# Historiography

in Mass Communication

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*Historiography in Mass Communication*



## Editorial Purpose

This journal publishes articles dealing with the study of mass communication history and of history in general. (It does *not* publish articles about historical events, episodes, people, etc., as one finds in, for example, historical research papers.)

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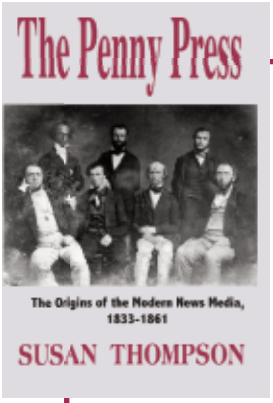


# The Penny Press

Scholars have lauded this book as the best ever written focusing on the cheap press before the Civil War.

"Susan Thompson has written the ideal history of the penny press era. The writing is lively and engaging while remaining rooted in sound scholarship and the documents of the period. She has provided a treasure-trove of stories and facts about this pivotal era of media development." — David Copeland, series editor, *Debating Historical Issues in Media of the Time*

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"Susan Thompson uncovers the shenanigans of penny press editors in a concise and entertaining narrative of the newspapers that first defined news and the mass audience in the United States. She reveals hypocrisies and controversies about sensationalism, invasion of privacy, truth in an era of hoaxes, and attempts at political independence." — William E. Huntzicker, author, *The Popular Press 1833-1865*

To purchase a copy, or to learn more about this book, click on the book cover above.

# Reinterpreting History: Four Lessons

## By Wm. David Sloan ©

Sloan

During my fifty years of trying to be a historian, I've been fortunate in the subjects I've chosen to study. Or should I say the subjects that happenstance handed to me? On two occasions I happened on them purely by chance. Going in, I knew little about either one, but they turned out to be of considerable importance. Both were ripe for reinterpretation.

As an added benefit, both taught me important lessons. In fact, the lessons were identical. That coincidence leads me to think the lessons are true and apply no matter what the subject.

The truth is, I learned four lessons.

The first subject I studied was the party press of the early American republic.

It started as my doctoral dissertation. At the time, I had little experience with studying history other than a rather flimsy acquaintance I had gained during my graduate studies. When it came time to select a dissertation topic, the only guidance I got came from my chair. He ad-

*David Sloan, a professor emeritus from the University of Alabama, is the author/editor of more than fifty books. The founder of the American Journalism Historians Association, he is a recipient of its Kobre Award for lifetime achievement and of a variety of other awards.*

vised me to select something that "no one else has done."

I came up with three ideas. A history professor on my committee specialized in American history of the early nineteenth century, and he said he favored my idea of the party press. That's how I wound up with the subject.

It soon dawned on me that the reason some subjects have received little or no study is that no one is interested in them. That's usually because historians think they're unimportant. I still find it strange when dissertation chairs tell their students to look for topics that other historians haven't studied. That's like saying, "Select a subject that no one cares about. Waste your time." Most unstudied topics are unstudied for good reason. Few of them turn out to be worthwhile.

As I began work on a literature review, I found that I wasn't entirely correct when I thought no historians had studied the party press. In fact, I eventually found more than 100 articles and books. Nearly all of them, though, were about individual editors the authors thought stood above partisanship, and none of the studies looked at the party press within a big context.

The dominant view of the partisan era was that which Frank Luther Mott had most recently popularized. He described it as "the dark ages of American journalism." It was barely worth studying. That notion had been around since the 1870s, and few historians in the twentieth century dissented from it. It's easy to see why historical study had neglected the party press. I went into my research with Mott's view.

But as I got into primary sources, I found an odd thing showing up. People of the time kept saying such baffling things as how important the press was. "How could they be so misguided?" I asked myself. "Didn't they realize that partisan newspapers were doing a poor job of journalism?"

Then it dawned on me. The reason historians, including me, had such a low opinion of the party press was that they were evaluating it by journalism standards of their own time. We were judging — and condemning — editors of the early 1800s by our own, later values.

Once I recognized that fallacy, I was able to see the party press in a new light, by the standards of its own time rather than by those of 1980. Awakened to that error, I offered a new explanation: that the party press, rather than a journalistic failure, had been an important player in America's early political system. That's the view that's dominant today.

Providing a new explanation of the party press was rewarding. But my study's value extended beyond the party press. It made me aware that journalism historians of the twentieth century were blindingly present-minded. Jim Carey had hinted at the problem, but, not trained in historiography, he didn't recognize exactly what it was. My study of the party press helped me to identify the journalistic specific standards that historians were employing to explain the past. Once I became aware of their perspective, I began to examine the issue further, and that quest to understand led eventually to my book *Perspectives on Mass Communication History*. When I began looking at the party press, I had no idea that it would provide the genesis of such an awareness.

The second subject I stumbled onto was the American colonial press. As with the party press, at the outset I knew little about it other than what I had read in books and journal articles. The prevailing view was that the colonial press offered the rudimentary beginnings of later journalistic advances and practices.

I chose to study the colonial press as part of a series of books that Jim Startt and I were editing. The series included seven volumes. Had I been smart, I should have chosen the volume on the party press. I already knew something about it, and writing the volume would've re-

quired less work than any of the other volumes. But I decided that, if researching and writing a volume were going to require several years, I would rather spend them learning something new. Since I knew little about the colonial press, I selected that volume.

But I immediately faced a problem. I wasn't interested in the colonial press. From historians, I knew that it was so, so simple. Researching it would be five years of tedium. I had to do something to stoke my interest.

The only subject that might excite me, I decided, was freedom of the press. The best place to start would be Benjamin Harris and *Publick Occurrences*. After one issue, you may recall, the Massachusetts government, encouraged by the colony's repressive Puritan clergy, suppressed the paper. At least, that's what historians in the twentieth century said. I plunged in, with that concept guiding me.

What I found was just the opposite story. The Puritan clergy actually supported the paper, and it was their opponents on the governing council who ordered Harris to stop publishing.

As for Harris, rather than being an opponent of the clergy and of religion generally, he was a devout Anabaptist. He had long opposed Anglicanism as the established church of England, and his purpose with *Publick Occurrences* was to support Puritan Massachusetts in its efforts to keep its political and religious autonomy.

James Franklin and the *New-England Courant* presented a similar historiographical case. Historians pictured them as champions of press freedom. As with Harris, according to these historians, the enemies of freedom again were the repressive Puritan clergy. Again, the historians were wrong. As it turned out, members of Boston's lone Anglican church ran the *Courant*. They believed Anglicanism was the only legitimate religion. Their goal was to disparage the Puritan leaders in hopes

of turning the public against them so that the Anglican church could gain ascendancy. Franklin, as I discovered, wasn't a great hero in the fight for press freedom. He was an agent in Anglicanism's attempt to become the established church in Massachusetts.

As with *Publick Occurrences* and the *New-England Courant*, every other newspaper I studied involved much more complex situations than historians had concluded.

As you might guess, I was as much surprised by what I found about the colonial press as I was by what I had learned about the party press.

Out of my two studies I gained a much deeper appreciation of both the colonial and the party press. But I also learned four important lessons about historical study in general. They apply to all historical studies. The lessons are these:

1) Don't begin a study with preconceptions. If you do, you may miss the real story. Go into your research with a blank tablet. In most cases, you'll be trying to answer two main questions: What was the nature of your subject, and why was it that way? Let the evidence lead you where it will.

2) Study history with one main purpose: To learn. Don't try to use it to make an argument. Avoid your favorite cause, ideology, political partisanship, and other isms. If your purpose is to persuade readers to your view, you'll skew the picture. You'll overlook the true one.

3) Simple explanations are usually wrong explanations. History, like life, is complex. Are you simple? People in the past weren't either.

4) The earliest historians' explanations are often more accurate than those of later historians. This is a surprising lesson. We think that we today have advantages that give us better insight than earlier historians had. But over time we've accumulated a lot of blinding baggage. It clings to us like barnacles on sunken ships, and it clouds our view. The

most accurate historical explanations generally are those that come closest to contemporaneous explanations. Early historians were closer in mindset to the contemporaries than we are. In my own studies I found that historians from around 1850 reflected contemporary views much more closely than historians a century later did. They considered, for example, James Franklin to be irresponsible in opposing the Puritan clergy, and they thought party press editors were bold advocates for political ideals when America's future was at stake.

In the 1970s I would have considered those explanations to be heresy. Fifty years later, I'm still surprised at how credible they were. How fortunate that I stumbled onto topics that changed my view. I didn't reinterpret them so much as they changed me.

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## Thoughts

### How Book Awards Become Meaningless

Like many other people, I was surprised at the U.S. Spelling Bee's announcement of changes to its contest. Starting in 2027, the Bee will give "special consideration to students who hail from states whose names begin with the letter *A*." So in two years contestants from Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, and Arkansas will receive favored treatment.

The change was odd enough, but just as strange was the brashness with which the Bee made the announcement. It didn't seem to blush in giving some students special treatment. In fact, it seemed to think they deserve preferment. Perhaps judges are from those states.

Like young spelling geniuses, wouldn't we all like to win some national awards? Book awards, for example. They usually designate books as outstanding. Authors take pride in them, and rightfully so.

But it's possible an award can be meaningless, and rightly so. How could such a thing happen?

One way is by stacking the deck. That happens when an award program prejudices the selection process. It favors some books over others through such means as the selection of judges or the ground rules for the award. In the former situation, if the majority of judges, or even a few, share a bias, a book that conforms to that bias will be awarded an unfair advantage.

In the latter, the rules can unfairly privilege some books over others. They build in a bias that amounts to — let's use the right word here — cheating.

Does anyone think that never happens?

Here's a real situation where it has. It's possible there are others, but I'm not aware of them. It's the AJHA Book Award. Over the AJHA's history many excellent and honest historians have invested countless hours in making it an important organization whose sole purpose was to advance the cause of history, not to promote personal or group biases.

But over the last few years, its book award has instituted bias as one of its cornerstones. The formal statement begins by saying the award recognizes "the best books in journalism history or mass media history." That's a perfect description. In fact, it comes close to the description of the AEJMC History Division's Book Award. It says simply, "The History Division's Book Award is awarded annually to the author of the best journalism and mass communication history book published in the previous year."

Most other organizations use similar, unbiased descriptions. The American Historical Association, for example, says its Eugenia M. Palmegiano Prize in the History of Journalism "is awarded annually to the

author of the most outstanding book published in English on any aspect of the history of journalism, concerning any area of the world, and any period."

But then the AJHA's call for entries adds that "we particularly encourage nominations of books by *women, LGBTQ+* and *BIPOC* authors." Those are my italics. In case you're not familiar with the acronym BIPOC, it stands for "Black, Indigenous, and People of Color." In case that description doesn't make clear which books will receive favored treatment, the statement adds that the awards committee welcomes books "that engage with *critical theory.*" Again, my italics. Critical theory, as everyone knows, or should know, is an ideological framework. Most of those who employ it know that it benefits their bias.

So when a book award program embraces those tenets, who is surprised when books that fit the prejudices win the award? One wonders how the AJHA could ever have adopted such a rogue statement.

Nevertheless, some winners will take pride in the award even while knowing they received special treatment, but others may always doubt that their book was truly the best of the year. Even for those who wrote a good book, the award will lose its shine. Like the rest of us, they'll wonder if the reason they won was that the selection was tilted. Neither they nor any of us can ever be sure the winner was one of even the 100 best books.

But the AJHA, we're told, is considering correcting the award's description. If it does, it will take an important step. Otherwise, the book award program will become meaningless, important only to those who find gratification in bias. And the reputation of the AJHA will suffer.

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# Exploring the Intersections of Political, Religious and Media History

## By Christina Littlefield ©

Littlefield

In her frequently cited 2011 historiographical assessment on the state of conservatism, Kim Phillips-Fein concluded that political historians needed to pay more attention to religion and to media. Political historians gave religion "more lip service than sustained engagement" when telling the story of conservatism in the United States.[1] Further, Phillips-Fein noted that "the role of mass media in the creation of the Right also has not yet received full attention from historians — especially important given the centrality of conservative talk radio, television programs, and leaders such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck to the movement today."[2] Journalism historian A.J. Bauer has cited Phillips-Fein's assessment in his numerous works interrogating conservative media, and made a 2023 call in *American Journalism* for journalism historians to fill this gap, identifying "conservative news cultures" as an unrealized subfield with rich potential.[3] He co-edited *News on the Right* with Anthony Nadler in 2016 and has a forthcoming book, *Making the Liberal Media: How*

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*Conservatives Built a Movement Against the Press,* to be published by Columbia University Press in March 2026. As an interdisciplinary scholar who just updated a book on white Christian nationalism, I see rich potential in exploring the intersection of conservatism, Christianity and right-wing media.[4]

The Venn diagram of scholarship that intersects all three is slim, and yet no historical assessment of conservatism is complete without understanding how Christian identity has undergirded this political movement or how this movement has utilized right-wing media to sustain this amalgamation for its audiences, creating what Bauer and Nadler have called a "conservative news culture" or what Mark Major dubbed a "conservative countersphere" or subculture.[5] Recent scholarship has even described this triad using terms from sociology of religion, describing the ways conservative commentators have promoted a form of civil religion or a quasi-religious structure for their audiences.[6]

In researching the rise of Christian nationalism, particularly over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, it became clear that no account of this ideology could ignore the role that conservative news media played in promulgating visions of a Christian America and rallying the faithful to fight to restore God's will over the nation. Yet most of the evidence I found in the books directly addressing the Christian Right or Christian nationalism was piecemeal; a mention here, a mention there, such as Kristen Du Mez's juicy acknowledgement that Tim LaHaye, a Christian Right leader of the *Left Behind* books fame, had, in his *Battle for the Mind* book, specifically called for a television news network "committed to rendering a conservative view of the news" that would "defend 'traditional moral values, the church of Jesus Christ, a strong national defense.'"[7] Only two of the books I reviewed for the Christian nationalism project gave any sustained coverage to how

conservatism, Christianity and the media interacted. Anne Nelson's *Shadow Network* dived into how right-wing media worked in concert to wallpaper the same narrative across the country. The Council for National Policy, a secretive conservative networking group, coordinated messaging across conservative media, including three-Christian owned channels that dominated talk radio across the country.[8] In *Righting the American Dream,* Diane Winston documented how Ronald Reagan used the press to mainstream his neoliberal vision of American exceptionalism, individual freedom and free-market capitalism. In general though, I found that religious historians regularly engaged with the political history of twentieth century Christianity, particularly in the rise of the Christian Right, such as in Daniel K. Williams' 2010 *God's Own Party,* but they usually gave just passing mention to the role Christian and conservative media played in those politics. For example, Williams noted that religious broadcasters reached 20 million Americans by the end of the 1970s and "exceeded the fund-raising abilities of the nation's largest political action groups," but he doesn't explore the nature of those broadcasts.[9] For another, Randall Balmer, in his updated 2024 religious biography of President Jimmy Carter, twice noted how the Rev. Jerry Falwell and other rising leaders of the Christian Right used their media spheres to critique Carter, but he doesn't elaborate.[10] Political histories similarly tend to acknowledge the role of religion or the media in the conservative movement but without much explanation, such as the few pages Robin Corey's 2017 *The Reactionary Mind* gives to evangelicals as a core conservative base.[11] Media histories have tended to engage the politics and minimize the religious connections. This siloing is understandable because it takes significant work to become literate in even two fields, much less three, and the interdisciplinary scholar always has to sacrifice depth for breadth. Still, there is value in being able to

show how fields intersect; how the faith reinforces the politics, and the media reinforces both.

*Searching for the Venn Overlap*

Since finishing the book in early 2024, I went down a rabbit hole researching the historiography of conservative media, looking for works that interrogated the role of religion and the media within conservatism. Having already read several more recent treatments of conservative media in the twenty-first century, my historiography started with Nicole Hemmer's *Messengers on the Right.* Hemmer developed the rise of conservative media from the 1940s through the 1970s. She acknowledged the role of religion for William F. Buckley and *The National Review.*[12] Her next endeavor, *Partisans*, emphasized the 1980s and 1990s formation of a New Right post-Reagan and Cold War dynamics. This book has more sustained coverage of Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson's efforts to run for president and the religious dynamics here.[13]

Next I explored Bauer and Nadler's excellent 2016 *News on the Right.* This edited collection has Mark Ward Sr. tackle ""From a Christian Perspective: News/Talk in Evangelical Mass Media" in chapter two. Ward noted the enhanced agenda-setting function of a media network that filters all news through a "Christian worldview." Evangelical mass media creates a "rhetorical community" unique from other conservatisms, and yet it still engaged the anti-communism of the broader movement, along with the anti-intellectual and anti-elite bias against the liberal media, and an us-versus-them sense that they are battling for Christ against a degenerative culture.[14] This chapter is a great overview, but then religion is mostly left behind for the rest of *News on*

*the Right.* One chapter, on weaponized victimhood, noted Fox News and its reporting on an alleged war on Christmas, and a chapter on "Conservative News and Movement Infrastructure" eventually referenced the role of the Christian Right.[15] Here, though, I found it jarring to read about Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie — conservative leaders I've always associated with being foundational to the Christian Right — for several pages on their contributions to New Right politics with nary a whisper of their religious connections. The chapter focused on *The National Review* also noted that its identity "was built around Christianity, anti-communism, and libertarianism, as well as the demonization of liberalism."[16] So even though this book included the role of religion in conservative media, it mostly siloed it to one chapter. Where religion came up elsewhere, it went undeveloped.

