

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 1 (2015). Number 1

Historiography in Mass Communication

Editor

Wm. David Sloan

Editorial Board

W. Joseph Campbell
American University

David R. Davies
University of Southern Mississippi

Erika Pribanic-Smith
University of Texas at Arlington

Bernell Tripp
University of Florida

Mike Conway
Indiana University

Michael D. Murray
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Michael S. Sweeney
Ohio University

Debra van Tuyl
Georgia Regents University

Editorial Purpose

This journal publishes essays 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.)

Copyright

The contents of this website, including the contents of the digital journal *Historiography in Mass Communication*, are copyrighted.

Essays

Essays may be original ones written specifically for this journal, or they may be from material that the authors already have (such as classroom lectures, AJHA presidential addresses, etc.).

Essay length may vary from 500 to 5,000 words.

To submit an essay for consideration, email a Word file to the editor at wmdsloan@bellsouth.net

If you have an essay accepted for publication, you will be required to affirm that you are the owner of it and that it violates no law.

Your essay will include a copyright notice that you are its owner. However, you must agree that your essay may be used in accord with the following policy: The essay may be used for personal research purposes and for classroom teaching material. Multiple copies may be made for classroom teaching. However, no one (other than yourself) may sell the essay or include it in any collection that is sold.

Historiography in Mass Communication

Volume 1 (2015). Number 1

Contents

From the Editor: "Where We Are"	page 1
James D. Startt, "The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?"	page 6
Michael S. Sweeney, "Historiography for Dummies: Or, a Rationale for What We Do in Journalism History"	page 21
Eugenia M. Palmegiano, "AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium"	page 32
Kobre Award Recipient Interview: Maurine Beasley	page 44
AJHA Book Award Interview: Carol Sue Humphrey	page 48

Terms of Use: The essays in *Historiography in Mass Communication* may be used for personal research purposes and for classroom teaching material. Multiple copies may be made for classroom teaching. However, no essay may be sold or be part of any collection that is sold. Violations of copyright are subject to prosecution.

CLICK
TO RE
TO TH
TABLE
CONTI

Where We Are

By Wm. David Sloan ©

WHEN I BEGAN TO WORK on my doctoral dissertation in 1976, I don't know if it would have been possible even to *imagine* a journal like *Historiography in Mass Communication*. And I'm not thinking primarily about technology. No, more important than the possibility today to publish digitally is something greater — the more sophisticated intellectual level in our field.

As I began to look around for a dissertation topic in 1976, the best advice I got was “Find a topic that no one has researched before.” Such advice easily translates into “Find an obscure topic.” Of course, the main reason no one would have researched a particular topic, and the reason it was obscure, was that no one was interested in it. So the advice to find an unresearched topic really boiled down to “Find a topic that is so unimportant that no one cares about it.” Today, it is hard to imagine any of our outstanding doctoral history advisors giving such suicidal guidance.

Things have changed greatly since my student days. The field of mass communication history has become much more vibrant. As just one example, in 1976 the total number of books published that year about the history of journalism — whether print or broadcast — was, as best as I can tell, thirteen. Three decades later, in 2006, the number

Wm. David Sloan, a professor emeritus from the University of Alabama, is the author/editor of a number of books and is a recipient of the AJHA's Kobre Award for lifetime achievement.

© 2015. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

was at least forty.

Likewise, we have many more professors today who are accomplished historians and who have a much more sophisticated understanding of what historical study is all about. One impact has been in the attention that graduate students give to the study of history. In 1976, only two or three dissertations on mass communication history were completed, but by 2006 the number had increased to at least a dozen, and the American Journalism Historians Association was seeing a keen competition for its award for the year's outstanding dissertation, chosen from among many.

Perhaps the best explanation for why the field of mass communication history has improved so much is that we have many more professors who take history seriously and who understand the principles that historical study demands. Obviously, there are contributing factors — reasons such as the founding of the journal *Journalism History* in 1974 and of the AJHA in 1982 and of *American Journalism* in 1984 and the availability of more outlets for research (such as the AJHA national convention).

But, whatever the reasons, the result is that there are many more accomplished historians today than in 1976. They have taught their own students the methods of historical study, and those students have become professors who continue to teach new generations. Doctoral students are better trained in history than most professors were in 1976. If one were to attend an annual convention of the AJHA today and an attendee, even a student, did not understand the term “primary sources” or “present-mindedness” — as would have happened in 1976 — we would probably think he had shown up at the wrong location, more likely looking for hoofers than historians.

The widespread sophistication today does not mean, however, that everything is rosy. Even though we have many excellent historians, there is no law prohibiting people from calling themselves historians if they want to — even if they have not mastered the most basic princi-

Where We Are

ples of historical study. In fact, perhaps as many as a quarter of the people who claim to be historians have few credentials other than their claim.

