

ARTICLE

Journalism and Corruption in Chicago, 1912–1931

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Abstract

The publicity of journalism has long been central to anti-corruption politics in the United States. This article explores relations between journalism and corruption in early twentieth-century Chicago and shows how newspapers could be used by corrupt politicians to consolidate and even constitute their power. By examining the three-term mayoralty of William Hale 'Big Bill' Thompson, the article considers a range of media strategies, from press-baiting to propaganda and boosterism, that fuelled public controversies about press hypocrisy and limited journalism's anti-corruption potential. Thompson's Chicago sheds light on broader debates about the politics of journalism in capitalist societies with commercial media environments; it also helps illuminate wider histories of corruption in America.

The rise of the muckrakers in the early twentieth century made journalism a key mechanism for combating corruption in the United States. Lincoln Steffens argued in *The shame of the cities* (1904) that journalism should expose corrupt practices and scandals so that public opinion could rally against them.¹ This argument continues to shape histories of American politics and debates about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.² Few now frame machine politics itself as necessarily or simply 'corrupt', for urban parties were complex organizations that provided welfare and employment, as well as real power, to working-class and immigrant constituencies.³ George Washington Plunkitt,

¹ Lincoln Steffens, *The shame of the cities* (New York, NY, 1904), pp. 18–19.

² E.g. Richard White, *Railroaded: the transcontinentals and the making of modern America* (New York, NY, 2011); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The bully pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the golden age of journalism* (New York, NY, 2013); Daniel Czitrom, *New York exposed: the Gilded Age police scandal that launched the Progressive Era* (New York, NY, 2016).

³ Jon C. Teaford, *The unheralded triumph: city government in America, 1870–1900* (Baltimore, MD, 1984); Daniel Czitrom, 'Underworlds and underdogs: Big Tim Sullivan and metropolitan politics in New York, 1889–1913', *Journal of American History*, 78 (1991), pp. 536–58; Amy Bridges, *Morning glories: municipal reform in the southwest* (Princeton, NJ, 1997); James J. Connolly, *An elusive unity:*

the New York politician and Tammany Hall partisan, suggested that ‘Steffens means well but, like all reformers’, he neglected the need for a certain degree of ‘honest graft’ in city government. Still, Plunkitt stressed that ‘Tammany don’t care to get in the papers. It goes right along attendin’ to business quietly and only wants to be let alone.’⁴ While journalists like Steffens were myopic about party machines, politicians like Plunkitt also wanted to avoid media attention. Journalistic publicity in general, and muckraking in particular, are potent resources and precedents for anti-corruption politics.⁵

This article complicates these debates about journalism and corruption by exploring Chicago’s political history in the early twentieth century. Chicago was a product of truly explosive growth, settlement, and migration. By 1900, it had become a globally significant metropolis that many contemporaries saw as symbolizing much about modern America.⁶ Moreover, Chicago’s press was highly successful, nationally influential, ‘the best in any of our large cities’ according to Steffens.⁷ Five mainstream newspapers had daily circulations above 200,000 in 1912: *The Tribune*, *The Daily News*, *The American*, *The Herald*, and *The Examiner* (which merged into *The Herald-Examiner* from 1918).⁸ Beyond these behemoths was *The Defender*, a leading black weekly; *The Day Book*, a popular left-wing daily; an exceptionally vibrant foreign language press, which served the city’s diverse immigrant communities; and many other papers, magazines, party sheets, pamphlets, and sundries. By the mid-1910s, Chicago’s newspapers were industry leaders as commercial publications and regular critics of city politics and each other. More than one million individual papers were sold every day, while the total number of dailies in circulation fluctuated around three dozen.⁹ Chicago’s press thus provides a valuable case-study in the history of American journalism.

urban democracy and machine politics in industrializing America (Ithaca, NY, 2010); Terry Golway, *Machine made: Tammany Hall and the creation of modern American politics* (New York, NY, 2014); Mary Frances Berry, *Five dollars and a pork chop sandwich: vote buying and the corruption of democracy* (Boston, MA, 2016); Matthew Vaz, ‘Tammany Hall and the machine style in black politics’, *Modern American History*, 4 (2021), pp. 103–7.

⁴ William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York, NY, 1905), pp. 54, 153–4.

⁵ E.g. Andrea Bernstein, *American oligarchs: the Kushners, the Trumps, and the marriage of money and power* (New York, NY, 2020), pp. 19–20. Cf. Paul Starr, ‘Goodbye to the age of newspapers (hello to a new age of corruption)’, *New Republic*, 4 Mar. 2009, pp. 28–35.

⁶ The classic study is William Cronon, *Nature’s metropolis: Chicago and the great west* (New York, NY, 1991). Recent discussions of Chicago’s national and global significance include James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 339–45; Keisha N. Blain, *Set the world on fire: black nationalist women and the global struggle for freedom* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018), pp. 47–52, 198–9; Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American capitalism: a history of the United States* (New York, NY, 2021), pp. 246–53.

⁷ Steffens, *Shame of the cities*, p. 273. For a similar view, see Will Irwin, ‘The American newspaper, part VII: the reporter and the news’, *Collier’s*, 22 Apr. 1911, p. 36.

⁸ Michael Stamm, *Dead tree media: manufacturing the newspaper in twentieth-century North America* (Baltimore, MD, 2018), p. 111.

⁹ Jon Bekken, ‘The Chicago newspaper scene: an ecological perspective’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74 (1997), pp. 490–500, at p. 493. Histories of Chicago journalism include Norman Howard Sims, ‘The Chicago style of journalism’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1979); Duane C. S. Stoltzfus, *Freedom from advertising: E. W. Scripps’s Chicago experiment* (Urbana, IL,

Chicago's politicians also provide historians with abundant material for studying corruption, but one in particular will be examined here. William Hale 'Big Bill' Thompson was the dominant political figure in early twentieth-century Chicago; he won three mayoral elections and governed from 1915 to 1923 and 1927 to 1931.¹⁰ Like many other mayors, Thompson dispensed patronage and favours, he maintained a diverse coalition of supporters, and he faced opposition from bourgeois reformers. But unlike Plunkitt's publicity-shy Tammany machine, Big Bill Thompson based his career on a media politics defined by constant fights and sporadic pacts with mainstream newspapers. Thompson matters not simply as a study in demagoguery, nor only for his symbols and imagery, but also for his publicity: that is, for his active contestation of Chicago's media environment and his consequent influence on the production and communication of public information.¹¹ Thompson was vastly corrupt, but he used ordinary journalistic processes to deflect critical scrutiny, to accuse the press of corruption and hypocrisy, and to mock its claims to 'objectivity'.¹² While many newspapers did promote anti-corruption politics, and while readers responded in various different ways, politicians were also part of these processes and their media strategies mattered.¹³ Through much press-baiting alongside propaganda and boosterism, including a mid-career alliance

2007); Wayne Klatt, *Chicago journalism: a history* (Jefferson, NC, 2009); Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: how the legendary black newspaper changed America* (Boston, MA, 2016). An invaluable resource is the Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey (hereafter 'CFLPS'), published in 1942 and recently digitized at <https://flps.newberry.org/>. Unless otherwise noted, all newspapers cited in this article were published in Chicago. Circulation figures are from Stamm, *Dead tree media*, p. 111.

¹⁰ The best biography is Douglas Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago, and the politics of image* (Urbana, IL, 1998). See also George Schottenhamel, 'How Big Bill Thompson won control of Chicago', *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 45 (1952), pp. 30–49; Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago* (1953; Evanston, IL, 2005); John M. Allswang, *A house for all peoples: ethnic politics in Chicago, 1890–1936* (Lexington, KY, 1971), pp. 104–5, 193–8; Gerald Leinwand, *Mackerels in the moonlight: four corrupt American mayors* (Jefferson, NC, 2004), pp. 9–65; Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: a biography* (Chicago, IL, 2009), pp. 179–82; Gary Krist, *City of scoundrels: the twelve days of disaster that gave birth to modern Chicago* (New York, NY, 2012); Andrew J. Diamond, *Chicago on the make: power and inequality in a modern city* (Oakland, CA, 2017), pp. 47–52. On the importance of mayoral power in Chicago politics, see Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli, eds., *The mayors: the Chicago political tradition* (1987; 4th edn, Carbondale, IL, 2013).

¹¹ For earlier interpretations, see Reinhard H. Luthin, *American demagogues: twentieth century* (Boston, MA, 1954), pp. 77–101; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 4–7 (on the politics of 'image').

¹² On this professional norm in American journalism, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the news: a social history of American newspapers* (New York, NY, 1978), pp. 121–59; Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the news: the public and the rise of commercial journalism* (Philadelphia, PA, 1981); David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the facts: how 'objectivity' came to define American journalism* (New York, NY, 1998); Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American press: the rise of objectivity, 1865–1920* (Cambridge, 2002); Andrew Porwancher, 'Objectivity's prophet: Adolph S. Ochs and the *New York Times*, 1896–1935', *Journalism History*, 36 (2011), pp. 186–95; Matthew Pressman, *On press: the liberal values that shaped the news* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

¹³ For a subtle account of the Steffens framework succeeding, see David Paul Nord, *Newspapers and new politics: midwestern municipal reform, 1890–1900* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1981). See also idem, *Communities of journalism: a history of American newspapers and their readers* (Urbana, IL, 2001), pp. 108–32, 246–77.

with William Randolph Hearst, Thompson's publicity became a fraught and long-term problem for journalists in the city.

