Investigative journalists of the early 20th century are called "muckrakers" because they unearthed corruption in corporate America.

Keywords

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Muckraking Journalism

Professor

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(Holy Cross College): “Muckraking” is a term that is given to investigative journalists by Teddy Roosevelt. And it's a disparaging term. Even though Roosevelt is a Progressive and he believes in sort of righteous indignation, which is a characteristic of progressive reformers, he doesn't really like the style, the sort of unseemly style, of investigative journalism. But, muckraking becomes a key part of the progressive initiative to investigate and then to expose social injustice.

Ida Tarbell writes a book about Standard Oil, and she takes on John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest and most powerful men in America. And she details in great, exacting detail exactly how Rockefeller operates, what he does, how he crushes his competition, how he uses the bigness of Standard Oil to get even better, the very same arguments that are made today about modern corporations usually in the computer industry. That because they're big, they can get bigger because they have the power to destroy their competition. They have the power to bribe or influence politicians and so forth. Lincoln Steffens focuses on political corruption. And so he writes his book

Shame of the Cities
at the turn of the century, exposing the rampant political corruption. The fact that most American cities are the in clutches of political machines that are corrupt and wasteful and, you know, preside over among other things huge vice districts with prostitution and gambling and drinking go on. And that cities will never get any better until we get rid of this hopelessly corrupt system.

And Upton Sinclair is another muckraker who writes a fictionalized account – but based on his own research – about the meat packing industry. And that one is probably the most famous muckraking book of all because it gets people, a lot of people don't really necessarily care much about their kerosenes they're getting from Standard Oil. And a lot of people don't live in cities. So, they're not concerned about
corruption of the political machines. But, they are concerned about the food they eat. Upton Sinclair writes this incredible exposé of the horrid practices both in the meat packing industry, the kind of food that they're actually producing, dreadfully unhealthy and selling to the American public. And the way in which they horribly abuse their workers.

So, muckraking is a major development in the late 19th century, early 20th century for sort of exposing the things that thing progressive politicians and leaders are going to pass laws to solve.