment and critique the urban scene of the growing nineteenth-century metropolis, and as such it holds a solid place in the development of American journalism.

"What a task have we undertaken!" Foster wrote. He defined his own reporting style as a way to "penetrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis, the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch, and all the sad realities that go to make up the lower stratum — the underground story — of life in New York!"¹ So began his 1856 volume titled *New York by Gas-Light and New York by Gas-Light With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine*.

Although different from mainstream journalistic writing, Foster's style can also be qualified as one that emerged because of a changing social context. It was bold and scathing and resembled what Michel Schudson identified as the emerging state of the American press starting in the 1830s, a protest of established power against a democratized — in this case, middle class

— social order.² Foster’s social commentary and criticism, which included critiques of the contemporary press, are exemplary of the emerging individualistic style of the mid-nineteenth century journalists. Exploring such analytical storytelling can further the idea that journalism is not a simple act of reporting the facts about current affairs, but it is a rather complex process of fact gathering, observation, and a meaningful interpretation.

Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda described literary journalism of the twentieth century in a similar fashion. In Foster’s case, such characterization is useful inasmuch as researchers have more commonly cited him as a literary figure than as a journalist — a notion the present study attempts to reverse. Kerrane and Yagoda point to the fact that the key word describing alternative journalism is innovation, such as “portrait painting, rebounding, playing blues guitar, or doing quantum physics, high-level literary journalism is a tradition, with each practitioner standing on the shoulders of his or her predecessors.”³ In these terms, and when placed in the context of the 1840s social reality, Foster too can be viewed as a predecessor of literary, or narrative, journalism.

Forster was one of the early contributors to the formation of a yet unknown field of investigative journalism known as muckraking, a term coined much later by Theodore Roosevelt. The progressive Republican president (1901-1909) had given a speech that described some of the most outspoken journalists of the time who had written about social conditions from the point of view of objective observers. Foster effectively used such critical approach, based on his observations while strolling through the streets of the city, as a way to comment on the social conditions in New York at the time. His criticisms of both society and the press were published not only in the *New York Tribune* — a publication Foster worked for at the time — but also in

Foster's books *New York in Slices* (1849), *New York by Gas-light* (1850), *New York Naked* (1850), and *Fifteen Minutes around New York* (1854).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the press had shifted its reportage toward a more lifelike reportorial style, commenting and critiquing the individual and society. Such radical approach to journalism began appearing in the 1840s, an expository style visible in Foster's work. Historian David S. Reynolds contends that Foster was able to put aside the restrictive conventions of journalism and truthfully depict the sights, sounds, and smells of the surrounding world for his readers.⁴ In these terms, surveying the development of urban journalism as a form of social commentary and critique during the antebellum era, can serve as not only an exploration of emerging journalistic forms, but also as an argument against popular notions that journalistic endeavors should be viewed solely in terms of political coverage and public service.

As noted by journalism historian Hazel Dicken-Garcia, if one accepts journalism as a social institution, the evaluation of that institution's capacity to fulfill its duties requires a close examination of cultural norms and expectations, but most importantly, it demands the consideration of society's values.⁵ Foster's approach is precisely reflective of the antebellum culture in New York, and his commentary on the state of the press and his fellow journalists goes against commonly held notions about the latter, which becomes evident in the fact that only a reform-minded and influential publisher like Horace Greeley of the *Tribune* would openly welcome Foster's exposés.

In Dicken-Garcia's words, press criticism of the first half of the nineteenth century points to the fact that the function of the press was indeed to serve the public by pandering to baser tastes and failing to take a stand against threats to society. There was a struggle to preserve a romantic view of the crusading journalist, which Foster openly attacked in many of his works.

Mainstream papers would have for these reasons toned down Foster's approach to reporting on corruption in society. Non-fiction writers and artists, including journalists like Foster himself, were saying, according to historian Thomas Connery, "Come see how people live, how they talk, how they treat one another, what it is they value."⁶ Reputable newspapers of the time, such as the *New York Times* and the *Tribune* would have been unlikely to publish such sweeping stories about the gloom-and-doom of society that condemned immoral men, criticized public officials and fellow journalists, or exposed corruption and sex scandals. Indeed, Foster deviated from the mainstream press in terms of the language he used and the topics he covered, an aspect of his narrative and the lack of its recognition that make it a worthwhile record for exploration.