Thompson's Chicago thus sheds light on broader debates about the politics of journalism in capitalist societies with highly developed media environments. Historians have long explored the emergence of 'print-capitalism' and more recently seen modern America as a 'media nation'.¹⁴ New histories of American newspapers stress their commercial and transnational production and consumption, but struggle to find clear links between their economic interests and editorial content.¹⁵ Beyond the United States, much scholarship suggests that historical changes in media technologies and communications had complex political consequences, which could subvert or confound journalistic intentions.¹⁶ In these contexts, Thompson's Chicago reveals a range of relations between press, state, and capital in a booming global city in the early twentieth century. Historians often see journalism from the perspective of journalists or publishers, but Thompson's career suggests the agency of local politicians and business interests in everyday journalistic processes.¹⁷ Further, his mayoralty reveals many ironies and difficulties of commercial media organizations claiming reformist agendas. For instead of falling victim to an anti-corruption politics of journalism, Thompson thrived on press attention and effectively developed a media-centred politics of corruption. Chicago's leading newspapers became dynamic co-producers of a political culture and economy that was corrupt, capitalist, and conservative, all at once and all in public.

Thompson's Chicago also helps illuminate wider histories of corruption in America. Historians might agree that corruption in general 'refers to excessive

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (1983; 2nd edn, London, 1991), p. 36; Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Media nation: the political history of news in modern America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2017).

¹⁵ Sam Lebovic, *Free speech and unfree news: the paradox of press freedom in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint metropolis: city papers and the making of modern Americans* (Chicago, IL, 2017); Stamm, *Dead tree media*; Tom Arnold-Forster, 'New histories of American newspapers', *Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), pp. 1390–400.

¹⁶ For an overview, see Richard R. John and Heidi J. S. Tworek, 'Publicity, propaganda, and public opinion: from the *Titanic* disaster to the Hungarian uprising', in Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton, eds., *Information: a historical companion* (Princeton, NJ, 2021), pp. 211–37. Recent studies include Erik Linstrum, 'Facts about atrocity: reporting colonial violence in post-war Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017), pp. 108–27; Heidi J. S. Tworek, *News from Germany: the competition to control world communications, 1900–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); Arthur Asseraf, 'Mass media and the colonial informant: Messaoud Djebari and the French empire, 1880–1901', *Past & Present* (forthcoming); and the special issue on 'breaking news', *Radical History Review*, 141 (2021).

¹⁷ Recent American historiography stresses the role of national politicians as media strategists, but has paid less attention to sub-national contexts like cities: e.g. David Greenberg, *Republic of spin: an inside history of the American presidency* (New York, NY, 2016); David Haven Blake, *Liking Ike: Eisenhower, advertising, and the rise of celebrity politics* (New York, NY, 2016). On California's media politics, see Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz politics: Hollywood in American political life* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014).

private interests in the public sphere'.¹⁸ However, in practice, debates about corruption often happen through commercial public spheres where private interests can exceed or distort the common good. Recent American historiography suggests that corruption's meaning has narrowed from expansive claims about the public interest to more legalistic definitions of bribery and fraud, but journalism's role in these changes has sometimes been overlooked.¹⁹ Here, Thompson's Chicago helps explain the media history through which corruption in America came to mean shameful moments of scandal and crime, rather than being seen as a more structural feature of (print) capitalism. Alternative modes of muckraking approached corruption through political economy; Ida Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil company* (1904) remains a classic account of how corruption functions through 'aggregations of capital'.²⁰ But Steffens's emphasis on exposing scandals and inducing shame became a dominant mode of anti-corruption politics, despite the persistent success of shameless politicians, the conflicted interests of commercial media organizations, and the public disaffection and cynicism that muckraking produced alongside outrage and criticism. To explore these dynamics, this article will examine Thompson's rise to power, different press responses, their mid-career entanglements, and their broader legacies beyond Chicago.

I

Thompson was born into a rich white family in 1869 and he worked variously as a cowboy, athlete, and real estate dealer before committing to Chicago Republican politics. In April 1912, he began to attack the press when campaigning for a seat on the Cook County board of review, a municipal body that heard property tax disputes. After learning that Victor Lawson, the venerable liberal publisher of *The Daily News*, owed just \$17.32 in property taxes for a new mansion on Lake Shore Drive, Thompson paid the bill himself and denounced Lawson as 'the greatest hypocrite in the United States' for preaching civic progress while practising tax-dodging.²¹ Thompson lost the election but touched a nerve nevertheless, because Chicago's newspapers were part of a wider political economy where much depended on property taxation and land valuation. *The Tribune* and *The Daily News* held favourable building leases on prime city

¹⁸ Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America: from Benjamin Franklin's snuff box to Citizens United* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), p. 9. Cf. Richard White, 'What counts as corruption?', *Social Research*, 80 (2013), pp. 1033–56.

¹⁹ Teachout, *Corruption in America*, pp. 291–8; Richard L. McCormick, 'Anti-corruption in American history', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 14 (2015), pp. 441–54; Paula Baker et al., 'Interchange: corruption has a history', *Journal of American History*, 105 (2019), pp. 912–38. A striking exception is David Witwer, *Shadow of the racketeer: scandal in organized labor* (Chicago, IL, 2009).

²⁰ Ida M. Tarbell, *The history of the Standard Oil company* (2 vols., New York, NY, 1904), II, p. 284.

²¹ Oswald F. Shuette, 'Lawson pays \$17.32 tax on lake shore palace', *Inter Ocean*, 4 Apr. 1912, pp. 1–2; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 18. Lawson replied that the small sum was an adjustment for earlier overcharges and furnished proof with a statement from the board of assessors: 'Facts for a Lorimer man', *Daily News*, 5 Apr. 1912, p. 1.

lands once meant for public schools; both papers fought attempts to revalue these lands.²² Further, both papers joined Hearst in violent campaigns to defeat strikes mounted by pressmen, newsboys, and stereotypers for better working conditions.²³ Chicago's mainstream newspapers often published anti-labour and race-baiting coverage, while their owners rubbed shoulders with local elites at the commercial club. Upton Sinclair exposed dire conditions in the city's meatpacking industry in *The jungle* (1906), but also identified Chicago's newspaper industry as corrupt and reactionary throughout *The brass check: a study of American journalism* (1919).²⁴

Victor Lawson's property taxes proved useful for Thompson because they framed newspapers not as disinterested public services, but as hypocritical businesses run by elites. Still, there was also hypocrisy among the politicians. Thompson had attacked Lawson partly to distract attention from his own links to William Lorimer, the recently disgraced leader of Chicago's Republican machine whose corrupt election to the US Senate had been exposed by *The Tribune*.²⁵ When the Senate expelled Lorimer in July 1912, Thompson defended him as a 'martyr' to the fact 'that a trust press controls this city and nation'.²⁶ For Thompson, the main lesson of Lorimer's downfall was that politicians needed to contest and oppose 'the crooked trust press'.²⁷ This was basically disingenuous, because Lorimer's career had not been squeaky clean, but Thompson's attacks on newspapers did resonate with many Chicagoans. *The Tribune* in particular was a partisan conservative paper that often vilified immigrant and African American communities.²⁸ The foreign language press ran regular critiques of 'the *Tribune's* fabrications', its 'laughable and disgusting' hypocrisies over school-land leases, and its audacious hubris as 'the self-styled "World's Greatest Newspaper"'.²⁹ *The Defender* also published much *Tribune* criticism, including letters from the veteran journalist Ida B. Wells that rebuked its racist coverage.³⁰

When Thompson attacked the mainstream press, he mobilized deeply felt injuries of class and race among a wide range of Chicagoans. At the same

²² This embarrassed reformers: e.g. Charles E. Merriam, *Chicago: a more intimate view of urban politics* (New York, NY, 1929), pp. 126–7.

²³ See Philip Taft, 'The limits of labor unity: the Chicago newspaper strike of 1912', *Labor History*, 19 (1978), pp. 100–29.

²⁴ Upton Sinclair, *The brass check: a study of American journalism* (Pasadena, CA, 1919), pp. 33–4, 53, 184–6, 251, 270, 328.

²⁵ Joel Arthur Tarr, *A study in boss politics: William Lorimer of Chicago* (Urbana, IL, 1971), pp. 236–41. The Lorimer scandal helped make the argument for directly electing senators, but many party machines beyond Chicago's Republicans backed this measure for other reasons: see John D. Buenker, 'The urban political machine and the seventeenth amendment', *Journal of American History*, 56 (1969), pp. 305–22.

²⁶ Tarr, *Boss politics*, p. 308.

²⁷ Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, p. 87.

²⁸ Stamm, *Dead tree media*, p. 26. Cf. Matthew Pressman, 'The New York *Daily News* and the history of conservative media', *Modern American History*, 4 (2021), pp. 219–38.

