

How did mass media affect the scope of the Dreyfus Affair in Europe?

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## I. Introduction

The effects of mass media have seeped into every corner of modern society: disinformation plagues social media, the phenomenon of cancel culture looms over public figures, and relentless advertisements pursue us from billboard to billboard. Today, with just a few clicks, we can expose ourselves to the opinions of millions across the world – a shift from previous eras, where mass media as a means of mass communication only took physical forms through media like newspapers or radio. While these modern capabilities have lent themselves to numerous improvements in society, at the same time, our society has grown far more divisive from the ease with which we can disseminate media.

Although these developments may seem firmly rooted in modern society, as with most cultural trends, the rise of mass media and its consequences has its roots in the past. Namely, the Dreyfus Affair of late 19th to early 20th century France is a key preliminary example of how mass media spread through newspapers and other forms of media often intensifies debate around contentious topics. In this sense, we can look back on the Dreyfus Affair as a warning about how mass media polarizes situations – reducing nuanced issues to black and white – often to the detriment of those involved in the affairs. At the same time, mass media has the potential to rally people to support a cause for the good of others.

## II. Background on The Dreyfus Affair

The Dreyfus Affair was a major political scandal in France centered around army captain Alfred Dreyfus. In December 1894, Dreyfus was convicted for treason, as it was alleged that he had been selling military secrets to the Germans. Worth noting in regards to the Affair is Dreyfus's Jewish descent: when coupled with a general growing antisemitic sentiment in France,

his guilt felt all the more assured to certain antisemitic newspapers like *La Libre Parole*, which published articles emphasizing his Jewish heritage as contributing to his perceived guilt.

Yet the case was not as open-and-shut as his near-immediate conviction made it seem. Rather, especially after the discovery of documents shedding doubt on the certainty of Dreyfus's guilt, the case ended up dragging on for 12 years. It involved multiple trials and a great deal of public attention, and as the Affair progressed, reactions on either side grew increasingly polarized. In fact, two distinct parties developed on either side of the Affair.

On one side were the anti-Dreyfusards – those against reopening the case – and on the other were the Dreyfusards. The latter were largely left-wing republicans and [who] viewed the issue in the context of the importance of balancing individual freedom and national safety, while the former were mostly right-wingers motivated by antisemitism in their staunch denouncement of Dreyfus.

Dreyfus was kept in exile for many years on Devil's Island in French Guiana as the arguments about his guilt continued on the French mainland. In 1896, crucial evidence implicating French officer Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy as the true informant may have given Dreyfus some hope of freedom – yet these hopes were certainly deflated as Esterhazy was acquitted in 1898. Then, amidst a storm of political and social contention surrounding the case, Dreyfus was tried again in 1899; although he was allowed off the island, he was once again found guilty. In the end, it took him until 1906 to be fully acquitted.

### III. How Mass Media Intensified the Dreyfus Affair

During the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte at the start of the 19th century, propaganda became a heavily utilized tool by the Emperor. From paintings to prints,<sup>1</sup> France was inundated with the dissemination of mass media to promote Napoleon's rule; therefore, the Dreyfus Affair took place in a nation already primed for the use of mass media to spread ideas. Also worth noting is France's history of antisemitism even prior to the affair. With the popularity of the antisemitic novel *La France juive* published in 1886 by Edouard Drumont<sup>2</sup> as well as the formation of the Antisemitic League in France, antisemitic rhetoric was not uncommon in 19th century France.

Thus, the media – using France's history with propaganda and antisemitism – took control of the Dreyfus Affair and twisted it into a narrative against the Jews. More specifically, they used Dreyfus's Jewish heritage as an excuse to spread antisemitic rhetoric when discussing his conviction. Then, by imbuing this rhetoric into mediums of mass communication ranging from newspapers to paper novelty products, his guilt was all the more certain in the eyes of the antisemitic public.

Early examples of the role of mass media in the Dreyfus Affair include the antisemitic content of French newspapers like *La libre parole* or *Le petit journal* during the Affair. Even before the Dreyfus Affair, *La libre parole* was notorious for its frequently antisemitic content; for instance, a caricature named "Judas défendu par ses frères" illustrated by Edgar Degas published in 1879 depicts two stockbrokers conspiring together<sup>3</sup> (see Appendix A). To an antisemitic

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<sup>1</sup> Notable examples include *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801) and *Napoleon in his Study* (1812), both by Jacques-Louis David.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Poliakov, *L'age de la science*, Volume 2 (n.p.: Calman-Lévy, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Degas, "Judas défendu par ses frères," cartoon, *La Libre Parole* (Paris, France), November 14, 1896, no. 175.

observer, this cartoon would have represented the Jewish financiers that they viewed as taking advantage of capitalism to further their own wealth.