This was the case for most, but not all, works that recounted the history of conservative media. Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj look at how conservative media encouraged a turn toward outrage across the whole media sphere, because of how well it sold on the right. Their work mentions some elements of American civil religion only.[17] Media Matter's David Brock, a former conservative turned liberal activist, gave six pages to the role of the Christian Right in his 2004 book, *The Republican Noise Machine*.[18] His 2012 book with Ari Rabin-Havt, *The Fox Effect,* about Roger Ailes, mentioned the channel's "War on Christmas" but gives no sustained attention to religion.[19] Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella similarly gave only passing attention to the Christian Right in their 2008 *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*.[20] In *Fox Populism,* Reece Peck explored how Fox News promoted itself to a working-class populist base, but does not appear to tackle the role of religion at all.[21] In a journal article, Richard Meagher traced the overlapping networks and funding

between conservative organizations and right-wing media, but without noting the religious elements.[22]

Some other works that went deeper into the intersection of Christianity, conservatism and right-wing media include Heather Hendershot's *What's Fair on the Air.* Hendershot looked at some of the more extreme anti-communist broadcasters of the mid-twentieth century, including two known for their religious activism, Carl McIntire and Billy Hargiss, and she fully engaged their fundamentalism.[23] She also has an earlier book, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, that looked at Christian cultural products — movies, books, music — and how such products reinforced a conservative Christian identity, including ideas about the end times.[24]

Firmly ensconced in the Venn diagram of media, religion and the political history of conservatism is Ward's two-volume edited collection, *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age*, released in 2016. Volume one traced the rise of Christian radio, televangelism, and even video games and how that created an evangelical subculture. Volume two is a sustained investigation into topics such as how that subculture shaped evangelical worldviews and engagement with the world, looking at Focus on the Family's media messaging, moral outrage on conservative talk radio, evangelical resistance to American religious pluralism, and the formation of a Christian political identity where Christians are the faithful, persecuted remnant working to revitalize a Christian America.[25] Similarly, Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage published an edited volume in 1998, *Media, Culture and the Religious Right,* which documented the subculture of conservative evangelicals, with their own books, music, movies, radio, television and educational materials, and how this subculture influenced conservative politics. It included case studies on Robertson, Weyrich, James Dobson's Focus on the Family

media empire, and Rush Limbaugh's appeal to Christians.[26] Ken Waters's brand new *Words That Shape Us* looked at how four evangelical magazines covered the Trump era, from pre-escalator announcement through the 2024 election.[27] Though dated, the 1990 edited volume *Religious Television* included chapters on conservatism, particularly the Religious Right's portrayal of the family.[28]

A few journal articles have also tackled this intersection, most impressively Susan Ridgely's investigation of how Focus on the Family's multimedia empire, including newsletters, magazines, radio and eventually the internet, helped maintain a vision of a patriarchal family structure and mainstreamed "fringe ideas" like homeschooling and the Christian Reconstructionist vision of a theocratic U.S. government. Her numbers are staggering, that Dobson's column ran in 550 newspapers, his radio spots on 230 stations, and his mailing list included 250 million households.[29] Angela Wilson and Paul Djupe looked at the Family Research Council, the political arm of Focus, and how their "flexible messaging" changed depending on their audience, in addressing abortion, same-sex marriage and religious liberty.[30] Jeffery K. Hadden's history of the rise and fall of televangelism pointed to how evangelicals came to dominate radio and television evangelism over mainline Protestants and then harmed their own standing after some broadcasters chose "to mix religion and politics to the point that the two become virtually undifferentiated."[31] Diane Winston critiqued how the news media itself promulgated right-wing politics by giving outsized attention to the Christian Right over more progressive religious activism.[32]

*Richness in the Intersection*

So what is lost when scholars leave religion out of the historiography of conservative media? Let me give one sustained example. The historiography of conservative media appears to always include an overview of how conservative media came to attack liberal media, and the best scholarship investigates new angles to better explain the origins of this dominant trope and how conservative media practitioners came to represent themselves as the only truthtellers Americans should trust.[33] In a book chapter in *Media Nation,* Sam Lebovic rooted the conservative critique against the mainstream media in the Progressive, muckraking era of the early twentieth century, when journalists bemoaned the corporate takeover of the media.[34] Hemmer traced its rise in the early conservative media movement, when thought leaders like Buckley questioned the very possibility of objectivity and warned of a pervasive liberal ideology throughout media and the academy. David Greenberg compellingly showed how Southern resistance to Civil Rights gave birth to the more widespread attack, painting Northern journalists as elitists giving the South a bad name.[35] William Gillis illustrated that much of Spiro Agnew's later critiques of the liberal media were rooted in decades-old anti-Semitic tropes of a "Jewish news media conspiracy" that "originated with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*."[36] Most of these narratives traced the history they unpacked forward to Agnew's attacks on the press.

This is all compelling evidence of the dark roots of a critique that is still used to divide Americans into camps of "us" and "them."[37] However, how much richer might this historical narrative be if one could bring these developments in media history into conversation with scholarship on how fundamentalist evangelicals shaped anti-intellec-

tualism in the twentieth century. For example, Greenberg, given the space limitations of his article, doesn't look at all at how religious faith formed Southern views. Willis, given his emphasis on anti-Semitism, noted in a single sentence that "a pervasive strain of anti-Semitism ran through the fundamentalist Protestantism that dominated the post-Civil War South."[38] For many Southern Christians, ideology and faith mixed mightily, and their belief in a natural, God-ordained divine hierarchy with white Protestant men on top was as rooted in their Calvinist theology as in their inherent white supremacy. Resistance to white Northern elitists as carpetbaggers was also part of the Lost Cause DNA, a civil religion narrative intrinsically tied to their belief that God would redeem the South someday.[39]

Beyond this, fundamentalist evangelicals have a longer history of anti-intellectualism rooted in their late nineteenth, early twentieth century militant reaction to Modernism and their insistence on the infallibility of scripture. They opposed historical criticism of the Bible and cultural and evolutionary arguments about the development of religious thought. They also opposed intellectual efforts to embrace science and natural reasoning over and against the supernatural. Some fundamentalists further embraced an apocalyptic, end-times vision that denigrated the need for earthly knowledge. This led many fundamentalists to create their own institutions for higher learning.[40] Much later, around the rise of the Christian Right, Francis Schaeffer and Timothy LaHaye developed a new anti-intellectualism that brandished any thinking outside of their narrow boundaries of faith-approved common sense as "secular humanism." This led them to promulgate conservative attacks against the liberal media and the academy, but now with the addition that these elitists were maligning the faith and seeking to lead the faithful astray.[41] While nineteenth century evangelicals

embraced education, mid-to-late twentieth century evangelicals increasing rejected learning outside of their own institutions, leading to what Mark Noll dubbed the *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* — that there was no evangelical embrace of the life of the mind, nor a willingness to seek truth freely, wherever it led.[42] In the twenty-first century, conservative fundamentalist evangelicals have continued Schaeffer's railings against secular humanism, only now everything they don't like is "woke" or, in the rhetoric of the charismatic wing, demonic or satanic.[43] The religious underpinnings of these attacks make them much harder to combat.

In *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*, Randall Stephens and Karl W. Giberson noted how evangelicals trust their religious leaders — even those clearly actively seeking political power — over and above other experts because they see these leaders as empowered, or anointed by God, to speak, teach and lead.[44] In my historical research on Christian nationalism, I found that Christian nationalists have often relied on misinformation and disinformation to advance their worldview, from working to dictate curriculum to demonizing journalists and scholars as controlling elites, to rejecting any information that would challenge their ideology.[45] Anti-intellectualism pervades Christian nationalism, which renders the faithful prone to other conspiracies latent in the anti-vaccination movement and QAnon.[46] Right-wing media, such as Fox News, One American News, Newsmax, Breitbart, and the Blaze, along with Christian radio networks that dominate rural America, have fostered this mindset.[47] PRRI found that 80% of OAN and Newsmax viewers, and 54% of Fox News viewers, endorse Christian Nationalism.[48] Christian nationalists have also gravitated to their own social media sites like Gab, Natural News, CloutHub, or Trump's own Truth Social that perpetuated their bubble.[49] Many Christian na-

tionalist leaders have their own video blogs or podcasts to transmit their views.[50] Of course, President Donald Trump accelerated conservative distrust of the media by declaring the news media the enemy of the people and called any coverage he didn't like "fake."[51]

*Media Studies Research in Conservatism, Media and Religion*

One challenge specifically for covering conservative media is that so much has developed in the last two decades, with the arrival of Fox News and the internet in the 90s and the development of social media in the mid-2000s, that scholars don't yet have critical distance to historically explore the more recent developments in religion, conservatism and the media.[52] Much of what scholars know about the recent history of Fox News comes from liberal critics like Brock or journalists like Brian Stelter, though they do point to the importance of understanding conservative media's impact on U.S. democracy.[53] There are some really interesting media studies work being done here, some of which have benefited from a historical lens. Mike Conway et al applied the propaganda techniques from the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in the 1930s to Bill O'Reilly's contemporary broadcasts in the mid 2000s, finding that he engaged most with name calling and glittering generalities. While not a focus of the paper, they found that he portrayed Christians as heroes and non-Christians as bad or evil. Of five heroes O'Reilly cited frequently, "Three (the Bush administration, Christians, and Republicans) were heroes for upholding praiseworthy social values whereas Americans as a group were heroic for their contribution to fighting terrorism. Right-leaning media were framed as heroic for their professional competence."[54] More recent studies are looking at how conservative religious ideas are propagated on social me-

dia, such as Lauren Horn Griffin's study of #Trad Catholics on Instagram, or at how white nationalists are using religion and the internet to mainstream their views.[55] Journalists have also conducted content analysis work on right-wing media talking points, such as a *New York Times* analysis of former Fox News host Tucker Carlson's descent into conspiracies or a Bloomberg analysis of white male podcasts and their influence on the 2024 election.[56]

In *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics,* scholars Yochai Benkler, Rob Faris, and Hal Roberts documented how far-right sites like *Breitbart, Drudge Report, InfoWars* and the *Daily Caller* managed to drive the agenda for even Fox News, pulling the cable channel further to the right and creating a propaganda feedback loop. Conservative viewers only watched the news they trusted, sticking to their bubbles. These sites amplified and repeated disinformation and shielded Trump and Republican politicians from blow-back, even demonizing fact-checkers. While partisan news existed on the far left, their audiences consumed a wide variety of media, where they would see fact checks from mainstream media.[57] More recent scholarship has replicated this, with particular attention to how Fox News replicated conspiracy theories more than other cable networks.[58]

In *News on the Right,* Anthony DiMaggio replicated Benkler et als' findings that the so-called echo chamber of cable news is one-sided. He reviewed his significant research that undercuts the idea of a liberal bias in the media, arguing instead that the media is first and foremost pro-business, pro-official U.S. government sources (no matter who is in office) and pro-national security. He also looked at whether Fox News, MSNBC and CNN predicted political and media attitudes on a 161-question survey. He found that "Fox News consumption is four times

as frequent a predictor of attitudes as MSNBC consumption, and six times as frequent as CNN consumption. Neither CNN nor MSNBC is a regular predictor of liberal attitudes, which undermines the liberal media echo chamber hypothesis."[59] Many other scholars have similarly documented the network effects of right-wing news and their success in mobilizing populist politics.[60] Other studies have specifically looked at how conservative media have shaped opinions on refugees, same-sex marriage, race and gender, and climate change.[61]

Scholarship has further shown that right-wing media have helped shape their viewers' identities and fulfilled viewers' emotional needs, making it extremely difficult for any news outlet to introduce facts that threaten viewer identity.[62] Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes pointed to the emotional effects of in-group identity formation and out-group negative stereotyping for increasing political polarization in the U.S.[63]

As briefly noted in the beginning of this essay, some of the most recent research in these overlapping spheres looks at the religious elements of conservative media, in sociological terms. Robin Globus Veldman used Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion, the merger of religious and secular concepts together in a nation, to explain the amalgamation of religion and ideology specifically in Rush Limbaugh's broadcasts.[64] Veldman showed how Limbaugh and other conservative broadcasters have utilized a general, broad Judeo-Christian promotion of God as the Creator to reject initiatives to address climate change. They never framed their religiosity in specific terms — Veldman had trouble discerning Limbaugh's Protestant denomination — so as to reach as broad a coalition as possible. But they formed a "collective conservative identity" that contrasted "'us' (the religious, who will be framed positively) and 'them' (the nonreligious) who will be framed negatively."[65] They

then promoted big government as a threat to reigious liberty, and a small, weak federal government — one that cannot deal with the complexity of climate change — as preferable. Veldman wrote that religion helped keep the conservative coalition together and mobilized:

"Most importantly," he argued, "being able to see themselves as a group with shared interests and common supra-religious identity facilitates conservatives' ability to bridge internal divides to achieve common goals. Religious content aids this project by providing the connective tissue — the tropes and values — that resonates with an electorally significant number of Americans, transforming the political process from mundane partisan squabbling to a battle for America's soul."[66]

Separately, Marcus Mann and Daniel Winchester argued that right-wing media represent a "quasi-religious phenomenon." It's worth quoting their core argument in full:

"More specifically, we assert that right-wing news is (1) epistemically religious in favoring worldview maintenance and sacred truths over and above "mere facts"; (2) functionally religious in that it privileges building moral community over informing individuals; and (3) ecologically religious because patterns of competition, stability, and change in right-wing media resemble schismatic dynamics sociologists have long found characteristic of the formally religious sphere."[67]

They pointed to Trump's cult-like status as a sacred leader of his party in forming this quasi-religious phenomenon, and used the 2020 election as a case study. As similarly documented by Brian Stelter in *Network of Lies,* Mann and Winchester showed how some of Fox News' audience abandoned them for News Max when they didn't prove sufficiently loyal to Trump and his Big Lie about election fraud, pointing to schismatic tendencies in right-wing news:

"More specifically, whereas organizations in the mainstream news ecology are still rewarded by their audiences for factbased reporting, perceived journalistic objectivity, and serving a general and diverse audience (cf. Benkler et al. 2018), news organizations in the right-wing ecology are more likely to be rewarded for strict adherence to sacred truths, maintaining strong sociocultural distinctions between themselves and the mainstream media, and a commitment to in-group loyalty."[68]

This quasi-religious function of right-wing news is helpful in understanding its staying power and how adherents are resistant to fact checking. Francisca Polleta and Jessica Callahan similarly have pointed to the emotional power in how Trump and right-wing media connect to deeper stories people tell themselves.[69]

My own interest in Christian nationalism drew me into the rhetoric of the late Charlie Kirk, the assassinated founder of Turning Point USA, and I currently have two journal articles in production considering sixty-plus hours of speeches Kirk gave to churches as he launched Turning Point Faith, an endeavor to radicalize biblical Christians to take back America for God, from May 2021 through October 2024. He live streamed these Freedom Nights in America on YouTube. While this work takes me out of religious and journalism history, it is still historically rooted in the intersection of Christianity, conservatism and media.

To be sure, journalism historians would do well to give more attention to religion full-stop. In reviewing *Journalism History* and *American Journalism*, I see few of us looking at the role religion has played in press history, though there has been good work from the likes of Bailey Dick, Bruce Evensen, John Ferré, Erika Pribanic-Smith, David Sloan, David Spencer, Ken Waters, and Diane Winston.[70] However, as more

of us engage with the history of conservative media, it would be wise to understand how religion is an essential bulwark to this movement.

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# Historian Interview

## By Steve Casey ©

Casey

Steve Casey is a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His book *The War Beat, Europe: The American Media at War Against Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2017) won the American Journalism Historians Association's award for best book of the year. His other books include *Cautious Crusade; Selling the Korean War; When Soldiers Fall: How Americans have Confronted Combat Casualties, from World War I to the War on Terror ; The War Beat, Pacific*; and *The Sceptic Isle* (scheduled for publication in 2026). He received his D.Phil. at Oxford University.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us a little about your family background — where you were born and grew up, your education, and so forth.*

**Casey:** I was born and raised in Ilford, a suburb to the northeast of London. I attended the local state grammar school, then worked for a few years in the City of London, before traveling around America in 1989. This trip got me hooked on the United States. I returned to Britain to apply for university, gaining a place at the University of East Anglia (UEA), where I obtained a starred First in US History and

Politics in 1994. From there I went to Oxford, gaining a Distinction in the M.Phil. in International Relations in 1996, before completing a D.Phil. — Oxford's own version of a doctorate — two years later.