²⁹ 'Editorial', *Loxias*, 7 Nov. 1914; 'Editorial', *Revyen*, 25 Feb. 1911; 'Editorial', *Jewish Daily Courier*, 30 Mar. 1914. All in the CFLPS.

³⁰ 'Ida B. Wells-Barnett scores *Tribune*', *Defender*, 9 May 1914, p. 2.

time, his attacks were self-interested and opportunistic ways to build and sustain his political power. Thompson won the Republican mayoral nomination in 1915 by defeating the *Tribune*-backed reform candidate Harry Olson, while his Democratic opponent in the general election, Robert Sweitzer, explicitly argued that the press knew best. One Sweitzer ad simply reprinted the endorsements of various newspapers and stated that ‘no other candidate in the city’s history has been so uniformly commended by them. *They know!*’³¹ Despite this knowledge, Thompson won a landslide victory. He sent thank-you notes to Chicago’s papers and received some cautiously optimistic *Tribune* coverage. But Lawson told him bluntly that ‘everything you do as mayor that is beneficial to Chicago will meet with the approval of *The Daily News*’, and that ‘I have no confidence in either you or your chief supporters’.³² Thompson quickly established new institutions for influencing journalists, including a ‘Committee on Literature, Publicity, and Printing’ that issued public statements from city hall. He also had *The Republican*, a pro-Thompson weekly run by Lorimer’s old fixer Fred Lundin.³³

What made Thompson distinctive? Many other mayors had their own papers, governed through party machines, and played on personal charisma. In New York, Jimmy Walker was a dashing Tammany figure (‘Beau James’) who eventually resigned after press and party pressure.³⁴ In Boston, James Michael Curley was a machine-backed mayor who governed through scandals with strong party support, and who sometimes attacked the press to distract from his own activities.³⁵ Thompson differed from his contemporaries in the political centrality of his media strategy, his innovative sense for how press hostility could be turned to his advantage, and his comparative neglect of more prosaic matters like party management. While Lundin kept the Chicago Republican machine running, Thompson focused on keeping himself in the public eye. He told *The Tribune* that journalists were vital even when critical because ‘they want to give you space’. Chicago’s mayor then stressed that ‘you must let enough slip so you can get roasted and not get ignored. I appreciate these stories. I appreciate the publicity.’³⁶ So, while Tammany-style machines often tried to avoid publicity, Thompson saw it and used it as his very essence. All publicity was not just good publicity; it was also the most important thing politically.

³¹ ‘Voice of the press for Sweitzer’, *Tribune*, 5 Apr. 1915, p. 18 (emphasis in original). On Olson, see ‘For mayor’, *Tribune*, 21 Feb. 1915, p. A4.

³² Charles H. Dennis, *Victor Lawson: his time and work* (Chicago, IL, 1935), p. 319. For *Tribune* coverage, see ‘To all crooks: “Quit Chicago” – W. H. Thompson’ and ‘A note from Chicago’s new mayor’, *Tribune*, 7 Apr. 1915, pp. 1–2; ‘The mayor elect and his prospects’, *Tribune*, 8 Apr. 1915, p. 6.

³³ Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, pp. 126–7, 150. For broader histories of publicity in this period, see Greenberg, *Republic of spin*, pp. 11–125; Sarah E. Igo, *The known citizen: a history of privacy in modern America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), pp. 17–54.

³⁴ Golway, *Machine made*, pp. 279–81. There is a vivid sketch of Walker in Robert A. Caro, *The power broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York* (New York, NY, 1974), p. 136.

³⁵ Jack Beatty, *The rascal king: the life and times of James Michael Curley* (Boston, MA, 1992), pp. 100–2, 209.

³⁶ ‘Merely doing right, mayor tells critics’, *Tribune*, 19 Oct. 1915, pp. 1, 7.

Despite the pressures and scrutiny of constant media attention, Thompson prioritized taking up space, getting roasted, and never being ignored above maintaining any particular imagery or controlling his party machine. The first big scandal of his mayoralty was the suicide of Theodore Sachs, the director of Chicago's tuberculosis sanatorium whose work had been impeded by John Dill Robertson, Thompson's hand-picked health commissioner. Sachs wrote a public suicide letter that blamed his death on corrupt interference by 'unscrupulous politicians'.³⁷ *The Tribune* ran this on its front page in a morbid gothic typeface, while *The Daily News* called Sachs 'a victim of spoils politics, which has done much shameful work in this community of late'. Thompson responded by insisting that 'every word that has been printed by any newspaper in the city of Chicago assailing Health Commissioner John Dill Robertson and your mayor in connection with the municipal tuberculosis sanatorium is an infamous lie and they know it'.³⁸ Here, Thompson reframed the substance of Sachs's death, and debates about public health, by creating a broader spectacle about the media itself. This became a common strategy and had serious consequences. Robertson underestimated the global flu pandemic in 1918–19 and was slow to order social distancing and close public buildings; Chicago thus suffered high rates of infection and mortality.³⁹

For newspapers outside the commercial mainstream, Thompson's mayoralty proved disappointing and his media strategies helped marginalize them further. *The Day Book* had been cheered by his handling of an early streetcar strike, but soon found Thompson unreliable on labour issues. Its reporter Carl Sandburg observed after a few months that 'all the prestige won by Big Bill in the car strike settlement is slipping away'.⁴⁰ While he was quick to mobilize anti-media views and sentiments, Thompson cared little about working-class interests and later developed alliances with Chicago's leading capitalists. When Thompson also broke his promise to ban *The birth of a nation* from screening in Chicago, *The Defender* noted grimly that the 'Mayor was handed the "Black Belt" vote, yet he did not stop play'.⁴¹ Many African Americans continued backing Thompson because his Republican faction

³⁷ 'I am weary – Dr. Sachs' last message', *Tribune*, 3 Apr. 1916, p. 1.

³⁸ 'Deadly spoils politics', *Daily News*, 3 Apr. 1916, p. 8; 'Mayor blames Sachs tragedy on mass-meeting', *Tribune*, 8 Apr. 1916, p. 3.

³⁹ 'Dr. Robertson predicts small influenza toll', *Tribune*, 3 Oct. 1918, p. 13; 'Chicago, Illinois', in *The American influenza epidemic of 1918–19: a digital encyclopedia*, at www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-chicago.html; Elizabeth Schlabach, 'The influenza epidemic and Jim Crow public health politics and practices in Chicago, 1917–1921', *Journal of African American History*, 104 (2019), pp. 31–58; Jeff Nichols, 'The maverick at the center of Chicago's 1918 flu response', *Chicago Reader*, 12 May 2020, <https://chicagoreader.com/city-life/the-maverick-at-the-center-of-chicagos-1918-flu-response/>.

⁴⁰ Carl Sandburg, 'Big chance for Big Bill Thompson to do a real job now – will he?', *Day Book*, 13 Nov. 1915, pp. 30–1.

⁴¹ 'Contentment of race leaders favored "Birth of Nation"', *Defender*, 19 Feb. 1916, p. 7. On the film in Chicago, see Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 49; Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: modernity, the great migration, and black urban life* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), pp. 124–32; Harris Ross, 'D. W. Griffith vs. city hall: politics, ethnicity, and Chicago film censorship', *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 100 (2007), pp. 19–40.

offered more than any Democratic alternative, and because Chicago's mainstream press often published racist articles, but the mayor was never seriously committed to anti-racist politics.⁴² *The Defender* remained supportive, though not without diffidence, while *The Broad Ax* was more iconoclastic and grew critical of Thompson 'for he is more of a Democrat than he is a Republican'.⁴³ Ida B. Wells saw him as yet another white politician who 'proceeded to ignore' black constituents after winning their votes.⁴⁴

Some commentators argued that Thompson's comeuppance was imminent, for his first term had seen few serious reforms and intense press criticism. In *The New Republic*, only just established but already a leading liberal weekly, the journalist William Chenery wrote that 'by his very blunders Mr. Thompson has awakened the people'.⁴⁵ However, 'the people' were not simply a unified constituency that journalists could rally to the cause of reform.⁴⁶ As Thompson well knew, the people of Chicago were complex and plural. They had diverse opinions and conflicting interests; many read and some resented the press, while many others engaged with politics intermittently given the myriad demands of daily life. And like people everywhere, Chicagoans disliked being shamed. Thompson had a shrewd appreciation for Chicago's *amour-propre* and he used publicity to distract, entertain, enrage, and engage. 'I have been grossly libelled', Thompson announced when *The Daily News* and *The Tribune* questioned his wartime record and patriotism. 'In furtherance of the conspiracy against me', he claimed, 'my enemies have recently bored holes in the walls of my apartments, installed dictagraphs, tapped telephone wires, stationed operators in adjoining rooms and employed spies to hound me.'⁴⁷ Who now remembered Theodore Sachs? What was the war even about? How could you trust anything in the papers?

II

From the perspective of the press, Thompson's publicity was difficult either to oppose or to ignore. He made his attacks with much bad faith, but they had enough basic purchase and media value to resonate with many Chicagoans. Thompson continued to campaign against Victor Lawson's property taxes

⁴² St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black metropolis: a study of Negro life in a northern city* (1945; rev. edn, Chicago, IL, 1993), pp. 61, 179, 346–51.

