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Journalists and Knowledge Practices

Histories of Observing the
Everyday in the Newspaper Age

Edited by Hansjakob Ziemer

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3 Why Marmaduke Mizzle and the Good Ship *Wabble* Fooled No One: Fake News and Metajournalistic Discourse in the Era of Journalistic Professionalization

Andie Tucher

When the news isn't true

I want to start with a quiz. Read the following five statements based on stories by journalists published in the US between 1797 and 1933:

- 1 Benjamin Franklin Bache, a fiercely partisan newspaper editor and the namesake grandson of the Founding Father, was uglier than a body that had been hanging on a gibbet for a week.
- 2 A heartless madam almost succeeded in framing a friendless and innocent clerk for the gruesome murder of a beautiful prostitute in New York City.
- 3 A petrified man frozen into a peculiar position was found in the Nevada desert, his body preserved by the dripping of limestone-infused water from a crag above where he lay.
- 4 A reporter helped a druggist scour the city for the woman to whom he had, in a moment of distraction, mistakenly sold arsenic instead of baking soda.
- 5 A well-known caraway-seed merchant whose adventures in exotic parts of the world were regularly chronicled in the *New York Times* recently reported encountering a thirty-inch-long specimen of the black two-headed hazza-mazazza bug, which looked like a cross between the speckled gyprangi-kappi of Siam and the Australian dinga-linga-dinga, and which could move only when its two heads were thinking in harmony.¹

Which, if any, do you believe? Which are accurate? And most important: *how do you know?*

Long before anyone ever retweeted the latest scoop about Hillary Clinton's pending indictment or "liked" the newest update about Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump, US newspaper readers were routinely and often serenely consuming humbugs, hoaxes, shams, scams, japes, jokes, and fakes. Anyone who has read deeply in the nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century US press knows that even as audiences and journalists valued the tradition of a free press as a vital player in the democratic process, newspapers were also fulfilling a wide range of roles that were far removed from democracy, or even reality. The kind of journalist known as the *reporter*, born in the 1830s as the necessary agent of the independent commercial press, faced the unprecedented task of figuring out what the relationship should be between the mass newspaper and the reader, and what terms would govern the earning, bestowing, withholding, or losing of trust. In smaller towns where access to printed matter could be limited, editors routinely stuffed their pages helter-skelter with everything the townspeople could have gotten in a bookshop if they'd had such a thing, and readers were accustomed to finding nuggets of news nestled in columns full of poems, humorous sketches in regional dialect, old wives' remedies, serialized novels, travelers' letters, and tall tales.

US reporters and editors had never been reluctant to talk about themselves, but in the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century, as the nation grappled with a great burst of political, economic, and social change, journalists began a sustained conversation about their daily work. In general interest magazines and newly established trade journals, in professional associations and college lecture halls, journalists undertook various strands of what scholars have called "metajournalistic discourse" to explore and assess how their work served the public.² Reporters on the sensational yellow press insisted that their readers preferred the brand of vivid reporting embellished with colorful details that they openly and unashamedly referred to as "faking." At the same time the new "professionalizing" press was staking its own identity on its radical difference from the yellow papers. Not only did it embrace scientific modes of observation and claim impartiality, respectability, and expertise as its hallmarks. It also spoke a distinct "journalistic" language, something close to the "logos" of the ancient rhetorical tradition—neutral, direct, rational—that was seen as the only way to convey or understand knowledge and that embedded in its very style and structure a commitment to epistemic authority. And, to back up those claims, the new mainstream press also explicitly vowed to its readers that it would never, ever fake, thus pointedly offering to relieve them of the traditional responsibility—or, perhaps, opportunity—to decide for themselves which items in the paper to believe.³

It's hard enough for scholars to get inside the skulls of people who are consuming the kind of journalism that we ourselves recognize and understand. It's harder still to do with journalism aimed at readers long dead and embedded in cultural *milieux* from long ago. And it's hardest yet to do when you can't even assume that the work in question intersected at all with what is supposed to be the fundamental journalistic task of telling the truth. In the case of the five statements I began with, the last four were demonstrably *not* truthful, and although I have found no verified contemporary image of

Benny Bache, I am confident that even his wildest-eyed political opponents understood in their heart of hearts he wasn't quite *that* ugly.⁴

But debunking dubious works of journalism as inaccurate, or not corresponding to reality, or, if you will, "fake," is merely a sterile exercise in one-upmanship unless we also accept the challenge of attempting to unravel the nature of the relationships between the many kinds of non-true stories and their audiences. The more interesting questions to ask run along the lines of: did readers *know* that those five stories and others like them were not truthful? What cues, contexts, and understandings did they rely on to evaluate the credibility of a story? What purposes were served by works of journalism whose goal was *not* to present an accurate representation of the way the world really was? Did those stories offer *other* kinds of truths? In short: how, in the great stew of truths, half-truths, and whole lies that was the pre-modern American newspaper, did readers identify what they were willing to accept as true?