***Historiography:*** *What did you do professionally before going into teaching?*

**Casey:** Before attending university, I worked for three years in the City stock market, just as it was transforming from a cluster of small, London-centric brokers into the consolidation that after "Big Bang" in 1986 allowed the big international banks to dominate. I started doing all sorts of menial office chores, but I always wanted to write. After being asked to produce short reports on companies and countries, I ended up as a researcher working on emerging markets, which in the early 1990s encompassed Latin America. I spent some time in Argentina producing analyses of that country's economic and political prospects.

I subsequently did one year of my BA degree at Georgetown University, during which I interned in the US Senate. During that time, I also had the privilege of taking courses with adjunct professors who were senior legislative aides on Capitol Hill, which sparked and then deepened my interest in congressional politics.

***Historiography:*** *Where, and what courses, have you taught?*

**Casey:** While completing my doctorate, I began teaching the Oxford-style tutorials: one-on-one hour-long sessions, which are based on analyzing the essay the student writes each week. My first academic job was as Junior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Oxford. This position enabled me to turn my D.Phil. into my first book, but I continued to

teach, both at undergraduate and M.Phil. level, largely the history-based courses in Oxford's Politics Department, including International Politics in the Era of the Two World Wars and International Politics, 1945 to Present. Since 2001, I have been at the LSE. One of the biggest attractions of this position is that faculty are able to develop specialized courses based on their research interests. For me, this has meant teaching courses on the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as my popular post-graduate course, Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy, from Roosevelt to Reagan.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us about your background in history: When did you first get interested in historical research? How did your education prepare you to be a historian? etc.*

**Casey:** While at work before attending university, I spent most lunchtimes in the Barbican Library in London. My reading was rather indiscriminate at first, but I quickly became absorbed by Watergate. At a time when the British establishment seemed like a cozy club in which politicians and the press could easily combine to cover up anything they deemed awkward, I became fascinated with the drive and determination of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and the way the US constitutional system slowly seized on their reporting to begin investigating and ultimately prosecuting Nixon's misdeeds. This fascination not only provided me with a self-taught crash course on the framework of American politics, but also prodded me to read more widely, especially about US foreign policy — at a time when the cold war still raged and the possibility of nuclear conflict seemed real.

***Historiography:*** *Who or what have been the major influences on your historical outlook and work?*

**Casey:** At UEA, I was fortunate to be taught by Richard Crockatt, whose book *The Fifty Years War* remains a model of how to integrate IR concepts and history. At Georgetown, I took courses with Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, the author of the excellent *Patterns in the Dust*, who encouraged students to explore the domestic roots of US foreign policy.

My post-graduate training at Oxford was in politics and international relations, and I often return to works in these fields, especially those that clarify key concepts. Ole Holsti's *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* taught me so much about the slippery concept of public opinion. Adam Berinsky's work on how public opinion is structured by the elite debate continues to influence my thinking. Likewise, Daniel Hallin's classic on Vietnam, *The Uncensored War*, still has enormous relevance, particularly his argument about the "sphere of legitimate controversy."

I am also drawn to historical works written by prose stylists who can bring their subjects alive. Arthur Schlesinger was the first historian to spark my interest in America. More recently, Rick Atkinson's trilogy on the US Army in World War II is unlikely to be bettered.

***Historiography:*** *What are the main areas or ideas on which you concentrate your historical work?*

**Casey:** My starting point has always been the extent to which domestic pressures shape America's action on the world stage. That has evolved from exploring the general concept of public opinion and how it factors into the government's policy discussions, to focusing on both media

and political debates. As a result, I am interested in propaganda and censorship, not just the messages crafted by political leaders in Washington but also the relationship the military has forged with the media overseas.

Until recently, my work has concentrated on the United States. But my new book, *The Sceptic Isle* ["Skeptic" for American readers], uses many of these ideas to shed new light on the British home front during World War II. *The Sceptic Isle* will be published by Oxford University Press in August 2026.

***Historiography:*** *Summarize for us the body of work — books, journal articles, and so forth — that you have done related to history.*

**Casey:** My D.Phil. thesis, which became my first book, was titled *Cautious Crusade* (2001). It explored the complex interaction between public opinion and foreign policy during World War II. My next project aimed to do something similar for the Korean War, but after spending weeks at the Truman Library I found that this president, unlike his predecessor, boasted of never consulting polls. Rather than look at the influence of opinion on policy, I focused on exploring how, when, and why the government attempted to change the popular mood. *Selling the Korean War* (2008) started out by focusing on just the White House and State Department, but it soon became clear that how the battlefield was reported had a crucial bearing on how the public perceived the conflict. In the first six months of the Korean War, MacArthur refused to introduce censorship. When he relented after the Chinese intervention, the media complained that his code was too harsh. MacArthur responded that he was simply deploying the regulations he had used in World War II. Trying to confirm the accuracy of this claim, I found a surpris-

ing gap in the literature. The result was two books, *The War Beat, Europe* (2017) and *The War Beat, Pacific* (2021), which detail how the two different theaters were reported.

During this research, I also discovered that one of the main debates in the political science literature — the notion that, as combat casualties rise support for war declines — is far too simplistic. What it fails to address is the various ways the military tries to shape knowledge of casualties, and the frequent push back from both politicians and the press. The result was *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans have Confronted Combat Casualties, from World War I to the War on Terror* (2014).

***Historiography:*** *Of the books and articles you have written, from which ones did you get the most satisfaction?*

**Casey:** My books on the Korean War and World War II. Although I have always tried to frame my work in novel ways, I have achieved the greatest satisfaction from unearthing hitherto unused primary sources. Journalist can be quite elusive. Not only do their news organizations not always retain files, but those operating at the front were discouraged from writing diaries, while their letters to friends and relatives were censored. When researching the Korean War and *War Beat* books, I discovered numerous files kept by the US army in navy, now held in NARA II in College Park, Md., which detailed the movements and actions of US war correspondents in Europe, the Pacific, and Korea between 1942 and 1953.

***Historiography:*** *We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the most accomplished people are often the most modest — but if you had to summarize your most important contributions to the field of*

*JMC (journalism/mass communication) history, what would they be?*

**Casey:** To integrate military, political, and media history. Too often, military historians have downplayed the political context in which wars are waged, while disregarding how battles are reported. Likewise, historians of the home front invariably ignore how news from often-distant battlefields — and the ways that this news is exploited or distorted by politicians — shapes what Americans come to believe.

***Historiography:*** *As you look back over your career, if you could do anything differently, what would it be?*

**Casey:** After finishing my book on Korea, I decided to go back in time to work on World War II. The Korean book explored the challenges of selling a limited war. I was tempted then to explore America's next limited conflict, the one in Vietnam. This is the war with the largest literature on the political and media context. It has also generated the most controversy on the issues with which I have dealt. I suspect there is much more that can be said about the relationship between politicians, the military, and the media, including vitally important subjects such as free speech, executive overreach, and the size of the "sphere of controversy" between 1963 and 1975. Perhaps the time is now ripe for such a project.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us about your "philosophy of history" (of historical study in general or of JMC history in particular) or what you think are the most important principles for studying history.*

**Casey:** I am interested in power — in who influences whom. My work

began exploring whether the public opinion drove presidential decision making or whether the White House shaped public opinion. Over time, I have realized that this problem is far more complex — that it needs to embrace, among other things, Congress, especially the connections legislators develop with departments, agencies, and pressure groups, as wells as the media, exploring if the crucial decisions are undertaken by reporters in the field, or editors and publishers in US cities. Put another way, I am also interested in the agency-structure debate, extending this beyond the corridors of the executive branch to congressional committees as well as the media's editorial and board rooms. I am in the process of completing a major book, *The End of Isolation: The Creation of the Interventionist Consensus, 1936-1941*, which draws these myriad processes together to present a new account of a pivotal period.

While seeking to convey complexity and contingency, I also try to bring the period to life — to show, for instance, how personality traits and quirks can sometimes be crucial.

***Historiography:*** *How would you evaluate the quality of work being done today in JMC history — its strengths and weaknesses?*

**Casey:** I am naturally drawn to those works that are infused with similar priorities to my own. And I am heartened by the number of impressive monographs that have recently been published, such as Kathyrn McGarr's *City of Newsmen* (2022) and Norman Domeier's *American Journalists in Nazi Germany* (2025). Both are based on a prodigious amount of research into a multitude of manuscript sources. And both skillfully show how, when, and why reporters in very different contexts made difficult decisions about what to remain silent about and what to write.

***Historiography:*** *What do you think we in JMC history need to be doing to improve the status of JMC history in (1) JMC education and (2) the wider field of history in general?*

**Casey:** JMC historians need to show why their subject matters — why it is important for a society to have trusted voices and shared narratives; how reporters speaking truth to power can improve public policy or expose serious wrongdoing. The American media has made plenty of mistakes over the centuries, but, as a Brit teaching in London I like to emphasize its proud tradition, underpinned by the First Amendment, which has compared favorably to the record of other democracies. My new book, *The Sceptic Isle*, shows how the British government was frequently fretful that US war correspondents would spill sensitive secrets; yet, desperate for American aid, Churchill's government also indulged them, relaxing certain rules, which in turn resulted in fewer falsehoods entering the public domain.

***Historiography:*** *What challenges do you think JMC history faces in the future?*

**Casey:** Technology is the main challenge, for it is not only altering the media landscape but also shaping how students think, research, and write. Sadly, this is one area where it is easier to identify the challenge than to offer solutions.

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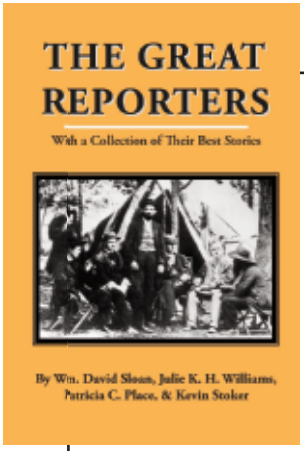


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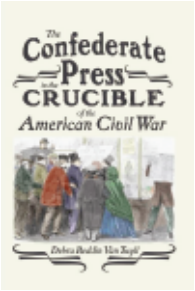
# Book Interview

## By Debra Reddin van Tuyll ©

van Tuyll




Debra Reddin van Tuyll is one of today's leading authorities on the history of the press during the Civil War era. She's the author of nine books, with three more in process. Among them, *The Confederate Press in the Crucible of the American Civil War* (Peter Lang, 2013) is particularly important and original in explaining how the war affected the press in the South. She serves as a host of the annual Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression. In 2019 the American Journalism Historians Association awarded Prof. van Tuyll its Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement. She received her Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina, where she specialized in the history of mass communication.

***Historiography:*** *Give us a summary of your book.*

**van Tuyll:** The book examines the history of the Southern press during the Civil War as a means of understanding how a wholly domestic war affects the news industry and its society. The focus is on newspapers in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, places that were not

hard-hit by actual fighting until very late in the war so as to offer a crucible in which I could study the economic, political, business, and cultural impacts of war on journalism and how the news industry interacts with all those social structures to influence the war itself. I was also curious about how publishing within a slave society impacted the press. I believed that slavery had to have had an influence on journalism, an influence that might account for some of the differences between Southern and Northern newspapers.

I took a systems approach to this research that focused on newspapers as institutions within a society because that seemed the best way to contextualize the effects of war and of journalism. Many other scholars had already looked at the contributions of individual journalists in covering the war, most notably J. Cutler Andrews who wrote the two classics, *The North Reports the Civil War* and *The South Reports the Civil War*, and frankly, I was less interested in the coverage of the war than I was the interactions between the news industry and a country at war.

***Historiography:*** *How did you get the idea for your book?*

**van Tuyll:** Don't laugh. This started when I was teaching a journalism history course many years ago and suggested a topic to a student who was considering paper topics. She wanted to do something about the Civil War but didn't know what. I suggested that she look at the *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel* for its coverage of Sherman's March to the Sea. The topic was local, and I knew the paper had been in publication throughout that march. Sherman's troops intentionally avoided Augusta, so I anticipated she'd find a full run of the newspapers.

She decided against reading six weeks of newspapers, and one day when I was killing time, waiting for my husband to finish his class, I

stopped in the microfilm room of the library to look at the *Chronicle*, just out of curiosity. I fumbled around with the microfilm machine a bit, but once I got things working and started reading, I was entranced. It was like I had stepped into a time machine, and while I personally had never been interested in the Civil War (that was my mother's interest. When we lived in Maryland, she dragged my brother and me to Civil War sites seemingly every weekend), I got interested fast after my microfilm/time machine experience. When I got to graduate school, my plan was to do a dissertation on coverage of Sherman's march in a sampling of both northern and southern newspapers.

***Historiography:*** *What was the state of the historical literature about the topic at the time you began work on your book?*

**van Tuyll:** One of my first steps in doing a historical dissertation was to delve into the literature to see what others had written about the Southern press, and I was dismayed by what I was finding. First, little had been written about the Southern press beyond Andrews' book and a handful of journal articles, and what had been written did not align with what I was reading in Southern newspapers. The state of the literature motivated me to change my dissertation topic. I believed what I was finding by doing deep dives into as many newspapers as I could get my hands on disputed what had been written earlier, and I wanted to set the record straight. So, my topic changed to an analysis of the press in a domestic war, with the Confederacy as my crucible.

I had started out by reading all the classic histories of American journalism, most notably Frank Luther Mott's, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 260 years: 1690 to 1950*. Mott, I suspected then and still do, was influenced by Frederic

Hudson's history of American journalism, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872*. Both portrayed the Southern press as far inferior to that in the North. Both Hudson and Mott, as I recall, stated the Southern press's practices and partisanship were throwbacks to an earlier era. I was especially incensed by the claim that few, if any Southern newspapers used steam presses – most of those I was reading had steam presses and were proud enough of the fact that they wrote about having them and some even used wood cuts of presses on their mastheads or in self-promotions.

They were also critical of the Confederate press for continuing the partisan press model in which an editor worked closely with a party to present party views. What neither historian seemed to have realized was that the party press had changed a good bit by 1860 from its earlier iterations. In only a handful of instances did I find evidence of political parties directly funding newspapers. Mostly I found plenty of Southern editors who were part of the party hierarchy, who might push subscriptions especially to other party members, but who zealously guarded their independence and who would break with parties if attempts at control got too extreme. I particularly enjoyed learning about one North Carolina editor who, in the late 1850s, single-handedly kept his party from choosing a nominee for governor, consequently handing the office to the Know Nothings. And I saw very little evidence that any of the authors whose works I was reading, other than Andrews, had spent any time at all with Southern newspapers. I wrote in my dissertation introduction that Frank Luther Mott had not done his due diligence by delving deeply into Southern newspapers themselves, not knowing that Mott had directed my dissertation director's dissertation. He didn't make me take it out, but he certainly commented on the observation.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us about the research you did for your book: What were your sources, how did you research your book, how long did you spend, and so forth?*

**van Tuyll:** It took about five-and-a-half years to complete my dissertation and another five years to turn it into a book. My dissertation director, Ronald Farrar, believed a dissertation is not a life's work. It is a means to a degree. That was a help, because I had a historian on my committee who believed a dissertation should be a finished volume that could be published upon graduation.

My main sources were the newspapers themselves. It's amazing how much editors in those days published about the editorial decisions they made, the state of their industry, their work, their technologies, and the shuttering of other newspapers. I also used archival sources at Emory University, the Atlanta History Center, the Southern Historical Society, Duke University, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina state historical societies, and state archives for those same states.

Those archival materials included letters to and from journalists and other journalists as well as the politicians and military leaders they covered and/or worked with. I also found court documents related to an editor's attempt to get his newspaper back after the war – this was a Savannah paper Sherman confiscated during his occupation of that town. Those documents contained a considerable amount of information about how newspapers were valued as businesses at the time as well as the experience of an editor during an enemy occupation. I also found business records for a newspaper established during the war. One of the most poignant documents was the blood-stained pages of a journal an editor kept as he was dying of tuberculosis. These are just a few of the treasures I found in my search.

Published books of memoirs and letters were important as well. While others had written about the Georgia peace movement, no one had made the connection between its leader, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, and editors in Atlanta and Augusta. I suspect because I recognized the names of journalists other Civil War historians might not have known, the involvement of editors such as J. Henley Smyth, Henry Cleveland, and Nathan Morse was glaringly obvious, just from reading Stephens' published letters – and then lucking into a few of theirs to Stephens in archives.

***Historiography:*** *Besides the sources you used, were there any others you wish you had been able to examine?*

**van Tuyll:** The National Archives in College Park, Maryland, has several Confederate collections that I wish I'd been able to get to. I don't know exactly what all is there, but that's the reason I would have liked to have seen them.