⁴³ 'Hon. William Hale Thompson should not be re-elected', *Broad Ax*, 28 Dec. 1918, p. 1; David Bates, *The ordeal of the jungle: race and the Chicago federation of labor, 1903–1922* (Carbondale, IL, 2019), pp. 107–9.

⁴⁴ Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for justice: the autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, IL, 1970), p. 353.

⁴⁵ William L. Chenery, 'The fall of a mayor', *New Republic*, 13 May 1916, pp. 36–8.

⁴⁶ Cf. Connolly, *An elusive unity*, pp. 189–216.

⁴⁷ 'Statement by Mayor Wm. Hale Thompson to the people of Chicago', 6 Sept. 1917, Chicago public library (Harold Washington branch), municipal reference collection item Cc M47 1917. On the wartime patriotism of Chicago's newspapers, see Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 62–4; Jeff Nichols, 'Propaganda, Chicago newspapers, and the political economy of newsprint during the First World War', *Journalism History*, 43 (2017), pp. 21–31; Stamm, *Dead tree media*, pp. 86–91.

and the newspaper school-land leases, while *The Daily News* and *The Tribune* struggled to deal with his attacks. *The Daily News* ran another rebuttal correcting 'Mr. Thompson's unfortunate memory' and priggishly regretting its waste of 'valuable space'.⁴⁸ Yet Lawson continued receiving anonymous threats about 'how slick you were in cheating the government out of excess profit taxes', and especially out of 'school funds'.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, in some contexts, Chicago's mainstream papers were obviously hypocritical and their claims to objectivity seemed very doubtful. For example, when Thompson ran in the 1918 Illinois Republican primary for the US Senate, his main opponent was Medill McCormick, former publisher of *The Tribune* and brother of its present owner Robert. While *The Tribune* published many pro-McCormick pieces, Thompson stressed the self-dealing hypocrisies of 'McCormick's family's newspaper' in particular and the corrupt double standards of 'profiteering newspapers' in general.⁵⁰

Thompson lost the Senate race, but he did well in Chicago and this boded well for his mayoral re-election in 1919. *The Tribune* and *The Daily News* quietly asked his predecessor Carter Harrison to run again and promised their support, but Harrison declined and Thompson went into the Republican primary as a strong incumbent.⁵¹ The mayor continued making claims about school-land leases, to which *The Tribune* responded (ignoring its overtures to Harrison) that it only exerted influence 'by measures publicly advocated'.⁵² Thompson's Republican primary opponents were Harry Olson, again, and the political scientist Charles Merriam; the mayor portrayed them both as puppets of 'commercial newspapers'.⁵³ Olson ran another reformer's campaign, which accused Thompson of giving jobs to fake experts and won many press endorsements.⁵⁴ But Merriam was a more unusual candidate, because he fancied himself an expert in Chicago politics and political psychology, having been an alderman and war propagandist.⁵⁵ Styling himself patriotically as 'Captain Merriam', he struggled politically throughout the campaign. This was partly

⁴⁸ 'The strange case of Wm. Hale Thompson', *Daily News*, 26 Aug. 1918, p. 1.

⁴⁹ 'Common Thief' to Victor Lawson, 27 Mar. 1919, Newberry Library, Chicago, Victor Lawson papers, box 125, folder 827.

⁵⁰ 'Patriotic airs are prelude to Thompson talk', *Tribune*, 20 July 1918, p. 5; 'Thompson opens city campaign with 3 speeches', *Tribune*, 20 Aug. 1918, p. 7; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 72–3. An example of pro-McCormick *Tribune* coverage is 'Peoria people defy rain to hear McCormick', *Tribune*, 18 Aug. 1918, p. 10: 'Notwithstanding a steady drizzle of rain, Congressman Medill McCormick had a fine reception in Tazewell and Peoria counties today. He was assured that the Republicans of both counties would vote almost solidly for him for United States senator in order to defeat Mayor Thompson.'

⁵¹ Carter H. Harrison, *Stormy years: the autobiography of Carter H. Harrison* (New York, NY, 1935), p. 349.

⁵² 'The Tribune school lease', *Tribune*, 13 Feb. 1919, p. 8.

⁵³ 'Thompson gives a few bouquets', *Tribune*, 18 Jan. 1919, p. 7.

⁵⁴ 'Olson charges city "Experts" drew millions from treasury', *Tribune*, 6 Feb. 1919, p. 1; 'Olson for mayor', *Tribune*, 24 Feb. 1919, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Charles E. Merriam, 'American publicity in Italy', *American Political Science Review*, 13 (1919), pp. 541–55; idem, 'The significance of psychology for the study of politics', *American Political Science Review*, 18 (1924), pp. 469–88.

because his own publicity was milquetoast and embarrassing; one leaflet argued that 'Captain Merriam's smile is one of his real assets as a human being'.⁵⁶ Yet Merriam also defended Lawson and McCormick, despite the frequent injuries of class and race their papers inflicted on many Chicagoans. Meanwhile, Thompson told voters in the starkest possible terms that 'before you vote as some newspaper editor tells you to, *be sure you do not vote against yourself!*'⁵⁷

Thompson's re-election campaign thus revolved around conflicts between ordinary citizens and media elites, rather than between different candidates for public office. He beat Merriam and Olson with 55 per cent in the primary and faced his old rival Sweitzer in the general election. Yet Thompson mostly campaigned by attacking *The Tribune* and *The Daily News*. For example, he asked voters to imagine what might happen if he increased streetcar fares:

Lawson and his *Daily News* and the McCormicks and *The Tribune* would have printed my picture on the front page, full length. (Applause.) I believe they would have put under it a very complimentary comment...And it would be a very pleasant change for me to read something decent about myself in the newspapers. (Applause and laughter.) But if I had looked down on my picture and a complimentary comment, under those circumstances, in my heart I would have known that I had sold the people of Chicago out; and in my heart I would have known that Bill Thompson was a crook. And I would rather be roasted and know I am on the square than be eulogized and know I am a crook.⁵⁸

This was deft. Thompson used the whole notion of journalistic authority, represented by an imaginary front-page story, to accuse the press of betraying Chicago and deflect claims about his own corruption. He downplayed the issue of streetcar fares and stressed instead that any positive coverage he might receive would mean selling the people out, because the press was corrupt and he was not. From the standpoint of this speech, delivered with a grin and given applause and laughter, there was nothing the newspapers could publish that would not benefit Thompson. His publicity bound them together in a destructive and symbiotic relationship. What Thompson produced in his re-election campaign, then, was a precise inversion of what Steffens had theorized. Chicago's newspapers were not effective vehicles for anti-corruption politics, but objects of and subjects for the shameless publicity of a corrupt politician.

By 1919, the combined daily circulation of Chicago's mainstream newspapers was nearly 1.5 million. *The Tribune* and *The Daily News*, along with

⁵⁶ *Win with Merriam* (Chicago, IL, 1919), p. 8, University of Chicago Library, Charles E. Merriam papers, box 75, folder 3.

⁵⁷ Charles E. Merriam, 'Chicago's hope is its free men and women', campaign leaflet, 23 Jan. 1919, p. 3 (defending Lawson and McCormick); Thompson campaign letter, 18 Feb. 1919 (emphasis in original). Both items in the Merriam papers, box 75, folder 3.

⁵⁸ Stenographic report of Thompson's speeches, Mar. 1919, Lawson papers, box 125, folder 828, pp. 3-4.

Hearst's *Herald-Examiner*, all published critiques of Thompson and opposed his re-election.⁵⁹ The mayor then used this publicity to clarify his message and frame the press as Chicago's enemy, day after day after day. *The Magyar Tribune*, a Hungarian weekly that backed Sweitzer, observed laconically that 'the press seems to be the severest critic of Thompson. It will be disappointed if he is elected.'⁶⁰ Nell Leddy, a fed up *Tribune* reader, argued that 'we depend on the newspapers for our information' and, invoking Thompson's candidacy, she asked if voters could 'depend on the papers to say who is or who is not a fit man for public office to serve the public?'⁶¹ Perhaps not, because Chicago's newspapers proved unable to agree an alternative. While *The Daily News* backed Sweitzer, *The Tribune* could not bring itself to endorse a Democrat and went instead for the independent Maclay Hoyne (also backed by Hearst). 'A vote for Hoyne is a vote for Thompson', warned *The Daily News*, to which *The Tribune* replied that 'a vote for Hoyne is a vote for Hoyne'.⁶² On election day, the anti-Thompson vote was split between Hoyne and Sweitzer, so Thompson won with 38 per cent. Another *Tribune* reader wrote that 'the *Tribune* Hoyne vote elected Thompson, the worst mayor Chicago ever had'.⁶³

Thompson's victory in 1919 depended on journalistic publicity. By embracing spectacular fights with leading newspapers, and by emphasizing their hypocrisies as commercial institutions, Thompson managed to evade criticism and scrutiny while keeping himself in the news.⁶⁴ 'I guess we gave you a pretty good fight, didn't we?' he winked at *The Tribune*. 'But, seriously', he added ominously, 'I am not apologizing for my fight on you. I am ready for more if you want it.'⁶⁵ Reviewing the election results, the radical Croatian weekly *Znanje* (*Knowledge*) argued that Thompson revealed some difficult truths about the politics of mainstream journalism. At one level, it seemed clear 'that the capitalistic press does not govern the capitalistic reader in every problem, because the citizens elected just that candidate who was assaulted hardest by the capitalist press'. But nor was Thompson's re-election a democratic moment, *Znanje* argued, because 'much money was spent, much energy used, many false statements made, many people were misled. All that was done', the editorial concluded, 'in order that everything may remain as it was before.'⁶⁶ In other words, the election results were less about capitalists simply controlling public opinion through corporate media, than about a

⁵⁹ E.g. 'Chicago needs a working mayor', *Daily News*, 28 Mar. 1919, p. 8; Arthur M. Evans, 'Voters seeking "American hope" to beat Big Bill', *Tribune*, 30 Mar. 1919, p. 2; 'To the men and women of Chicago', *Herald-Examiner*, 1 Apr. 1919, p. 8.