Back around the year 2000 I was working on an edited book of short accounts of the history of practices in journalism, and I issued a call for volunteers. It wound up in the hands of one professor, whom I didn't know, who got his ph.d. "specializing in communication history" at a prominent midwestern school. My guidelines for the historical accounts listed, among other things, the requirement that they make use of primary sources. The young midwest graduate submitted his account, devoid of primary sources. I emailed him, repeating the requirement for primary sources. He sent me a revision, again with no primary sources. We went through the process half a dozen times. Finally, after several months and six drafts, he implored me to explain to him "what a primary source is." I found, when I got to know him later, that he was a sincere individual with good intentions but that he had never heard the phrase "primary source" during his doctoral program. Instead, the focus was on the "philosophy of history." He wound up knowing how to talk about philosophy, so-called, but he had little idea of how to study history.

He and I subsequently became friends. As he applied himself, he eventually became a good historian. But the shortcomings of his ph.d. program are not confined to him. Most professors who claim they are historians probably do take history seriously, but there is a group who don't. They are the hangers-on and the pseudo philosophers. They talk about the field needing "new approaches" or "new theories." One suspects that they want new approaches because they don't know what the standard approaches in historical study are. Others attended graduate programs that emphasized social science theory and that convinced them that the standard social science approaches should be applied to history. They call for new theories in history because they don't understand the use of theory in history. Unfortunately, they are

the ones who are most vocal in calling for new ways to study history and who talk or write most prolifically about how to do it.

That is not a paradox. Our accomplished historians understand the purposes of historical study and the strength of historical methods and thus probably don't find much motivation to indulge in the speculations that consume dilettantes. Sometimes, one suspects, the reason accomplished historians don't get involved in such matters is simply because they have no desire to engage in discussion with dabblers. But that has left the discussion of approaches — of historiography — in the hands of the dabblers.

Yet, we have many good historians who truly understand historiography and the various issues that one must confront. To know that, one needs only to get into a serious conversation at a convention such as the AJHA or read the books that our historians produce. And when it comes to historiography, the best informed and most insightful thinkers are exactly the ones you would expect: the historians who have a track record, who write books and well researched articles — and who, oddly enough, rarely participate in such things as conference panels dealing with “new approaches” to history.

So it has not been easy to find historiographical material from good historians in our field. We are hoping this journal will help change that. Most historians with a record of accomplishment perhaps have been busy at work on books or other projects and haven't had time to write about historiography. But those historians have much to offer the rest of us. We hope the existence of this journal will encourage good historians occasionally to submit essays. Many of you now reading this new journal are among them.

The study of mass communication history is strong enough that it deserves and needs serious attention devoted to it. Many, many books have been written about historiography, but few have been done in mass communication history. Our field, though, has advanced and has many historians who think deeply about what we do. That was not the

Where We Are

case forty or even thirty years ago. Now, though, the founders of this journal are optimistic that our field's historians, especially those who have a superior record of achievement, are interested in starting to write more about historiography.

This journal is intended to provide a forum for you to discuss historiography and share your ideas. In each issue we hope to publish substantive essays by historians who, in the popular vernacular, "know what they're talking about." Thoughtful consideration of what practitioners do is evidence of the maturity of a field. We believe mass communication history has reached that point.

With this first edition of *Historiography*, I think we are off to a good start. Each of the writers is a former president of the AJHA, and four of them have won its prestigious Kobre Award for lifetime achievement. All have been productive authors, and each has given a considerable amount of thought to the nature of historical study and how it should be applied to the field of mass communication history.

We're inaugurating with this first issue a couple of features that we hope to be able to include in issues of *Historiography* for the foreseeable future: a Q&A interview with a Kobre prize winner and a second interview with the author of a history book that has received critical praise. In this issue, those historians are, respectively, Maurine Beasley and Carol Sue Humphrey.

We hope you will find all of the articles enjoyable to read and stimulating as well.

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

By James D. Startt ©

CLICK
TO RET
TO THE
TABLE
CONTE

LET US BEGIN with a proposition: The study of history is the search for truth about a specific subject. Truth in history, however, can be blurred or even abused. Personal and national interests, popular whims and emotionalism, and the fogs of romantic misperception have distorted it. Propagandists and the entertainment industry have exploited it. Sometimes it has been employed for purposes harmful to society. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the study of history is one of the most important dimensions of modern thought. It provides the framework for so much in our daily lives and for so many avenues of scholarly inquiry. It is also the best means available for guaranteeing the integrity of knowledge about the past. It is also worth remembering that the scholarship associated with it is among the most vigorous of any field of learning and that it contributes to the well-being of contemporary life.

The purpose of that scholarship is varied. Curiosity moves some people to undertake it; the sharpening of identity encourages others. In the case of the former, the simple but timeless desire to know about significant past events and personalities or how things of the present

James D. Startt, a Senior Research Professor in history at the Valparaiso University, has written a number of books about President Woodrow Wilson and is a recipient of the AJHA's Kobre Award for lifetime achievement.

Editor's Note: This essay is a revised version of one that Prof. Startt originally published in 1992.

© 2015. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

HERE
TURN
E
OF
ENTS.

came to be provides sufficient reason for serious study. The latter serves as a type of collective memory for understanding self and society, or some group or institution within society. Others embrace the study for the broad background it provides for comprehending the present and engaging the future. Some turn to it seeking knowledge of change; others, of continuity, tradition, and human nature. Some people perceive an ethical value in history. They might claim that it fosters a sense of humility, stimulates an awareness of other people and cultures, encourages consideration of humanistic (if not eternal) values, and increases appreciation of certain social responsibilities that concern all humankind.