Background

Beginning in the 1830s, George G. Foster worked as an editor and reporter for various publications in New York, Pittsburg, and Alabama. Despite the scarcity of biographical records on the journalist, research suggests that he has been recognized primarily as a street wanderer who reported and commented on New York life and culture following the rise and fall of the licentious flash weekly press. In economics scholar George Rogers Taylor's words, "during his most active years, 1845-1856, Foster made a precarious living by observing and writing about the metropolis at the mouth of the Hudson. Few, if any contemporary writers knew the city by daylight and by gaslight, above ground and underground, better than he."⁷

As a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, Foster explored and documented the underground culture of the city in the late 1840s and early 1850s. He has been noted as an urban chronicler and his literary style of reporting on city life is evident in his newspaper columns and books alike. His series of articles, published in the *New York Tribune* in 1849 as *New York in*

Slices, bolstered the appearance of many similar works about American cities in what historian and literary critic David S. Reynolds calls *stylistic splintering*. The latter was imitated in all directions and publishers were suddenly issuing titles like *Hudson in Patches*, *Wisconsin in Chunks*, *Mississippi in Cobs*.”⁸ In these terms, Foster can be considered as one of the chief contributors to the emergence of such livelier-style city life reporting.⁹

He presented his observations to the reader in an attempt to explain the growing metropolis and the changes that have come with it. Indeed, the antebellum years were a time of radical expansion of population and shifts from rural to urban areas. In addition, growth of interconnecting systems of transportation and immigration triggered a growth in city living and pursuit of economic opportunities. The modernization was beginning to change the American landscape and subsequently its print culture. “New York in the nineteenth century constituted a locus of tremendous cultural experimentation and commercial possibility, especially during the middle decades,” writes journalism scholar Donna Dennis. “At the same time, thanks to its burgeoning book and newspaper publishing industries, New York came to enjoy unrivaled position as a communication center.”¹⁰ Before Foster’s work, New York was already shaping as the heart of the print world since the early 1800s when alternative publications, such as the scandalous flash weeklies, served to spice up the life of the middle classes and outrage the moral masses. Both, the flash press and the urban reporters covered similar aspects of life, but in remarkably different fashions. These writings were the true representation of that culture as the city itself transformed into a busy metropolis driven by a salacious commercial entertainment and a commercialized press, and defined by its raucous saloons, dance halls, and scandalous happenings.

Furthermore, popular attitudes reflecting Victorian sexual repression in antebellum America as reflected in the press held rich accounts of folk wisdom, the anti-flesh teachings of evangelical Christianity, popular science, moral reform, and sexual radicalism.¹¹ The context for the moral and social changes that took place in the nation, as well the way they reflected the larger cultural and economic changes of the period and its press, undoubtedly influenced Foster's writing.

Reynolds suggests that darkening of moral discourse occurs precisely in the absence of conflict. "The antebellum period has long been known as the great era of reform movements," Reynolds writes, "the time when piety came to be widely equated with puritanical moralism and when scores of societies were organized to combat behavioral vices and social ills."¹² In these terms, Foster's urban reporting style exemplifies an original exposé of such vices and ills.

Reynolds also notes during the first half of the nineteenth-century literature in general was intended to correct human behavior. Foster's approach was part of that effort and although viewed in literary terms, as a journalist he intended to attack the vices rotting society as he loudly demonstrated his goal to "stamp out various behavioral sins or social inequalities — intemperance, licentiousness, urban poverty, chattel and wage slavery, poor prison conditions."¹³

In Reynolds' words, a vociferous social critic and reformer, Foster set out to expose the moral sins and degradation of New York's society at the time. Its licentiousness, inequality, urban poverty, corruption, and wage slavery were at the center of his work, yet as one of the few authors to address society's flaws, he too described vice in such lurid detail that the latter could potentially brand him as dangerously immoral and sacrilegious.¹⁴ Perhaps the latter can be seen among some of the reasons Foster was not as successful of a journalist or a muckraker, yet his

journalistic endeavors, including his work for the *Tribune* and the short-lived American satire magazines *Yankee Doodle* and *John-Donkey* are important to note here as well.

David E. Shi, a cultural historian and newspaper essayist, contends that by the 1850s the tide of cultural idealism had changed the landscape of social concern with the leading idea of each day being the true. “Little by little, here and there, more candid and precise representation of contemporary life began to surface in cultural expression,” he writes, “as people developed a consuming passion for ‘actual’ knowledge about their increasingly diverse society.”¹⁵ It was the journalist’s duty and calling to respond to these shifts, yet the mainstream press was not so quick at deviating from its established role as a guardian of the public good when it came to exposing darkening moral discourse, an undertaking that defined Foster’s reportorial style.

Although researchers more frequently cite him as a literary figure, he more clearly represents a realistic style of reporting that followed the growth of sensational penny papers. His *New York in Slices*, which had sold nearly 100,000 copies in pamphlet form, is one of the most notable examples of such realism, and as Reynolds contests, Foster could rightly call himself “the philosophic explorer of the lowest phenomena of life and human nature, a writer devoted to ‘gathering up the fragments, the refuse of everyday life.’”¹⁶

Literature Review

A review of secondary literature reveals that scholars have already explored journalistic endeavors and existing criticism of the press from the antebellum era; however, very few accounts recognize Foster in terms of journalism, identifying him as a precursor to a much larger transformation in media that led to the development of muckraking. Since various political and social forces influence the evolving definition of journalistic content in any given historical

moment, this review of literature illuminates some of the cultural influences that may have shaped Foster's work.

