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Rumors, Lies and Alibis: How Newspapers Sensationalized the Lizzie Borden Murder Case

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The Lizzie Borden murders, one of the most infamous murder cases from the 1800's, engulfed the public because of the atrocity of the murders, the suspects and the outcome – no person was ever found guilty of what became known as the crime of the century. This paper adds to the discourse of analytical discussion of the Borden murders and how the press coverage reflected sensationalism in ways that exposed societal flaws of that time. The press succeeded in covering the police investigation, preliminary hearing and the Superior Court trial, all of which interlaced with sensationalistic rhetoric. As the case unfolded, the most frequently addressed and, ultimately, the most sensational aspects derived from onerous societal norms of the time. First, several newspapers negatively censured the efforts of the police investigation and switched their stance on Lizzie Borden's innocence because of the poor quality of work produced by the police. Consequently, the press's doubt in the abilities of the police and the press's fluctuation between her innocence and guilt sensationalized the case. Most importantly, the press, from the moment of the murders until the end of the Superior Court trial in Massachusetts, constructed a masculine version of Miss Borden to symbolize her guilt and a feminine version to symbolize her innocence. This enticed readers to imagine either a foul, masculine woman or a pretty, feminine woman to sensationalize the situation. This dichotomy directly correlated with the society's ideology of men and women and their inherent differences. Moreover, by examining the facts of the case through the lens of the press, it may be inferred that these sensational yet flawed aspects influenced the press coverage, public opinion and potentially the verdict.