The truth historians seek is neither absolute nor metaphysical. When they refer to truths in history, they mean the state of an historical subject being in accord with the facts upon which it rests. Their intent is to have the product of their inquiries be as accurate a representation of an appropriate past reality as it is possible to achieve.¹ It would appear to be a simple task to articulate the truth in this manner, but that which appears easy can be deceptive and complicated. The end sought can never be achieved in full. In their reconstruction of some part of the past, historians can only approach complete truth. Yet, for the sake of present society, even for civilization itself, it is important for historians to keep the axiom “truth in history” before them as they proceed in their work. We shall examine first a sampling of the problems that impair their work and then basic guidelines that can make it as viable as possible.

Obstacles to Truth in History

Curiosity about the past, David Hume once said, “excites a regret that the history of remote ages should always be so much involved in obscurity, uncertainty, and contradiction.”² His reflection can apply to the near as well as the distant past, for everything that has happened soon becomes unknowable to some degree. All past events occur in relation-

Startt

ship to various personal and impersonal forces. Who can know, much less express, them all in their endless variety? Everyone who inquires into history, moreover, is part of the present and is in some way bound by its social and cultural standards. Complete detachment is impossible and probably would be undesirable at any rate. The record of a past event is never perfect, nor is the vision of the beholder of that record. Indeed, obstacles of many sorts abound to fetter the cause of truth in history. Imperfect records or poorly understood records can impair knowledge of the people and events of the past. The same can be said of personal prejudice and racial, class, national, and occupational biases. For the purpose of discussion, we shall consider some obstacles to truth created by poor construction and then some related to faulty generalization.

The burden of proof in history is the responsibility of historians. They must locate and study the evidence, and the quality of the evidence directly relates to the quality of interpretation. "The first test by which any historical work must be judged," one authority on historical methodology observes, "is how far its interpretation of the past is consistent with all the available evidence."³ One of the basic rules of research is that interpretation must be based on an examination of the full record. Yet, publications continue to appear based on inadequate sources. Despite the many excellent, historical studies published in recent decades, there appears to have been a lowering of standards regarding sources and documentation of sources. Too often media historians have failed to resist this tendency. Sound history, however, rests on an imaginative and comprehensive search for all available evidence pertaining to the inquiry. In most cases, that search should go back to primary sources. Also, since the time of Leopold von Ranke, historians have recognized the rule that all interpretation is supposed to stand on fact. This has not always been the case.

At times some historians have elevated interpretation over fact. A case in point is the work of certain of the revisionist historians who

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

concerned themselves with the origins of the Cold War. In a probing evaluation of their work in 1973, Robert J. Maddox drew attention to the fact that their work contained numerous rudimentary errors. He demonstrated that it stood on “practices such as splicing together diverse statements to produce fictitious speeches and conversations, altering the meaning of sentences through the use of ellipses, and wrenching phrases out of time sequences and contexts, among other things.”⁴ Other historians soon confirmed his findings. Yet the revisionists continued in their work and even found scholarly support for it. It would appear that only interpretation counted, not documentation. Consequently, such history little serves the cause of truth, and it gives bite to the statement of the British historian D. C. Watt when he remarked that “American historiography of the Cold War tells us very little of the Cold War, but much of the American intellectual history in the 1960s and 1970s.”⁵ History of this sort is only pseudo-history because it contains flawed craftsmanship.

Some fallacies that mar history are less intentional than the preceding case. Again consider the records of history. They are of many sorts, but a general rule of research is this: Trace a point to its best source. In many cases this is a primary source, and in some cases a primary source is an original source.⁶ Too often writers use secondary sources for the raw material of their works, and thus rely on information gathered by other people for other purposes.

Too frequently writers also violate another rule of research regarding sources. Historians are supposed to have mastered the art of distinguishing between the types and authoritativeness of sources used. The newspaper as an historical source can serve as an example. Do historians make adequate allowance for the variation found among newspapers? In many cases they do, but too often they fail to make the proper differentiation. There was, for instance, a great difference in the early 20th-century British press between “popular” and “quality” papers in terms of size, purpose, and readership. Nevertheless, historical

Startt

accounts involving the British press at that time often fail to make the distinction. There are, of course, also many differences among newspapers published in the United States. They vary not only in terms of type and tone but also in terms of character, which, in the case of an individual paper, might change in the course of time. The *New York Times*, for instance, did not always possess the prestige it enjoys today. In her classic study of newspapers as historical sources, Lucy Salmon wrote many years ago: "The historian cannot evade responsibility of at least attempting to understand the personality of the newspaper if he is to make use of it as historical material, for upon the personality of the newspaper as a whole depends its power for good or for evil."⁷ Historians who wish to avoid indiscriminate references to sources that weaken the validity of text will find her advice as relevant today as when those lines were written.