One way to answer these questions is through careful textual analysis that is based on wide reading and searching in digitized databases, that places stories in the context of contemporary events, that seeks to understand the underlying cultural allusions and resonances, that is alert to stylistic and linguistic cues, and that considers the visual messages embedded in the physical artifact of the newspaper. Of course the textual analyst does have to walk a fine line. On the one hand, as Susan Douglas's sensible call to arms put it in 2008, attempts to infer meaning-making from a text itself have too often been dismissed as arrogant, simplistic, or culturally elitist, while the overly "reverential" attitude towards "the hermeneutic processes of others" tends to "devalue our own hermeneutic skills."⁵ On the other, there's also the risk of *over*-valuing those same hermeneutic skills when we are dealing with an object like the historical newspaper, which *feels* much more familiar to present-day readers than it actually is.⁶

But an approach to textual analysis that combines humility with sense can suggest intriguing insights into the relationships between readers and reality. Take the story of the petrified man. Several Twain scholars have suggested that readers weren't as dumb as they were portrayed, and that the humorist's tall tale about the stony figure was itself part of a bigger tall tale: his subsequent pseudo-penitent confession about how easy it was to bamboozle worldwide legions of readers was wildly exaggerated. In the case of the prostitute's murder, the so-called friendless and innocent clerk was guilty as hell of the crime, while the penny-press coverage of the affair was more an exercise in community-building than investigative journalism. As for the tale of the distraught druggist, one of many fictional episodes this reporter recounted in his memoir, he and his readers enjoyed collaborating in the pretense that the journalist's life was one of constant swashbuckling drama.⁷

In this essay I examine readers' relationships with yet another kind of fake news. After the turn of the twentieth century, even as serious newspapers

worked to establish their roles as public servants and firmly staked their identities on that new neutral, professionalized journalistic style, some of these same serious papers also published articles that resembled news accounts but incorporated a variety of elements and styles more appropriate to the lightest kind of fiction. Written with humor, melodrama, whimsy, even wholesale and silly invention, these stories looked to the casual eye exactly like any standard news story and sat unobtrusively in the news columns amid the standard accounts of accidents, wars, and politics. But unlike hoaxes, faked interviews, and other such pranks, stories of this sort seem never to have been intended to deceive anyone at all. So the questions remain: what *were* they intended to do? In an era of high journalistic seriousness in the mainstream press, why did some papers devote so much space to high jinks? The two series I explore, both involving dramatic overseas adventure, led to very different conclusions. In one case the apparently goofy stories yielded layers of meaning, messages, and pointed metajournalistic argument aimed at both readers and fellow journalists, but the most lasting message was not what the writer was trying to convey. In the other case the apparently goofy stories were in fact exactly that, and nobody paid much attention to them. A comparative analysis offers some insights into how readers and reporters together made meaning and evaluated knowledge from the surprisingly unfamiliar text that is the historical newspaper.

Making meaning with the *Wabble*

The first series included at least ten stories that ran in the New York *Sun* between 1907 and 1914, chronicling the maritime adventures of the good ship *Wabble*. It was a vessel like no other. Aboardly captained by Heinrich Hassenpfeffer, reported to be "one of the most trusted skippers of the Royal German Frankfurter Line, whose home offices are at Liverwurst on the south coast of Saxony," the ship had derived its name from its most distinctive design feature: it had only a single sidewheel. Because of that imbalance the poor *Wabble* spent most of its time steaming in circles and rarely made port. Captain Hassenpfeffer himself had sailed the seas for more than sixty years, having made his first voyage on a Peruvian bark carrying a cargo of artesian wells.⁸

Of course, the ship was physically impossible, the narrative linguistically frolicsome, and the whole story certifiably loony, and unlike Mark Twain with his petrified man, the perpetrator of the *Wabble* series could not possibly have imagined that his readers would think he was doing anything other than telling whoppers. The whoppers succeeded so well, however, that he kept on telling them. Within weeks of its first appearance in January 1907 the plucky little *Wabble* began bobbing up in the midst of stories about events that were otherwise verifiably genuine. When rumors circulated out

of Washington that Haiti was hoping for the loan of a warship, the *Sun* claimed that the *Wabble* was being chartered for the purpose. When Mark Twain was reported to be fogbound on a steam yacht off Virginia, the *Sun* flourished the scoop that the *Wabble* had been sent out to look for him. When an artifact tentatively identified as an ancient Norse anchor was unearthed on a farm in land-locked Crookston, Minnesota, the *Sun* insisted that the object was the *Wabble's* own anchor, lost during an attempt to lower it without hitting a pod of mermaids. And when the explorer Frederick Cook, engaged in a fierce battle with Robert Peary over who had reached the North Pole first, claimed that attempts were being made to steal the scientific documents and records that he was sending under heavy security aboard a fast ship to the University of Copenhagen, the *Sun* reported that the thief was Captain Hassenpfeffer himself.⁹

About half of the articles appeared in Sunday editions, which readers would readily have recognized as the traditional province of softer news and feature stories, but all ran in the news sections and were not visually distinguished in any way from all the other straight news articles the paper ran each day. And the *Wabble* was a modest but marked hit with the public, especially in its first installment. *Sun* readers wrote letters to the editor making elephantine jokes about the wobbly ship; newspapers around the country copied the piece or alluded knowingly to it.¹⁰ The enthusiastic readers, however, seem to have missed or ignored the reporter's main point. The author of the accounts of a fantastical ship, I believe, intended them as a particular kind of metajournalistic discourse about how journalism worked in an era of radical change in the profession. But that doesn't seem to be what most readers enjoyed about them.