There was also a lawsuit in 1865 by the stockholders of the *Augusta Chronicle and Sentine*l to wrest control of that paper from majority owner Nathan Morse. Morse was a ring-leader of the state's peace movement and a loud voice among dissenters who despised Jefferson Davis and his work to build a large, centralized government – something that was anathema to most in the South, who tended toward Jeffersonian Republicanism.

Morse's co-owners wanted to silence him by seizing his ownership. That file is listed as being in the possession of the Georgia State Archives. But it isn't there. I searched, the staff searched. It's not anywhere in their possession. Apparently, in earlier times, the archives staff was of the habit of sending whole files to scholars who requested them.

The scholars were supposed to return them but didn't always. I think this file must have been sent to a University of Georgia faculty member who mentioned it in his history of Georgia journalism. I never could find that his papers are held anywhere, but I'm hoping that file still exists somewhere, and someone can find it someday.

***Historiography:*** *Based on your research for the book, what would you advise other historians in our field about working with sources?*

**van Tuyll:** One of the diaries I read in this work was by a North Carolina woman, Cornelia Phillips Spencer. I kept a quote from that diary by my desk for years, just to remind myself of her wise counsel. "Always keep a wide berth for the unexpected." I think that's some of the best advice I could offer anyone working on a research project. If you see a reference that gets your "spidey sense" tingling, follow that lead. You might find something valuable. That happened to me.

I was in North Carolina, looking at the papers of the wartime governor, Zebulon Vance. Vance had broken off relations with the newspaper editor he believed had gotten him elected governor in 1862, and as the 1864 election approached, he believed he absolutely had to create a newspaper of his own to support his re-election bid. I knew that had happened, but as I was going through his papers, I saw a reference to a collection of papers belonging to one of Vance's political allies. "Conservative business records," the reference said. *The Conservative* was the name of Vance's newspaper. I called for the records, and I found a real treasure trove: all the records related to the establishment of Vance's campaign newspaper, which had been popular enough, it continued to publish after the election was over. The records included not only a list of stockholders and how much they invested but also let-

ters with editors Vance considered hiring, letters and other records related to the purchase of his press and type, lists of expenses and income.

I've just had the same thing happen with my current project. Trolling for sources, I saw a reference to a particular journalist's business notebook. Not only does that notebook include the names of his individual subscribers, it also has names of the taverns and exchange newspapers to which he sent papers, financial information, and copies of some of his letters, including one to a woman who had asked him to investigate a man she was interested in (he warned her away from the man, who was already known to have two wives in different places and a bunch of children).

Always leave a wide berth for the unexpected. And always follow your hunches.

***Historiography:*** *What were the challenges you faced in researching your book?*

**van Tuyll:** One of the biggest challenges was having to travel to all the places I needed to travel to. I had a young child at home, I was working fulltime, and travel grants were few and far between. That's one reason my travel was mostly to nearby archives and libraries. But those sources gave me everything I needed for this project. I think the thing to remember is that history can never tell the whole story. It tells the whole story as we know it for now. You're obliged to be a thorough as possible, but it's impossible to see every archival holding out there.

One of the other problems I faced was writing about the Confederate press at a time when anything on that topic, even solid scholarship, was considered by many to be questionable. I got those

reviews that questioned the legitimacy of my work, that accused me of all sorts of prejudices and biases. I mean, at the time I was working on this project, protestors lined the sidewalks around the South Carolina capitol, demanding the Confederate flag be removed from the building. Back home in Georgia, people were working to have the Confederate battle flag removed from the state flag (in the end, the state ended up adopting a very close replica of the Confederate national flag, only with the state seal in the hoist rather than stars – a fact I continue to be amused by). My project was in no way glorifying the Confederacy. It was legitimate scholarship, but scholarship that some thought ought not be done.

***Historiography:*** *Is it possible to get too close to a research subject? How do historians maintain their neutrality of viewpoint when conducting and interpreting research?*

**van Tuyll:** In my case, it was perhaps easier because of the challenges I faced. I did the project knowing my crucible was underpinned by unsupportable ideas and values – ideas and values they truly believed were right, but that we, 150 years later, know are not. Slavery, fighting to establish a slave society as a nation, both were wrong. That was never far from my mind. But I was able to put that aside and focus on the press and war as part of a system.

I didn't get as close to my overall subject as I did to a subset of my editors. I am a sucker for those who question established authority, and I really came to admire my peace journalists. They were despised by their contemporaries because they didn't fall into line. But that's exactly why they made such valuable contributions as journalists and as citizens. Jefferson Davis was a terrible president, and the Confederacy was

fighting for a terrible cause in awful circumstances. The editors who saw that and who were willing to say in print that the emperor has no clothes, that the war needed to end then and there to keep the consequences from being so dire – they were right, and they were persecuted and reviled for being right. That's what happens so often to dissenters.

I don't know if it's entirely possible to stay neutral when you live with a group of men for a decade. I do think it's possible to be fair.

***Historiography:*** *What new insights does your book provide?*

**van Tuyll:** Probably the most important insight deals with the impact of slavery on journalists and journalism. For example, a question I continued to find in the literature was why Southern journalists never criticized slavery. Most historians concluded it was because of planter hegemony – that is, planters had so much power within their local communities, they could control what journalists published. That wasn't what I found at all. Planters didn't wield power so much as influence, but journalists, though they were for the most part on the lower end of the economic spectrum, wielded influence of their own.

That was different in earlier times when political parties were so much more involved in the news business, but by the time of the Civil War, at least in the South, journalists typically worked with, not for, parties. The same would be true for the planters and better-off farmers who made up the party leaders and faithful. It wasn't so much that journalists were cowed by planters or anyone else as that they were products of a slave society. Editors of Southern newspapers were by-and-large born in the South, reared in the South, and educated in the South. They were socialized to Southern ideals and values. Why would they criticize slavery, a system to which most Southerners at the time aspired?

Slavery also influenced attitudes toward press freedom — and not just among journalists. Southerners, from the richest to the poorest, lived in a society where they witnessed daily the realities of slavery. They had a firm grasp of what it meant to lose one's freedom, and that made most Southerners fanatical on the question of individual freedoms – individual freedoms for white people. They were radically protective of their freedoms, and that included press freedom. Six years before the Civil War, Robert Gibbes, Jr., a South Carolina editor, brought the first open-meetings lawsuit in American history (at least that I can find). He argued he was a citizen on Columbia, S.C., and hence he had an absolute right to attend city council meetings. And the court agreed. This was the attitude slavery produced among white Southerners, and it was the attitude that white journalists brought with them into their profession.

***Historiography:*** *What findings most surprised you?*

**van Tuyll:** Just the contradiction of the extreme commitment to individual rights for some but not for all in the Confederacy and the way that ideology played out on attitudes toward press freedom was probably the most surprising finding. I certainly never anticipated that slavery would produce libertarian perspectives on the press. The other finding I've been amazed by is that so many newspapers stayed in business so long into the war – even when they were being paid in chickens and firewood, if they were being paid at all, they kept their papers going somehow, because they knew their readers depended on them for news of the war, even if it was weeks old by the time they published it. That commitment to their communities went much farther than I ever anticipated.

***Historiography:*** *What advice would you give to people in our field who are considering doing a book in JMC history?*

**van Tuyll:** Find a topic you can commit to and live with for a long time. Books aren't written fast, and life happens. Also, if you have a co-author or co-editor, choose carefully someone you can work with for a long time and through all manner of crises. My current project, being co-authored with Mary Lamonica, is way behind schedule because it has been plagued by undiagnosed broken bones, surgeries, destruction thanks to a hurricane, and death. Literally. But we're still plugging along because we have a topic that interests both of us profoundly and to which we're committed.

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# Roundtable: Documenting Threats to Press Freedom and Accountability Journalism

## By Erin Coyle, Tom Mascaro, and Eric P. Robinson ©

Coyle

Scholars and legal experts recently have raised concerns about government actions that could challenge the ability for journalists and other members of the media to hold government actors accountable in the United States. Actions at the federal level that have inspired such concerns include President Donald Trump's libel suits against members of the media and a Pentagon policy change that could prevent members of the press from publishing content that government officials haven't approved. Amy Kristin Sanders, John and Ann Curley Professor of First Amendment Studies at Penn State University, wrote for The Conversation in 2025 that this change in Pentagon policy "represents an unprecedented development in the Trump administration's offensive against the press and a historic departure from previous administrations' policies."

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index described the U.S. press freedom situation as problematic in 2025. The nonprofit organization's annual ranking of 180 countries ranked the United States as 57

*Erin K. Coyle, Associate Professor of Media Law and the First Amendment at the Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, has published a book and more than two dozen articles on press and privacy rights.*

of 180 in 2025, the lowest ranking RSF has assigned to press freedom in the United States. While RSF connects some deterioration in press freedom to Trump's second presidential term, the organization also recognized state and municipal government actions have restricted how journalists may perform their jobs. A recent Collier Prize for State Government Accountability survey found that reporters covering state governments have endured difficulties accessing press briefings and government-held information.

While it should not be considered normal for journalists to repeatedly encounter barriers when attempting to report on government in the United States, historical scholarship has documented challenges members of the press previously have encountered. This is an important time to consider how historical research may shed light on press freedom in relation to the accountability function of the press as well perceived attempts to manage news, intimidate members of the press, or encourage members of the press to engage in self-censorship. This roundtable explores how media and legal historians may explore direct and indirect constraints on the press in relation to fundamental values for freedom of expression.

Mascaro

Robinson

*Tom Mascaro, Professor Emeritus at Bowling Green State University, has published* Into the Fray: How NBC's Washington Documentary Unit Reinvented the News*, which received the 2013 James W. Tankard Award for Best Book on Journalism. His analysis of "The Benjamin Report" also received the 2006 Covert Award in Mass Communication History.*

*Eric P. Robinson, Reid H. Montgomery Freedom of Information Chair and Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina College of Information and Communications, publishes legal and historical research in books and articles.*

***Historiography:*** *What inspired you to research the history of potential threats to free expression, such as a libel lawsuit, that could be perceived as attempts to change media narratives?*

**Coyle:** Working as a journalist at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I recognized shifts in government policies and practices, particularly at the federal level, changed how journalists could access information and places after 9/11. By 2003, *The New York Times* reported that the George W. Bush Administration had decreased access to proceedings and information to a greater degree than had other recent presidents. Two years later, *The Nation* recognized access to information was declining around the country — not only in Washington, D.C. News organizations challenged such restrictions, and scholarship recognized tendencies for political leaders to attempt to control information flows and press access to shape how the public could see government officials.

When U.S. Sen. Barack Obama campaigned to become the next president, he addressed the importance of providing greater government transparency and openness. During his first term, President Obama connected openness to strengthening democracy. Nonetheless, professional journalism organizations and scholars documented limitations the Obama administration placed on members of the traditional press, limiting their access to information and events, demonstrating preferences for using White House media to provide the public with images. In 2013, more than thirty journalism organizations signed a statement protesting limitations on how the press could cover the White House. That protest inspired Nicole Dahmen and me to research visual communicators' perceptions of White House attempts to shape visual media narratives by managing images of U.S. presidents between 1977 and 2009. *American Journalism* published this research in "Filter-

ing History: Photojournalists' Access to US Presidents, 1977 to 2009."

**Mascaro:** As a documentary journalism historian, I'm drawn to First Amendment cases related to broadcast documentaries and newsmagazines. Libel cases are foundationally about courage. People in power do not want to be challenged, so it takes courage to publish stories about public officials and issues. My historical question, then, is, what is the trajectory or evolution of "courage" in connection with documentary journalism over time? When Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly challenged McCarthyism on CBS in the 1950s, they were greeted with praise but also condemnation, including from Sen. McCarthy. But that event was not publicized as a "libel" matter. Murrow and Friendly also defused the controversy by inviting McCarthy to rebut their report on their program, *See It Now*. Murrow on McCarthy is one of the true benchmarks for courage and how to understand libel charges as a currency of power.

The case that most affected my reading of history and future research involves *CBS Reports: The Selling of the Pentagon*. The Pentagon complained about editing that blended answers and broke the connection between one question followed by one answer. Again, it was not a libel case, per se, but it was a challenge by the government (Defense Dept./Congressional hearing) against CBS to break into their editorial process and require the network to surrender outtakes and notes pertaining to the production of the documentary. CBS refused and narrowly escaped a contempt citation from Congress, thus establishing a broadcast, not legal, precedent protecting the editorial notes and work product and requiring complainants to file charges based on what was broadcast, not what was *not* broadcast.

The two cases that related most directly to my dissertation research

on the 1980s were *Herbert v. Lando* and *Westmoreland v. CBS News*. Col. Herbert sued CBS producer Barry Lando for libel. The Supreme Court decision in *Lando* requiring a *60 Minutes* producer to turn over outtakes and production notes was the direct result of the *New York Times v. Sullivan* rule protecting journalists from libel judgments in cases absent knowing falsity or reckless disregard for the truth. In *Lando* the Court said in order to prove this "actual malice" standard from *Sullivan* the plaintiff was entitled to the notes. This proved to be a landmark ruling that disfavored documentary and newsmagazine productions. When General William Westmoreland sued CBS News over a 1982 documentary about abuses of intelligence information during the Tet Offensive period of the Vietnam War, Westmoreland's legal team gained access to all of the documentary producer's notes, including an internal CBS investigation that, while supportive of the premise and development of the documentary argument, was nonetheless highly critical of the producer's process. Although Westmoreland had to drop his case, he did not need the libel judgment to damage CBS. In short, these libel-related cases reveal disturbing trends. Libel plaintiffs began to gain support from court judgments and a general assault on journalism spawned and exacerbated during the Nixon era. CBS lost its libel insurer as a result of the Westmoreland case. Years later, when *60 Minutes* had a scoop to air an interview with a tobacco company insider, proving the cigarette industry *knew* nicotine was addictive and that they were manipulating nicotine levels to enhance the addictive experience, the network pulled the interview before air, fearing the resultant controversy would put the kibosh on a merger involving the network.

The cases are of interest to me as histories of the courage of documentary journalists but also the decline or lessening of courage from the 1950s through the 1980s and especially in today's anti-journalism envi-

ronment. Making matters worse is the rise of opinionated commentaries passed off as "news" by cable and other programmers, which further undercuts the impact of documentary journalism on the public sphere. These libel and libel-adjacent cases reflect an ebbing over time of the courage of journalism organizations, which has the effect of undercutting the journalists who do the research and reporting.

**Robinson:** While the fundamental transformation of American defamation law in the *New York Times v. Sullivan* precedent has been extensively researched and documented, several of the Supreme Court decisions that followed and fleshed out the meaning and application of the "actual malice" standard announced in *Sullivan* have been less comprehensively examined. While the *Sullivan* decision revolutionized American defamation law, it left many unanswered questions that the lower courts and the Supreme Court had to address in subsequent cases.

One of these was *St. Amant v. Thompson* — decided just four years after *Sullivan* — which required the Court to define and apply the "actual malice" standard announced in the earlier case. In *Sullivan*, the court held "the constitutional guarantees require, we think, a federal rule that prohibits a public official from recovering damages for a defamatory falsehood relating to his official conduct unless he proves that the statement was made with 'actual malice' — that is, with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not." What was the standard for such knowledge?

A detailed examination of *St. Amant* was a gap in the academic and legal literature. As a doctoral student at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where the case began and was tried, and where the trial transcript was obscure but available, I decided to fill this gap with a comprehensive examination of the case, from its origins with a televi-

sion advertisement for a 1962 U.S. Senate campaign through its trial and appeals in both the Louisiana courts and the U.S. Supreme Court. I also undertook an examination of the historical, political and legal setting in which the case proceeded, and how these factors effected the results at various courts, until the ultimate resolution by the U.S. Supreme Court. I also examined the short- and long-term effects of the cases, both in Louisiana and in defamation law nationwide. The result was my book, *Reckless Disregard: St. Amant v. Thompson and the Transformation of Libel Law*.

***Historiography:*** *What sources do you consider foundational for research on press freedom in relation to the accountability function of the press? How have these sources influenced your perception of this function?*

**Coyle:** My research often focuses on core underlying values for freedom of expression, particularly when free expression rights may conflict with other rights also considered significant to democratic society. My book, *The Press and Rights to Privacy*, identifies foundational democratic values that undergird recognition of press freedom in relation to the accountability role that journalism serves in a democratic society. For my research, secondary and primary sources have provided important indications of what press freedom means in relation to the press's responsibilities to hold powerful institutional sources in check.

When addressing this conceptual foundation, I have turned to writings that explain normative theory and historical conceptions for press freedom. For example, Vincent Blasi's "The Checking Value in First Amendment Theory," U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Potter Stewart's "Or of the Press," and Timothy Gleason's *The Watchdog Concept: The Press and the Courts in Nineteenth-Century America* illuminate

an important role for the press to scrutinize and report on government actors and institutions. Of course, *The Four Theories of the Press* demonstrates how this cultural conception of press freedom fits within libertarian and social responsibility press systems, but not in authoritarian or Soviet-communist press systems.

