

# **Communication In History: The Key To Understanding Yellow Journalism And The USS Maine Explosion**

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Time and time again, the importance of communication is tangible as it has served as a critical component of various events throughout history. Communication is the very reason people can interact, express, and share each other's thoughts and emotions. In history, communication is constantly taking place whether it be between enemies, allies, civilians, or even political figures like presidents and their commands to the public. Many factors can affect the way messages are conceived. When it comes to communication, the ways of communicating or putting out a message vary from newspapers, televisions, speeches, and other forms of media.. Communicating and understanding what is being communicated is crucial as it results in a chain of either satisfactory or substandard events if it is not interpreted right. Take the USS Maine explosion which resulted in the Spanish-American War. Yellow journalism was a major factor of communication that played a role in the aftermath of the event of the Maine explosion.

After several conflicts between America and Spain, America reached their boiling point when the USS Maine battleship exploded on February 15, 1898. This explosion led to the start of the Spanish- American War. “An official U.S. court of inquiry was set up soon after the loss of Maine to investigate the cause. Its findings, which did not assign blame” (“Sinking of the USS Maine”- Topics on Newspapers.com.” Topics, 20 March 2020) Though the cause of the explosion was unclear, America and Spain blamed each other for the outcome of the dead sailors and the exploded ship. Both, therefore, held their investigations to prove each other wrong and make a point and stance. The Spanish investigating team claimed that on one hand, that the explosion was merely a mistake exacerbated by a few of the ship's internal issues. Whereas the American inquiry found that the explosion must have been triggered by the Spanish harbor mines. Newspapers at the time were people's means of communicating and being aware of their

surroundings. Thus, newspaper outlets like yellow journalism were popular. The exploitation of the event pulled Spain and America into a war in 1898.

Yellow journalists in America shaped the story about the Maine explosion by fueling Americans' hatred and anger towards Spain. This power the journalists had illustrated that they could manipulate and influence the public's views on global events. One major factor that caused this uproar was the yellow journalist's manipulation of the public. Yellow journalists like Hearst and Pulitzer took advantage of the event to get Americans to go into war. From an excerpt from Hearst journal her says, "But while we must wait for definite evidence before formally charging Spain with the shameful treachery, which all the world is ready to suspect her, we need wait for nothing before instituting such a change of policy it will relieve us of the fear of future troubles...Whether a Spanish torpedo sank Maine or not, peace must be restored in Cuba at once. We cannot have peace without fighting for it, let us fight and have it over with. It is not likely that the entire Spanish navy would be able to do us as much harm in open battle as we suffered in Havana Harbor in one second for a state of things that was neither peace nor war." (Hearst's Randolph William, "Shameful Treachery": Hearst's Journal Blames Spain," New York Journal, 17 February 1898) This illustrates how eager Hearst was to go into war with Spain. Even if Spain were not at fault, he implied that war was the only option for America. With this motive in mind, he did all he could to manipulate the public into siding with his beliefs using their emotions. After the explosion, Hearst and Pulitzer convinced people of the public swiftly. War fever in the United States was in the air, thus it gave multiple newspaper outlets, people, and congress members the message that the mine found on the ship was placed by Spain/their people. "Newspapers published by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer blamed Spain for the wreckage. Hearst's New York Journal on February 17 reported: The Warship Maine was Split in

Two by an Enemy's Infernal Machine. The drawing in the newspaper showed the ship anchored over a mine, with wires connecting the mine to a Spanish fort. Newspapers helped promote the battle cry: "Remember the Maine" and "To Hell with Spain!" (U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898)

Yellow journalists and other newspaper outlets joined forces to bring out their firm beliefs and speculations. They felt the so-called "attack" in front of them was a sign to initiate war with Spain. The words in the newspapers made people feel dejected and regretful about those who died in Maine and enraged at Spain because it was supposedly in their eyes all Spain's fault. In another situation, Hearst got a hold of the De Lomé Letter given to him by a spy, which he then released to the public. "But the American public, agitated by the yellow press and American imperialists, demanded firm action. "REMEMBER THE MAINE, TO HELL WITH SPAIN!" ("Remember Maine," U.S. History. org) Yellow journalism successfully won over the American people and they were furious. They wanted to go into war against Spain who was constantly getting on their skin. Based on yellow journalism, most Americans wanted America to initiate war against Spain based on the narratives they were told about Spain. The message they were getting was that Spain was getting out of hand and the people needed to speak up to support the idea of war to get their justice.

While America was being heavily influenced by yellow journalism, Spain was blamed for the Maine explosion. They were not given a chance to explain themselves as by this point the United States had pure hatred towards them. From Spain's perspective, "Public opinion was led to believe that people in the United States only knew how to make money, were motivated only by greed, were just a motley group of immigrants lacking national cohesion, shamelessly wanting to snatch away Spanish possessions, and that the United States armed forces could not

defeat the glorious military tradition of Spain. The Spanish press did not report on the comparative military strength of the two nations, which in so many ways favored the United States, especially regarding the navy.” (The Spanish-American War of 1898: a Spanish View - The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War) Spain found the United States to be the real threat as they believed they were stealing from them. They acknowledged the power in the United States in terms of the U.S. being influenced by the yellow journalists. Spain also was not truthful to their citizens as they did not alert their people about their military disadvantage against the United States. Also, from Spain's point of view, they believed that they were not responsible for the explosion. The text says, “U.S. public opinion at the time naturally believed the explosion had been deliberately caused by the Spanish. When this impression, already exaggerated out of proportion by the press, seemed to be confirmed by the findings of the naval commission of inquiry, the war became inevitable. The Spanish government first proposed a joint investigation of the explosion, and when this was refused, carried out its own. In conclusion, that it had been an internal explosion, however, was irrelevant in the face of a tremendous surge of popular indignation in the United States and the battle cry of "Remember the Maine!” (The Spanish-American War of 1898: a Spanish View - The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War) Despite Spain's efforts to cooperate with the United States, they denied any help so Spain took things into its own hands. Spain was no match compared to yellow journalists who had influenced Americans.