The *Wabble* story was inspired by a real incident. For twelve days New Yorkers had been anxiously speculating about the fate of the steamship *Ponce*, missing since encountering a gale en route from Puerto Rico, when the owners finally received a laconic cable from a shipper in Bermuda that was instantly reprinted in all the city papers. "STEAMER PONCE IN TOW OFF BERMUDA OF TRAMP WABBLE," it read. "Wabble," as most shipping reporters knew, was simply cablese, a standard code term, used for brevity in a business telegram, that translated as "Shall we act as your agent?"

At least one New York newspaper, however, the *Evening Mail*, unfamiliar with telegraphic code, made its own sense of the cable and reported that *Wabble* was the name of the tramp steamer that had towed the crippled *Ponce*. And then the hapless *Mail* compounded the offense by going on to report that "The sea was smooth throughout, but the *Wabble*, a craft much smaller than the *Ponce*, had all she could do to lug the crippled liner along"—details that it was painfully obvious could have come from nowhere but the reporter's own imagination.¹¹

The *Sun* loved it. The *Mail* was neither influential nor distinguished, leaning to the yellow side of journalism with banner headlines like "Hot

Thief Chase in Broadway" and "Guild to Save Girls from Ruin," so it was probably a soft target in any case. But this case proved irresistible. The *Sun* began its *Wabble* story with four leisurely paragraphs explaining, and chortling over, the *Mail's* faux pas with the cable code before it moved on to elaborate on its own invention. The *New York Times* also enjoyed the error, including in its front-page story about the *Ponce's* safe arrival a brief and condescending mention of the misread wire as an "amusing feature" of the episode. But the *Times* was doubtless mortified to be caught a week later reproducing the same mistake—and it was the *Sun* that caught it. In a full-column story that also rehashed the *Mail's* error, the *Sun* pointed out a tiny photo of the *Ponce* buried deep in the *Times's* Sunday picture section for January 20 that bore the unfortunate caption "The missing steamship which was towed into Hamilton, Bermuda, by the steamship 'Wabble.'"¹²

It's this mockery of the *Times* that offers a clue to what the reporter intended as the larger meaning of the *Wabble* stories. Not merely silly sketches, almost every one of them, it turns out, also managed to incorporate into its plot line a sharp dig at something foolish or embarrassing a rival newspaper had done.

The one about Haiti's efforts to borrow a warship referred repeatedly to the flock of "ship news experts" who swarmed to the top of a building on Times Square—we can make an informed guess which one—in order to scan the horizon for the *Wabble*, and quoted an alleged exchange of telegrams between a skeptic and the expert at the *Evening Mail* who insisted the ship was real because "my god I wrote the wabble and had ought to know." So the *Sun* was reminding its readers yet again of the gaffe with the cable.

Mark Twain's distress at sea had been reported by the *Times*, and the revelation that the humorist had actually been safe at home all the time offered the *Sun* another irresistible opportunity to needle its rival. The paper reported that "Samuel Clemens" was awaiting the latest news flash "from the conning tower of the tallest building in Times Square," reporting "that Mark Twain had been rescued from a watery grave at sea."

The Norse anchor story featured a long, labored anecdote involving Captain Hassenpfeffer and a newspaper clipping from the *Times* and contrived to drag in giggly references to Twain, the *Evening Mail*, and Times Square. "You never can tell about a disappearing anchor or the *Wabble*," it concluded. "One day they seem to have gone for good, but if you watch and watch, day after day, they will persist in bobbing up again."

And the story about Frederick Cook came amidst a cacophonous newspaper battle over the explorers' competing claims, a battle complete with accusations of conspiracy, favoritism, and fraud by journalists as well as by the explorers themselves. Not surprisingly, the *Sun's* piece included a gibe at the ship-news reporters of the *Times*, the *Evening Mail*, and another paper for having missed the *Wabble's* departure because they have "disregarded the doings of the *Wabble* for some time."

For all their eccentricity, the *Wabble* stories were in some ways a very typical *Sun* product. Yet the *Sun* was, in some ways, not at all a typical paper. It offered the kind of reliable, fact-centered news coverage characteristic of the more serious New York journals like the *Times*, the *Herald*, and the *Tribune*, and its circulation figures fell around the middle of that pack. And, like all of the other serious papers, it came in far short of the sales of the city's more sensational mass papers, Hearst's *Journal* or Pulitzer's *World*.¹³ But the *Sun* distinguished itself from the competition by generally resisting the kind of uninflected and neutral "journalistic" language the fact-centered papers relied on to signal their credibility. Though it followed the custom of the era in rarely giving bylines to its reporters, it prided itself on its reputation as the home of the most literary and talented of journalists—a reputation embodied to this day in the immortal 1897 *Sun* editorial "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus." In its own day the paper was even better known for the kind of story its late editor Charles A. Dana invented the term "human interest" to describe. Those were true stories, grounded in fact and generally confirmable in other sources, but told with intimacy, brio, and narrative art—stories like E. C. Hill's delicate "A Little Child in the Dark," about a three-year-old girl who died in a fall from a tenement roof, or Will Irwin's tour de force profile of a woman he tracked down after noticing a curious personal ad in some of the morning papers. "Whereupon the Fair Cuban," the piece began memorably, "seated in her front parlor at 281 Clifton place, Brooklyn, composed herself among the cushions of her chair and related the following extraordinary story."¹⁴