Turning to primary sources also has been essential to conceptualize what press freedom, freedom of speech, and First Amendment values mean. I have reviewed writings of the Framers of the U.S. Constitution and U.S. Supreme Court justices. Consulting primary sources and the sources cited within each primary source is essential for accuracy. To better understand how Supreme Court Justices explained free expression rights in cases that addressed access to court proceedings, Ayla Oden and I carefully read U.S. Supreme Court opinions and sources that justices cited. In "The Gloss of History," published in *Communication Law and Policy*, Oden and I found that U.S. Supreme Court opinions had too frequently provided inadequate context and support for their assertions about the Framers' intentions for or understandings of press freedom, which hindered the accuracy of explanations of freedom of expression.

Reviewing primary sources, such as archival records of journalists and journalism organizations, also has shaped my understanding of how journalists perceive press freedom and the accountability function of the press. For example, Elisabeth Fondren, Annette M. Masterson, and I reviewed correspondence between Sigma Delta Chi Advancement of Freedom of Information (FOI) Committee members, drafts of annual committee reports, and SDX publications for "The Throttling of the Free Press in Cuba," published in *Journalism History*. Such records revealed how committee members presented government attempts to manage news in the United States and abroad. Journalists' writings also

identified an arrest of a journalist and intimidation of members of the press as threats to journalists' abilities to do their jobs.

**Mascaro:** At the top of the list are official sources, including court decisions, trial transcripts, discovery evidence, and the actual documentary broadcasts and transcripts, when available. The Westmoreland case is a prime example. The court case plus discovery generated nearly a thousand microfiche cards of information. These included texts of depositions, correspondence, the text and records of the so-called "Benjamin Report," the internal CBS investigation into the production process for *CBS Reports: The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*.

I place high value in recorded interviews with principles — producers, editors, researchers, plaintiffs, and industry personnel who were either part of the case, such as legal counsel for the network, or involved in the news division at the time of the event. Effective interviewing demands very deep preparation before consulting with principles. For high profile cases, newspaper reporting from trustworthy organizations is useful in establishing timelines of milestones as well as the nature of public discourse at the time of the event. For cases that make broadcast news, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive is an excellent source for recovering the broadcast reporting on the case.

Depending on the point where a scholar enters the history of a documentary/libel event, case studies, especially historical case studies are very useful in preparing the scholar for deeper questions and providing a reference to triangulate what interview subjects said and remembered compared to hard, primary source evidence.

Finally, you have to think outside the normal pathways for research. I found revelatory primary evidence in the annual reports of network news organizations, including comments by shareholders about

these kinds of issues. The annual reports convey how network management portrays a case to shareholders, but it also reflects the network's narrative about the event.

After close reading of the Benjamin Report, I published an article in *Journalism History* about flaws in that report. Benjamin criticized the producers for judgments about how to interpret and present evidence in the documentary, but Benjamin himself also made judgments about how to interpret what the producer and others had done. CBS's decision to deploy an internal investigation played into the hands of the plaintiff and did nothing to quell public outrage, including within the media business, about *The Uncounted Enemy*. The Benjamin Report had as many flaws as those attributed to the documentary.

Last point: stay with the historical arc. Twenty-five years after the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland appeared on the *Today* show and confessed to having known about the flawed intelligence data cited in *The Uncounted Enemy.* He said if he had it to do over, he would have called a press conference to explain the evidence in 1968. Instead, he withheld it and covered up the glaring deficiencies in the intelligence reporting prior to Tet. In effect, Westmoreland confirmed the thesis of *The Uncounted Enemy*.

**Robinson:** The accountability function of the press is based on the press examining and explaining government actions and activities to the public. Thus, any media content that serves this role could be primary material, along with any legal materials — including court rulings, regulations and other administrative materials — in an examination of a specific example of the accountability function.

The defamation case I examined in my dissertation and book involved the accountability function only indirectly. The plaintiff in the

lawsuit was East Baton Rouge Deputy Sheriff Herman Thompson, who sued U.S. Senate candidate Phil St. Amant over a statement St. Amant made that said Thompson had taken a cash payment from a local Teamsters official, that St. Amant insinuated was a bribe.

St. Amant used this anecdote to allege that his opponent, U.S. Senator Russell Long was corrupt and associated with unsavory characters, such as New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello and Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa. So, St. Amant's statement was intended to hold two public officials — Sen. Long and Deputy Sheriff Thompson — accountable for alleged corruption. Thompson sued for defamation and ultimately lost, with the U.S. Supreme Court holding that St. Amant had made his statement based on information from someone who appeared to be a reliable source, so St. Amant had not acted with "actual malice." In deciding this case, the U.S. Supreme Court placed a limit on the media's checking function: regardless of whether St. Amant's bribery claim was true or false, Thompson could not recover for any injury if St. Amant relied on a credible source.

Note that, based on my research, I concluded that the cash payment to Thompson was ***not*** a bribe. Instead, it was a cash payment for a regular donation to a youth baseball league, that otherwise had been paid via check.

The "actual malice" standard can be considered both a facilitator and an impediment to the checking function. It can facilitate checking and embolden the media by providing them with a shield in case they make a minor, unknowing mistake in reporting on the actions of government officials and organizations. But it could also allow false statements to avoid reprimand, as long as the media can point to a reasonable basis for their statements.

***Historiography:*** *Local, state, and federal government officials have taken actions, such as filing civil lawsuits against members of the press, that could raise concerns about chilling effects. What sources have you used to provide greater understanding of such actions that could influence free expression rights?*

**Coyle:** I have reviewed court records, analyzed archival records of journalists and judges, and performed oral history interviews to better understand government actions that journalists perceived as chilling First Amendment rights.

In 1966, the Supreme Court's majority opinion in *Sheppard v. Maxwell* criticized an Ohio trial judge for allowing prejudicial publicity and disruptions from members of the press to hinder Samuel H. Sheppard's constitutional rights during a murder trial. Two North Carolina judges recognized the Sheppard opinion as identifying responsibilities for them to safeguard defendants' constitutional rights to receive fair trials. These judges responded by writing a court order that limited how members of the press could access information relevant to the investigation and adjudication of criminal court proceedings in Wake County. Journalistic records identified chilling effects from that order.

To better understand whether and how that court order hindered the flow of information in North Carolina, I reviewed multiple categories of sources. Relevant content in the Raleigh *News & Observer* indicated that government officials were citing the judges' order as reasons they could not release information to the press. A prominent North Carolina journalists' archival records, including correspondence and speeches, described the order as preventing officials, attorneys, and trial participants from communicating with the press. Significantly, an oral history interview of one of the judges, who was in his 90s, suggested the

order and the judges' intentions for the order were misconstrued, as exemplified by government officials outside the county in which the order was applicable citing the judge's order as a reason to deny access to government-held information.

**Mascaro:** I find historical scholarship of such cases particularly insightful. While working on *Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years, Updated with Analysis of 21st Century Threats to Democracy*, co-authored with the late William E. Porter, I had occasion to analyze Porter's original 1976 conclusions. I looked back to assess what had changed and where Porter had been right, wrong, and clairvoyant. In order to analyze how First Amendment/libel/privacy, etc. laws had changed, I referred to more recent cases and then delved deeper into the foundational cases. This is not unlike how we have routinely studied *Sullivan* as both a libel case and a story of how the South wanted to scare off and intimidate members of the press to drop the Civil Rights story.

I wrote a section in *Assault on the Media* about the collateral bar rule as the basis for requiring a journalist to honor a prior restraint even if unconstitutional on its face. Porter worried in 1976 about the effects of *U.S. v. Dickinson*. Larry Dickinson and Gibbs Adams each wrote articles for their newspapers summarizing the day's testimony after a judge had imposed a specious gag order. A federal appeals court found the judge's order unconstitutional but also that the contempt citation was to be upheld until a ruling on the constitutionality of the court order — a de facto prior restraint. Media law scholars have since revisited *Dickinson* and collateral bar rule and provided much needed historical context. In "Martin Luther King, *Walker v. City of Birmingham,* and the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*," David Benjamin Oppenheimer analyzed *Walker* and determined typical casebooks — used to teach law — ex-

cluded the historical context of the collateral bar rule. The Supreme Court codified *Walker* absent the context of the planned Good Friday civil rights march in Birmingham. The timing of the march was critical to the First Amendment rights of the marchers. By excluding the necessary timing of the proposed march, the court confirmed "the white officials' view that the injunction [against the march] was necessary." The court accepted the view of Birmingham officials that the march would be violent and disturb the peace. King faced a choice — to obey a court order and sacrifice a key moment in the movement or recognize a higher authority and judge the injunction as invalid as a matter of moral choice.

There are similar cases in the analysis sections of the Porter-Mascaro book that also go back to local, state, and federal cases regarding the chilling effects of lawsuits and court rulings filed against members of the press.

**Robinson:** Because my primary focus was a single case — *St. Amant v. Thompson* — I focused on primary source materials on all aspects of this particular case, from its origins to its final resolution and beyond. I dug up coverage of the case and the socio-political climate in which it occurred in local newspaper archives, primarily *The Baton Rouge Morning Advocate* (later *The Baton Rouge Advocate*); *The Baton Rouge State-Times*; and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. I accessed microfilm copies of the original 1964 trial transcript and trial court rulings, as well as the rulings of the Louisiana Court of Appeals and the Louisiana Supreme Court.

For insights into the U.S. Supreme Court's deliberations and ruling on the case I examined the personal papers of all nine justices on the court when the *St. Amant* case was argued and decided. While the ex-

tent of these papers — held in archives at the Library of Congress, Princeton University and Yale University — varied between the various justices, they included personal notes, internal intra-justice memos and draft and revised opinions and together formed a comprehensive portrait of the case and how the court reached its majority, concurring and dissenting opinions. These documents also showed that the justices and their clerks were conscious of the importance of free speech rights under the First Amendment, and of the possible consequences of the precedent that they were establishing in their ruling.

***Historiography:*** *What are some challenges scholars have faced when attempting to research libel lawsuits or government policies that could be perceived as attempts to intimidate members of the press or influence how members of the media cover government?*

**Coyle:** Attempting to research lawsuits and perceived attempts to inimidate members of the press has been challenging. For some legal cases, trial transcripts do not exist. Other documents also have not been available due to being sealed or lost. Some have been destroyed by natural disasters. Others were not saved due to policies that limited how long records must be preserved.

When I could not access legal records for research, I sometimes turned to journalism organization's reports, archival records, and news coverage to check for accuracy and context. I have found dozens of professional organization reports and letters documenting journalists' perceptions of government attempts to intimidate members of the press during the twentieth century. Newspaper executives played important roles in documenting such threats to press freedom and crusading for political and legal changes. These executives often took such steps as

leaders in professional organizations. In "Litigation, Legislation, and Democracy in a Post-Newspaper America," legal scholar RonNell Andersen Jones recognized membership and support for such groups declined in the twenty-first century as newspapers have closed. Such declines ultimately could prevent the creation and retention of documentation of journalist's perceptions of government attempts to manage news.

**Mascaro:** Lee Bollinger and Geoffrey Stone published a collection of essays in 2020, *National Security, Leaks and Freedom of the Press: The Pentagon Papers Fifty Years On*. They cite the difficulty of balancing the government's legitimate need to conduct its operations against the public's right and responsibility to know what its government is doing. That is a significant challenge for journalists.

Feuds between the White House and the press are forms of intimidation against journalists. National assaults on the media filter down to state and local levels and make it more difficult for reporters to simply do their jobs. Newspaper deserts have made it difficult for reporters to cover and citizens to know what their local/state governments are doing. The attitude advanced by Nixon advisor Patrick Buchanan that journalists have no right to critique elected officials created a culture that both intimidates the press and sours citizens' respect for journalism. If citizens don't appreciate and respect the job of reporters, that too is a form of intimidation, often exacerbated with outright verbal and physical assaults on reporters.

Abuses or misinterpretations of things like the Espionage Act directly threaten journalists and/or their sources, who face career and financial ruin if they are found to have shared vital civic information with the press. The government is using high profile lawsuits against

journalists to force them to reveal confidential sources and attacking government officials suspected of leaking information. These tactics are direct assaults on democracy, as they deny citizens the right to information, they need to make election and policy decisions. Legislation like the Patriot Act is being used to intimidate the press. Some previous attorneys general were cavalier, to say the least, about responding to criticisms from journalists about policies that made it difficult for them to report. Today, the Pentagon has denied press passes to journalists who refuse to sign agreements essentially guaranteeing Pentagon propaganda as the only source of information coming from the Department of War. The appearance of right-wing advocates at administration press conferences, attacking journalism and mainstream reporters, throwing softball questions to the president's spokespeople, attacking foreign dignitaries during press conferences — these behaviors represent a complete breakdown of the journalism culture needed to sustain a democracy.

The Trump presidency has proven the worst fears of William Porter when he wrote *Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years* nearly 50 years ago. The Nixon era planted the seeds of a permanent assault on journalism, and journalists appear to have gained power in the twenty-first century. The case of Fox News feeding viewers false allegations against the Dominion Voting Systems company during coverage of the 2020 election represented the transition from journalism to outright propaganda in America media. Many citizens seem oblivious to the consequences. And the assault on academe and threats to the careers of academics who don't toe the administration's line add another impediment to scholars seeking to research libel, privacy, and prior restraint, and other obstacles to journalism. At least scholars, such as Bollinger and Stone, and many others, have shown a willingness to balance the need for government integrity against the public's right to know. The current administration

refuses to participate.

**Robinson:** The primary problem I encountered in my research into the *St. Amant* case was accessibility of primary source documents, which were scattered in geographically dispersed repositories in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, New Haven, Princeton, and Washington, D.C. While most of these repositories were cooperative with my project, each required different protocols and had different policies regarding obtaining materials in useful formats. One repository, in particular, had onerous — and, in my opinion, unjustified — policies regarding photography of the public records in its archive: under the policy, the records had to be individually printed, page by page for a fee, rather than photographed with a cell phone.

These impediments can be intimidating and could impose barriers for journalists and other researchers who are unsure about asserting their rights to access these materials. In short, it takes a certain amount of determination and resolve to access some of these materials in the face of administrative and bureaucratic barriers.

***Historiography:*** *How should media historians and legal historians document contemporary threats to press freedom and journalists' abilities to serve accountability roles?*

**Coyle:** As the magnitude and prevalence of threats to press freedom and accountability journalism appears to be growing in the United States and in other countries, media and legal historians have unique abilities to document and contextualize these threats. First, media and legal historians should ask questions about how contemporary threats compare to previous threats to better explain whether and how contemporary

press restrictions are unprecedented. Second, media and legal historians should explain how past and present threats to free expression and journalism fit with the historical context of fundamental values for the society in which threats are occurring.

RSF, UNESCO, and other organizations are creating timely reports on threats to the press around the globe. Media and legal historians could help to document this point in history by analyzing and preserving press coverage, political cartoons, editorials, and non-profit organization reports that are documenting intimidation, harassment, arrests, and other actions that are limiting journalists' abilities to monitor and report on powerful officials and institutions. Ideally, historians also would save government officials' social media posts and recordings of government officials' statements that journalists indicate are intimidating, harassing, or otherwise attempting to chill the press.

Also, media and legal historians must have the courage and support to document and accurately identify threats as threats to accountability journalism, press freedom, and fundamental values for a well-functioning democratic republic. Media and legal historians need to clarify that providing true and accurate information is neither inappropriate partisan nor political activity. Providing accurate information within relevant cultural and historical context is a hallmark of excellence for historical work.

**Mascaro:** In two ways: 1), continue to write scholarship about threats to press freedom, and 2), do it faster with an eye toward developing templates for legislation that will protect First Amendment journalism rights and blunt the forces of rightwing propaganda infecting public discourse and sabotaging democracy.

Our academic system is based on publishing peer-reviewed scholar-

ship. It holds a high standard and, when supported by primary source evidence, contributes to both academic and popular understandings of a free society. But the process is extremely slow. We are not well equipped to complete research that is "on the news," per se. In the meantime, press antagonists are rapidly claiming power, much of it lacking the normal checks and balances of a society ruled by law and electoral integrity. A president can write an executive order that takes effect immediately. The courts can select or reject cases having monumental implications for a free press and society ruled by law, including of late Supreme Court emergency decisions that are done rapidly without benefit of public hearings, transcripts, or votes on record. When Congress abdicates its responsibility to enforce the bipartisan independence of legislated regulatory agencies, it can have the effect of immediate chills on free speech, as reflected in the recent Jimmy Kimmel incident when the FCC Chair Brendan Carr essentially threatened ABC broadcast stations with retaliation because conservatives did not like one of Kimmel's jokes. Corporations owning media organizations are so tied up in economic deals that it has become threatening to let journalists in their employ simply do their jobs, as in CNN recently telling its employees to cut back on reporting of the destruction of the East Wing of the White House.