Years after the explosion, analysts and engineers continued to examine the cause of the USS Maine explosion which was not thoroughly yet determined. In an evaluation of the 1898 report, “Many ships, including Maine, had coal bunkers located next to magazines that stored ammunition, gun shells, and gunpowder. Only a bulkhead separated the bunkers from the

magazines. If the coal, by spontaneous combustion, overheated, the magazines were at risk of exploding. An investigative board on January 27, 1898, warned the Secretary of the Navy about spontaneous coal fires that could detonate nearby magazines.” Additionally, “There was no evidence of a mine or wires from shore, but the AME analysis made several assumptions to decide whether a mine was a possible cause.” (“Destruction of Maine (1898)- The Law Library of Congress” 4 August 2009) The Navy was warned ahead of time about the possible threat of having coal bunkers and magazines stored with harmful powers. Despite the warning ahead of time fingers were still pointed at Spain. The yellow journalists claimed that Spain mined the USS Maine ship which eventually let out the explosion however, study’s time and time again prove the lies of the yellow journalists and their so-called narrative.

In conclusion, the message conveyed by yellow journalists greatly impacted their actions. Yellow journalism in a sense communicated with the people and their emotions and beliefs. It changed the Attitudes of Americans towards Spain. It also made it hard for Spain to have a say in anything. With yellow journalism telling people to point their fingers at Spain it united people into having a uniform belief of initiating war against Spain. Yellow journalists aided in shaping a believable narrative that they played out and convinced people to cooperate. Thus, through this, we see how evident and key it is to understand various means of communication between two parties as we can see how impactful it can be.

## Annotated Bibliography

### **Primary Sources**

A Spotlight on a Primary Source by Harper's Weekly. "The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History." *Remember the Maine, 1898* | *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, [www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/remember-maine-1898](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/remember-maine-1898)

I used this source to get access to a primary source news article that was posted about the USS Maine explosion. This source helped me to get a better visual as well as additional background information about my topic.

Lee, Karen. "Sinking of the USS Maine - Topics on Newspapers.com." *Topics*, 20 March 2020, [www.newspapers.com/topics/american-imperialism/sinking-uss-maine](http://www.newspapers.com/topics/american-imperialism/sinking-uss-maine).

I used this source for adding details to my research paper. I also used this source to examine various newspapers from around the same time as the Maine explosion to help me make better connections. This helped to understand my topic because it helped narrow down key events such as the first official inqur of the USS Maine explosion along with information about the investigations that followed later.

"Primary Sources: Major Events: USS Maine Explosion." *LibGuides*, [cnu.libguides.com/primarymajorevents/ussmaine](http://cnu.libguides.com/primarymajorevents/ussmaine).

I used this source to get primary sources from journals and etc of peoples thoughts about the explosion. It helped me to understand the topic from different viewpoints rather than just one.

"'Shameful Treachery': Hearst's Journal Blames Spain." *New York Journal*, 17 February 1898, [historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5471](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5471).

This source was one of the articles from LibGuides. It helped me to better understand and dig deeper into Hearst's Journal. Reading about his beliefs and aspiration for America to go into war helped me paint a better picture of him and his motives.

## Secondary Sources:

Fisher Louis, "Destruction of Maine(1898)- The Library of Congress" 4 August 2009, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/usconlaw/pdf/Maine.1898.pdf>

I used this source to help read into additional studies done regarding the Maine explosion and its root cause. The source was simple and easy to break down so it helped me get a better understanding about all the studies done to finally come to a conclusion.

"*U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898,*" *Office of the Historian* [history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism).

I used this source to explain what resulted as an outcome of the influence of yellow journalism. I sourced helped me understand the impact yellow journalism had on the Maine explosion.

"Remember Maine!" *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, [www.ushistory.org/us/44c.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/44c.asp).

I used this source as another source for additional details. The source helped me get a better understanding of the impact of the explosion on Americans. I learned why the patriotic Americans were fuming and willing to do anything to get justice.

"The Spanish-American War of 1898: a Spanish View." *The Spanish-American War of 1898: a Spanish View - The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War (Hispanic Division, Library of Congress)*, [www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/ojeda.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/ojeda.html).

I used this source as a resource to get insight on how Spain felt on the whole situation. The source opened me up into another point of view which was great because I got to see how the other side felt against yellow journalism in America.

"The Sinking of the U.S.S. Maine and Our Rise to Empire." *The Tribune*, 7 March 2020, [www.irontribune.com/2020/03/07/history-lesson-the-sinking-of-the-u-s-s-maine-and-our-rise-to-empire/](http://www.irontribune.com/2020/03/07/history-lesson-the-sinking-of-the-u-s-s-maine-and-our-rise-to-empire/).

I used this source as a means of getting background information about the USS Maine explosion. This source helped me get a sequence of events that played up leading to and after the USS Maine explosion.