All of this meant that the completely fantastic *Wabble* story, while obviously different from a normal straight news story, was *less* different from the *Sun's* version of a normal straight news story—which is to say that an article that would have stood out against the generally bland columns of the *Tribune* or the *Times* like a cardinal in the snow would barely have flushed a little pink for regular readers of the *Sun*. It suggests too that those regular *Sun* readers enjoyed a different kind of relationship with their favorite paper than the subscribers to the more serious and more "modern" *Times* or *Tribune* did with theirs. The communications scholar James W. Carey has argued that the new professionalized approach to journalism transformed what had been an intimate two-sided "conversation" between readers and their newspapers into "a journalism of fact without regard to understanding . . . that justifies itself in the public's name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience."¹⁵ Readers who chose the *Sun* were also choosing to embrace a more traditional view of their newspaper, approaching it not as passive spectators but as engaged partners in making meaning and as connoisseurs of a special kind of truth that readers steeped in the "journalistic" style of rival papers could not appreciate.

The *Wabble* beat had been created by Frank Ward O'Malley. Remembered today mainly, and probably inaccurately, as the inventor of

the word "brunch," in his day he was judged by many—reportedly including H. L. Mencken—to be one of the best reporters in the country. Readers could always "spot" even his unsigned work by its "unmistakable" quality of "humor or pathos," reported the obituary in his own paper, and another eulogist recalled that the *Sun* man was "worshiped [*sic*]" in small-town newsrooms. "We recall our cub reporter days on the Register back home," this anonymous writer continued, "when somebody got hurt every morning in the rush to get the office copy of the Sun 'to see what O'Malley had.'" The tear-jerker O'Malley had in 1907 about the murder of the young policeman known as Happy Gene Sheehan, told entirely in the voice of his staunch but shattered mother, showed up for years afterward in anthologies of great journalism.¹⁶

Different meanings for different audiences

The *Wabble* stories were implicated in several different metajournalistic discourses within different audiences.

First of all, O'Malley was talking shop with his buddies. By all accounts a highly congenial soul, O'Malley and the pack of fellow reporters he liked to call "our set" frequented the legendary haunts of the Great White Way—the old Waldorf Astoria, Jack's Café, the huge Hippodrome Theater where Houdini made an elephant vanish. He also enjoyed the society of a group of waterfront reporters who called themselves the Ultramarines and whose bibulous dinners featured in some of the later *Wabble* stories.¹⁷ Although Nellie Bly and other female reporters had begun in the 1880s to make in-roads into the overwhelmingly male realm of the newsroom, most female journalists still tended to be either sequestered in the women's pages or featured as "sob sisters" covering softer, more emotional stories. The *Sun*, recalled the pioneering *Tribune* reporter Ishbel Ross, was "notoriously averse to women" at the time O'Malley was active; a "girl" who had fought her way onto the *Sun's* staff was barred from entering the city room and wrote her assignments from the office boy's nook.¹⁸ Thus, O'Malley's "set" reflected the news values and professionally socialized routines of the typical (white, male, young-to-middle-aged) city-room reporter.

So part of what drove the work of this tight-knit band of brothers was very likely the desire to impress, tease, challenge, and outdo each other in the terms of the culture they all shared. Communications scholars have written frequently of the ways that journalists assert their cultural authority and encourage group coherence by creating and sharing stories about their professional decisions and strategies. Barbie Zelizer, for instance, analyzed how television reporters used their coverage of President Kennedy's assassination to establish themselves as an "interpretive community" that "authenticate[d] itself through its narratives and collective memories. . . . Through shared narrative lore, reporters are able to espouse collective

values and notions that help them maintain themselves as an authoritative interpretive community." But the more ground-level view expressed by the historian Robert Darnton, based on his own brief experience as a cub reporter in Newark and New York in the late 1950s and early '60s, seems particularly applicable to the *Wabble* stories:

We wrote for one another. Our primary "reference group," as it might be known in communication theory, was spread around us in the newsroom, or the "snake pit," as we called it. We knew that no one would jump on our stories as quickly as our colleagues, for reporters make the most voracious readers, and they have to win their status anew each day as they expose themselves before their peers in print.¹⁹

The *Wabble* stories both sparked and memorialized the intense competition that always prevailed among the readers in New York who were also reporters.