Added to this threatening environment, the government has pressured academic institutions, curbing their research support and funding, as a tool of intimidation to exact concessions designed to curb certain types of speech, in-class instruction, and research theories. The imbalance of power in today's America is an existential threat to the First Amendment, including the loss of protections against frivolous libel suits that are designed, by virtue of claims of hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in damages, to damage individuals, media

organizations, and careers, and to intimidate other journalists and their sources to avoid talking to the press on the record.

So, although it appears America is inching toward authoritarianism comparable to the worst of 1930s Europe, in fact the government is *galloping* in its efforts to deny journalists the right and access to sources of meaningful public discourse needed to make informed decisions about election contenders and ballot measures.

Historians and legal historians cannot keep up with the government's pace in their assault using our tried-and-true peer-review process. We should continue to explore our historical questions, with an eye toward present-day attacks on the First Amendment, a free press, and freedom from libel suits and other kinds of intimidation. We should deploy the tools of historiography to revisit seminal case law and First Amendment/libel and other issues and bring those histories up to date. The use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) imposed by the government on media and communications organizations is a de facto prior restraint. We need more scholarship on that front, as well as reckless actions by the current Justice Department or executive branch directives to communication through government websites and at federal stations, such as TSA check-in locations, highly political rhetoric that is contrary to law, blatant propaganda, intimidation against journalistic coverage of the 2025 government shutdown, and Congress's inability to resolve the crisis while numerous American families suffer financial distress and/or ruin.

We comprise a body of informed historians, scholars, and media law experts who keep apprised of daily attacks and issues of First Amendment deterioration. We need an outlet for expert, informed, and cited commentary from our field that pushes back in real time against rampant government seizure of First Amendment rights. Perhaps this

takes the form of a website, a daily podcast or radio/television program, or widely distributed joint statements from academic journalism and legal scholars. I have long believed we need to be a presence to explain journalism's goals, rights, and services to democracy, through televised or broadcast radio public service announcements, ads on websites, including of rightwing purveyors of media, and news info-bits embedded in coverage of popular programming, such as college and professional sports telecasts. Half of the public no longer seems to believe in the First Amendment or rights of journalists. It has to be our job to educate the entire population concerning how our work protects their rights and a rational government and society.

Finally, this community can begin to draft templates for legislative consideration designed to protect First Amendment journalism rights. One area of need relates to a legislated *firewall* protecting journalistic departments from management meddling, including government organizations, such as the recently destroyed Voice of America, where political actors first ignored the firewall separating reporting from policy and ultimately decimated the organization. There needs to be a firewall isolating news divisions from corporate editorial influences, a firewall protecting academic freedom and free speech rights of tenure-track professors from university and board of trustee's oversight.

Most of us tend to avoid the role of "advocate" as college faculty members. We seek to answer historical and legal questions for posterity, as we should. But in effect, teaching what was and how it has changed, as well as teaching the values of First Amendment protections and scholarship, is a mild form of advocacy — for an informed professional cadre of reporters and an informed citizenry graduating our higher education institutions. We're going to lose that right if we don't exercise it more forcefully. I don't have many answers to this question in the near

term, but I know that the theme of this set of questions is ultimately asking about the historiography of threats to free speech for journalists. Others are legislating away our rights and responsibilities. We need to apply our knowledge of history, historiography, and journalism/media law history to legislate for self-preservation and to preserve and protect the U.S. constitution and Bill of Rights.

**Robinson:** In researching and writing my book, it took some effort to obtain materials from a more than fifty-year-old case. Documenting contemporary threats to press freedom will of course be an easier task, not only because it is easier to collect present-day materials but also because of the greater access to contemporary materials through the internet. For example, original court documents that I had to visit archives to access on microfilm can now be likely accessed online from a researcher's own desk.

A bigger challenge, unfortunately, is what contemporary threat(s) to focus on, since there seem to be many more dire threats in this era than in most. It is difficult to foresee which threats will turn out to be minor skirmishes and which will become significant precedents. Luckily, there is a robust group of organizations such as the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Knight First Amendment Institute that monitor and document (and sometimes litigate over) instances of press repression, so that academic researchers on these issues can rely on these groups for alerts and developments regarding these threats. Academics can use these resources to examine contemporary threats to press freedom and the media's checking function in the larger context of historical and other trends regarding press restrictions.

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# The Media and Racial Equality

## By Rodger Streitmatter ©

NOTE: This is the fifteenth and final article in our series "How Media History Matters," dealing with the significance that the mass media have had in American history. We think the series should appeal especially to historians who believe historical claims need evidence to support them. It's easy, someone has said, to suggest explanations if one doesn't have to worry about facts. Many ways exist to justify JMC's historical importance. JMC historians make a mistake if they focus on just one explanation, whether it be "cultural history," materiality, Progressivism, or any other interpretation. They shouldn't put all their eggs in one basket. One monolithic explanation won't work.

In the following essay, Rodger Streitmatter examines the Black press and its role in the long struggle to attain equality for African Americans. For a case study, he examines Charlotta Bass and the *California Eagle* and the many crusades they waged during the first half of the twentieth century. The crusades, Streitmatter concludes, "transformed the lives of ... hundreds of thousands of African Americans."

*Rodger Streitmatter is a professor emeritus of the School of Communication at American University. His primary research concentration is the alternative press, and he's the author of* Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History*, along with six other books. He reported for the* Roanoke *(Va.)* Times & World News *for six years and received the Ph.D. in United States history from American University.*

Few issues have played a more prominent or more perplexing role in the history of the United States than has the struggle for racial equality. As early as the eighteenth century, the Founding Fathers argued over the issue of racial justice in determining representation at the Constitutional Convention. A century later, efforts to achieve racial equality were at the center of the devastating war that ripped the nation in two. The civil rights reforms of the twentieth century were thought to have moved the country a giant step toward racial equality, but the riots in Los Angeles in 1992 reaffirmed that racial tension still lies just below the surface of American society.

For nearly two centuries, the Black press has led the struggle to attain true equality for Americans of African descent. Indeed, it was that struggle that spawned the Black press, which has become America's most significant alternative medium. In the spring of 1827, two African-American intellectuals, the Rev. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, read vile attacks against their race in New York City newspapers. Even though both men were learned and articulate, mainstream newspapers refused to grant them a voice through which to respond to the attacks, either in the news columns or through letters to the editor. So the two freemen were compelled to found their own newspaper. In their first issue, the editors of *Freedom's Journal* stated: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations in the things that concern us dearly." With those eloquent words, the African-American press was born.[1]

The primary mission of that first, short-lived weekly newspaper was the abolition of slavery. Since that time, some 3,000 Black newspapers have continued to chronicle the various forms of racial injustice that have remained intrinsic to the daily lives of their readers. In the last

thirty years, the mainstream media — especially newspapers, the electronic news media, prime-time television, and motion pictures — have taken a leading role in reflecting the realities of Black America. That role was defined by the Black media during the previous century. Black journalism, however, historically has committed itself not only to reflecting realities, but also to taking a pro-active role by attempting to lead society toward a better world. Throughout its long history, the African-American press unashamedly has acknowledged itself to be an advocacy medium and steadfastly has positioned itself at the forefront of racial protest — and progress.[2]

Women and men committed to African-American journalism historically have maintained a tradition far more expansive than their counterparts in the majority press. For, in addition to chronicling and interpreting the news, journalists working for the Black press routinely have entered the fray. They have given speeches, organized boycotts, led marches, carried signs, raised money, led investigations — all in the name of protest. Combative editors have transformed their newspapers into lightning rods for racial protest and their newspaper offices into headquarters for crusades. In short, Black editors have become community leaders as well as journalists, working to mold solidarity and to do battle against the heavy hand of racial oppression.

Black newspapers, most of which have been urban weeklies, have struggled against such formidable barriers as racial prejudice, physical violence, and economic hardship in pursuit of their ultimate goal of achieving full citizenship and equality of opportunity for Americans of African descent. The history of the Black press is the story of countless men and women — often penniless but refusing to accept being powerless — who have devoted their energies to bettering the condition of their race.

The centrality of the Black press to the struggle for racial equality is dramatically illustrated by a list of some of the editors who have combined their journalistic positions with political leadership to emerge as prominent figures in African-American history. Frederick Douglass, the most important Black leader of the nineteenth century, established four newspapers — the *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, *Douglass' Monthly*, and *New National Era*. T. Thomas Fortune, founder of the Afro-American League as a precursor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, edited the *New York Age* and became the first African-American journalist to write for a mainstream newspaper. Ida B. Wells, founder of the anti-lynching movement in the United States and Great Britain, was banished from the South because of the defiant editorials she published in her Memphis newspaper, the *Free Speech*. William Monroe Trotter, the vitriolic activist who originated the concept of civil rights marches and demonstrations at the turn of the century, spoke through his militant *Boston Guardian*. W.E.B. DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP, edited the *Crisis* when it was the country's leading medium for expressing the African-American experience. Roy Wilkins, director of the NAACP, began his career as a fiery columnist for the *Kansas City Call*. Adam Clayton Powell, who piloted anti-poverty and education legislation through Congress, published his own New York weekly called the *People's Voice*.

Likewise, scholars of African-American history have credited the Black press with making major contributions to many of the landmarks in Black America's slow march toward full citizenship. By fearlessly and relentlessly criticizing the American social order and protesting unjust laws, the Black press has helped to improve the conditions of all African-Americans. Specifically, the Black press has been praised for taking a leading role in abolishing slavery, raising the American conscious-

ness to the brutal realities of lynching, and galvanizing Black America during the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

Although the best known of the victories in which the Black press has played a leading role are national in scope, the roots of this success lie in the hundreds of local Black newspapers and the thousands of battles that they have waged in their individual communities. Some of these local battles eventually have taken on national dimensions, while others have succeeded in raising the quality of life of an African-American community, neighborhood, family, or individual. Regardless of the ultimate scope of these crusades, there is no question that these victories have made a significant contribution to American history.

## Charlotta Bass And The California Eagle

Representative of the many African-American newspapers that have changed history is the *California Eagle*. During the first half of this century, the Los Angeles weekly led innumerable crusades that transformed the lives of the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who flocked to Southern California during the great western migration of the World War I and World War II era.[3]

The fundamental force behind the Black exodus from the South was economic. Floods and the boll weevil damaged the Southern cotton crop and forced wages to plummet during the World War I years. At the same time, the war effort was underway and the wheels of Northern and Western industry were turning with unparalleled speed, increasing the demand for laborers. The unjust laws, segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching that defined the Southern Black experience also propelled African Americans to seek a more hospitable environment. For many African-Americans accustomed to the mild weather of the

Deep South, the severe cold in the North was uninviting, but the sunny climate in Southern California became the promised land.

Whites living on the West Coast viewed the great migration from a very different perspective. Many were threatened by the masses of poorly educated and marginally skilled Black workers who invaded their homeland. The most extreme manifestations of the racial tension were frightening increases in the number of race riots, murders, and instances of physical violence as the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups rose to new power and strength. More subtle but even more widespread were discriminatory practices in housing and employment.[4]

Although this wartime era was a period of great tension and struggle in the history of Black America, it ultimately was a period of expanded opportunity as well. For the first time, Americans of African descent were allowed to benefit from the industrial growth of twentieth-century America. Indeed, by the end of World War II African-American women and men represented a major segment of the army of workers employed in the major industries on the West Coast, and residents of Black neighborhoods throughout the region were well on their way to winning the right to live wherever they chose.

The shift during this thirty-year period was a dramatic one. And a dynamic force in helping to guide this turnaround in the history of Black Californians was Charlotta A. Bass, editor and publisher of the *California Eagle* from 1912 until 1951. Bass, along with her husband, Joseph Bass, dedicated her life to attempting to secure a level playing field for her fellow African Americans. The Basses used the pages of their newspaper to lead crusades against discriminatory hiring practices by such behemoths as the Los Angeles City Fire Department, Los Angeles County Hospital, Southern California Telephone Company,

Boulder Dam, and Los Angeles Railway Company. In addition, the crusading editors mounted blistering attacks on the motion picture industry, Ku Klux Klan, and restrictive housing covenants. As the Basses fought the endless list of injustices, Charlotta became a militant spokeswoman for her people, and the *Eagle* office became campaign headquarters for strategy sessions on innumerable crusades. Bass, with the behind-the-scenes support of her husband, was uncompromising in her war against racial injustice. On the pages of her newspaper, she blasted wrongdoers, organized demonstrations, and galvanized the Black citizens of Los Angeles.

Adding to the difficulties for Charlotta Bass was the fact that her career as a progressive journalist overlapped with the height of this country's anti-communist fervor. Her militant stances became the subject of investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Post Office, Central Intelligence Agency, State Department, and War Department. Intimidation be damned, Bass continued to fight — and to win — battle after battle for forty years. The intrepid editor relinquished her position as a journalistic powerhouse only when she was offered the opportunity to become the first American woman of African descent to run for national office, campaigning for Vice President of the United States on the Progressive Party ticket in 1952.

The story of the *California Eagle* begins in 1879 when John J. Neimore founded the newspaper. In 1910 he hired Charlotta Spear to sell and collect subscriptions, at a salary of $5 a week. On his deathbed in 1912, he asked her to take over the *Eagle*, which by then had become the state's oldest Black newspaper.[5]

Spear became owner as well as editor of the *Eagle* when she bought the newspaper for $50 at public auction later that year. She then ascended to owner, publisher, editor, reporter, distributor, advertising

representative, bookkeeper, receptionist, printer, janitor.[6] In 1913, she hired an assistant. She chose Joseph Bass, a fifty-year-old journalism veteran who earlier had edited the *Topeka* (Kan.) *Plain Dealer* and had founded the *Montana Plain Dealer*. He worked as a reporter for Spear but soon advanced to editor, with Spear serving as managing editor. Bass and Spear married in 1914. They then began to build the "Soaring *Eagle*," as it became known, into a statewide newspaper.[7]

The Basses, who did not have children, became a formidable editorial and activist team. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Charlotta assumed a strong public profile while Joseph remained largely out of the public eye. She was the *Eagle's* editorial voice and the community activist; he made the financial decisions and ran the business.

## *Birth of an Activist*

The event that established the *Eagle's* activist tradition was D.W. Griffith's 1915 production of a motion picture based on the Thomas Dixon novel *The Clansman*. Because of the book's negative depiction of African Americans, Charlotta Bass spearheaded a campaign to block production of the film, which was named *Birth of a Nation*. With this campaign, she challenged one of Hollywood's leading producers at the same time that motion pictures were becoming the most powerful industry in Southern California. Bass was not intimidated. In one scathing editorial, she wrote:

> As long as the Afro-Americans of this country sit supinely by and raise no voice against the injustice heaped upon them, conditions for them in this country will grow worse. It is time that the black sons of Ham raise not only their voices, but exercise every right that is grant-

ed them as citizens against injustice.[8]

Bass convinced members of the Los Angeles City Council to prohibit scenes for the film from being shot in the city, but Griffith then took the battle into the courtroom. When hundreds of Los Angeles workers — Black as well as white — argued that they should not be denied the high wages that Griffith was paying, the judge allowed the motion picture to be filmed.[9]

Despite Bass' ultimate failure in that battle, the fact that an African-American woman editor had challenged the motion picture industry spread like wildfire. Her defiant voice was in demand by downtrodden African Americans all over the country, and she thrived on her new-found status as a militant warrior. In 1915 Bass traveled to Texas to exhort farmers to rebel against their employer — Herbert C. Hoover. In 1917 she spoke equally fiery words to workers in Kansas City, Chicago, Boston, and New York City.[10]

Early in her career as an advocacy journalist, Bass recognized that a fundamental barrier for African Americans was economic inequality; and, therefore, the major form of injustice that she targeted was unfair employment practices. For the next forty years, discriminatory hiring would be the primary focus of her crusade to empower her people.