⁶⁰ 'Before we elect a mayor', *Magyar Tribune*, 28 Mar. 1919, CFLPS.

⁶¹ Nell M. Leddy, 'The press and Mr. Thompson', *Tribune*, 14 Mar. 1919, p. 8.

⁶² 'Thompson or Sweitzer - which?', *Daily News*, 29 Mar. 1919, p. 8; 'A vote for Hoyne is a vote for Hoyne', *Tribune*, 1 Apr. 1919, p. 8.

⁶³ T. E. O'Brien, 'Why Thompson was elected', *Tribune*, 7 Apr. 1919, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Cf. Schudson, *Discovering the news*, p. 180: 'muckrakers have typically focused on the hypocrisies and corruptions of government, rather than on underlying assumptions or structures of power'.

⁶⁵ Charles N. Wheeler, 'Mayor tells three big aims; boosts G. O. P.', *Tribune*, 2 Apr. 1919, p. 4.

⁶⁶ 'Last elections in Chicago', *Znanje*, 7 Apr. 1919, CFLPS.

more general but still conservative inertia produced at the frenetic intersection of politics and journalism. Thompson's campaign trapped Chicago's newspapers in self-defeating cycles of continuous media spectacle. Beneath and because of their conflicts, both press and politics worked to entrench the status quo.

Indeed, newspaper publishers worried that Thompson's media strategies seemed eerily similar to the economic basis of mainstream journalism. Weeks before the election, Victor Lawson told Arthur Brisbane, a leading Hearst editor, that Thompson revealed 'the power of mere iteration – and iteration – and iteration, regardless of the character of thing said'. When Lawson added that 'you and I have occasion to recognize it in the science and art of advertising', he sensed their entanglement with the mayor.⁶⁷ From the publishers' perspective, Thompson was good for business and bad for journalism, because his media strategies helped increase circulation but also harmed news content. In this sense, Thompson succeeded by setting the political economy of the newspaper industry against the editorial authority of journalism. Still, attacking the press over and over again risked becoming repetitive, boring, and thus ineffective. Thompson's publicity had worked through oppositional hostility and revolved around the media's school-land leases and tax-dodging owners. But he now began to develop more positive modes of propaganda by cultivating alliances with leading capitalists and even newspaper publishers. 'I have had my fights with the newspapers', Thompson announced, 'but I want to say that as far as I am concerned they are bygones and all I want to do now is get Chicago interested in Chicago.'⁶⁸

III

At the start of his second term, Thompson established the Chicago Boosters' Publicity Club (CBPC). Boosterism had long shaped the ideologies of capitalism, especially in cities like Chicago; it promised rapid urban development, big returns on real estate investment, and a broadly imperial sense of civic destiny.⁶⁹ Many booster organizations were led by private businesses, but Thompson's club was driven by public authorities and developed links between Chicago's businesses and its government. The CBPC institutionalized an alliance between city hall and the local chamber of commerce, manufacturers' associations, real estate boards, and various other business and civic groups (but not trade unions).⁷⁰ The core political fantasy of the CBPC was that city government could become a purely capitalist enterprise. Thompson's club

⁶⁷ Lawson to Brisbane, 15 Mar. 1919, in Dennis, *Victor Lawson*, pp. 321–2.

⁶⁸ 'Mayor buries hatchet', *Tribune*, 10 June 1919, p. 1.

⁶⁹ See Cronon, *Nature's metropolis*, pp. 31–46. See also Carl Abbott, 'Civic pride in Chicago, 1844–1860', *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 63 (1970), pp. 399–421; Tom Zimmerman, 'Paradise promoted: boosterism and the Los Angeles chamber of commerce', *California History*, 64 (1985), pp. 22–33; Mike Davis, *City of quartz: excavating the future in Los Angeles* (London, 1990), pp. 21–6; Belich, *Replenishing the earth*, pp. 153–6.

⁷⁰ A full list is appended to 'A plan to boost Chicago' (typescript, 1920), Chicago History Museum, Chicago Boosters' Publicity Club materials.

argued that Chicago was a factory and that 'the citizens of Chicago, who are, after all, its factory organization, should be educated through preliminary advertising to a proper appreciation of Chicago's greatness'. From this perspective, boosting Chicago meant seeing citizens as workers and subjecting them to propaganda from the factory owners. Chicago would not distinguish between government and business, nor between private interests and the public good, but ordinary citizens would nevertheless become cheerful and permanent boosters of political leaders like Thompson and 'high-powered salesmen persistently selling the Chicago idea'.⁷¹

The basic political context for Thompson's new boosterism was the multifaceted social crisis that shook Chicago in these years.⁷² With mobs of white men fuelling racial violence against African Americans in July 1919, and with strike waves across the steel and packing industries until 1921, Thompson worked to align his administration with Chicago's business interests through the CBPC. During the race riots, Thompson was out of town, slow to return, and happy to leave deeper investigation to a governor-appointed commission.⁷³ Divisions within the labour movement were also long-standing, especially when it came to race, not least because of the press. But amid these crises, Thompson's publicity club developed a plan, 'approved by the leading business interests of Chicago', for continuous propaganda to help achieve 'the stabilization and stimulation of our industrial forces' and the 'Americanization' of immigrants.⁷⁴ Thompson claimed that 'success must be ours if we work and boost unceasingly' and promoted events like the annual 'Pageant of Progress Exposition', which celebrated the 'industrial and commercial interests of Chicago'.⁷⁵ In his second term, then, Thompson's corruption deepened, because he built alliances with local capital to quell social unrest and maintain the status quo. Meanwhile his party machine actually weakened, for he continued to neglect its management and Fred Lundin got caught embezzling school funds. Publicity remained central to Thompson's politics, but this now involved more propaganda alongside press-baiting.

Thompson's boosterism further aligned his administration with the commercial interests of mainstream newspapers. His publicity club promoted its agenda by advertising directly in *The Daily News*, *The Tribune*, *The American*, and *The Herald-Examiner*.⁷⁶ Publishers like Lawson and McCormick had long been hostile to unions; both endorsed the anti-labour Landis arbitration in 1921.⁷⁷ Moreover,

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 5–6; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 108–9.

⁷² For overviews, see William M. Tuttle Jr, *Race riot: Chicago in the red summer of 1919* (New York, NY, 1970), pp. 34–64; James R. Barrett, *Work and community in the jungle: Chicago's packinghouse workers, 1894–1922* (Urbana, IL, 1987), pp. 188–238; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: industrial workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (1990; 2nd edn, Cambridge, 2008), pp. 38–52; Bates, *Ordeal of the jungle*, pp. 112–68.

⁷³ Krist, *City of scoundrels*, pp. 150, 175–8, 214.

⁷⁴ 'The greater Chicago plan of publicity', *Greater Chicago*, Aug. 1920, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁵ William Hale Thompson, 'Red letter days in Chicago', *Greater Chicago*, Mar. 1921, pp. 3–5; 'The story of the pageant of progress exposition', *Greater Chicago*, July 1921, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁶ 'What the Chicago boosters' publicity club is – what it does – how it does it', *Greater Chicago*, Feb. 1921, p. 13.

⁷⁷ Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 128–30; Bates, *Ordeal of the jungle*, p. 155.

their newspapers were already big Chicago boosters. *The Tribune* had coined the term ‘Chicagoland’ to stimulate demand among consumers, generate advertising business, and increase newspaper production.⁷⁸ So, when *The Tribune* boosted Chicago’s ‘destiny as master market of America’, it sounded very like Thompson when he celebrated the city’s ‘ever-increasing commercial pre-eminence’.⁷⁹ While the paper’s editorials continued to criticize the mayor, *The Tribune’s* circulation almost doubled from 300,000 per day at the start of Thompson’s first term to nearly 600,000 by the end of his second. So *The Tribune* and *The Daily News* benefited economically from Thompson’s pro-business policies, while continuing to suffer editorially from his attacks on journalism. The structural congruence of interests between Thompson and the media intensified, despite the ongoing spectacle of their conflict.

