

Sex, Crime, and Jazz-Age Journalism

The [1920s](#) were an exciting, shocking decade in America's cities. Although [Prohibition](#) laws outlawed alcohol, people flocked to speakeasies, private clubs where they could drink bootleg liquor and dance to the latest jazz. [Gangsters](#) battled in the streets for control of the alcohol trade. [Women](#) put on lipstick and rouge, wore short skirts, and smoked in public. Ground-breaking novels and plays focused on the once-taboo subject of sex. People poured into sporting events and movie houses and worshipped new-found celebrities like [Babe Ruth](#) and [Charlie Chaplin](#). This raucous decade was known as the jazz age.

Newspapers reflected the era, attracting readers with sensational stories. Throughout the decade, many newspapers drew readers by focusing on stories involving sex, crime, and celebrities. This was known as "jazz-age journalism."

In 1921, a story broke that involved all three elements—sex, crime, and a celebrity. [Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle](#), one of Hollywood's most famous stars, was accused of sexually assaulting and killing a movie actress. The press pounced on the story, printing detail after lurid detail. The case of "Fatty" Arbuckle raised the question of whether a celebrity could get a fair trial amid enormous national press coverage.

The Rise of the Tabloids

On June 26, 1919, a new kind of newspaper called a tabloid hit the streets of New York City. Half the size (15 x 11 inches) of other newspapers, the *Daily News* typically displayed a front page with a screaming headline and large pictures. Inside, short, sensationalized news articles sat alongside photos, illustrations, and feature stories about the lives, loves, and misfortunes of both ordinary and famous people. Stories were intentionally written to startle, excite, and even mislead the reader. By 1924, the *Daily News* had the largest circulation of any paper in the country.

The success of the *Daily News* attracted the attention of major publishers like [William Randolph Hearst](#), who established his own tabloids. Soon other tabloids appeared in most of the country's big cities. Facing serious competition from these upstarts, traditional newspapers began to imitate the tabloids' large front-page headlines, splashy photos, and sensational stories.

"Fatty" Gets Into Trouble

Along with Charlie Chaplin, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was one of the great comic stars of silent pictures. Between 1913 and 1916, he made over 100 short films for the Mack Sennett Studio. By 1917, he was directing as well as acting in comic short movies in his own studio. He made his first feature-length film in 1919. Its success led to several feature-length comedies. Earning an incredible \$5,000 a week, the 34-year-old Arbuckle completed three films in quick succession during the spring and summer of 1921. Then

on Labor Day weekend, he took a break. With some of his Hollywood friends, he drove his Pierce Arrow touring car to San Francisco.

Arbuckle checked into a suite of rooms at the posh St. Francis Hotel. Numerous friends, city officials, and assorted freeloaders came around to see the Hollywood star. He ordered food and, despite Prohibition, managed to get three cases of liquor. Throughout the day, people came and went, ate and drank, listened and danced to records. Arbuckle, dressed in his pajamas and a robe, was the life of the party.

One of Arbuckle's guests was [Virginia Rappe](#) a 25-year-old aspiring actress. In the late afternoon, Arbuckle went to his bedroom to dress for the evening. He later testified that he found Virginia Rappe on his bathroom floor writhing in pain. He said that he carried her to his bed. Others testified that they heard angry shouting coming from Arbuckle's bedroom. At some point, Arbuckle apparently put some ice on her body. Others then came into the room and saw the delirious actress thrashing about on the bed grabbing at her torn clothes. Finally, Arbuckle called for a doctor, and Rappe was taken to a hospital. She died there a few days later without fully regaining her senses.

Shortly after Virginia Rappe died, San Francisco police arrested Arbuckle and charged him with murder. He was jailed and denied bail. Newspapers throughout the nation ran screaming headlines:

"Evidence Shows Conclusively He Was Directly Responsible for Death"

"'Arbuckle, Beast from Gutter, I Would Kill Him,' Declares Virginia Rappe's Fiance"

"Plan to Send Arbuckle to Death on Gallows"

Pictures of Arbuckle and others involved in the incident covered the front pages of many newspapers. The Los Angeles Times, hardly a tabloid, ran a spread of front-page photos with the headline, "Three Striking Poses of Virginia Rappe, Victim in Arbuckle Orgy." In many cities, movie houses canceled the showing of "Fatty" Arbuckle films.

On September 13, 1921, a San Francisco grand jury indicted Arbuckle for manslaughter. Not satisfied, San Francisco District Attorney Matthew Brady announced that he would not proceed on the indictment but would seek a first-degree murder charge against the actor at a preliminary hearing.

In the meantime, newspapers reported the findings of the coroner's jury. The jury concluded that Virginia Rappe died from a ruptured bladder and peritonitis "caused by the application of some force which, from evidence submitted, was applied by one Roscoe Arbuckle."