Regarding the authoritativeness of sources, the *New York Times* is again illustrative. It is frequently cited as a newspaper of record and a publication known for its trustworthy news. In many respects, it deserves that reputation. Years ago, however, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz proved that the *Times*' reporting of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath was full of inaccuracies.⁸ If the *Times*' reports of such a great event were flawed, it stands to reason that those of other papers probably were, too. In fact, there are many reasons why newspaper accounts of events might be flawed, and the time factor in making those reports is only the most obvious one. The newspaper is typical of other historical records. Conditions of creation and preserving of record must be considered in any use of these materials. Historians should, therefore, always examine these records with another rule of research in mind: "When looking at this document, what else can be seen?"

Another rule of research deserves consideration in order to avoid faulty construction of argument. Simply stated, it is that context must inform text, but in practice it receives too little attention. The word *race*

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

can serve as a case in point. It must be understood in the context in which it is used. References to *race* appear frequently in the 19th-century press; and on into the 20th, public figures used the word proudly in speeches. But what did it mean? Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge used it interchangeably with *nation*. In other cases at that time it may have had an anthropological, cultural, or national meaning. Distinctions must be made. The same can be said for many other terms (e.g., propaganda, public opinion) that find their way into the records of history. This need to decipher past terminology reminds us that interpretation of the human past requires the ability to interpret its record.

If the cause of truth can be hindered by the failure to locate, employ, and interpret the record in a proper manner, it can also be hampered by certain tendencies of projecting the present back into the past. These present-minded fallacies can take many forms, some more popular than others. In a sense, it can be said that unexamined popular historical generalizations blur the search for truth about the past. Too often such popular generalizations fail to reflect the real past and become expressions of a fixed idea. Consider, for instance, how present definitions are projected back into the past with popular usage of unexamined terms such as *imperialism*, *nationalism*, or *socialism*. Such terms have experienced dramatic change over time. David Hackett Fischer provides the following example of how the static idea of a democratic society had influenced popular perceptions of three centuries of American history:

The result is a historiographical equivalent of the Dance of the Seven Veils, featuring the damsel Democracy herself, and a half dozen willing helpers. First, Roger Williams helps her out of a sombre shroud of Puritan black. Then Benjamin Franklin rends a red coat with his lightning rod, and Thomas Jefferson tugs off a covering of Hamiltonian buff and blue, to expose an earthy homespun of Old Hickory brown. The rude garment falls to pieces, revealing a

Startt

cloak of Confederate gray, which Lincoln removes with magnanimous gestures. Next there is a gilded robe, embroidered with Black Fridays and costly touches of Tweed, which miraculously yields to a checkered cloth of Populist red and Progressive lily white, with a free-silver lining. The last veil finally falls away, and beauteous Columbia stands revealed, with a blue eagle tattooed on her belly.⁹

At least that projects the idea through the 1930s. Beyond that we shall have to imagine what garment would suit “damsel Democracy” during World War II, the Cold War, or in later eras.

G. Kitson Clark labeled a particular type of the fixed idea fallacy “generic statements.”¹⁰ He used that term in reference to popular, present generalizations about groups of people that can find their way into history. The groups may be based on race, creed, class, nationality, political preferences, and so on. Thus in history, as in mass communication, many tidy references to “the Germans,” “the Protestants,” “the lower class,” and “the media” can be found when in fact the group delineated was far more complex than the image conveyed by the word. The same can be said of many other generic groupings. Think of almost any social, political, or economic grouping. Are proper distinctions made between “conservatives” and “reactionaries,” between “liberals” and “radicals,” or even between “Fascists” and “Nazis”? Can we refer to the South and Southerners? Or, are there really many Souths and, consequently, many Southerners? Do not terms like *medieval* or *Victorian* lose much of their meaning when measured against the great variety of life they cover? When we read that a nation wanted this or that, what are we reading? Germany wanted an empire in the 1880s, wanted war in 1914, and wanted revenge after the Versailles Settlement of 1919. Who actually wanted these things, and why did they want them? But many Germans in the late 19th century had no wish for empire, least of all for an overseer empire. Furthermore, the largest political party in Germany before World War I was the Social Democratic Party, which

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

opposed war in 1914. These popular, unexamined generic references lack the necessary precision to be convincing. On the other hand, any generalization about such large topics might be uncertain due to its very nature. Readers, however, can expect two things of historians in these matters: (a) that they themselves have a clear idea of what they mean by collective references, and (b) that their generic descriptions rest on evidence.¹¹ Generalizations about the past will always exist. It is the job of historians to make them as truthful as possible.

Historians are also expected to recognize national myths for what they are and to explain them accordingly. They are intuitive by nature and come out of a shared or imagined historical experience. Historians, themselves, and journalists often help to perpetuate them. Although they may serve a national purpose (e.g., they explain confusion, inspire a people, and rationalize policies), they also can outdistance truth. The Puritan Myth, the New (American) World Myth, the Manifest Destiny Myth, and others have at times been a powerful force working on national sentiment. They should be presented in that manner and submitted to the same scrutiny that historians are supposed to give to all large ideas. It should be remembered, too, that national myths can become self-fulfilling prophesies, and at the very least they tend to encourage reductionist thinking. The latter can lead to an unreal conversion of complex into simple issues. It can produce “good vs. bad,” “saints vs. sinners,” and “heroes vs. villains” thinking. Such emotional reductionism represents a serious impediment to truth in history.