A rare account of Foster's affair with urban life depictions is that of George Rogers Taylor. His *Gaslight Foster: A New York 'Journeyman Journalist' at Mid-Century* provides a valuable outsider point of view in terms of journalism studies. Taylor noted that urban history studies have neglected Foster's work, and except for an occasional writer who has quoted a few of Foster's lines, his work remained buried in newspaper files.¹⁷

Taylor indirectly puts Foster in the same field as the muckrakers of the next century, noting that the journalist shared sentiments with the unfortunate on the same note as ironically critiquing the prestigious. "Functioning much like a modern newspaper columnist, he reflected the optimism and perfectionism of his era while at the same time exposing the prevailing humbug, poverty, and degradation," Taylor wrote." In so doing he often offended the respectable people of a romantic and prudish age."¹⁸

A similar view of Foster is also noted by historian Stuart M. Blumin in the introduction of a recent edition of Foster's *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*. He describes the motives of Foster's "arrival" at a meaningful representation of the urban metropolis, as one providing a new, non-fictional, genre of urban commentary that closely resembled newspaper opinion columns' content.¹⁹ According to Blumin, Foster's journalistic background gave his work an edge that deserves more respect than his more famous contemporaries received. Yet, Foster's sensational approach surpassed that of his contemporaries inasmuch as he did not provide a romantic view of the city.²⁰ In his introduction, Blumin also provides perhaps the most accurate definition of urban journalism relative to Foster's work suggesting that "by explaining the realities that lie beneath the deceptive appearances of the city and its people, Foster offers the

reader a critical analysis along with a solution to existing issues. *Gas-Light* is a virtue-and-life-protecting tour offered by a street-wise expert in city ways.”²¹

Foster’s social commentaries and criticisms published in his books and in the *Tribune* have indeed received some, though limited, attention by literary scholars. His innovative approaches to reporting have received little notice too, even though they in ways influenced the emergence of a new journalistic genre. They reflected the historical period and critiqued it, And in Connery’s words, journalism only matters because its reportage of people, places, events, and activities carries the time period’s cultural meaning, values, and ideals — “in the 1800s its overriding, broad, cultural message was that the actualities of life being lived were important in knowing and understanding America.”²²

Indeed, the years before the American Civil War signaled a cultural shift in the form of scientific and sexual radicalism along with rebellion against moral suppression. It was a time of dramatic changes in the demographic and the sexual politics. The press no longer served politicians, but also the advertisers, and publications were no longer just about politics, but about making profit while providing entertainment too.²³

Journalism scholar Dan Schiller refers to Foster’s style suggesting that while cheap dailies were the bottom feeder at one point, by the 1850s, they were emerging as an important factor in the sociocultural role of journalism. The press at that time grew more and more influential and its role in commenting on culture and in prescribing values and norms in society, is evident in Foster’s work. In Schiller’s words, “writing news is telling stories: repetitive, even stylized narratives, bearing the stamp of a dominant social purpose.”²⁴ The press was indeed a reflection of its unstable society as journalism took center stage at documenting and reporting on the latter. “Artisans’ economic status, political presence, and ideological temperament,” he

wrote, “were undergoing distinctive processes of transition and transformation, which led to changes that, in the end, were expressed through new institutions and new perceptions of the nature of society.”²⁵

During Foster’s years of productivity, newspapers became less passive and more expressive. In addition to an increased focus on news, the emergence of the penny papers at the time generated prominence for the “human interest story,” which can readily be seen in Foster’s writings. The latter, in Michael Schudson’s words, was not only important in daily journalism, but one of its most characteristic features too.²⁶ “The attention to everyday life did not necessarily mean attention to the familiar,” Schudson wrote. “The penny papers printed much that would appeal to the ordinary middle-class reader precisely because it was exotic — it concerned the everyday lives of other classes.”²⁷ Foster’s urban sketches were precisely that.

He worked for the press as well as for society inasmuch as his urban spectatorship and cultural surveillance can be viewed as a journalistic endeavor to present the social reality in New York to his audience. Such approach to reporting can be seen as an alternative form of both, feature journalism and early efforts of muckraking. In Shi’s words, “he gathered up ‘the fragments, the refuse, of every-day life’ so as to reveal the degradation of the city to those insulated from such coarse actualities.”²⁸

Although rarely addressed, Foster’s narrative style closely resembled that of highly regarded investigative and sensational reporters to come like Nelly Bly. As noted by Schudson, reporters in the 1880s and 1890s were “as eager to mythologize their work as the public was to read of their adventures.”²⁹ Foster’s literary realism can be studied in a similar fashion as he went on an adventure, exploring New York’s streets, undergrounds, and social happenings, in order to “bring” them to his readers.

