

Congress vs. the Press in the 19th Century

March 2017

Mark Twain's cynical and satirical genius shines through again and again. In this passage from *The Gilded Age*, he writes with hilarity about a fictitious bill brought to Congress, as reported in the papers, for a Knobs Hill University to benefit the Negroes. It is a sham and hypocritical Senator Dilworthy anxiously awaits the carnage coming from the newspaper reports-

"Senator Dilworthy was so anxious to know what the New York papers would say about the bill, that he had arranged to have synopses of their editorials telegraphed to him; he could not wait for the papers themselves to crawl down along down to Washington by a mail train which has never run over a cow since the road was built, for the reason that it had never been able to overtake one. It carries the usual "cow-catcher" in front of the locomotive, but that is mere ostentation. It ought to be attached to the rear car, where it could do some good; but instead, no provision is made there for the protection of the traveling public, and hence it is not a matter of surprise that cows so frequently climb aboard that train and among the passengers.

The Senator read his dispatches aloud at the breakfast table. Laura was troubled beyond measure at their tone, and said that that sort of comment would defeat the bill; but the Senator said:

"Oh, not at all, not at all, my child. It is just what we want. Persecution is the one thing needful, now – all the other forces are secured. Give us newspaper persecution enough, and we are safe. Vigorous persecution will alone carry a bill sometimes, dear; and when you start with a strong vote in the first place, persecution comes in with double effect. It scares off some of the weak supporters, true, but is soon turns strong ones into stubborn ones. And then, presently, it changes the tide of public opinion. The great public is weak-minded; the great public is sentimental; the great public turns around and weeps for an odorous murderer, and prays for him, and carries his flowers to his prison and besieges the governor with appeals for his clemency, as soon as the papers begin to howl for that man's blood. – In a word, the great putty-hearted public loves to 'gush,' and there is no darling opportunity to gush as a case of persecution affords".

So much then is so much the same as today.