It then follows that during the Dreyfus Affair, this antisemitism accumulated and found an easy target in Dreyfus and his Jewish heritage. *La libre parole* is again a key example of these virulent sentiments, as only a week after Dreyfus's conviction in November of 1894, the paper published an antisemitic, anti-Dreyfusard cartoon titled "Savonnage Infructueux" (or Fruitless Soaping).

In the cartoon (see Appendix B), Dreyfus's features are warped beyond recognition to fit derogatory stereotypes of Jewish people while the word "Traitor" is branded prominently across his forehead<sup>4</sup>. Next to Dreyfus stands another stereotypical Jew with a Masonic pendant who appears to be giving Dreyfus money. In the background stands a group of armed men with guns; the caption reads, "Only blood can clean a stain like this."

The cartoon's depiction of Dreyfus with a Masonic Jew represents a belief at the time of a Masonic conspiracy against France. By depicting this conspiracy and exaggerating Dreyfus's Jewish features, the media helped turn the Affair from a political issue into an excuse to spread antisemitic rhetoric. As this antisemitic rhetoric spread through mass media, to the many antisemites in France, the Affair was no longer simply about an army captain convicted of treason; instead, it pointed to a larger conspiracy of a network of Jews plotting against the government. To the people that held this view, it became certain that the Jewish Dreyfus was guilty.

Thus, mass media further polarized reactions to the Affair by tying it to pre-existing biases against Jewish people in France; antisemitic media created a clear split between virulent

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<sup>4</sup> Emile Cohl, "Savonnage Infructueux," cartoon, *La Libre Parole* (Paris, France), November 1894, 71st edition.

antisemites who firmly believed in Dreyfus's guilt compared to a more cautious citizen. The media also overtly encouraged violence as a response to the perceived betrayal of Dreyfus and his Jewishness – as shown by the armed men with the caption advocating for “blood” as a solution – which only served to further escalate reactions to the scandal.

Hate even seeped into typical consumer goods to turn them into vessels for mass communication. Seemingly innocuous products turned into forms of mass media – for example, a paper novelty item produced in 1898 named “The Last Judgment” (see Appendix C) allowed the user to hang Dreyfus, who is labeled “the dirty beast.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, a postcard depicts Dreyfus being tortured (see Appendix D).

Though neither of these items mention Dreyfus's Jewish heritage, these violent condemnations of Dreyfus in everyday goods normalized extreme, hateful reactions to the Affair. Moreover, these goods and thus their messages were sold to the public. Especially when combined with the ease of access the public would have to these goods – paper was cheap and by the end of the nineteenth century, sending postcards was half the price of posting letters<sup>6</sup> – these items became means of mass communication; once again, mass media marketed to the public increased the scope of the Affair for the worse.

Yet the media didn't only influence opinions on the Dreyfus Affair – it also impacted French politics. For instance, following the worst riots in reaction to the Dreyfus Affair, 22 antisemitic officials were elected to the Chamber of Deputies, with many rural officers appealing to anti-Dreyfusard nationalist sentiments.<sup>7</sup> Their victory was largely thanks to the media: the

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<sup>5</sup> Fitch, “Mass Culture,” 64.

<sup>6</sup> Brigitte Sion, “Postcards from the Dreyfus Affair: Mass Media and Modern Antisemitism,” *Brill's Series in Jewish Studies* 49 (July 2013): 344, accessed May 17, 2023, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004256958\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004256958_013).

<sup>7</sup> Fitch, “Mass Culture,” 57.

media used the Dreyfus Affair to make French Jews seem like traitors infesting France, and when combined with the public's constant exposure to this antisemitism, the same public directed their hatred into who they cast their votes for. Consequently, mass media during the Dreyfus Affair again shaped opinions and widened the scope of the Affair.

#### IV. How Mass Media Turned the Tide

Towards the end of the affair, new evidence implicating French officer Ferdinand Elsin Esterhazy as the actual spy was unveiled. While antisemitic and hateful anti-Dreyfusard rhetoric continued to plague the media, certain media played a role in rallying Dreyfus's supporters to advocate for his innocence.

On Jan. 13, 1898, Emile Zola published his letter "J'accuse" in the newspaper *L'Aurore*. The letter argued that Dreyfus's conviction was based on fabricated evidence and that the ruling was therefore unjust. Instead, Zola declared Dreyfus's innocence, pointed to Major Esterhazy as the culprit, and then accused those that played key roles in Dreyfus's conviction of several crimes ranging from forging evidence to prosecuting Dreyfus based on concealed evidence.<sup>8</sup> Zola's letter was the most notable catalyst for the press war that underscored the Dreyfus Affair, as it was the first source to compile all the evidence in favor of Dreyfus. Finally, the case was being brought into the court of public opinion not to degrade Dreyfus, but to uplift him.