Foster's social commentaries and criticism of New York's urban and print cultures, though highly nuanced, broke ground in what later became known as muckraking. Although writers like Foster, including Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Henry Mayhew and later, John Hersey, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, are considered literary journalists and social critics, literature rarely identifies them as either precursors or practitioners of muckraking. Thomas B. Connery contends, regardless of form and structure, the articles and books documenting life while being lived, with all of its vices and virtues, its praises and critiques, are all part of a journalistic endeavor that expresses and shapes culture and holds deep roots in the American realism tradition. "These writings reach back through time to the many portrayals of the poor and marginalized, of immigrants and African Americans, of people of all types chasing the American Dream and its middle-class status."³⁰

Foster's work is representative of the latter; however, historical volumes rarely mention his contributions to journalism. His scathing language and vivid descriptions of life and corruption in the commercialized metropolis closely resemble the ideological sympathies and intense interest in social issues of investigative pioneers such as Upton Sinclair, Ida M. Tarbell, and Lincoln Steffens. Historian Herbert Shapiro suggested that the muckrakers were mostly concerned with social problems and only a few related to public life, but his commentary also advances the idea that the press has been and can be of utmost importance when it comes to generating social awareness and influencing the ideology of society and media practitioners alike.³¹ Theodore Roosevelt who coined the term "muckraker" supported the idea by stating "There should be relentless exposure of and attack upon every evil man, whether politician or businessman, every evil practice, whether in politics, in business or in social life."³²

Journalism scholar C. C. Regier supports Shapiro's position inasmuch as muckraking style reporting was indeed driven by both, sensationalism and passion for social justice. Although referring to the journalists from the early 1900s, his description of the men and women who attacked ills in society closely summarizes Foster's approach. "[The muckrakers] were nauseated by the spectacle of grab and draft presented in these United States," Regier wrote. "They were enraged at the corruption in municipal, state, and national governments. And they were shamed and sickened by the complacency of the majority of citizens, who remained utterly indifferent to the purulent condition of the political and industrial order."³³ Kerrane and Yagoda also agree that Victorian social reporters and muckrakers alike aimed at factual literature of the modern industrial life. "Their literary touches came less from artistic design than from the writers' sense of moral and political urgency: a determination to dramatize the reality of poverty, prostitution, and prejudice."³⁴

Yet, from a press criticism angle, the dramatization, when taken to a level of sensationalism, was also a cause for concerns over invasion of privacy, ethics, and values. As noted by Hazel Dicken-Garcia, a common criticism of the era revolved precisely around the notion that the press was destroying the values in society. By mid-century, editors were interested not in serving a party, but providing realistic reportage about items of human interest, contemporary life and society's surroundings.³⁵ Foster's accounts corresponded to that notion, yet they revealed too much about the ills in society and highlighted some major weaknesses of the American nation and its institutions. This, perhaps in itself, is a reason why many writers like Foster did not find means for publishing their observations in the mainstream press. In Dicken-Garcia's view, it also meant that society was supporting a more romantic view of the press or one that featured the nation's values and activities, and promoting individuals' interests

— an approach involving the withholding of harmful information. “In expressing fears about the deterioration of society and the destruction of general erudition [both journalists and non-journalists] revealed deep-seated values,” Dicken-Garcia writes. “Most critics directly charged the press with leading and directing what they were certain were downward trends.”³⁶

In order to understand the implications of Foster’s unique approach, it is important to note that, after all, there were no concrete standards for journalistic conduct at the time and as noted earlier, Foster’s social commentaries and critiques should be studied in terms of their historical context. Although Dicken-Garcia’s comprehensive study provides a helpful insight into the role of the press and its criticism during the nineteenth century, a discussion of alternative journalistic approaches intended to critique some of journalism’s shortcomings, such as the accounts found Foster’s work, cannot be found.

In defense of journalism’s overarching role in nineteenth-century society, Connery questions the journalism-realism discourse and its role in the cultural shift at the time. He suggests the term *paradigm of actuality* to describe this shift, “For journalism, this paradigm of actuality essentially involved documenting, in nonfiction and fiction, in drawings and photographs, the perceived reality.”³⁷ Furthermore, he acknowledges the disparity in recognizing alternative journalistic styles and content as elements influenced by cultural shifts. The same has frequently been conveniently coupled with focus on political reporting and objectivity, while dismissing literacy forms and divorcing journalism from realism.³⁸ In these terms, Connery provides a valuable discussion about literary journalists such as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Jacob Riis, to name a few. He does not fail to mention Foster, indicating how little has been noted about the *Tribune* reporter, his “City Items” column, and his books even in terms of literary contributions, let alone journalistic. Foster was noted as an urban chronicler,

who roamed the streets of the city, observing, recording, commenting and explaining the city and offering city-life snapshots to its dwellers.³⁹