Yet, with their strenuously raffish behavior in public and the insurrectionary journalistic style sanctioned by their paper, O'Malley and his set seem to have had a larger audience in mind than just their fellow reporters. They were performing for their public that mythic and hyper-male role of the independent and devil-may-care journalist that dated back at least to the Civil War, when newspapermen embraced for themselves the nickname Bohemian and enjoyed living up (or down) to its connotations of charming and disreputable nonconformity. Eventually, however, those same boisterous Bohemians were roundly repudiated by the new class of professionalizing journalists who ratified the respectable values they were for by publicly condemning the rowdy ones they were against.²⁰ This was the class epitomized by the generally sober, serious *New York Times*. The same *New York Times* that had, in that tiny little photo that any ordinary person would easily have missed, made a stupid mistake about the name of a tramp steamer.

So a third metajournalistic discourse O'Malley may have hoped to open with his goofy pieces concerned the relationship between style and credibility in an era of change. Not only was he claiming that stylish human-interest writing still had a place in a journalistic world that was becoming more and more standardized and dull; he was also insisting that stylish writing was also accurate, journalistically sound writing. As the *Sun's* rivals among the professionalized press ostentatiously used their neutral, standardized, and arguably boring style to both reflect and validate their methods and to vouch for their own accuracy, O'Malley was subverting all that, using the implicit contrast of his extravagantly and obviously fictionalized stories to argue that even neutral, standardized, and arguably boring journalism can get it wrong. To demonstrate that style does not validate content, and that credibility is not a function of style. That "mythos" can be just as informative as "logos."

Readers, however, are notoriously independent, and the ordinary folks who followed the *Wabble* found their way into a fourth kind of audience that was much less concerned with metajournalistic discourse than with the exegetical possibilities of a good, juicy symbol. O'Malley's inventiveness with the *Wabble* seems to have run out of steam by around 1914 and he quit the paper entirely in 1920, but the word continued to pop up periodically in the *Sun*, often in letters to the editor by readers who were clearly recalling the decade-old original stories. Yet what they remembered was not the clever put-down of a professional gaffe; for them the wayward ship served as a striking and memorable symbol of whimsically or foolishly erratic behavior. On April 26, 1916, for instance, just ten days after the US declared war on Germany, one oddly larky letter writer who signed only his initials suggested launching the *Wabble* as a warship because it would be "proof against submarine attack in that her course is so laid that it would cause an observing periscope to wring its own neck." President Woodrow Wilson, however, inspired correspondence that was much less amiable. The issue of September 11, 1916, carried a missive from one H. E. Knight:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SUN—Sir: In the past we have had great pilots of the ship of state. I do not think the present occupant of the White House could pilot the good ship *Wabble*: he wabbles too far for her even.

And on September 29, a letter, signed Julius Wilcox, recalled that a defeated candidate used to be described as "going up Salt River," and suggested that "W. W." should board the "Federal-Democratic Hamiltonian-Jeffersonian ship *Wabble*" and go explore Salt River for himself. Nor was it just *Sun* readers who continued to enjoy allusions to the plucky old tub. A two-sentence squib in the *Brooklyn Eagle* commending William Howard Taft's steady statesmanship on the peace treaty as "not the 'good ship *Wabble*'" was reprinted both approvingly and widely, showing up from Cincinnati to Anaconda, Montana and from Santa Fe to Salem, Oregon.²¹ The wobbly *Wabble*, it seems, handled nimbly enough to offer its readers a wide arena for participatory meaning-making.

The meaninglessness of Mizzle

That the idiosyncratic *New York Sun*, known for its stylish writers and its literary panache, teased its readers with an extravagantly fictionalized story that was ripe with layers of meaning and that invited readers into the conversation comes as no surprise. But when I started this essay with a quiz and you saw the fifth statement beginning: "A well-known caraway-seed merchant whose adventures in exotic parts of the world were regularly chronicled in the *New York Times*"—confess it. You thought it was probably true. Or at least that it was serious.

You thought so because the *New York Times* is famously dowdy, the paper whose proud new owner had characterized it in 1896 as “clean, dignified, and trustworthy,” stating that he hoped it would appeal to “thoughtful, pure-minded people.” Its trademark style in the Adolph Ochs years was strenuously bland and neutral, its declaration of fealty to the news that was “fit to print” a pledge of aggressive sobriety. Nevertheless, over the course of nearly twenty-five years, from 1917 to 1940, the paper published some twenty long stories chronicling the journeys of the seed-merchant Marmaduke M. Mizzle and his encounters with whistling vipers, Dalmatian plum-pudding hounds, and the flop-eared jelalajazza of Nepal.²²

The Mizzle stories were populated by vaguely anthropomorphic animals with names that smacked of Dr. Dolittle’s menagerie and were driven by plot points and devices shamelessly lifted from H. Rider Haggard’s wildly best-selling late-Victorian adventure romances, *She* (1886) and its sequel, *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905). Unlike Haggard’s opus, however, the Mizzle stories ran more to mischief than to melodrama. Both Mizzle and Leo Vincey, Haggard’s hero, traveled arduously through remote and exotic parts of the world. Each was constantly threatened by head hunters, hostile chief priests, and magical and powerful females who passionately desired him. Each eventually eluded his lady by escaping to a lamasery in Tibet. But in Vincey’s first adventure he was seeking the “Pillar of Life,” which was supposed to bestow immortality, and in the sequel he was in hot pursuit of the reincarnation of the powerful queen Ayesha or “She.” Mizzle, on the other hand, was driven by his insatiable quest for those little black seeds. It was never clear whether Mizzle knew that caraway seeds are a traditional home remedy for flatulence.