In the summer of 1917, she learned that Black men being allowed to complete the civil service examination for the Los Angeles Fire Department was a charade because only white applicants were hired. She launched a campaign on the editorial page of the *Eagle*. Her words were based on rational thinking rather than hysteria or unbridled passion. She wrote: "We are asking no special favors; if we have eligibles on the list there is no need for any fireworks. Do the right thing. Certify them, put them to work; that is all we ask."[11] In another editorial, she wrote:

"The city of Los Angeles does not ask the color of a man's skin when it presents its tax bill."[12] Bass repeated her rational argument with a new editorial each week. In October she wrote: "All that is asked is that the colored citizens who take the civil service examination be given the same treatment and the same consideration as any other citizen. Their ambition is to succeed on merit and not on color; give them a square deal, that's all."[13] After three months of mounting editorial pressure, the councilmen hired the city's first Black fireman. When the council announced its reversal of policy, it credited the change to Bass' logic and persistence.[14]

For her next campaign, the crusading editor combined editorial pressure with political activism. After learning that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors refused to hire African-American workers at the county hospital, she first wrote editorials and then appealed directly to the supervisors. They were impressed by Bass and agreed to experiment with hiring Black nurses' aides, with only one stipulation — that Bass first interview applicants and select the best of them. For the next year, Bass wore the hat of employment counselor for hundreds of applicants who filed into the *Eagle* office. After a year of placing successful workers in the jobs, Bass eliminated herself from the process.[15]

### *The Battle Against Terrorism*

The combative editor's next battle was against the Ku Klux Klan. In 1922, she exposed the fact that the white-supremacist group had attempted to burn a Black family's house,[16] and in 1924 she reported that the Klan was distributing hate literature in the Watts section of the city.[17] The Klan mobilized a campaign of intimidation against the Basses. The letters "KKK" were painted a foot high on the sidewalk in

front of the *Eagle* office, and Charlotta Bass received phone calls throughout the day and night: "Is this that nigger newspaper?" "Is this that nigger woman who owns that dirty rag called the *Eagle*?"[18]

The Basses were not deterred. In 1925 the *California Eagle* delivered a body blow to the Klan by publishing a letter signed by G.W. Price, the head of the Klan in California. The letter outlined a plot to rid Los Angeles of its most effective Black leaders by involving them in a traffic accident and having them convicted of driving while intoxicated. The letter stated: "We could plant a bottle of booze in the enemy's car."[19]

After the *Eagle* published the letter, Price sued the Basses for libel, a conviction for which carried a penalty of one year in prison and a fine of $5,000. Price offered to drop the charges if the Basses publicly stated that the letter was a fraud. The defiant editors would have none of it. Instead, they hired an attorney, fought the charges in the all-white court system, and turned the law suit into personal martyrdom. Charlotta Bass wrote:

> If to jail we must go for publishing without malice such propaganda as we in common with all fair minded citizens believe to be prejudicial to good government, we go with a smile and feel that we are rendering a greater service for the protection of society than our fondest imagination would ever make us believe. We go forward unafraid as we continue our steady march for law and order, fighting every inch of the way all things which retard our progress.[20]

The Basses won. In her next issue, the triumphant editor boasted: "Heretofore Price had met all the forces against him and won his battles; it remained for the *Eagle* Editor representing the Colored group of

our citizenship to lay him low."[21]

After the courts failed the vigilantes, they took the law into their own hands. One night when Charlotta Bass was alone in the *Eagle* office, eight hooded men appeared on the sidewalk in front of the building, staring at her through the plate-glass window. When they demanded that Bass let them in the building, the fearless editor went to a desk drawer, pulled out a gun, and aimed it at the would-be intruders. The men beat a hasty retreat.[22]

By the mid-1920s, Bass had become widely recognized as a voice of the underdog. In 1926, she organized and was elected president of the Industrial Council, a Los Angeles organization formed to combat job discrimination.[23]

The aggressive journalist's increasingly high profile propelled hundreds of victims of racial prejudice into the *Eagle* office — seeking not only sympathy, but also action. In 1930, nineteen-year-old Eva Cooper told Bass that her white employer, Pascal Gueccione, had brought her from Louisiana to California to work as a domestic but had paid her no salary other than an occasional quarter. After working for Gueccione eleven years, Cooper had earned only $13.75. When Cooper asked her employer for a regular salary, he beat her with a razor strop. Bass not only reported the abuse on the front page of the *Eagle* but also took Gueccione to court, forcing him to pay a $50 fine and Cooper's back wages. When the decision was read, Gueccione turned to Bass and yelled: "If I had YOU back in Louisiana, I'd break your damned neck."[24]

Undaunted, Bass continued to walk fearlessly into the heart of any situation — regardless of the potential danger. Joseph Bass always supported his wife but sometimes feared for her safety, as well as his own. According to one anecdote, he once said: "Mrs. Bass, one of these days

you are going to get me killed." And she responded: "Mr. Bass, it will be in a good cause."[25]

There were many causes for which Charlotta Bass was willing to jeopardize her safety. Desegregation efforts at Freemont High School led hundreds of white students to burn a Black man in effigy; while the disturbance was at its height, Bass worked her way into the center of the crowd — as students yelled, "No niggers wanted here!" — to talk to the leaders and ease the tension.[26] A political rally led by radical politicians exploded into a race riot; when she tried to reason with the crowd, people cursed her and struck her with rotten apples. After that incident, she wrote: "For the first time in the history of my life, I realized the meaning of a lynch mob."[27]

*Activism Victorious*

Bass considered such harassment a small price to pay for the victories that she continued to amass. A number of the opponents she defeated were industrial giants that fell victim to the "Don't Spend Where You Can't Work" campaign that she brought to Los Angeles during the 1930s. The campaign, which originated in Chicago in the 1920s, urged African Americans to boycott businesses that refused to employ Black workers. The concept was controversial because it threatened the economic livelihood of white America.[28]

A textbook example involved the Southern California Telephone Company. When company officials rejected Bass' request that they hire Black workers, the intractable Bass convinced 100 African-American customers to cancel their telephone service, each saying the action was because of the all-white hiring policy. When company officials felt the economic repercussions of their discriminatory hiring policy, they re-

lented and employed their first Black workers.[29]

Another Goliath that fell to the editor's attack was the Boulder Dam. Officials agreed to hire Black workers to help build the dam, but the rural area where the dam was being constructed had no provisions for African Americans, forcing the Black workers to commute to Las Vegas to sleep and eat lunch. In July 1932, Bass demanded that company officials provide accommodations for Black workers; by September, three dormitories had been built. Bass had chalked up another success.[30]

While Charlotta amassed victories in the public arena, Joseph Bass experienced similar success in the more private area of the family business. By 1925, the *California Eagle* was, indeed, soaring. It employed a staff of twelve, and its 60,000 weekly circulation made it the largest African-American newspaper on the West Coast. By that time, Joseph Bass also had founded the first Black-owned printing business in Southern California.[31]

The formidable publishing team began to lose its momentum in the early 1930s, however, when illness forced Joseph Bass to spend much of his time in bed. When he died in 1934, Charlotta Bass incorporated the *California Eagle* and turned financial decisions over to a board of directors.[32]

Alone again, she continued to combine a powerful editorial voice with activist strategy to oppose unfair employment policies. In 1943, she set her sights on the Los Angeles Railway Company. When the city's public transportation system refused to employ Black workers, she mobilized 1,500 angry marchers to demand an end to the job discrimination. Bowing to the powerful Bass, the company finally hired its first Black conductor.[33]

During the 1940s, Bass shifted much of her attention to fighting

discrimination in housing. Segregationists had created restrictive housing covenants to prevent non-whites from living in their neighborhoods. In 1945, Black leaders formed the Home Owners Protective Association to fight the covenants. Bass was elected president of the association, which met in the *Eagle* office.[34]

The group's first victory was in the "Sugar Hill" case. Thirty Black doctors, lawyers, and entertainers — including actresses Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, and Ethel Waters — had purchased homes in an affluent neighborhood. When white residents passed a covenant to force the African Americans to move, the homeowners turned to Bass. She advised them to band together and hire a lawyer. They did, eventually winning the case.[35]

Buoyed by that success, Bass fought covenants in middle- and low-class neighborhoods as well. The most celebrated case involved Henry and Anna Laws. In 1930, the couple had bought a plot of land and built a house on it. Twelve years later, after the land had skyrocketed in value, two real estate agents announced that a covenant restricted who could live on the property, and a judge ruled that the Laws family had to abandon their home.[36]

Like so many African Americans in Los Angeles, the Laws family took the case to Bass. The militant journalist began by writing stories about the "fascist real estate agents" and "real estate hogs." In reporting the judge's decision to force the Laws family from their home, Bass wrote: "After listening to a plea that would have stirred the sympathetic emotions of Hitler, Judge Ashburn, unmoved, ordered Henry and Anna Laws to vacate their home."[37] Next, the creative Bass hired a professional pollster to survey people who lived on the same block as the Laws family; the results — that the white neighbors had no problem with the Black family — became a front-page story in the *Eagle*.[38]

When such journalistic devices did not prompt the action that Bass desired, she appealed personally to the judge. Not only did he refuse to rescind his decision, but he stated that if the Laws family did not vacate their house, he would have them arrested and imprisoned for contempt of court. The Laws family took Bass' advice and stayed in their home. The judge placed the couple and their daughter in jail indefinitely.[39]

Enraged, Bass mobilized the African-American community. She organized a picket line around the Laws home, telling her readers: "Come to the *Eagle* office. Demonstrate your indignation by signing up for duty on the picket line." She also organized a massive demonstration that drew 1,000 protesters.[40] After a week of headlines and demonstrations, the judge released the Laws family from jail. Bass had turned the tide.[41]

The defiant editor remained vigilant in covering housing covenants as the issue was appealed first to the California Supreme Court and then to the U.S. Supreme Court. Finally, in 1948, the highest court in the land ruled that restrictive covenants were unconstitutional. Bass had helped win a national victory.[42]

Bass, like other Black journalists before and after her, paid a high price to be a fearless community leader. She was the target of verbal abuse, physical attacks, libel suits, arrests, and death threats. But she would not be dissuaded from her journalistic mission. She told her readers:

> When a person, an organization, even a newspaper gets the courage and fortitude that it is going to require to put this old world in such condition that it will be a fit and happy abode for all the people, they must first be prepared to have their heads cracked, their hopes frustrated, and their financial strength weakened.[43]

*The Price of Victory*

In the 1940s, Bass came face to face with her toughest nemesis — one that would plague her for the rest of her life. During World War II, publishers of Black newspapers became targets of investigation by the federal government. Because African-American newspapers favored the country increasing the human rights of Black Americans rather than becoming involved in an international conflict, the government considered them a threat to national security. Many federal officials proposed indicting Black newspaper publishers for sedition.[44]

FBI agents arrived unannounced at the *Eagle* office in March 1942, interrogating Bass and accusing her of financing her newspaper with money supplied by Japan and Germany.[45] That visit was the beginning of an intense investigation of Bass that would continue for more than a quarter of a century. Agents read each issue of the *Eagle* and attended her speeches, writing weekly reports to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in Washington. According to those confidential reports, by 1944 the agents had become convinced that Bass was a member of the Communist Party.[46]

Most of the 563 pages of documents in the FBI's confidential file on Bass consisted of summaries of *Eagle* articles. The agents considered all statements and activities in support of increased rights for African Americans to be evidence that she was a communist. Typical was the comment: "She follows the Communist Party 'Line,' advocating abolition of poll tax, abolition of 'Jim Crow,' etc." In their reports, the agents called the *Eagle* a "Communist Party mouthpiece" and stated: "The subject, as owner and publisher of the paper, is obviously collaborating with the Party."[47]

The U.S. Post Office Department also investigated Bass' newspa-

per, believing that it contained subversive material that could not legally be sent through the mail. In 1943, the Post Office asked the Department of Justice to revoke Bass' mailing permit. Although Justice officials ultimately refused, Post Office officials continued to monitor the *Eagle* throughout the wartime era.[48]

Intimidation tactics by segregationists had not silenced Bass; neither would such efforts by the government. In fact, it was simultaneous with the investigations that Bass moved into her most strident political phase by becoming a candidate for public office.

Throughout its first half-century, the *Eagle* supported the Republican Party. Bass became frustrated, however, by the party's lack of progress toward achieving racial equality. In 1944 she joined the National Non-Partisan Committee for the Reelection of Roosevelt. Soon dissatisfied with Franklin Roosevelt's treatment of African Americans as well, she switched her allegiance to the Progressive Party.[49]

In 1944 Bass was the Progressive Party candidate for U.S. Congress from the 14th congressional district, and in 1945 she ran for Los Angeles City Council. Despite decisive defeats in both races, Bass never altered her platform as a militant advocate for full and unequivocal civil rights for all minorities.[50] In 1948, she actively supported Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry A. Wallace, who had been Vice President under Roosevelt, by serving as co-chairwoman of Women for Wallace.[51]

Bass' attempts to win public office caused a flurry of attacks and accusations against her. In 1945, the Ku Klux Klan sent her a letter threatening to kill her if she did not drop out of the City Council campaign.[52] In 1948 the *New York Daily News* and *Los Angeles Tribune*, a moderate Black weekly, both identified Bass as a member of the Communist Party. Although she denied the allegations, it was not an era in

which the country listened to denials.[53]

The defiant activist did not cower. In 1950 she attended a peace conference in Czechoslovakia and then traveled to the Soviet Union. Her foreign travel prompted CIA agents to be called into action to follow her while she was in Eastern Europe.[54] She provided more fodder for the agents when she documented her positive reactions to the Soviet system of government in articles she wrote for *Soviet Russia Today* and the newspaper of the American Communist Party.[55]

Bass became so determined to change American society through the political process that she was willing to sacrifice her forty-year commitment to journalism. In 1951 she sold the *Eagle* and moved to New York City, national headquarters of the Progressive Party, to devote all of her time and energy to the party.[56]

In 1952 she became the Progressive Party candidate for Vice President, becoming the first African-American woman to run for national office. By this time, Henry Wallace had left the Progressive Party, which had become widely identified with communism.[57] Bass and her running mate, San Francisco lawyer Vincent Hallinan, crisscrossed the country to put their platform before the American people.[58] Their militant message proved unpopular, however, and the ticket received only one-fifth of one per cent of the vote.[59]

After the political defeat, Bass, then in her seventies, did not return to journalism. She retired to a small town outside of Los Angeles. The *California Eagle* changed ownership twice and ceased publication in 1965. Charlotta Bass died in 1969.[60]

## Conclusion

The first half of the twentieth century represented a difficult period of

transition in African-American history. The great migration during and after World War I propelled an army of Black Americans into an inhospitable white America that saw little reason to celebrate the arrival of the newcomers. In short, this migration expanded the realities of racial inequality beyond the Deep South and into the North and the West Coast. As has happened repeatedly during the last century and a half, much of the responsibility for struggling with this conflict was assumed by the Black press.

Los Angeles, the largest urban center on the West Coast, was at the center of the war zone. The *California Eagle*, a Black weekly, led the struggle to attain racial equality for the region's mushrooming African-American population, and the editors of the crusading newspaper became spokespersons for their readers and catalysts for protest and progress.

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, the *California Eagle* had moved to the center of African-American militancy and community activism in Black Los Angeles. The advocacy newspaper waged numerous campaigns against discrimination. Those campaigns typically began with news stories and editorials, but, if such journalistic devices did not succeed, Charlotta Bass expanded into the tactics of community activism, such as personally confronting elected officials, organizing economic boycotts, and mobilizing hundreds of people for mass demonstrations. As the public profile of the *Eagle* enlarged, African-American residents of Los Angeles increasingly turned to this fearless medium of protest for strength and guidance as they confronted and attempted to combat racial injustice in the various phases of their lives. In particular, the newspaper became a powerful force in broadening the employment opportunities for its readers. It amassed a long list of victories over unfair hiring practices by such powerful organizations

as the Los Angeles City Fire Department and the Southern California Telephone Company. In addition, the "Soaring *Eagle*" triumphed in its battles against the Ku Klux Klan, restricted housing covenants, and any number of abuse cases involving individual African-American women and men. For four decades, the *California Eagle* demonstrated the power of the media as an advocate on the forefront of the on-going battle for racial equality.

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## NOTES

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[5] The major source of information about Bass's personal life is her self-published book, *Forty Years: Memoirs From The Pages Of A Newspaper* (Los Angeles: 1960). The 200-page book focuses on the relationship between the *California Eagle* and the Los Angeles community. Another important source is the Charlotta A. Bass Papers and Manuscript Collection at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, in Los Angeles. The six boxes of documents include Bass's personal correspondence, speeches, and book manuscript. Another source on Bass is Gerald R. Gill, "'Win or Lose — We Win': the 1952 Vice Presidential Campaign of Charlotta A. Bass," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, Sharon Hartley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds. (Port Washington, N.Y.: National University Publications, 1978), 109-18.

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[9] Bass, "The Afro-Americans of Los Angeles Demand the Clansman in Motion Pictures be Denied Admittance," *California Eagle*, 30 January 1915, 1; "In the Civil Walk," 6 February 1915, 1; "Fight Against 'The Clansman' Lost by City Council And Many Citizens of both Races," 13 February 1915, 1; "A Fight for Justice," 13 March 1915, 4; Bass, *Forty Years*, 35.

[10] Bass, *Forty Years*, 41; "Managing Editor Welcomed Home," *California Eagle*, 22 September 1917, 1.

[11] Bass, "Is the Council Mesmerized," *California Eagle*, 15 September 1917, 4.

[12] Bass, "Unfair Discrimination," *California Eagle*, 25 August 1917, 4.

[13] Bass, "The Welfare Department," *California Eagle*, 13 October 1917, 4.

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[24] Bass, "Hold Negro Girl as Peon 11 Years," *California Eagle*, 3 October 1930, 1; "Southern Cracker Gets Jolt Of California Justice," 31 October 1930, 1; *Forty Years*, 77-78.

[25] Taylor, *Daily People's World*, 5.

[26] Bass, "Negro Hanged in Effigy; Editor of Eagle Menaced," *California Eagle*, 20 March 1947, 1.

