

Faustina Press

American journalism has lost its crusader instinct. Here's how to get it back...

It's an age-old debate among journalists: which approach to covering the news is superior—the American, with its striving after objectivity and balance, or the European, with its frank embrace of slant and party? Should news organizations seek out all sides of an issue, or should they present the news with an unabashed tilt? By now, it seems clear that the Americans (at their best) have the edge. Newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*, for all their shortcomings, offer a rich

daily diet of news, from distant wars to local schools; analysis of events and trends; coverage of arts and culture; and opinion from both in-house columnists and outside contributors. Another top paper, the *Financial Times*, though based in London, follows an American-style approach. The European model has its own impressive exemplars, notably *The Guardian*, but overall the American way has, I think, shown its superiority.

Yet in the American quest for balance, something critical has been lost: the

crusader instinct. I don't mean crusades of the lurid "Remember the *Maine*" type waged by the yellow rags of yore (or, sometimes, the screaming tabloids of today). Rather, I'm referring to the sustained coverage of key issues with a passion and tenacity that can help mobilize the masses and bring about lasting change.

Today, most investigative projects at American news organizations are limited in scope, episodic in nature and aimed at specific rather than systemic abuses. A good example is "Invisible Child," the smart December 2013

New York Times series describing a year in the life of Dasani, a homeless girl in Brooklyn. Totalling more than 28,000 words and appearing over five days, the series was the largest investigative project ever run by the paper at one time. The reporter, Andrea Elliott, eloquently captured the travails of Dasani's daily life and the terrible conditions that she and her family had to endure at the decrepit shelter in which they lived.

Michael Massing: "How To Fix American Journalism." *The Nation*, 2015 edition.

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¶26. *This new genre defines itself by claiming many of the techniques that were once the unchallenged terrain of the novelist: tension, symbol, cadence, irony, prosody, imagination.*

¶Jack Newfield, "Hooked and Dead" *New York Times Book Review*, 1967.