The perpetrator of the series, T. Walter Williams, covered a wide range of foreign and domestic stories for the *Times*, but his primary beat, from which his nickname “Skipper” derived, was shipping news. Until it was done in by the era of airplane travel, the assignment of covering ships, passengers, and the waterfront was seen as something special, “a romantic side of a romantic calling,” as an old *World-Telegram* man recalled, and one that came with a certain flexibility as to literal accuracy. Ship news reporters “worked long hours,” the *World-Telegram* man continued:

They were a talented lot, noisy and lively and ready to fake harmless stories, creating fanciful ships and persons. . . . Almost every day held the promise of adventure.²³

Williams strenuously lived up to the ideal of a shipping-news *personality*. He was mentioned, with fondness—or at least bemusement—in some of the newsmen’s reminiscences of his day, and his obituary described him as a “familiar, almost Dickensian character.”²⁴ And, given that as late as 1940 the *Times* was granting personal bylines to fewer than 10% of its inside-page

stories and only for those by staffers deemed “star reporters,” the fact that Williams’s Mizzle stories carried his own name from 1929 on strongly suggests that he was considered, by his editors at least, if not his readers, as a distinctive voice with a following of his own.²⁵

But even though they appeared in the newspaper that was most closely identified with what has come to be called the “information model” rather than the “story model” of reporting, the Mizzle tales appear not to have conveyed to their readers any information at all, nor did readers seem to want to decode any. Told mainly as rambling monologues or quotes from letters that had allegedly reached New York through bizarre and circuitous channels, the stories found their humor in making up silly names and sending up conventional adventure tales. The exotic geography was vague and had no apparent connections to the momentous events going on around the world in the 1920s and ’30s. All but two stories appeared in feature-rich Sunday editions, and in many of the tales Mizzle nudged his readers in the ribs with some variation of the studiously arch comment “I have promised my dear old mother that I would never tell a lie and I have always tried to keep my word.” A search through various digital databases showed that only seldom were any of the stories quoted or even mentioned in other publications, and seem never to have inspired a letter to the editor.²⁶

Nor did all of his readers appreciate his humor. The *Herald Tribune* columnist Lucius Beebe, who stylishly inhabited the world he had coined the term “cafe society” to describe, called Williams “a tall tower of mendacity, a liar of majestic dimensions to ensmall Baron Munchausen.” Beebe seems to have been referring mainly to the stretchers Williams told his rival ship reporters. But “every so often,” Beebe noted, the *Times*’s Sunday editor

would allow the Skipper space in which to lie officially in the Sunday paper. On such occasions he would produce a laborious three or four thousand words about a fictional Marmaduke Mizzle, the Mincing Lane Caraway Seed Merchant. The Skipper considered them hilarious, the greatest thing since Pope and Addison.²⁷

And when the old *World-Telegram* man, reminiscing about characters he had known, mentioned the Skipper’s story about the hazza-mazazza, he concluded lamely, “Well, it was pretty funny for *The Times* and funnier still to think that *The Times* thought it funny.”²⁸

The Marmaduke Mizzle stories came out of an era of frantic change in the New York newspaper world. In 1916 the freewheeling eccentricity of the *Sun* was doomed by its purchase by Frank Munsey, the mogul who would be memorably eulogized by the beloved Kansas editor William Allen White as having had “the talent of a meat packer, the morals of a money changer, and the manner of an undertaker.”²⁹ Then in 1919 the racy new tabloid *Daily News* brought new competitive pressures to bear on the nervous journals that were left. Thus the Mizzle stories—the first of which appeared in 1917—may

have been the *Times's* effort to compete on new ground, maybe even to lure in readers who missed the old *Sun*: a ponderous jape by a ponderous newspaper trying very hard to demonstrate that it, too, could show a little leg.

It seems fair to conclude, however, that the *Times's* leg wasn't terribly enticing to readers who had plenty of better views elsewhere. Digital databases have their flaws, but the scarcity of Mizzles just about everywhere *except* in the *Times's* archives or those quizzical memoirs by the Skipper's colleagues suggests that the stories simply did not connect with readers in any personal way. And although we can only speculate as to the reasons for this, the comparative example of the *Wabble* stories in the *Sun* offers some suggestions. Perhaps the central figure Mizzle didn't offer readers the use of the same kind of flexible, accessible and useful symbol as the erratic steamer did. Perhaps the adventures of a seed merchant confronting weird insects and rare dogs were too remote from the interests or experiences of New York readers to be available for meaning-making. Perhaps the *Wabble* stories, which, despite their playful language, were embedded in actual news events and structured very much like any other news story in the *Sun*, felt more *normal* in a newspaper than the Mizzle tales, which were not only closer in style and structure to some well-known novels but also wildly divergent from the style and structure characteristic of the paper that carried them.