While placing Foster's writings in the literary realm, Connery is one of the few scholars who do not fail to comment on Foster's involvement with the press. He suggests that Foster's writings hold their place in journalism because of his detailed descriptions and observations, paired with analysis, judgments, and commentary about the places and people depicted. In interpreting the new metropolis, Foster, a "street-wise expert," Connery writes, explained and depicted "the realities that lie beneath the deceptive appearances of the city and its people." In doing so, Foster provided examples of an increasing fascination with "the actual" of American life and city life.⁴⁰

Method

The lack of scholarship and examination of George G. Foster's contributions to journalism calls for a critical historiographical analysis of his "urban sketches," social commentary and criticism. An appropriate methodological approach to analyze changes to journalistic styles and content can be found using the developmental and progressive angles of scholars. Developmental historians — those who have focused on the survey of the continued development of media practices and the individuals who have contributed to changes in the media — play a unique role in understanding the changing reporting approaches in the mid nineteenth century.⁴¹ Likewise, progressive historians — those who have concentrated on the ways journalists exposed economic and social issues — also play a unique role in understanding Foster's work. His urban-style journalism can be studied as both, a journalistic tool contributing to the formation of journalistic standards in later decades and as a prime example for the origins

of muckraking intended to address the need for social change. The Progressives believed the media was best used as a tool in crusades for social causes and to fight on the side of working people against the interests of American business and government.⁴² After all, journalists like Foster were the ones who had bestowed to greater democracy by illuminating social issues and moral degradation.

Additionally, the above notions can also be seen as grounded in what historiographical methods would describe as a cultural school of studies by placing a direct link between the evolution of journalism and its interaction with its surroundings. This paper seeks to explore the very idea of the emergence of alternative, in this case urban, journalistic styles because of societal transformations that took place in New York between the 1840s and 1860s and the interaction between them and the press.⁴³ Cultural school historian, Sidney Kobre acknowledged, “as the media mirrored the changes in economics and society they changed to conform to new conditions. Thus, there developed a greater emphasis on interpretive journalism and newspaper column writing to explain a complex society to readers.”⁴⁴

Survey of primary sources such as Foster’s written “visualizations” of New York’s culture and his critique of fellow-journalists, as published in the *Tribune* and his books, offer that precise insight into the changing social climate, its print culture, and their interconnectedness. In order to contribute to the cultural, developmental and progressive interpretations of the state of the antebellum press, this study addressed the context in which Foster worked. It analyzed primary sources such as his *New York in Slices* columns as published by the *Tribune*, as well as the writings found in his books *Fifteen Minutes Around New York* and *New York Naked*.

All primary sources identified as pertinent to this study were chosen relative for their contribution to an understanding of urban journalism and press criticism in terms of content,

style, and context. Among the most frequently used words used in the search for primary sources included “George G. Foster,” “New York Tribune,” “New York in Slices,” “antebellum press,” “antebellum journalism,” and “press criticism.” The selected time period was narrowed down to the 1840s and 1850s as biographical literature on Foster had indicated his works have been published only within that time frame. The textual analysis that followed was primarily with comments and criticism of the press, reporters and other institutional corruption, as well as items concerning the moral vices of society, such as homelessness and crime. Textual analysis of Foster’s reflection on city businesses and entertainment were not considered as a focus of this study.

The study relied largely on online primary sources found in databases such as ProQuest Historical Newspapers and WorldCat. Digitized versions of Foster’s writings were found in the *New York Tribune* online archives as well as through WorldCat in Indiana University’s Wright American Fiction database (yet another indication Foster is most frequently recognized in terms of literature despite the non-fictional nature of his accounts) and also in the Making of America database accessed through the University of Michigan Library.⁴⁵

Findings

The radical style of journalism that emerged in the 1840s — perhaps in response to the moral degradation and corruption in the growing metropolis — has rarely been addressed through exploration of alternative journalistic styles such as that of George G. Foster.⁴⁶ His vivid descriptions and scathing critiques were intended to evoke realistic sensations and convey a clear understanding about the negative changes taking place in antebellum New York. “It is only in a large city, where some hundreds of thousands combine their various powers, that the human

mind can efficiently stamp itself on every thing by which it is surrounded can transmute the insensible earth to a fit temple and dwelling-place for immortal spirits,” Foster wrote in *New York in Slices*, a *Tribune* series later published as a book.⁴⁷ These accounts offer not only a praise of arts and theater, markets and eating houses, but also a sound critique of moral degradation and corruption of jails, mental hospitals, and the press, as well as business establishments such as Wall Street and the gambling houses.