The most brazen aspect of Thompson’s mid-career propaganda was his alliance with William Randolph Hearst, America’s leading capitalist-publicist and a broadly conservative press baron in 1920. Hearst and Thompson met that year at the Republican national convention in Chicago, which nominated Warren Harding for the presidency after much wrangling in famously smoke-filled rooms. Thompson proved his value to Hearst by working against Illinois Governor Frank Lowden, whose nomination was pushed by Victor Lawson and various McCormicks (Robert, Medill, Ruth Hanna). When Thompson resigned from the Illinois delegation to attack Lowden publicly, Hearst’s *American* ran it on the front page and Thompson had copies distributed across the convention floor.⁸⁰ This weakened Lowden, who soon withdrew to endorse Harding and defeat Leonard Wood, a diehard militarist and imperialist. Thompson’s pact with Hearst thus helped consolidate the emerging dispensation of conservative ‘normalcy’, through which Harding won a crushing victory.⁸¹ In Chicago, Hearst’s *American* and *Herald-Examiner* became the only papers to celebrate Thompson’s pageants of progress, while the mayor began to suggest that Hearst would make an excellent president of the United States. Two weeks later, Hearst’s Chicago papers responded with headlines like ‘6,000 cheer Thompson attack on interests’ and ‘Mayor appeals to people to break yoke of hypocrites and big interests’.⁸²

⁷⁸ Stamm, *Dead tree media*, pp. 111–12.

⁷⁹ William Hale Thompson, ‘Chicago – mistress of waterways’, *Greater Chicago*, Aug. 1920, pp. 3–5; Guarneri, *Newsprint metropolis*, p. 192.

⁸⁰ ‘Mayor bolts Republican party’, *American*, 12 June 1920, p. 1; William H. Stuart, *The twenty incredible years* (Chicago, IL, 1935), pp. 97–104; Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, p. 183; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 110–11.

⁸¹ On the convention, see Wesley M. Bagby, *The road to normalcy: the presidential campaign and election of 1920* (1962; 3rd edn, Baltimore, MD, 1968), pp. 71–101. On the election, see John A. Morello, *Selling the president, 1920: Albert D. Lasker, advertising, and the election of Warren G. Harding* (Westport, CT, 2001).

⁸² ‘6,000 cheer Thompson attack on interests’, *American*, 29 Nov. 1922, pp. 3–4; ‘Mayor appeals to people to break yoke of hypocrites and big interests’, *Herald-Examiner*, 29 Nov. 1922, p. 3; Stuart, *Twenty incredible years*, pp. 156–7; W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: a biography of William Randolph Hearst* (New York, NY, 1961), p. 362; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 124–5.

Thompson combined Hearst's propaganda with continuing attacks on Lawson and McCormick, but these attacks became ever more outlandish and conspiratorial. 'Do you know that the state courts in this country are largely *Tribune* owned?' Thompson asked in 1922. 'Do you realize that the measure of justice to be accorded you depends in the final analysis on the whims of *The Chicago Tribune*? Do you know that *The Tribune* maintains a large law firm on one of the upper floors of *The Tribune's* school land building?'⁸³ But how long could he keep this up? Thompson had been mayor for seven years; Chicago was roughly the same across many social domains. In terms of education, for example, the city's public schools remained overcrowded and underfunded, partly because Thompson fuelled culture wars about history textbooks while Lundin embezzled public funds at the school board. Local teachers and unions advocated raising taxes and ending newspaper school-land leases, but Thompson did neither because the leases made for good speeches and his business allies disliked taxes.⁸⁴ Margaret Haley, leader of the Chicago Teachers' Federation, won some concessions from Thompson over school governance issues, yet she knew that he was 'a gallery player in public life' who cared little about education policy beyond his immediate political interests.⁸⁵

Thompson's prioritization of publicity over governance extended into policing and public safety issues. Despite the violence of July 1919 and his African American supporters, Thompson's approach to law enforcement deepened long-standing patterns of police corruption and racism.⁸⁶ Crime in Chicago was common and organized, and widely covered by the press, but Thompson's response was once again media-focused. In 1920, he appointed as Chicago's police chief, not a police officer, but a journalist: Charles Fitzmorris, sometime city editor of Hearst's *American*. In 1921, Thompson and Fitzmorris established *Main 13*, a monthly police magazine for contesting and managing crime coverage; it was edited by Jack Lait, another Hearst reporter and future co-author of the hard-boiled bestseller *Chicago confidential* (1950).⁸⁷ As the glossy publication of a brutal department in editorial collaboration with Hearst journalists, *Main 13* provided space for Thompson to argue that stories about Chicago crime were lies and that 'wonderfully complimentary articles' were actually filling newspapers across the United States

⁸³ '6,000 cheer Thompson attack on interests', *American*, 29 Nov. 1922, pp. 3–4.

⁸⁴ Julia Wrigley, *Class politics and public schools: Chicago, 1900–1950* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1982), pp. 203–27; Michael W. Homel, *Down from equality: black Chicagoans and the public schools, 1920–1941* (Urban, IL, 1984), pp. 58–84; Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture wars in the public schools* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 17–31; Jim Carl, "'Good politics is good government': the troubling history of mayoral control of the public schools in twentieth-century Chicago', *American Journal of Education*, 115 (2009), pp. 305–36, esp. pp. 309–13.

⁸⁵ Margaret A. Haley, *Battleground: the autobiography of Margaret A. Haley*, ed. Robert L. Reid (Urbana, IL, 1982), pp. 65, 165, 230; Kate Rousmaniere, *Citizen teacher: the life and leadership of Margaret Haley* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 187–9.

⁸⁶ Richard C. Lindberg, *To serve and collect: Chicago politics and police corruption from the lager beer riot to the Summerdale scandal, 1855–1960* (Urbana, IL, 1998), pp. 137–218; Simon Balto, *Occupied territory: policing black Chicago from red summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019), pp. 26–55.

⁸⁷ Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *Chicago confidential* (New York, NY, 1950).

'eulogizing the department and the Chief and his associates for the great police work that is being done'.⁸⁸ Like all of Thompson's boosterism, *Main 13* responded to real problems by denying their existence and declaring that matters were excellent and constantly improving.

Still, Thompson's publicity had its limits and he decided against running again in 1923. *The Tribune* claimed to be 'disappointed by Thompson's decision', because it deprived Chicagoans of their chance to bury 'Thompsonism' once and for all.⁸⁹ But his Democratic successor William Dever changed little either and this created enough political space for Thompson's return in 1927. Once again, he prioritized media strategy over party management; Thompson's comeback involved hiring a theatre to debate caged rats representing ex-allies like Lundin and Robertson. 'Big Bill strode on the stage with his rats and the show was on', *The Tribune* reported. 'Thompson said he had six rats to start with, but that Fred [Lundin] and Doc [Robertson] ate up the other four, which were smaller.'⁹⁰ Thompson also appointed William Stuart, another Hearst hack, to chair his campaign's publicity committee, and he continued attacking *The Tribune* and *The Daily News*. Under the slogan 'America First', Thompson campaigned less against his actual opponent than against newspaper publishers and history textbook authors ('pro-British rats who are poisoning the wells of historical truth!').⁹¹ Meanwhile, the Democrats campaigned by intensive race-baiting, which undermined their wider message of 'Dever and Decency'.⁹² When Thompson won with 52 per cent, his old symbiosis with newspapers soon reappeared. *The Tribune* lamented his return in editorials but also boasted that its circulation hit a new world record of 909,448. Never before in history, *The Tribune* claimed, had any paper sold as many copies as the 'World's Greatest Newspaper' did on election day in Chicago.⁹³

IV

Thompson's third term witnessed rampant corruption and relentless publicity. He quickly established a business advisory committee to keep Chicago's elites on side, while outside commentators rightly observed that he remained 'a business mayor'.⁹⁴ Thompson's political energies went into sustaining familiar modes of bread-and-circuses capitalism. So he sponsored children's trips to Riverview amusement park, where rollercoaster rides were accompanied by mayoral lectures on 'America First'. The Young Pioneers of America, a communist youth group, argued that 'Mayor Thompson doesn't want us to think about how rotten our living conditions are', and that fairground trips were a

⁸⁸ 'Mayor William Hale Thompson to the police department', *Main 13*, May 1921, pp. 5, 8.

⁸⁹ 'Why we wanted Thompson to run', *Tribune*, 27 Jan. 1923, p. 6.

⁹⁰ 'Big Bill sets his big rats on his old pals', *Tribune*, 7 Apr. 1926, p. 5.

⁹¹ Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, p. 261.

⁹² Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 180–6; Diamond, *Chicago on the make*, p. 48.

⁹³ 'Tribune sets a world mark for election extras', 'Thompson elected', *Tribune*, 7 Apr. 1927, pp. 5, 10.