[27] Bass, "Editor Attacked in Student Riot," *California Eagle*, 22 April 1948, 1.

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[29] Bass, "On the Sidewalk," *California Eagle*, 14 September 1934, 1; 21 September 1934, 1; Bass Papers, Box 2, Folder 10; Taylor, *Daily People's Worker*, 5.

[30] Bass, "The Boulder Dam," *California Eagle*, 15 July 1932, 12; "Situation At Boulder Dam Clearing Up," 29 July 1932, 1; "Negro Labor Called to Boulder Dam," 9 September 1932, 1.

[31] "The West's Greatest Journal," *California Eagle*, 4 April 1924, 10; Bass, *Forty Years*, 38, 42.

[32] "Eagle Editors Returned 13th," *California Eagle*, 19 October 1934, 1; "Editor J.B. Bass Passes," 2 November 1934, 1; "Eagle's Directors Hosts At Dinner," 3 May 1935, 1.

[33] Bass, "300 Cars, Buses Out in L.A. RY. Job Bias — 1,500 Threaten March," *California Eagle*, 18 December 1942, 1; "On the Sidewalk," 22 January 1943, 1; "LARY HIRED NEGRO — Conductors, Motormen!" 29 January 1943, 1.

[34] Bass, "Support of Laws Case Urged By Home Owners Association," *California Eagle*, 25 October 1945, 1; Bass, *Forty Years*, 110.

[35] Bass, "Celebrities Set For 'Sugar Hill' Covenant Fight," *California Eagle*, 1 November 1945, 1; "'Sugar Hill' Covenant Fight Opens Wednesday," 29 November 1945, 1; "Celebrities in Spotlight As 'Sugar Hill' Trial Begins," 6 December 1945, 4; "Defense Attorney Analyzes Historic 'Sugar Hill' Decision," 13 December 1945, 1. See also *Los Angeles Times*, "Negro Property Owners Protest," 6 December 1945, B-2.

[36] Bass, "Laws Case Postponed Again; New Trial Date November 13," *California Eagle*, 1 November 1945, 1; "Hearing Denied; Family Ordered To Vacate Home," 13 December 1945, 1.

[37] Bass, "Laws Case Postponed Again; New Trial Date November 13," *California Eagle*, 1 November 1945, 1; "Citizens Urged To Fight Laws Case Verdict," 29 November 1945, 1.

[38] "White Neighbors Like the Laws Family, Survey Shows," *California Eagle*, 6 December 1945, 1.

[39] Bass, "On the Sidewalk," *California Eagle*, 20 December 1945, 1.

[40] Bass, "Hearing Denied; Family Ordered To Vacate Home," *California Eagle*, 13 December 1945, 1; "On the Sidewalk," 20 December 1945, 1.

[41] Bass, "This Is Your Fight!" *California Eagle*, 3 January 1946, 1.

[42] Bass, "Race Covenants Ban By High Court Wins Wide Approval Here," *California Eagle*, 6 May 1948, 1; *New York Times*, "Anti-Negro Pacts on Realty Ruled Not Enforceable," 4 May 1948, 1.

[43] Bass, "On the Sidewalk," *California Eagle*, 31 January 1946, 1.

[44] On the federal government's relations with the black press during World War II, see Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially 3-10.

[45] *Pittsburgh Courier*, "Cowing the Negro Press," 14 March 1942, 6.

[46] Charlotta A. Bass file, no. 100-297187, Los Angeles Field Office Report dated 2 October 1944, United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C.

[47] FBI file, report dated 5 April 1944.

[48] Records of the United States Post Office Department, Office of the Solicitor, Record Group 28, file no. 103777, E-440, folder labeled "California Eagle," National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[49] Bass Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.

[50] Bass's best showing was in the Los Angeles City Council election. She finished second among six candidates in the non-partisan primary and received 34 percent of the vote in the run-off election, losing to Carl Rasmussen.

[51] Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon's Army*, 3 vols. (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965), 3:596-97.

[52] *Los Angeles Sentinel*, "City Council Winners," 3 May 1945, 1; Bass, "On the Sidewalk," *California Eagle*, 3 May 1945, 1.

[53] *New York Daily News*, "Henry and His Reds," 26 August 1948, 37; *Los Angeles Tribune*, "Words Fly at Burns Rally; Cooley on Bowron; Bass on Red Baiters," 25 December 1948, 1; Bass Papers, Additional Box 1, Folder marked "Letters to C.A. Bass, 1940s," 31 August 1948, statement labeled "Notice of Libelous Statements Published and Demand for Retraction."

[54] FBI file, report dated 15 September 1950.

[55] Bass, "They Work for Peace — Not War: Impressions of the USSR," *Soviet Russia Today*, November 1950, 19-21; "For these rights I will fight ...," *Daily Worker*, 2 April 1952.

[56] Bass Papers, Additional Box 1, Folder marked "Letters to C.A. Bass, 1950s."

[57] Karl M. Schmidt, *Henry A. Wallace: Quixotic Crusade 1948* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1960), 311-12.

[58] Bass, "'Uncle Tom' Is Not Dead," *California Eagle*, 14 July 1950, 1.

[59] David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt,

Brace and Company, 1959), 213; Bass Papers, Additional Box 1, Folder marked "Letters to C.A. Bass, 1950s." A major source of information on Bass' vice-presidential race is some forty newspaper and magazine articles held under her name in the Schomburg Clipping File, Schomburg Research Center on Black Culture, New York Public Library. The Progressive Party's platform in 1952 is summarized in Kirk H. Porter and Donald Bruce Johnson, comps., *National Party Platforms: 1840-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 487-94.

60 "Legendary Black Publisher Mrs. Bass dies at 95," *People's World*, 19 April 1969, 12; Bass Papers, Box 2, Folder 18.

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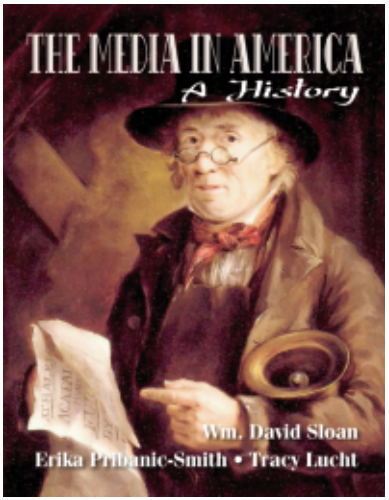


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# News & Notes

(Please note: Announcements are from the organizers of the activities.)

## Call for Papers for Special Issue of *The Moving Image:* Videotape in the Archives

Guest Editors: Dan Erdman, Adam Charles Hart, Helena Shaskevich

*Proposal deadline: March 31, 2026*

"Videotape is NOT an archival medium," influential documentary filmmaker George Stoney provocatively announced in 1998. Videotape is, as Stoney knew, an extraordinarily fragile medium — easily damaged through handling but also in danger of natural deterioration after only a few years. Further, there's no possibility for videotape "restoration" in the manner of celluloid film; once magnetic media is damaged, that information is lost. That's why, Stoney asserted, the work of archivists and scholars is so important — without active study and intervention, the work of videomakers is in perpetual danger of being lost forever.

This special issue will articulate the unique logistical, technological, and legal challenges of videotape preservation while introducing *The Moving Image*'s readership to the idiosyncratic character of videotape archives and the history of videotape as a medium.

NOTE: The editors ask that submissions focus on video-tape, from open-reel formats to DV.

Themes include (but are not limited to):

* Historical studies of specific formats, cameras, recorders/players, and other videotape-related equipment.

* The history of videotape distribution and commercial availability. Arthouse/avant-garde specialists like Electronic Arts Intermix, Video

Databank, and Women Make Movies. Commercial distribution of VHS, including both mainstream feature films and "niche" content like pornography, shot-on-video (SOV) genre movies. Lesser-known video distribution formats. Boutique BluRay labels releasing shot-on-video movies.

* Historical accounts of screening/exhibiting videotape: loft, gallery, and storefront exhibition; video festivals such as the Global Village Documentary Festival and the Women's Video Festival. Videotape in cinemas and the theatrical distribution of VHS and MiniDV.

* Nontraditional archives: collectors and individual archivists, video stores, collections in archives not focused on media. Preserving/saving VHS pornography, shot-on-video genre movies, instructional/ educational tapes, independent LGBTQ+ productions.

Types of Submissions:

*Features*: Double-blind peer reviewed research articles, 4,000-6,000 words.

*Forum* pieces: Shorter, less formal pieces that include interviews and "notes from the field" that involve discussions of single institutions or archivists' own work, such as specific restoration projects. The editors are particularly interested in brief accounts of dealing with the technological/logistical challenges of preserving/ digitizing videotape.

*Collections*: Discussions of collections held by moving image archives, including their provenance. Please note that the editors wish to approach this category broadly to include nontraditional archives and collections.

*Reviews*: Analyses of recent books, media (e.g., DVDs, BluRays), conferences, film festivals, exhibitions, and online resources.

Inquiries and submissions:

Please send initial proposals and final submissions to special issue co-editor Adam Charles Hart at adam@mediaburn.org and CC journal editor Devin Orgeron at editor@themovingimage.org. We encourage potential writers to contact the editors in advance of submission. We are happy to work with and to help develop article ideas!

All manuscripts should be submitted as a Microsoft Word e-mail attachment, double-spaced throughout, using 12-point type with 1-inch margins, following the 17th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. **The deadline for proposals is March 31, 2026.**

Please note if your piece should be considered for the Features, Forum, Collections, or Reviews sections. If you have an idea for a submission but are not sure as to which section would be the best for your work, the guest editor would be glad to discuss this during the planning stages.

## AJHA Announces Election Results for Board and VPs

The recent AJHA election filled two vice president and three Board of Directors seats. Michael Fuhlhage was elevated from first vice president to president. Members confirmed Erin Coyle as first vice president and elected Pamela Walck as second VP. Melissa Greene-Blye, George Daniels, and Karlin Andersen Tuttle were elected to three-year terms on the Board of Directors. Susan Swanberg was elected to serve the remaining two years of Walck's board term.

## AJHA Announces Joseph Mckerns Research Grant Awards

The American Journalism Historians Association has awarded four Joseph McKearns Research Grants.

The recipients are: Michael Fuhlhage, Wayne State University;

Brian Gabrial, Concordia University; Christie Kleinmann, Belmont University; Madeleine Liseblad, California State University, Long Beach.

Michael Fuhlhage's project explores how journalists and public communicators in the Chicano Movement from the 1960s to the 1980s pushed back against media misrepresentation of Mexican Americans. His research traces how these activists used counternarratives to challenge stereotypes and build a media infrastructure that amplified Chicano voices. Funding will support archival research at the University of Texas at San Antonio to examine the nation's first Hispanic-oriented news service and its efforts to translate Latino culture for mainstream audiences. The project also looks at how Hispanic activist groups collaborated through the 1990s to expand media outreach.

Gabrial's project examines the contentious 19th-century relationship between Canada and the United States before Canadian Confederation in 1867. Specifically, it examines a period from 1864, when confederation talks began, through 1867, paying close attention to Canadian newspaper editorial rejection of ideas about a union with the United States. These editorials also began framing a Canadian national identify separate from Great Britain, France, and the United States.

Kleinmann's project examines how public relations strategies and media framing shaped divergent outcomes of two Nashville civil rights protests: the 1960 lunch counter sit-ins and the largely overlooked 1961 Centennial Park pool desegregation effort. The research will analyze archival materials from mainstream and Black press sources to evaluate how communication practices influenced public memory and contributed to historical omissions. The work underscores media institutions' role in reinforcing systemic exclusion through selective story-

telling, offering insights into race, civic identity and historical representation in mass media.

Liseblad's project will examine The Federal Communications Commission versus George A. Richards's Goodwill Stations, Inc., a 1950s case centered on news slanting. It led to widely publicized FCC hearings, resulting in over 18,000 pages of transcripts and one of the FCC's most strongly worded legal edicts explaining how his stations failed to serve the public interest. Liseblad will use her grant money to visit the National Archives and the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.

Named for the late Joseph McKerns, who taught at both Ohio State University and Southern Illinois University and was AJHA president in 1986-87, the McKerns Grant provides research assistance, while also recognizing and rewarding the winners. Up to four grants for up to $1,250 apiece are awarded upon review and recommendation of the Research Grant Committee.

### **Call for Papers**: **Tenth Annual Conference on the History of Recent Social Science (HISRESS)**

Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

*Thursday, 11 June & Friday,12 June 2026*

This two-day conference of the Society for the History of Recent Social Science (HISRESS), at the Geneva Graduate Institute in Switzerland, will bring together researchers working on the history of post-World War II social science. It will provide a forum for the latest research on the cross-disciplinary history of the post-war social sciences, including but not limited to anthropology, economics, psychology, political science, and sociology as well as related fields like **history**, **communication studies**, area studies, design, international relations, law,

linguistics, and urban studies. The conference, hosted by the Geneva Graduate Institute, aims to build upon the recent emergence of work and conversation on cross-disciplinary themes in the postwar history of the social sciences.

Submissions are welcome in such areas as, but not restricted to:

* The interchange of social science concepts and figures among the academy and wider intellectual and popular spheres

* Comparative institutional histories of departments and programs

* Border disputes and boundary work between disciplines as well as academic cultures

Themes and concepts developed in the history and sociology of the natural sciences, reconceptualized for the social science context

The two-day conference will be organized as a series of one-hour, single-paper sessions attended by all participants. Ample time will be set aside for intellectual exchange between presenters and attendees, as all participants are expected to prepare unpublished papers (not longer than 10,000 words, excluding footnotes and references) for circulation to other participants and read all pre-circulated papers in advance.

Proposals should contain no more than 1000 words, indicating the originality of the paper. The deadline for receipt of abstracts is February 2, 2026. Final notification will be given in March 2026 after proposals have been reviewed. Completed papers will be expected by May 15, 2026.

Please note that published or forthcoming papers are not eligible, owing to the workshop format.

The conference sponsor, HISRESS (the Society for the History of Recent Social Science), has launched a new journal (*History of Social Science*), published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. The journal is accepting submissions.

All proposals and requests for information should be sent to submissions@hisress.org.

### Call for Papers: Women's Broadcasting Histories Conference 25-26th June 2026

The International Women's Broadcasting Histories network is delighted to announce that it will be hosting its inaugural conference at the University of East Anglia, **25-26th June 2026.**

The International Women's Broadcasting Histories (IWBH) network (formed 2021) aims to create a global nexus for scholars researching women's broadcasting histories.

The conference aims to explore key challenges and opportunities in researching women's broadcasting histories, including the 'limits of the archive'—the gaps and omissions in institutional and organisational archives regarding women's work, the different national, linguistic and regional contexts in which women worked, and the value attributed to programming, labour and women audiences. We are inclusive in our definition of women.

We welcome papers and pre-constituted panels on any aspect of women's broadcasting history. These include but are not limited to:

* Locating women in the archive
* Women's labour in broadcasting
* Women and broadcasting audiences
* Transnational, transmedial and entangled histories of women's broadcasting
* Women's programmes on radio and television

Proposals for 20-minute presentations must include 250-word abstract, 50-word biography of the author(s). Pre-constituted panels should also include a 250-word rationale statement.

The deadline for proposals is **31st December 2025**. Please submit to iwbh2026@gmail.com*

The conference will be in person with the potential for some opportunities for remote presentation.

For any inquiries, please contact Dr Helen Warner: helen.warner@uea.ac.uk

**Call For Papers**: **Ranging the Gaps: Approaching National Cinematic Histories through Incomplete Archives (RtG 2026)**

We invite submissions of 20-minute presentations that engage with the intersection of archives, cinema, and nation, particularly in ways that challenge hegemonic histories and/or put a spotlight on marginalised groups.

Proposals should consist of a title and abstract of up to 300 words. Please include a short biography of up to 100 words. We are very happy to consider proposals for videographic essays, short films, and other diverse research forms.

Submit proposals here:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfw0qq2UI7JJ522ptjZDeqsU2BIwQCXYAA9RoFYf95vTkEvdw/viewform?usp=publish-editor or paste this link into your browser:
https://forms.gle/nboE8R528oQVKfLB6.

**Deadline:** 2 January 2026

Acceptance emails will be sent on 4 February 2026

We encourage submissions from PGRs at NWCDTP-funded institutions (even if you yourself are not funded by the NWCDTP). We have a number of travel bursaries available for speakers and/or attendees from these institutions.

The event will take place in the Ellen Wilkinson Building (handi-

cap accessible) at the University of Manchester on Monday, 13 April 2026. Whilst we welcome both online and in-person attendees, we ask that all speakers be able to present on the day in-person. See our website: https://rangingthegaps.wixsite.com/2026 for more information.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions:

Lillian: lillian.wang@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk — Enquiries about CFP submission

Tillie: tillie.quattrone@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk — Enquiries about the event (e.g., registration, access needs, travel reimbursements, day-of logistics)

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