Foster had the perfect “playground” to base his attacks on — the growing metropolis and its vices responsible for negative influences on society and institutions alike. Foster commented on the immoral city and its institutions with the consistently scathing tone as the one used in his “slice XXI,” published in the *Tribune* on August 31, 1848, where he described a New York prison that served as one of the city’s principal jails for more than a half century and was originally named “The Halls of Justice,” but noted by the Department of Correction with a more commonly-used term — “The Tombs.”⁴⁸

“What unsightly labyrinths of filth and abomination-what heaped-up cells of iniquity and unrepentant crime what dens of drunken madness, howling over the grave of Reason, what dark recesses, sacred to the orgies of a corrupt and abominable Justice-hast thou not passed over,” Foster wrote of The Tombs. “No wonder that thou art tainted with a poison that strikes to the very soul but to breathe. No wonder that in such a red-hot furnace of corruption, bribery, theft, burglary, murder, prostitution, and delirium tremens, the very air is rarefied with crime.”⁴⁹

Similar observations and language were evident in early twentieth century muckrakers’ works too. Although divided by almost half a century, from a journalistic standpoint, the similarities among leading muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Foster himself, suggest that they all, as both individuals and as journalists, shared a few common ideals — the

exposure of social ills and corruption. Through their work in the press and other print forms, they strived to do so in order to raise social consciousness and indirectly suggest a need for reform. Some of the darkest accounts of the city published in the *Tribune's New York in Slices* include one of New York's most notorious places, the Five Points area, which was a central location for millions of newly arrived immigrants who lived in poverty and degradation. Foster explored the crime-ridden area and described for his audience in "slice V," published on August 5, 1848 in the *Tribune*. "Turning eastwardly from the Tombs into a street that would strike even the practiced eyes and hardened olfactories of a veteran New-Yorker as particularly foul and loathsome, a few steps bring us to the great central ulcer of wretchedness-the very rotting Skeleton of Civilization," Foster wrote. "The memory of the horrors that here breed and gender will haunt you like a fiend, forbidding hope for a human nature that may become thus degraded. Mere words can convey but a faint idea of the Five Points."⁵⁰ Such writings closely resemble a muckraker's style too.

To analyze developments in journalism as an institution and to place Foster's urban journalism in the field, it is important to consider the motivation behind his work and its interpretation from a cultural point of view, in context with the social conditions of the era. Moreover, in order to establish a connection between journalistic reform efforts and Foster's urban sketches, calls for a closer examination of the antebellum society from a progressive school of thought, or that of the press' impact in social reform efforts.

Progressives, and the early twentieth-century muckrakers, stood behind the idea that the purpose of the press was to fight on the side of the masses and set forth the truth about liberal, social, and economic problems. As he walked about the city and observed, Foster produced a detailed depiction of life in New York and criticized the tenement conditions in the city similarly

to immigrant rights crusader and muckraker Jacob Riis, who became known for his social reform advocacy several decades after Foster. In writing about the poverty-ridden tenements from personal observations, Foster described them as “utterly destitute of wholesome space in rear, dry cellarage ... into which whole families are thrust to swelter and corrode ... with cockroaches, fleas, bedbugs, wharf-rats, and every other sort of vermin indigenous or possible to the climate.”⁵¹

His critique of the negative socio-economic changes happening in the city, the troubles found in New York’s immigrant communities, and growing pains of the racially and ethnically divergent metropolis mirror the approaches of muckrakers who emerged in later decades. Yet, his voice accurately reflected the changing environment and attitudes of the newly emerging urban living. A precursor to the muckrakers, Foster “investigated” society, critiqued its vices and commended its virtues. Alternative forms such as Foster’s urban journalism emerged to serve the purpose of scrutinizing society, critiquing commercialization, and exposing public institutions’ ills in the form of commentary/opinion columns. One such example is in his introductory chapter of his 1849 book *New York in Slices*.

In the centre of the town is also another huge “palace” full of malefactors and magistrates, policemen, and petty larceny rogues, drunkards, vagrants, rioters, negroes, and wretches of every grade and aspect of misery; and on a beautiful green island surrounded by peaceful and transparent waters for they have not yet reached the turbulent City are other “palaces” also built and maintained at great cost to the good citizens, and whose noisome and infected cells, not bigger nor higher than coffins, are crammed with wretches, layer above layer, and oh, so horribly filthy, worm-eaten, and abominable, that Death would blush through his grinning skeleton to call them his!⁵²

Although mainstream reporters did not share Foster's approach, audiences seemed to appreciate his narrative reportage from the streets of the city and to support his views too. On August 24, 1848, a letter to "to the writer of New York in Slices" was published in the *Tribune*. "A most happy vein have you struck upon, in enlightening us as to the *localities* of New York disclosing dull 'realities,'" the "admirer" wrote. "Bitter truths to some, in disclosing their mockery of life, presenting a glass to reflect their distorted features. The *morale* is the point. ... Facts are strange and stubborn things, still when presented in a novel garb, by a masterful pen, we like to look upon them; live and learn."⁵³