⁹⁴ Arthur Krock, 'Chicago's mayor', *New York Times*, 13 June 1927, p. 18; Richard Norton Smith, *The colonel: the life and legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Boston, MA, 1997), p. 274.

trick by which elites ‘pretend they’re giving us a treat when the fact is – *we are getting only what is coming to us* – and should get much more!’⁹⁵ Nevertheless, lots of children liked the trips. Saul Bellow became ‘one of Big Bill’s fans’, while teachers were encouraged to praise Thompson publicly (‘so many happy faces’, Mary Zollman told *The Daily News*).⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the media increasingly came to define corruption itself through organized crime in the later 1920s.⁹⁷ Left-wing activists saw Thompson as a political distraction from deeper economic conflicts, but mainstream journalists ran many stories claiming to expose his links to gangsters like Al Capone.⁹⁸ In general, Capone cared most about relatively minor racketeering and gambling schemes, as well as larger bootlegging operations, but Thompson saw his media value and later accused *The Tribune* of Capone-style vigilantism.⁹⁹

Thompson also developed new media strategies to sustain his regime for a few more years. His radio station WHT broadcast mayoral propaganda from the Wrigley building, including further lectures on ‘America First’ themes. However, most listeners preferred stations like WGN, a *Tribune*-owned NBC affiliate that offered news, sport, comedy, and music, while also displacing smaller stations.¹⁰⁰ Thompson’s radio speeches never reached the mass audiences of figures like Father Coughlin, but they show that publicity still endured as his political essence across different media technologies. His alliance with Hearst also continued, even strengthened. In September 1927, Thompson made a pilgrimage to Hearst’s castle in California, where the Chicago police quartet sang for the baron and ‘most of the party, led by Mayor Thompson, swam in the marble pool’.¹⁰¹ Two months later, *The Herald-Examiner* published

⁹⁵ Young Pioneers of America, ‘What about this?’, undated leaflet c. 1928, Newberry Library, Chicago, Dolores Haugh Riverview amusement park collection, box 2, folder 51 (emphasis in original). Cf. Paul C. Mishler, *Raising reds: the Young Pioneers, radical summer camps, and communist political culture in the United States* (New York, NY, 1999).

⁹⁶ Saul Bellow, *It all adds up: from the dim past to the uncertain future* (New York, NY, 1994), p. 243; Mary J. Zollman, letter to *The Daily News*, 28 May 1928, Riverview amusement park collection, box 2, folder 51.

⁹⁷ Daniel McDonough, ‘Chicago press treatment of the gangster, 1924–1931’, *Illinois Historical Journal*, 82 (1989), pp. 17–32; David E. Ruth, *Inventing the public enemy: the gangster in American culture, 1918–1934* (Chicago, IL, 1996), pp. 118–43; Julien Gorbach, ‘The journalist and the gangster: a devil’s bargain, Chicago style’, *Journalism History*, 45 (2015), pp. 39–50. For prominent contemporary texts that linked crime with corruption in late 1920s Chicago, see Maurine Dallas Watkins, *Chicago* (New York, NY, 1926); Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The front page* (New York, NY, 1928); John Gunther, ‘The high cost of hoodlums’, *Harpers*, Oct. 1929, pp. 529–40.

⁹⁸ E.g. ‘Capone called donor to mayor campaign fund’, *Tribune*, 8 June 1928, p. 14.

⁹⁹ Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, pp. 217–24; W. J. Rorabaugh, *Prohibition: a concise history* (New York, NY, 2018), pp. 69–71; Steven A. Reiss, ‘When Chicago went to the dogs: Al Capone and greyhound racing in the windy city, 1927–1933’, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 112 (2019), pp. 265–92. Thompson’s accusations concerned the case of Jake Lingle, a *Tribune* reporter and Capone associate murdered in 1930.

¹⁰⁰ On WHT, see ‘Pupils to get “America First” by radio talks’, *Tribune*, 9 Nov. 1927, p. 6; Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, p. 273; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 195. On WGN and Chicago radio in general, see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 138–43; and Michael Stamm, *Sound business: newspapers, radio, and the politics of new media* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011).

¹⁰¹ ‘Mayor leaves Hearst ranch’, *Herald-Examiner*, 15 Sept. 1927, p. 2.

an editorial from Hearst himself that defended Thompson's patriotic education policies from various liberal critics.¹⁰² Thompson thus deepened his links with leading capitalist publishers, while media coverage of crime and Capone became ever more prominent. Mayoral corruption in Thompson's Chicago was structural and political-economic, but the press often called it criminal and preferred to expose its scandals.

What drove Thompson's decline was not increasing crime but the emergence of economic crisis. When the depression hit Chicago after 1929, very many citizens experienced a rapid collapse in living standards; the unemployment rate was about 50 per cent by winter 1932.¹⁰³ Other big city mayors, such as Boston's Curley, governed successfully in the crisis through strong party machines that could sustain popular relief and public works initiatives.¹⁰⁴ Yet Thompson had relied on publicity to compensate for his machine's weakness and he never grasped the depression's economic reality. In October 1930, he claimed that 'this slump is all psychological', and to cheer people up he organized 'William Randolph Hearst Day'.¹⁰⁵ As a full-blown parade for Hearst followed by a stadium rally, this was the craven zenith of Thompson's Hearst alliance and a political blunder that exalted media elites while most Chicagoans suffered.¹⁰⁶ Thompson's attacks on *The Tribune* plunged to new depths of absurdity when, three weeks later, he claimed that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated because hostile *Tribune* coverage pushed John Wilkes Booth to pull the trigger.¹⁰⁷ Once Thompson had been very effective and unignorable when attacking *The Tribune*, but now the paper dismissed his claims as 'scurrilous and unprintable'.¹⁰⁸

Thompson went into the 1931 election as a weak incumbent. His business allies were struggling or failing, his machine was falling apart, and his media strategies had grown all too familiar.¹⁰⁹ Thompson issued direct instructions to voters to 'buy Hearst papers', but few were listening any longer.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, his opponent Anton Cermak did offer something new. Cermak was a Czech immigrant and effective political operator who specialized in

¹⁰² William Randolph Hearst, 'Undermining patriotism no cause for laughter', *Herald-Examiner*, 7 Nov. 1927, p. 8. Critics included Walter Lippmann, *American inquisitors: a commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (New York, NY, 1928); George S. Counts, *School and society in Chicago* (New York, NY, 1928); John Bright, *Hizzoner Big Bill Thompson: an idyll of Chicago* (New York, NY, 1930).

¹⁰³ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 214–18; Levy, *Ages of American capitalism*, p. 381.

¹⁰⁴ Beatty, *Rascal king*, pp. 229–31.

¹⁰⁵ Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁶ For reports, see 'Mayor greets W. R. Hearst in Soldiers' Field', *Tribune*, 10 Oct. 1930, p. 3; '100,000 cheer at Chicago day fete', *American*, 9 Oct. 1930, pp. 1–2; 'A political humbug', *Przebudzenie*, 16 Oct. 1930, CFLPS; 'All Chicago hails Hearst', *Herald-Examiner*, 10 Oct. 1930, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁷ 'Speech prepared by Mayor William Hale Thompson for delivery at Apollo Theater, Oct. 31 [1930]', Newberry Library, Chicago, John Drury-Marion Neville papers, box 25, folder 680.

¹⁰⁸ 'Surgeons operate on mayor', *Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1930, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁹ In the Republican primary, Thompson framed his opponents as newspaper stooges, but voters threw eggs and one accused him of being Hearst's lackey. See Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, pp. 324–5.

¹¹⁰ 'Speech by William Hale Thompson', 22 Feb. 1931, Merriam papers, box 90, folder 8, pp. 10–11.

building multi-ethnic coalitions. He ran a well-oiled Democratic machine, had worked hard on issues like prohibition, and now focused on crises like unemployment; in general, he went down well across the city.¹¹¹ When Thompson resorted to racist slurs on his immigrant background, Cermak used them as opportunities to unite his coalition and show how Chicago could move on from Thompson. The Hungarian weekly *Otthon* (*Home*) argued that Cermak would ‘change the present bad economical system’, while *The Chicago Greek Daily* urged readers to ‘disdain the sinister, lying, and insulting propaganda’ that Thompson had been circulating.¹¹² *The Tribune* and *The Daily News* also backed Cermak; neither Hearst paper endorsed Thompson explicitly; *The Defender* withheld its endorsement on the basis that no one deserved it.¹¹³ Cermak won a landslide victory and Democrats have retained the Chicago mayoralty ever since.

Thompson’s defeat was not a vindication for anti-publicity machine politics, because he got so far and had lasted so long with a media-centred approach. The Democratic machine that governed Chicago after Thompson, and that peaked at mid-century under Richard J. Daley, was a machine that focused on resolving conflicts, forcing compromise, distributing patronage. But Daley had grown up in Thompson’s Chicago and knew that journalism mattered, so he developed a more engaged and managerial approach to the media. Mike Royko, his sharpest critic, wrote that Daley ‘holds more press conferences than any other public official in the country’, and that ‘he dislikes reporters and writers, but gets on well with editors and publishers’.¹¹⁴ Daley also built directly on Thompson’s legacy by attacking liberal journalists for elitism and hypocrisy. Defending police brutality at the 1968 Democratic convention, Daley went after Walter Cronkite and ‘the television industry’ for broadcasting images that damaged Chicago’s reputation. Cronkite struggled to respond and visibly squirmed on air.¹¹⁵ Thus, rather than reverting to Tammany type, post-Thompson Chicago integrated attacks on media elites and ever more press conferences into the daily texture of political life. The city’s public sphere was not simply constituted by Cronkite-style journalists watched by a unified public, but was also contested by politicians and their allies to divide a plural citizenry and sow mistrust of the media.