But all reductionism is not of the emotional variety. Some is based on reason. Consider the problems of causation in history. The effort to isolate causes, locate “the cause,” or measure causes can distort reality. “Every attempt in historical writing,” Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff explain, “to formalize causal description or make a show of exactitude by assigning one ‘paramount’ cause and several ‘contributory’ causes ends in self-stultification.”¹² This often neglected advice should be a basic rule of historical methodology. What caused the spread of Chris-

Startt

tianity or the passing of Rome in the West? Did capitalism cause Protestantism, or was the reverse true? What or who caused the brutalization of the freed slaves after the Civil War? Or, in the case of mass communication, why did the patriot press denounce King George III in the years before the American Revolution? Why did the penny press appear when and as it did? Who or what was responsible for yellow journalism or for the performance of network television coverage of recent presidential politics? Problems of causation do not yield simple quantifiable answers. They deal with conditions in time and should be a matter of explanation rather than artificial delineation.

Or, consider the case of determinism and related instances of the use of theory to explain history. Without entering into a lengthy discussion of history and theory, it can be said that historians in general have hesitations about using theory to explain the past and insist that it be used with care. Art, politics, race, religion, industry, and war are some of the variables of the mainstream of human history just as government control, technology, commerce, conviction, and passion are some of the variables of mass communication history. All the variables associated with any past act must be taken into account, and it is a precariously formed generalization that allows either a single variable or an outside speculation to determine the nature of an object under investigation. Sometimes, for instance, the economic factor is considered the most important in explaining human institutions. That thesis cannot be supported beyond doubt. Human activity is never free of religious, cultural, and psychological influences. Does the “great-man” theory explain the workings of the 19th-century penny press as is sometimes suggested? Theories both grand and specific are valuable. They contain insights that can help to unlock past mysteries. They should not be allowed, however, to negate the basic rule that history is multidimensional. It occurs in time and space, and it occurs in relation to many human conditions.

As the foregoing examples indicate, there are many obstacles to

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

truth in history. The first step to take in avoiding them is to recognize their existence. There exists, moreover, a canon of criticism to guide historians in their pursuit of the truth about past realities. This large body of criticism varies somewhat according to the subject of an inquiry, but certain of its general features need to be comprehended regardless of the particularities of a given study. We now turn to a discussion of these general features.

The Critical Method

When the renowned Dutch historian Pieter Geyl returned to the lecture hall in 1945, five years after his arrest by the Germans who occupied his country, the first thing he addressed for his students was the value of criticism. He said it was the “first duty of independent scholarship” and claimed that it was a bulwark of Western Civilization.¹³ Accordingly, he reminds us that careful evaluation lies at the core of the study of history. If it is true, as Carl Becker once said, that everyone is his or her own historian, it is also true that people involved in history must be their own critics. The canon of criticism they recognize begins with an appreciation of self in history.

The past may be infinite and immutable, but historians are fallible and live in a changing present. In recapturing a part of the past, they can never be free of the present. Consequently, there is a subjective side to all history. The word *subjectivity*, as Trygve Tholfsen reminds us, “no longer holds the same terror for us that it did for the theorists of scientific history. For them, ‘subjectivity’ was a demon to be exorcised, in order to produce knowledge of pristine ‘objectivity.’”¹⁴ Today historians still value the ideal of objectivity and desire to discover how things really were, and no one wants history to be shaped by unguarded subjectivity or unrestricted relativity. How do they deal with the subjective factor? They try to see themselves in the larger picture of their study and to recognize their own presuppositions and values — to be mindful of self. Barzun and Graff cite this ability to “see around themselves”

Startt

or “self-awareness” as one of the qualities historians most need to develop. Construed in this way, “subjectivity” is far removed from “bias.” It should be considered as part of historians’ judgment, much in the manner that honesty and accuracy are part of that judgment. “An objective judgment,” Barzun and Graff observe, “is one made by testing in all ways possible one’s subjective impressions, so as to arrive at a knowledge of objects.”¹⁵

“Made by testing” is the key idea. It runs all through historical methodology. Historians begin by submitting the materials of the past to testing. No type of evidence is more important to historians than primary materials. They provide not only information but also a feel for that information. They can offer an intimate appreciation of the formation of policy and opinion, of how events occurred, and of how institutions operated. The primary record is vast, and the subject of inquiry determines its type (e.g., written, visual, oral, or physical). The most common source is the written record, or a document, and the critical method associated with it is also applicable for many other types of records. In this case, historians first determine the exact type of document they are examining. Was it a statement of background information or one of command? Was it a public document like a newspaper or a speech? If it were, it must be understood as a public record and judged accordingly. Many documents like the various journalistic publications have numerous parts. Each must be understood on its own grounds. A given newspaper, for instance, may have had a limited news coverage or editorials that attracted little notice, but it may have had excellent drama reviews or business reports. Once historians establish a document’s type, they then submit it to tests of external (when necessary) and internal textual criticism. The former, which applies mainly to original records, establishes authenticity; the latter, credibility. Such testing becomes automatic and is part of the continuous effort to discover the truth about the human past.