Foster's criticism of the press and his fellow journalists appears to be consistent with that of journalists and non-journalists of the era too. Considering that specific standards were not yet established, the press was considered an institution which should strive to be "independent, fearless, and forthright in expression on any topic, it should boldly state views and be able to withstand the consequences."⁵⁴ Where his writings diverge from such commonly held views is in terms of journalistic writing that is free of prejudices and passions, allowing the readers to make up their own minds. Yet, in these terms, Foster's approach aligns closely with that of muckrakers to come — another reason his writings, for the most part, did not find place in mainstream newspapers. In Dicken-Garcia's words, criticism sided with optimism and views of the press as the salvation of the human race saturated much of the latter.⁵⁵

Foster's fellow colleagues quickly responded in accordance to this view as they criticized his *Slices* column and, even more so its theatrical version performed on Broadway. "Among Reporters: The Dignity of the Profession," published in the *Baltimore Sun* on October 24, 1848, suggested that during one of the exhibitions of the play in New York, some of the reporters were visibly upset and "were, of all things, silly enough to give notoriety to their folly by making an

uproar in the theater and getting unceremoniously ejected for their pains.”⁵⁶ The article further suggested that only a few professions, including those of doctors and lawyers, “would suffer more than that of the proprietorship of the press were its respectability affected by the conduct of individuals. Not only do we find the columns of many journals abounding in slander, falsehood, and vituperative abuse, inflamed by part zeal,” the article stated,” but there are not wanting instances in which the most disgraceful and systematic fraud is perpetuated by the press.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, in defense of Foster and his approach, an article, published by the *Southern Quarterly Review* in 1842, suggests the press was not perfect, but it had undergone and was facing a dramatic, and a much-needed shift.⁵⁸ “At one moment, we are prepared to declare that the press has been employed to promote legitimate ends, the cause of truth, virtue, and humanity, at the next we exclaim, that it has been perverted and abused and prostituted to the vilest uses.”⁵⁹

The sentiment is likewise evident in Foster’s view of the press. In the *New York Naked* chapter on the press’ duties and responsibilities, Foster declared there is no institution or power on earth ever held with so much trust and regard as the free press of the nineteenth century.

And yet, sometimes, when looking partially or hastily at the subject, and seeing of what materials some of the elements of this powerful institution is composed, one is almost tempted to denounce it as the giant imposition of the age, the false priest and the dishonest monitor, that should be chased in disgrace from beyond the temple.⁶⁰

In both *New York Naked* and *New York in Slices*, Foster takes the time to consider individual journalistic traits, particular publications, and notable editors in New York’s print world. In *Fifteen Minutes around New York* he criticizes the monotone and formulaic styles and content of mainstream media too, suggesting that despite occasional sensationalism in editorial columns

“for the most part, their leaded lucubrations are so notoriously stale, flat and unprofitable, that the reader gives up all expectation of being interested, and lays them aside in silence.”⁶¹

As much as his commentary is one of praise of the hard-working and underpaid reporter, his writings also imply that the business of news was at times “joining” the corrupt forces of financial institutions as fellow colleagues were taking advantages of perks and privileges in society. In Foster’s view, members of the press were also forgetting about their powers to influence that society. Furthermore, he noted journalists’ sacrifices and inadequacies by suggesting that they could convert their occupation from an unjustified struggle for bread into a more noble, worthy, and useful of the professions.

At the same time [journalists] should learn to reform many of the bad habits which they have insensibly acquired, to set a proper value upon money, to repress extravagance either in themselves or families and to avoid, as a pestilence, that gulf in which so many high-spirited and intellectual men have lost their footing and floundered and struggled through a disgusting existence.⁶²

Exploring Foster’s writing as an early form of literary journalism and a precursor to muckraking helps place his urban sketches into the appropriate historical context within the development of the press. Such historiographical analysis of changes in journalistic styles and content and the integration of urban journalism as an approach to commenting on society and the press and reporting about them are at the root of cultural, developmental, and progressive scholars’ work. Furthermore, interpreting Foster’s narrative in context with the press and the social conditions of the era plays a unique role in understanding mid-nineteenth-century journalism and the changes that have emerged in journalistic form, style, and value in the aftermath.

Conclusion

Analyzing George G. Foster's contribution to the antebellum New York press, served to highlight the early emergence of alternative journalistic styles and to present them to the reader as ones just as valuable in depicting the mid-nineteenth century social reality, societal ills, and criticism of corrupt institutions, as the writings found in mainstream publications. Moreover, tracing the evolution of journalistic standards calls for an examination of pre-twentieth-century journalism inasmuch as the notions of objectivity were somewhat scant at that time. Foster's storytelling style can further the idea that journalism scholarship needlessly subscribes solely to the idea of objective reporting of partisan and political activities and current affairs. Surveillance of the rich, corrupt and immoral members of society, some of which were also members of the press, is an important contribution not only to the understanding of the antebellum culture, but to the tracing of the development of journalistic values and norms too.

