

Com 440: “*The Brass Check*” Presentation

Background:

Upton Sinclair is an extremely important figure in the history of American journalism and is considered a seminal author in investigative journalism in particular, or “muckraking” as it was known in Sinclair’s time.

Sinclair is most famous for his landmark novel “*The Jungle*,” a work of fiction rooted in his experience as an undercover reporter, which exposed the corruption and exploitation that existed in the meatpacking plants of the Chicago stockyards in the early twentieth century. The controversy raised by the book led directly to the implementation of the Food and Drug Act of 1906, which established the Bureau of Chemistry (which we know today as the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA). It also resulted in Sinclair winning a Pulitzer Prize. Sinclair is also famous for the novel “*Oil!*” which was recently made into a film called “*There Will Be Blood*” starring Daniel Day-Lewis. In addition to his writing, he also ran for Governor of California in 1934.

“*The Brass Check*” is one of a series of non-fiction works where Sinclair examined major issues of his time (others include “*The Profits of Religion*,” which looked at religious hypocrisy and demagoguery and “*The Goose-step*,” a hard-hitting study of the American education system). In “*The Brass Check*,” published in 1919, Sinclair presents a critique of the U.S. media system. The title is a reference to a token provided to customers at a brothel; in the book, Sinclair develops the argument that the journalists of his time are little more than prostitutes, “bought” by unscrupulous newspaper tycoons.

Sinclair was, and still is, a controversial figure and his writings and beliefs divided popular opinion. However, whether one agrees or disagrees with his views, there is no doubting his importance as one of the most influential journalistic figures of the twentieth century.

Assignment:

Students will work in groups to present a selection of chapters from “*The Brass Check*.” The goal of the assignment is to “teach” the material to the class. In order to do this, you will not only have to read the chapters concerned but do background reading to familiarize yourselves with the issues and concerns that Sinclair is raising (see “Resources” below).

For this assignment, I will assign you into groups rather than have you come up with your own groups (don’t worry, for the final presentation you get to arrange yourselves).

Your presentation should answer most, if not all, of the following questions (not necessarily in this order):

- What are the key issues raised in the chapter(s)? (i.e., don’t summarize, but select what is most important!)
- What are the historical circumstances that are propelling Sinclair’s concerns?
- What concerns of Sinclair’s remain relevant to this day? What concerns of his are no longer relevant?
- Are there aspects of Sinclair’s arguments that you agree with? What do you disagree with?
- If Sinclair were to address these same concerns today, how would he go about it? How would he be received?
- If Sinclair were alive today, what would be capturing his attention? What would he be writing about?

- Are there contemporary figures in journalism who could be said to be latter-day Upton Sinclairs? Who are they? Why?

I *don't* want you to read the chapters to us, but rather, to quote James Carey, “to invest the ordinary with significance.” This was, and remains, a very important book. You should consider your goal to be to show the class why.

The presentation should be fifteen minutes in length, including discussion time.

Resources:

Everyone should read the introduction by Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott as this will establish some preliminary familiarity with the text and its major themes.

A valuable resource to you (which, as seniors, you will already be too familiar with!) is the WSU library system. I encourage you to go to <http://libguides.wsulibs.wsu.edu/journalism> where you will find a listing of the various materials the libraries have that pertain to journalism. You may want to look for biographical material on Sinclair and his works as well as on the causes and issues he raises in the text. The libraries faculty specialist for communication is Erica Nicol (ecarlson@wsu.edu), and you may want to take the time to visit with her for help locating materials.

You may also want to check out the following websites:

- http://www.americanwriters.org/classroom/resources/tr_sinclair.asp
- <http://www.enotes.com/authors/upton-sinclair>
- http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/s/upton_sinclair/index.html
- <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0502rwmscott.htm>

To connect Sinclair’s concerns to contemporary issues, there is no better place to start than the media you are surrounded by. Look at contemporary newspapers, television, advertising, and public relations and ask yourself “what would Upton Sinclair say about this?”

Finally, the course materials we have looked at so far will undoubtedly be of use to you. Specifically, the readings by Patterson and Wilkins (the textbook), Lambeth, Siebert, The Hutchins Commission, Peterson, Merrill, Carey, McAllister & Proffitt, Boyd-Barrett, Hindman, and Glasser will (depending on the issues involved) be of use to you.

Grading

This assignment is worth a total of 50 points (approximately 22% of your final grade). This score is comprised as follows:

- 20 points for analysis (i.e., how well you addressed the points above)
- 10 points for presentation delivery/structure
- 10 points for a written outline of the presentation
- 10 points for team effort

For this last section, each group member will be given a sheet where they will anonymously rate the overall effort and performance of every member of their group, including themselves. I will collect these and your score for this section will be the average of the ratings you have received. I factor

effort into presentation grades to ensure that the overall grade is representative of each member's efforts.

Finally...

This assignment is intended to be a self-guided activity – i.e., you are expected to take it upon yourselves to research your topic and present it. If you are having major difficulties – for example, if you are having difficulty with a group member not pulling their weight – then please come talk to me. However, for all issues pertaining to the substance of the assignment, you should always try to solve the problem yourselves in the first instance. The argument that you found the book hard to read or had a hard time finding background material is not acceptable at the senior level!