Moreover, the press-baiters could reach bigger audiences as journalism changed and nationalized across the twentieth century. Among Thompson’s

¹¹¹ Paul M. Green, ‘Anton M. Cermak: the man and his machine’, in Green and Holli, eds., *The mayors*, pp. 99–110; Lisa McGirr, *The war on alcohol: prohibition and the rise of the American state* (New York, NY, 2016), pp. 164–7, 185.

¹¹² ‘Cermak and the problem of unemployment’, *Otthon*, 5 Apr. 1931, ‘The Greek people of Chicago as a whole for Cermak’, *Chicago Greek Daily*, 6 Apr. 1931, CFLPS.

¹¹³ Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, pp. 325–9; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 232; Stuart, *Twenty incredible years*, pp. 457–68; Michaeli, *The Defender*, pp. 187–9.

¹¹⁴ Mike Royko, *Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago* (New York, NY, 1971), pp. 13, 18.

¹¹⁵ Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley: his battle for Chicago and the nation* (New York, NY, 2000), pp. 3–6, 478–80. Cf. Peter C. Pihos, ‘“Police brutality exposed”: Chicago, 1960–1974’, *Radical History Review*, 141 (2021), pp. 128–50.

contemporaries, Huey Long wielded national power while attacking Louisiana's 'lying newspapers'.¹¹⁶ Beyond the United States, many democracies were damaged by fascist politicians exploiting dysfunctional media environments.¹¹⁷ Thompson himself flirted with far right parties in the 1930s and once attended a Nazi picnic in Chicago, but his political legacies stretched beyond the depression to embrace a range of mid-century Republicans.¹¹⁸ Senator Joe McCarthy, for example, developed a national audience for his attacks on journalism thanks to newspaper syndication as well as radio and television broadcasting. While Edward R. Murrow's role in his decline remains a heroic folk narrative, many journalists worried about their complicity in McCarthy's career given what one called 'the part the press has had in building him up'.¹¹⁹ Nor was McCarthy the last such figure. Vice President Spiro Agnew, for another example, became a ruthless culture warrior who berated the liberal media, praised Daley's police department, earned the respect of Pat Buchanan, and responded to corruption scandals with claims about press hypocrisy.¹²⁰ McCarthy and Agnew have recently been interpreted as precursors to Donald Trump, and Thompson can also be slotted into this genealogy.¹²¹ From the Chicago mayoralty to the American presidency, all these figures built and partly sustained their careers through various forms of press-baiting demagoguery.

However, some prominent conservatives developed press-friendly personas that combined anti-corruption credentials with pro-business policies. Here, Thompson's dialectic successor was not Donald Trump, at least not initially, but rather Thomas Dewey, the celebrity prosecutor and presidential candidate who did much to shape mid-century Republican politics. Dewey became famous for convicting New York's criminals partly because national magazines like *Life* claimed in countless puff pieces that 'Dewey pursues Evil with uncompromising vigor'.¹²² The press critic A. J. Liebling called him 'the publishers' all-time favorite candidate'.¹²³ Indeed, Dewey embodied the post-Capone

¹¹⁶ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the great depression* (New York, NY, 1982), pp. 26–7; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 196; Alecia P. Long, 'Huey Long vs. the media', *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, Summer 2018, <https://64parishes.org/huey-long-vs-the-media>.

¹¹⁷ E.g. Bernhard Fulda, *Press and politics in the Weimar republic* (New York, NY, 2009), pp. 131–68.

¹¹⁸ David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the depression: American radicals and the union party, 1932–1936* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), pp. 246–7; Bukowski, *Big Bill Thompson*, p. 253.

¹¹⁹ Glen Feighery, 'A "moral challenge": journalists, Joe McCarthy, and the struggle for truth, 1950–1955', *American Journalism*, 38 (2021), pp. 127–49, at p. 133. On newspaper syndication and the nationalization of journalism in America, see Guarneri, *Newsprint metropolis*, pp. 234–47.

¹²⁰ Peter B. Levy, 'Spiro Agnew, the forgotten Americans, and the rise of the new right', *The Historian*, 75 (2013), pp. 707–39; Matthew Pressman, 'Objectivity and its discontents: the struggle for the soul of American journalism in the 1960s and 1970s', in Schulman and Zelizer, eds., *Media nation*, pp. 96–113.

¹²¹ Larry Tye, *Demagogue: the life and long shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York, NY, 2020); Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz, *Bag man: the wild crimes, audacious cover-up, and spectacular downfall of a brazen crook in the White House* (New York, NY, 2020).

¹²² 'Political glamor boys: Dewey and Murphy compete for crime-busting honors', *Life*, 31 July 1939, pp. 18–19; Alan Brinkley, *The publisher: Henry Luce and his American century* (New York, NY, 2010), p. 224.

¹²³ A. J. Liebling, *The sweet science and other writings*, ed. Pete Hamill (New York, NY, 2009), p. 748.

consensus that corruption was a scandalous criminal activity committed by gangsters and trade unions, not a structural feature of capitalist societies and their elites in particular. When a journalist once asked him about racketeering's influence on private industry, Dewey answered bluntly with 'that's a stupid question'.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, syndicated columnists like Westbrook Pegler pioneered new modes of conservative muckraking that denigrated unions, celebrated Dewey, exposed racketeering scandals, and helped erode the New Deal order.¹²⁵ Departing from Agnew's or McCarthy's incendiary approach, Dewey and his allies developed subtler forms of conservative media politics, which stressed the importance of criminal prosecutions when scandals arose while serving business interests as a matter of course. Paradoxically, Dewey's Republicans claimed to represent the anti-corruption party of capital.

Both demagogic press-baiting and pro-business crime-busting, then, were key themes in broader debates about corruption's meaning and in the developing conservative movement. Both were also bound together in the fateful career of Richard Nixon: fearless prosecutor of Alger Hiss, frequent critic of liberal media bias, global defender of capitalism, 'not a crook', and the ultimate scalp for American journalism.¹²⁶ In other words, Nixon's career was partly a culmination of older developments in American relations between corruption and journalism, which stretched back decades to local contexts like Thompson's Chicago. A *longue durée* way to interpret the Watergate scandal is precisely as a victory for Steffens's version of muckraking over Tarbell's more structural approach.¹²⁷ Amid unprecedented national shame and international media attention, Nixon resigned for covering up a minor hotel burglary and wiretap, after which Ford and Reagan restored and then strengthened the Republican party's world-historic role of sustaining American capitalism. As in Thompson's Chicago, the consequences of publicizing corruption here involved disaffection and cynicism as well as outrage and criticism. These entangled dynamics have also fuelled a favourable political environment for Trump, who has combined a corrupt and conservative agenda with stark claims about media corruption and demagogic incitements to violence. Like Thompson, Trump has often been difficult for the press to oppose or ignore, because he drove circulation while denigrating journalism with dangerous and uncertain consequences.

Relations between journalism and corruption in the United States have long been simultaneously oppositional and more ominously symbiotic. Chicago in the early twentieth century was a booming city that many saw as symbolic of American modernity, not least because of its newspaper industry. Lincoln

¹²⁴ Richard Norton Smith, *Thomas E. Dewey and his times* (New York, NY, 1982), p. 246.

¹²⁵ Witwer, *Shadow of the racketeer*, pp. 1–36, esp. pp. 11–13.

¹²⁶ On these aspects of his career, see Garry Wills, *Nixon agonistes: the crisis of the self-made man* (1969; New York, NY, 1971); David Greenberg, *Nixon's shadow: the history of an image* (New York, NY, 2003); Brownell, *Showbiz politics*, pp. 188–224.

¹²⁷ But on the more proximate media politics of the 1970s, cf. Kathryn Cramer Brownell, 'Watergate, the bipartisan struggle for media access, and the growth of cable television', *Modern American History*, 3 (2020), pp. 175–98.

Steffens argued that Chicago's press could be an effective vehicle for anti-corruption politics. But corrupt politicians like Big Bill Thompson based their careers on attacking the press, exploiting its publicity, and exposing its hypocrisy, all while building links with business interests through propaganda and boosterism. Thompson's Chicago was a city where elites remained wealthy and politicians were shameless, where newspapers made things visible and little really changed. This history reveals difficult limits to the anti-corruption politics of journalism, particularly one rooted in commercial public spheres and driven by mainstream newspapers with hypocritical publishers. Thompson also reveals the dangers of a media-centred politics of corruption, especially when politicians mobilize public opinion against the press while utilizing its publicity nevertheless. Thompson died in 1944, long since friendless and obscure, but his media strategies and political legacies shaped the careers of more prominent and recent conservative Republicans. His fraught example shows how journalism can become a means to consolidate and even constitute corruption.

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