And, as we recall our own response to that portentous statement, "A well-known caraway-seed merchant whose adventures in exotic parts of the world were regularly chronicled in the *New York Times*," we can also posit that a "modern," respectable, fact-centered paper that so conscientiously presented itself as an aloof and authoritative dispenser of knowledge and information instead of as an engaged partner in public conversation simply did not have the kind of relationship with its readers that would have encouraged them to see a patently fictional story about a big black bug with two heads as an invitation to join in metajournalistic discourse about the role of the newspaper. Just as in its front pages and news sections the *Times* told its readers what *it* thought they should know and believe, the manifestly untrue Mizzle stories carried the clear message that readers need not bother to know or believe anything about them. Yet, while the paper's professorial approach may have freed readers from the anxiety of not knowing what was true, it also deprived them of the assurance that they were smart enough to figure out the truth for themselves. In an era when the mainstream press was striving to establish itself as professional, authoritative, and serious, two influential New York City newspapers devoted a significant amount of column space to the ship *Wabble* and the merchant Mizzle, which not only weren't real; they were also extravagantly, goofily, unmistakably unreal. The stories that offered a stylistic hint of verisimilitude, a readily graspable symbol, a connection to actual events, and a variety of meanings that appealed to a range of readers—in other words, that embedded in their very structure an invitation to join in a serious public conversation about the credibility of journalism—enjoyed a long popularity. The ones that were *merely* "fake"—didn't.

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Anaconda (Montana) Standard (RX)
Brooklyn Daily Eagle (NP)
Buffalo (New York) Commercial (NP)
Chicago Tribune (NP and PQ)
Cincinnati Enquirer (NP)
Independence (Kansas) Evening Star (NP)
New York Evening Mail (microfilm)
New York Herald (LoC and NP)
(New York) Sun (LoC and NP through 1920; thereafter on microfilm)
New York Times (NP, NYT, and PQ)
New York Tribune (LoC, NP, and PQ)
Pensacola (Florida) Journal (LoC and NP)
Porcupine's Gazette (Philadelphia) (RX)
Salem (Oregon) Statesman Journal (NP)
Santa Fe New Mexican (NP)
Vancouver Province (NP)
Washington Post (NP and PQ)

Databases consulted

LoC Library of Congress Chronicling America, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>
 NP Newspapers.com subscription database, <https://www.newspapers.com>
 NYT *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/search>; the fuller subscription archive is at <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/browser>
 PQ ProQuest Historical Newspapers subscription database, <https://www.proquest.com>
 RX Readex America's Historical Newspapers subscription database, <https://www.readex.com/content/americas-historical-newspapers>

Notes

- [William Cobbett], "The Market Street Scoundrel," *Porcupine's Gazette*, November 16, 1797; *New York Herald*, April 11–June 10, 1836; Mark Twain, "Petrified Man," originally in *Territorial Enterprise*, October 4, 1862 (issue does not survive); Chambers, *News Hunting on Three Continents*, 13–18; "Famous Explorer Found to be Alive," *New York Times*, May 21, 1933.
- Carlson, "Metajournalistic Discourse."
- On "faking," see Tucher, "The True, the False," 102. On the "professionalizing" turn see Schudson, *Discovering the News*; Waisbord, *Reinventing Professionalism*, 19–42; and Nerone, *The Media and Public Life*, 143–74.
- The engraved portrait illustrating Bache's Wikipedia entry, as of September 30, 2019, is reproduced elsewhere as an image of his namesake nephew and depicts clothing more characteristic of the nephew's era.
- Douglas, "Textual Analysis," 68.