A body of secondary literature also exists to aid historians in that

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

effort, but it too must be scrutinized. It represents a valuable resource for contemporary historians, but it can only be used when weighed against the content of the appropriate primary records. Both older and newer authoritative studies should be consulted for the lode of background and interpretative matter they contain.¹⁶ They are often guides offering direction and clarification to one's inquiry. "Every historian," wrote Oscar Handlin, "must. . . be his own reviewer and assimilate into his own fund of knowledge the old works of enduring value as well as the new. That demands the application of rigorous standards of critical evaluation and assessment."¹⁷

The critical process continues when historians proceed to interpret information drawn from historical sources. Interpretation of materials, in this sense, occurs at several levels. First it takes place at the level of establishing the meaning of specific objects.

Such objects can be called historical facts and should not be confused with data, which can be defined as uncontested routine information. Historical facts do not stand alone. They include interpretations, which should be carefully constructed. Questions of the what, how, and why of a fact must be addressed, and when needed, there are a variety of qualitative and quantitative analyses to use in deciphering its meaning. Some questions of self awareness should also be asked to satisfy oneself about the viability of resulting interpretations: Do I understand the nature of this fact? Do I understand its vital relations to associated human, cultural, institutional, and physical factors? Do I understand all of the forces that acted upon it? Have I made allowance for the constraints to human thought and action that affected it? What authority do I have for making this statement about it?

Some of the most engaging subjects that concern historians are complex and huge in scope. Why, for example, did the Civil War happen? What were the consequences of the Great Depression? What impact did the press have on the outbreak of World War I or on the Cold War? What has defined the shape of the modern news media? Such

Startt

questions require a synthesis of many historical facts. Problems occur. There can be too little or too much relevant information available. The evidence does not always fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Gaps have to be closed; inferences made. Accordingly, it is necessary to recall that all historical generalization must derive from evidence and reflect context. Interpretations at this level should convey indications of the spirit of the times of the object studied. Inferences must be reasonable and based on probability, and be properly qualified. Beware of “too-perfect” explanations.¹⁸ They probably are imposed on the materials of history from the outside and are apt to be suspect. Avoid the reduction fallacy on the one hand and overextended generalizations on the other. Avoid, too, careless use of words, “all,” “only,” and “never,” for example. At this point, more than at any other in implementing methodology, historians need to take their audiences into their confidence. They need to explain how they resolved particular problems of explanation and how their conclusions reflect evidence. They should persuade audiences that knowledge of what real people did in the past is not only knowable but also worth knowing. That calls for careful and reflective interaction between historians and their materials.

The use of critical methodology, however, in gathering, deciphering, and explaining historical material cannot guarantee truth in history. The perils of faulty composition remain. Proper composition requires disciplined attention as much as any other element of history. It has its own critical apparatus. Vocabulary needs to be examined and reexamined. Does the language employed have the controls needed to avoid rhetorical excess and misrepresentation? Does it sharpen the outlines of reality? Ordinary events should not become “amazing,” and qualities of greatness should not be attributed to ordinary people, or even to most major historical figures. When the exceptional figure who deserves to be discussed in terms of possible greatness does appear, the discussion should be a balance of reasons. Why can such a claim be advanced for that individual? What were his or her mortal? Believa-

The Study of History: Truthful or Flawed?

bility and accuracy should be the hallmarks of the vocabulary of historical compositions. The exact noun must be found to convey the connotation intended; the exact verb, to describe its movement.

Moreover, because people should expect both clarity and freshness in the history they read, it must be free of jargon, clichés, and slang. There are yet other hallmarks of writing to acknowledge. A logical and natural sense of order should shape the composition, and a reasonable tone permeate it. It must have the necessary evidences of documentation (quotations, footnotes, etc.), and they must be well crafted. To make matters more difficult, a historical composition is supposed to have style enough to save it from dullness and to invite the contemplation of others. It has often been said that historians are in part artists, and any historical narrative that overcomes the traps of composition while remaining committed to the real past proves the point.

Validity can still be found in the old saying that truth is the beginning of wisdom. That idea applies to history, which is committed to finding the truth in the past and to the idea that present wisdom can benefit from it. The objective is not an overarching truth to explain all things, but an aggregate of many truths. About these truths historians will continue to speculate and interpretation will follow interpretation. That obstacles to truth in history should be avoided whenever possible, and critical methodology employed, is the least that people can expect of historians. Interpretations of the deeds of men and women and events in the past that fail in these respects will receive the little attention they deserve.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1979), 118; and Lester D. Stephens, *Probing the Past: A Guide to the Study and Teaching of History* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974), 52.

²David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (1754-1762; new ed., Phila-

Startt

delphia: Porter and Coates, 1776), Vol. 1: 25.

³John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1986), 29.

⁴Robert J. Maddox, "The Rise and Fall of Cold War Revisionism," *History* 73 (May 1984): 423. For the complete version of his critique, see his *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁵Quoted in Maddox, *ibid.*, 416.

⁶For a discussion of the distinction between primary, original, and secondary sources see James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989), 114-17.