Following the publication of *J'accuse*, calls for a retrial began growing louder. However, Zola's letter was not the only piece of media that generated public criticisms of the case: in September of 1898, journalist and editor Rachel Beer interviewed Esterhazy and published his confession to being the true spy. In her article, she also accused the French military of

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<sup>8</sup> Emile Zola, "J'accuse" [I accuse], *L'Aurore* (Paris, France), January 1898.

antisemitism and called for a retrial of Dreyfus's case, rallying people to support Dreyfus and his innocence.

Inspired by the media's support of Dreyfus, public outrage against how the case was handled soon grew from a few isolated protests to a maelstrom of people voicing their disapproval. Following these denouncements, the Affair was once again brought to court in a retrial that lasted from August to September 1899, where Dreyfus was ultimately reconvicted. Yet this time, the media did not react in favor of Dreyfus's guilt. Instead, media opposition to the court's decision grew to such a degree that French President Émile Loubet was forced to pardon Dreyfus, releasing him from prison but still marking him as a traitor. Dreyfus was not fully acquitted until 1906.

From sparking public outrage to spurring on retrials, the media played a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the Dreyfus Affair. Had it not been for Zola's letter, the Dreyfusards would not have had evidence for their arguments against Dreyfus's initial conviction; thus, media pieces like *J'accuse* were crucial in rallying support for the Dreyfusard cause. Then, as public support for Dreyfus swelled, his reconviction brought tensions to a boiling point – these tensions soon bubbled over into the media and became impossible to ignore, forcing the French government to offer Dreyfus a pardon. Although the media began by antagonizing Dreyfus, it ultimately turned the tide of the Affair to reveal the truth of Dreyfus's innocence.

## V. Conclusion

The prominent role of the media in the Dreyfus Affair can be linked to the role of media in society today. Similar to the battle between the antisemitic, anti-Dreyfusard media against the Dreyfusard media that called for Dreyfus's acquittal, on social media platforms, people both



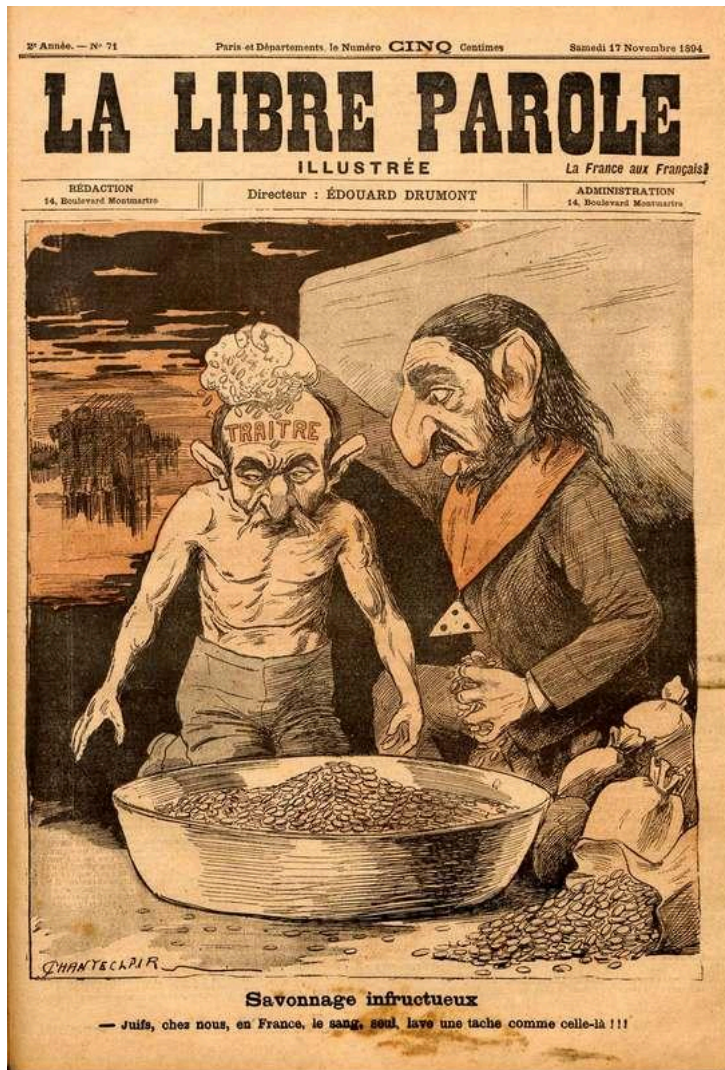
spread hate-fueled misinformation around and garner support for causes. Moreover, in the Dreyfus Affair, an uncautious French public was dogged on by hateful mass media into jumping to conclusions about Dreyfus's guilt. The Dreyfus Affair can then serve as warning to us today: in a society where mass media influences nearly every aspect of our lives – whether this influence comes from social media, television, or the news – an element of caution should influence our consumption of mass media, lest we find ourselves spreading unfounded hate.

