

# All the News Unfit to Print



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You really can't believe everything you read . . . A premature newswire report announces the end of World War I, spurring wild celebrations in American streets days before the actual treaty was signed. A St. Louis newspaper prints reviews of theatrical performances that never took place—they had been canceled due to bad weather. New York newspaper reporters plant evidence in the apartment of the man accused of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby and then call him a liar in the courtroom once the trial begins. These are just a few of the many wrongs that have been reported as right over two centuries of American history. All the News Unfit to Print puts the media under the microscope to expose the many types of mistakes, hoaxes, omissions, and lies that have skewed our understanding of the past, and reveals the range of reasons and motivations—from boredom and haste to politics and greed—behind them. Reviewing a host of journalistic slip-ups involving Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, William Randolph Hearst, Theodore H. White, and many others, this book covers the stories behind the stories to refine incorrect "first drafts" of history from the Revolutionary War era to more recent times. " All the News Unfit to Print is a rollicking joyride that careens through the ridiculous, the odd, and the serious malfeasances in American journalistic history and reminds us of the difference between news and facts."

— Neal Gabler , author of *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*

### From the Inside Flap

What if Sam Adams had reported the facts instead of using his pen and imagination to stoke the flames of anti-British rebellion? What if William Randolph Hearst had not relentlessly commanded Americans to "remember the Maine"? What if New York Times reporter Walter Duranty had not let Communist sympathies keep him from accurately reporting the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s and the brutality of Stalin's Five-Year Plan? The history of American journalism is rife with errors, omissions, pranks, and downright lies. Some of these have actively influenced events and shaped history, while others have prompted little more than raised eyebrows and wry amusement. In *All the News Unfit to Print* , veteran journalist and media analyst Eric Burns surveys two centuries of American history to reveal how the media have gotten history wrong and how their mistakes distorted our view and understanding of the past. Burns offers fascinating examples from the entire spectrum of journalistic wrongdoing, from unintentional errors to deliberate deceptions motivated by greed, bias, arrogance, or self-promotion. Ben Franklin created the false "Trial of Miss Polly Baker" story in an attempt to improve women's lives. A bored Samuel Clemens exercised his mastery of the hoax in a piece on the discovery of a hundred-year-old "Petrified Man," a tale made up of whole cloth, not mummified remains. H. L. Mencken accelerated the news in his "synthetic war dispatch," reporting details of a major Russo-Japanese War battle nearly two weeks before actual battlefield reports became available. Years later, circulation-boosting journalists around the country shamelessly invented incriminating facts—and one even tampered with evidence—in condemning the German carpenter accused in the infamous Charles Lindbergh baby kidnapping case. Through these and many other stories, Burns traces the remarkable evolution of American journalism from its undisciplined beginnings as a profession from which little was expected in the way of truth or accountability to the gradual evolution of standards of objectivity (or at least transparent bias) and veracity which, while not always met, are accepted as the norm today. Written with insight and flair, *All the News Unfit to Print* is essential reading for anyone interested in American history and in controversies about the accuracy and bias of the nation's media coverage.

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