⁷Lucy Maynard Salmon, *The Newspaper and the Historian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 74.

⁸Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, "A Test of the News," *New Republic* (4 August 1920), 1-42.

⁹David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 153.

¹⁰G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), Chap. 11.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 160.

¹²Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 189.

¹³Pieter Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History* (1955; reprint ed., Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1970), 72.

¹⁴Trygve R. Tholfsen, *Historical Thinking: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 225.

¹⁵Barzun and Graff, *Modern Researcher*, 58 and 184.

¹⁶G. R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 74.

¹⁷Handlin, *Truth in History*, 115.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 125.

CLICK
TO RE
TO TH
TABLE
CONT

Historiography for Dummies: Or, a Rationale for What We Do in Journalism History

By Michael S. Sweeney ©

BEFORE ANY ACADEMIC gets far into the piece of original research, be it thesis, dissertation, article, or book, someone likely will ask a very powerful (but short) question: “So what?”

Why should the world care whether a researcher has found a new species of mollusk, measured a correlation coefficient in a social science experiment, or catalogued the works of some obscure artist or musician? So what?

It is a question that all good researchers continually ask themselves, for the answer may redirect their energy or even stop them altogether before they waste their time on work that others will not appreciate or understand — or, much worse from a practical standpoint, that will fail to result in a passing grade, an advanced degree, or tenure and promotion. Not to mention the simple joy of seeing one’s work in an academic journal.

Researchers who do history love to ask the “So what?” question of each other. That’s because in the eyes of many skeptics, much of the past seems to have little or no bearing on actions in the present. And so it’s only fair to consider why history is relevant. And there is no perfect answer. It’s like the meaning of life; the meaning of history is not “42”

Michael S. Sweeney, a professor of Journalism at Ohio University, has written a number of books and is a recognized expert on the history of the press and war. He is a recipient of the AJHA’s Kobre Award for lifetime achievement.

© 2015. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

(despite that number being the ultimate answer to “life, the universe and everything” in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*) or “X minus Y,” because history is not a hard science. It’s a humanity, an art, a thing constructed by humans for humans, and its meaning lies in the interpretations given by individuals.

As one such individual, the author believes that history is the most interesting and important subject anyone can study. The most important subject for humanity to study is humanity itself, and that leads researchers to history.

Where can they turn to learn more about humanity at large, and to learn more about themselves by comparing themselves with others? Where is the context that provides meaning?

There are two possibilities.

One is the study of other contemporary cultures. Researchers can examine people in other states, other countries, other tribes. This is the realm of sociology, political science, anthropology, criminology, economics, journalism and a host of other social sciences.

The other possibility for those who yearn for greater understanding of the human animal is to turn to history. Want to know how humans respond to a crisis that seems to threaten the end of the world? Read Barbara W. Tuchman’s *A Distant Mirror*, which chronicles the Black Death of the 14th century, when the disease that killed one-third of the people in Europe had many sane adults believing that God had decreed the end of time. Want to know how the introduction of a new information technology, such as the Internet, might alter the political process? Read about how President Franklin Roosevelt and Louisiana Governor Huey Long used radio to bypass the existing power structure of the print press in the 1930s, or about how Martin Luther realized, in his challenge to the bureaucracy of the established church, the value of the printing press in putting a Bible in the hands of every literate person. The beauty of history is that ideas, beliefs and conditions likely have been played out before, over the roughly 6,000 years that humans

A Rationale for What We Do

have kept written records. In other words, the past is a much larger and more diverse place than the present for those who seek insights into the question, “Who are we?”

I believe mass media history is not merely a subset of history. It is integral to the understanding of *who* did or said *what* to *whom* with *what effect*. Ever since Gutenberg’s magic invention of the 1450s, mass communication has profoundly influenced global, regional, and local events, whether it is as big as a revolution, like Luther’s break from the Catholic church or America’s break with Britain, or as small as how learning changes when children use smart phones and iPads.

The practice of studying mass media history is much like what mass media professionals already do. For that matter, everyone to some degree already is a historian. Journalists gather data, evaluate it and impose on it some kind of order so that others may receive knowledge from it. Historians do too. The main difference between the two is that journalists tend to take the last 24 hours or so as their time frame, and they have a bias toward oral sources — they’d typically prefer to interview the mayor or governor than read that person’s letters or records.

Historians also use oral interviews as a tool of information gathering, but they go far beyond them. They also rely on letters, archives, census records, plat maps, books, visual inspection of terrain, newspapers, magazines, tape recordings, gravestones, baptismal records, architecture, autobiographies — just about anything that might impart information. In his research, the author of this essay has cited everything from editorial cartoons to “After-Action” combat reports of the U.S. Army to letters written by FDR, and they all can be equally valid and useful. It is the historian’s job, like the journalist’s, to decide whether the source is credible — whether it tells the truth, or perhaps an even-more-interesting lie — and whether that information is relevant for a particular audience. This is not so different from what everyone does nearly every day. Did your wife pay the phone bill? That’s an

historical question. To find the answer, you might consult the written records of your checkbook, and ask yourself if the date and amount of the check, as recorded, are accurate. Did you complete all of the credits you needed to get your degree? That's an historical question, in which an answer might require you to turn to a usually reliable source, the university registrar, and request a written record as proof.