At the same time, the later role that mass media played in the Dreyfus Affair demonstrates the necessity of mass media in sparking changes for the better. As shown through Dreyfus's pardon, when the media is used to shed light on injustice, it can incite the public into taking action for a greater good. Mass media is a versatile tool, and it is ultimately up to the wielder to decide if it will be used as a vicious weapon or a merciful light in the dark.

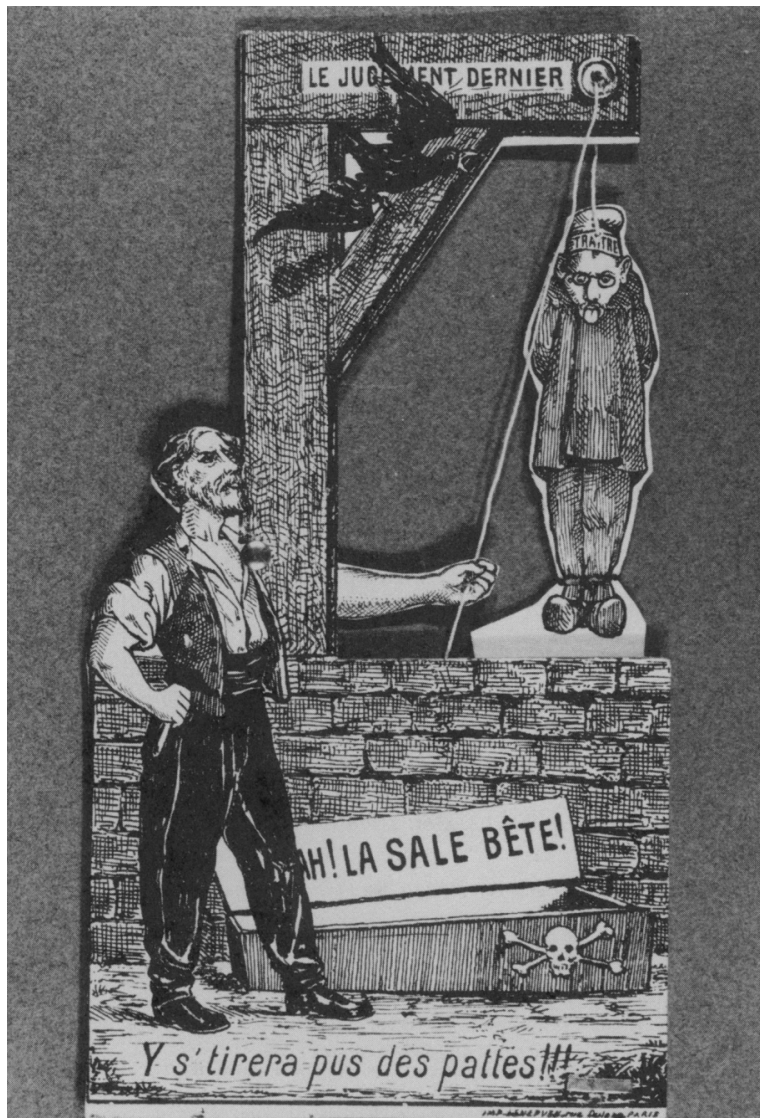
Appendix A, “Judas défendu par ses frères” by Edgar Degas (1879)



Appendix B, "Savonnage Infructueux" by Emile Cohl



Appendix C, "The Last Judgement" by unknown creator





Appendix D, "Dreyfus Being Tortured" by unknown creator



Cohl, Emile. "Savonnage Infructueux." Cartoon. La Libre Parole (Paris, France),  
November 1894, 71st edition.

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## History Elective Research Paper Rubric

Ms. Hanson May 2023

### **Content = 60% Final Paper Grade**

- Your paper should not be primarily descriptive or biographical. Rather it should be a thesis-driven cause/effect argument.
- Strength of argument in face of historical/historiographical findings.
- Effectiveness of writing.
- Research in both primary and secondary documents, with an emphasis on the former.

Andrea – this discussion of Dreyfus is excellent. I love how you have refreshed and reframed it for your interests and our moment (plagued by social media and fake news). Congratulations on putting the pieces of this matter together in a new way! I do prefer longer paragraphs but I must comment that your writing is really compelling!

60/60

### **Form + adherence to requirements/conventions = 40% Final Paper Grade**

- A minimum of six primary and three secondary sources are required, with a length of 8-10 pages of text.
- Properly documented as to notes and bibliography, in accordance with the format presented on the Menlo School Library citation guide.

There are some format issues with this paper:

– footnotes can only go at the end of the sentence, never in the middle.

– Bibliographic entries need to be single spaced with only one space between each one.

36/40

96% on paper.