Although different from mainstream journalistic writing, Foster's style emerged because of the changing social context. His social commentary and criticism, including that of the press, are exemplary of the emerging individualistic style of the mid-nineteenth century journalists. His explorations not only featured his "adventures" in the undergrounds of the city, but also his solid critique about the commercialization of the culture, vices of society, and corruption of institutions, including of the press. These writings paved the way to a cultural analysis in a relatively new journalistic form fitting the description of urban or literary realism.

Recognizing the historical significance and authenticity of city reporter and litterateur George G. Foster's urban writings, is essential in identifying the origins of such social commentary as an emerging journalistic convention and a form of early press criticism. Foster, one of the first literary journalists whose non-fictional approach in observing and recording the

vices and virtues of New York City during the mid-nineteenth century, readily identifies with the genre of urban journalism.

Largely understudied, especially in terms of journalism history, future research should focus on exploring Foster and other journalists alike who have contributed to press criticism and social commentary in a similar fashion. Furthermore, alternative journalistic styles that deviate from mainstream reporting, such as Foster's, can find a solid place in studies of the development of journalistic standards in later decades.

Additionally, a survey of the short-lived humor magazines, *Yankee Doodle* and *John-Donkey*, Foster wrote political satire for, can be useful in illuminating his journalistic contributions further. A colorful character, George G. Foster has been an influential figure in the New York print world during a dynamic and an exciting era of American history. Although not regarded as a "proper" journalist, he had lived a life as colorful as the city depicted in his books and articles, evidence of which can be found in the his obituary in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, describing him as an "author, poet, musician, newspaper writer, actor and manager"⁶³

Foster's "humble" beginnings were noted in his book *New York Naked*, as he undertook the city sketches job purely by accident arising from a bread-and-butter necessity. "It was my duty to make daily pilgrimages to that shrine of petty larceny, drunkenness, vagabondism, and vagrancy," he admitted.⁶⁴ This in itself demonstrates that he recognized the role he played in as a cultural critic of antebellum society and the press, but he also appreciated the overall significance of the journalistic profession and as such, he treated it with integrity, moral obligation, and respect.

Endnotes

¹ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine*. (New York : Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 5.

² Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 13.

³ Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 14.

⁴ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 317.

⁵ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 21.

⁶ Thomas B. Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 7.

⁷ George Rogers Taylor, "Gaslight Foster: A New York 'Journeyman Journalist' at Mid-Century" (*New York History*, 1977): 297.

⁸ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 317.

⁹ Thomas B. Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 52.

¹⁰ Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 43.

¹¹ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Attitudes toward Sex in Antebellum America: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 9.

¹² David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David E. Shi, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26.

¹⁶ David E. Shi, *Facing Facts*, 317.

¹⁷ Taylor, "Gaslight Foster," 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

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- ¹⁹ George G. Foster and Stuart M. Blumin, *New York by Gas-light and Other Urban Sketches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ²¹ Foster and Blumin, *New York by Gas-light*, 53.
- ²² Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life*, xx.
- ²³ Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 57.
- ²⁴ Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 1.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ²⁶ Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 27.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ²⁸ Shi, *Facing Facts*, 27.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ³⁰ Connery, *Journalism and Realism*, xvii.
- ³¹ Herbert Shapiro, *The Muckrakers and American Society* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1968), iv.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 4. Excerpt from a Theodore Roosevelt speech, April 14, 1905.
- ³³ C. C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Gloucester, MA.: Peter Smith, 1957), 10.
- ³⁴ Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*, 17.
- ³⁵ Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America*, 106
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.
- ³⁷ Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life*, 7.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁴¹ Wm. David Sloan and Michael Stamm, *Historical Methods in Communication* (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2010), 29.
- ⁴² Sloan and Stamm, *Historical Methods in Communication*, 34.
- ⁴³ Wm. David Sloan, *Perspectives on Mass Communication History* (CITY? Routledge, 2009), 8.
- ⁴⁴ Sloan and Stamm, *Historical Methods in Communication*, 43.
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- ⁵⁰ Foster, "New-York in Slices: Slice XI ... The Five Points," *New York Tribune*, August 5, 1848.
- ⁵¹ Foster, "New-York in Slices: Slice I ... The Immigrants," *New York Tribune*, July 8, 1848.
- ⁵² Foster, "New York in Slices," 5.
- ⁵³ From a letter to Foster, "To the writer of 'New York in Slices,'" *New York Tribune*, August 24, 1848.
- ⁵⁴ Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America*, 153.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.
- ⁵⁶ "A Flurry Among Reporters: The Dignity of the Profession," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 24, 1848.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ In *Journalistic Standards*, Dicken-Garcia, 146.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Foster, *Fifteen Minutes around New York*, 24.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁶² Foster, "New-York in Slices, Slice XXII ... The Press," *New York Tribune*, September 4, 1848.
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