The preliminary hearing took more than a week. The district attorney attempted to convince the judge that Arbuckle, who weighed over 300 pounds, had sexually assaulted

Virginia Rappe causing her injury and death. The judge, however, found evidence supporting only a trial for manslaughter. He ordered Arbuckle released on \$5,000 bail.

Arbuckle returned to a shocking reception in Los Angeles. More than a thousand people, described by one witness as a "hate-frenzied mob," met Arbuckle at the train station. "Murderer!" some yelled. "Beast!" jeered others. Police had to protect him as he made his way to a waiting car.

"Fatty" On Trial

Newspaper reporters from all over the country and crowds of curious onlookers came to see "Fatty" Arbuckle on trial. The trial began on November 14, 1921, and lasted for three weeks. Arbuckle denied attacking Virginia Rappe. His attorneys introduced evidence that the actress had long-suffered from a bladder disease. The prosecution played up the "wild orgy" in Arbuckle's hotel suite and described him as a depraved emperor "sitting on his throne and pouring wine." On December 5, after 40 hours of deliberation, the jurors reported that they were hopelessly deadlocked 10–2 for acquittal. The district attorney called for an immediate retrial.

Arbuckle did not testify at his second trial. The jury deadlocked 10–2 for conviction. Again the district attorney demanded a new trial.

The third trial opened on March 6 and continued for over a month. Arbuckle testified, as did more than 70 other witnesses, including doctors who testified about Rappe's chronic illness. In the end, the jury barely met for five minutes and found Arbuckle not guilty.

"Fatty" Is Banned

The verdict did not end Arbuckle's troubles. Several groups, concerned with immorality in Hollywood's movies, had mounted efforts to get the government to censor movies. To prevent government censorship, the movie industry set up its own clean-up campaign. Just six days after Arbuckle was found innocent, the newly appointed head of the campaign banned the screening of his films. With all the negative press Arbuckle had gotten, he became the perfect scapegoat to prove the industry was cracking down on immoral behavior.

"Fatty" Arbuckle did eventually return to the movies as a director (under a pseudonym) and even acted again in some comic shorts. But his career as a movie great ended in the storm of publicity surrounding his three trials. He died in his sleep at age 46 in 1933, leaving an estate valued at \$2,000.

Nobody will probably ever know exactly what happened in "Fatty" Arbuckle's hotel room in San Francisco. But two juries heard evidence in the case and failed to convict him of any wrongdoing. A third jury acquitted him and even issued an extraordinary statement saying, "...We...hope that the American people will take the judgment of 14 men and women who have sat listening for 31 days to evidence that Roscoe Arbuckle is

entirely innocent and free from all blame." But many people in America judged Arbuckle from the sensational allegations raised in newspapers across the country, and Arbuckle suffered greatly. Even today, you can read many accounts of the Arbuckle scandal that seem to be based on wild accusations printed at the time.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What methods made the tabloids different from traditional newspapers?
2. Which do you think is more trustworthy—evidence presented at a trial or news stories in a newspaper? Why?
3. Do you think "Fatty" Arbuckle was treated fairly by the press? By the motion-picture industry? Explain your answers.
4. What similarities do you see between press coverage of the "Fatty" Arbuckle trials in 1921–22 and coverage of trials of celebrities today?

A C T I V I T Y

Should Witnesses Be Prohibited from Selling Their Stories?

In this activity, students role-play advisers to the governor (played by the teacher).

A recent development in tabloid-style news is the payment of fees for exclusive stories. This practice has drawn heavy criticism, especially when tabloids pay prospective witnesses in criminal trials. Critics fear both that people might make up sensational stories for tabloids and that juries might not believe witnesses who have been paid by tabloids.

Imagine that your state legislature is considering a bill that will make it illegal for witnesses in criminal matters to "receive payment for providing information obtained by witnessing an event or having personal knowledge of the facts."

The governor, unsure about this bill, asks your advice. The governor particularly wants your opinions, **supported with reasons**, on the following questions:

1. Do you believe that this bill violates the First Amendment freedoms of speech and press? Why?
2. Do jurors find it harder to believe witnesses who have sold information about the case to a tabloid magazine or TV show? Explain your answer.
3. If this bill becomes a law, what penalty for violating it do you think would be appropriate? Why?
4. Should this bill not apply to any of the following kinds of persons: expert witnesses, police officers, private investigators, police informers, or news reporters? Explain.
5. Do you think a bill like this one should become a law in our state? Why or why not?

A. Form small groups of advisers. Each group should discuss and write a response to these questions. Any differences of opinion should also be recorded.

B. After evaluating the bill, each group should report to the governor and other groups its responses to the five questions.