- 6 On challenges in reading historical newspapers, see Tucher, "Why Journalism History Matters."
- 7 Ferguson, "Petrified Truth"; Twain, *Early Tales & Sketches*, 158. On the prostitute's murder, see Tucher, *Froth and Scum*, part 1; on the druggist, see Tucher, "Why Journalism History Matters," 438–39.
- 8 The first installment, "Glad News from the Wabble," published January 12, 1907, was reprinted in Walker, *City Editor*, 293–96. Compiling an accurate census of the *Wabble* stories is challenging. The New York *Sun* can be searched on the Library of Congress Chronicling America website and on the subscription database www.newspapers.com, but neither search function is as effective as ProQuest's or the *New York Times*'s.
- 9 "The Wabble is Hayti's Navy," *Sun*, April 20, 1907; "Can't Find Mark Twain at Sea," *Sun*, May 5, 1907; "Wabble's Lost Anchor Found," *Sun*, June 30, 1907; "Dastardly Anti-Cook Plot," *Sun*, November 27, 1909.
- 10 Among the reprints and references that turned up in database searches are: "Ponce in Harbor Sans Wabble Ship," *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 1907; an untitled item in the *Buffalo (New York) Commercial*, January 15, 1907; "The Good Ship 'Wabble' a Mysterious Tramp," *Independence (Kansas) Evening Star*, January 27, 1907; "In Re the Good Ship 'Wabble,'" *Pensacola (Florida) Journal*, February 14, 1907; "Ponce Arrives at this Port," *New York Tribune*, January 27, 1907; and "Incidents of a Single Night in a Steamer's Wireless Room," *Washington Post*, December 15, 1907. Joking letters to the *Sun* invoking the *Wabble* appeared on January 14, 1907, January 16, 1907, January 23, 1907, etc.
- 11 The only known surviving issue of the *Evening Mail* from January 11, 1907 (available on microfilm at the New York Public Library) is labeled "11 PM Final Edition," by which time the embarrassing mistake had been purged from the paper. The *Sun* reported the purge in a follow-up story on January 21, and also quoted what it said was the *Mail*'s original report, which I reproduce here with the obvious caveats.
- 12 N.W. Ayer & Son's *American Newspaper Annual [and Directory]* for 1908 does not give circulation figures for the *Evening Mail*; [George P.] Rowell's *American Newspaper Directory* for 1909 notes that it had been credited annually since 1901 with between about 7,500 and about 12,500 copies sold (747). See <https://archive.org/details/americannewspape1909newy>.
- 13 "The Ponce at Bermuda, Towed There Helpless," *New York Times*, January 12, 1907; "Ahoy! The Wabble Once More," *Sun*, January 21, 1907; the *Times*'s photo of the *Ponce* appears on p. 8 of the pictorial section of January 20, 1907.
- 14 According to N.W. Ayer & Son's *American Newspaper Annual [and Directory]* for 1908, the circulation of the weekday morning *Sun* was 120,000, while the weekday *Tribune* reported 65,850, the weekday *Times* 100,000, and the weekday *Herald* 130,000. Pulitzer's *Evening World* had 412,290 and Hearst's *Evening Journal* reported 700,000 (601–15). See <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vols/loc.gdc.sr.sn91012091.00143501899/pageturner.html?size=800>.
- 15 Dana, *Art of Newspaper Making*, 12; Hughes, *News*, 12–13. Hill's piece appeared on April 15, 1905, and Irwin's, under the headline "Narrative of the Fair Cuban: Stolen in Her Youth, She Can't Find Out Who She Is," on March 26, 1906; see also Irwin, *Making of a Reporter*, 107–20, and Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 57–64.
- 16 Carey, "The Press," 391.
- 16 "Frank O'Malley is Dead in France," *Sun*, October 19, 1932; the comment about the small-town newspapermen comes in a brief unattributed clipping in the "O'Malley, Frank Ward" folder, New York *Sun* Newspaper Morgue Files, New York Public Library. See also "Frank W. O'Malley Dies in France at 56," *New*

- York Times*, October 20, 1932, quoting Mencken. The story on Happy Gene appeared as "As His Mother Looks at It," *Sun*, October 23, 1907. The *Sun* supplied no bylines for the *Wabble* stories and didn't mention them in its obituary of O'Malley, but the attribution is confirmed by a number of contemporaries, notably O'Malley's friend and colleague Irvin S. Cobb, *Exit Laughing*, 253.
- 17 Irwin, *Making of a Reporter*, 118–19; the Ultramarines and the *Wabble* featured e.g. in "No Mary Garden to Sing to Them," *Sun*, April 1, 1912.
- 18 Ross, *Ladies of the Press*, 143, 114; Whitt, *Women in American Journalism*, 16, 37–40.
- 19 Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 10; Darnton, *Kiss of Lamourette*, 62.
- 20 Tucher, "Reporting for Duty."
- 21 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 14, 1919; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 19, 1919; *Anaconda Standard*, May 23, 1919; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, May 23, 1919; *Salem Statesman Journal*, August 2, 1919; and others.
- 22 "Business Announcement," *New York Times*, August 19, 1896. See for example "Ever Meet up with a Zoozookasukas?" August 5, 1928; "Singing Spiders Irk Mizzle in Jungle," November 22, 1931; and "Egad! M. Mizzle Shows up Again," May 26, 1940.
- 23 Ferris, *Winds of Barclay Street*, 90–92, 86.
- 24 "T. Walter Williams of the Times Dies," *New York Times*, November 10, 1942.
- 25 Reich, "Constrained Authors," 711–12.
- 26 On "information" and "story" journalism see Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 88–120; for the mother's quote, see "M.M. Mizzle Quits his Lamasery, Pursued by Sable Amazon on Yak," *New York Times*, February 14, 1937; on Sunday papers, see Mott, *American Journalism*, 584–85. A search on July 28, 2020, on the database Newspapers.com, which has the broadest coverage of the post-1922 era (but a relatively unsophisticated search engine), turned up a total of just 24 references to Marmaduke Mizzle in North American papers between 1917 and 1940, including several that were brief or offhand and several more that were the same piece reprinted in different editions. Canadian papers accounted for no fewer than a quarter of the mentions, including a bemused comment in the *Vancouver Province* of August 24, 1931 that seeing Mizzle stories in the *Times* was like seeing "an octogenarian . . . suddenly stand upon his head in the middle of the Stock Exchange."
- 27 Beebe, *Provocative Pen*, 272–73.
- 28 Ferris, *Winds of Barclay Street*, 93.
- 29 White, quoted in Churchill, *Park Row*, 291.

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