Historians tend to ask more complicated questions — how was the news censored in World War II? — but the methods of seeking an answer are substantially the same.

Here are some common steps that mass media historians employ, along with some thoughts about their value. For the sake of being conversational, I've used the pronoun "you."

I. Choose a topic that interests you. Especially if you are writing a thesis, dissertation, or book. You will spend months or even years on a single topic, and it is important for your intellectual and creative energy to remain high.

I think four kinds of topics are the most common. First is biography, be it the story of the life of a journalist or the "life" of a particular newspaper, magazine, radio/TV station, or other mass medium. If you are interested, good examples of this kind of mass media historiography are *Pulitzer* and *Citizen Hearst*, two books by W.A. Swanberg, or David Nasaw's more recent *The Chief*. Second is a broader, more thematic look at the development of a media system, structure, or convention, such as censorship, propaganda, the inverted pyramid, objectivity, presidential-press relations, etc. For an example of this kind of historiography, consider *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth Century America*, an analysis of the rise of objectivity and the templates of news stories by Hazel Dicken-Garcia. Third is an analysis of how the media covered (or failed to cover) a particular topic, such as lynchings, poverty, the Gulf War, etc., focusing on external and internal pressures on the media, including economics, ideology, hegemony, etc. For an example of this

A Rationale for What We Do

kind of book, consider *On Bended Knee*, by Mark Hertsgaard, which analyzes the inadequacies of the media in performing their watchdog role during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. Fourth is an analysis of actual media content, such as a count of newspaper articles or television broadcasts on a particular topic, or a count of their themes. For an example, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Dirty Politics*, an analysis of political television ads in the 1988 presidential campaign, or Laurel Leff's *Buried by the Times*, an account of how the *New York Times* underplayed the Holocaust. This is not an all-inclusive list.

II. Find out what already has been written about your topic. Historiography means doing original history, not synthesizing other people's work. Historians must not do a book report, but rather write something that no one has written before. The only way to do that is to survey hard-copy and electronic indexes of existing scholarship and talk with people who have expertise.

III. Formulate research questions. These questions should not be too broad or too narrow, but rather should be sufficient to keep you busy for a few months. Think of Baby Bear's porridge. You must have some idea of what you wish to focus on in your research. If you do not, you will waste your time sucking up too many facts like some giant Hoover vacuum cleaner, without regard to how they might fit your ideas of a historical narrative. If, on the other hand, you limit yourself to seeking information that addresses too narrow a topic, you will miss the kinds of information that will give context to your work.

Your research also should have a definite beginning and end, and both should be logically derived. For example, if you wish to examine the development of photographic reproductions in newspapers, you could start with the creation of the first halftone engravings and end with the establishment of the first newspapers designed to feature photographs on their front pages as a marketing strategy. If you're study-

ing the Office of Censorship, as I have, it's easy to concentrate on its creation in December 1941 and its end of operations in August 1945. But you'll have a bigger problem if you wish to study American news media coverage of the Vietnam War. As it was an undeclared war, and American participation gradually increased from the mid-1950s until 1969, you must choose a particular date as your starting point. Was it the date of the first American casualties, the date of the arrival of the first American ground troops, the month of the Tonkin Gulf incident, or some other time? It's up to you, as long as you can defend your selection as being logical for your study.

Research questions may or may not emerge from a particular theoretical framework. Some historians love theory; others do not. My own take on theory is that if there is one that helps explain what a historian discovers through research, then by all means the historian should feel free to use it. You likely won't know, with confidence, whether one theory, or any theory, helps explain a particular event or series of events, until you have followed many, or even all, of the steps outlined in this essay. My only objection to theory is very narrowly focused: I disapprove of historians who embrace one theory like holy writ and then use it to explain everything they write about. Facts first, then theory — that makes sense to me. And, of course, it makes sense to bounce back and forth between the two to refine what information you seek, and refine the application of theory, as you know more and more. This is the waltz between deduction and induction. To do otherwise, to make facts fit theory, seems to me to be like the adage we all likely heard in grad school: If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

IV. Collect data. You'll want to use primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are the actual witnesses to history. They range from diaries and archives of people who are relevant to your study to physical artifacts such as paintings, guns, photographs, and

A Rationale for What We Do

clothes. Secondary sources are the books and other narratives constructed by other historians who have relied mainly on primary sources. You'll want to read many secondary sources to see what other scholars have done, and to get an overview, a context, for your own research. However, do not use these secondary sources too heavily in your own research. Tuchman, an amateur historian who nonetheless was widely respected, says that once she read the relevant secondary books, she put them down and never referred to them again. She refused to rewrite someone else's research, and she probably also was wary of repeating another person's biases and inadequacies. Therefore she used only primary sources in her books.

That's a bit extreme, and the author of this essay has no problem citing another person's text for information that is of secondary importance to a particular study. In any event, whether you use primary or secondary sources, you'll need to cite them using the footnote (or endnote) style of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. You may want to purchase that book (or the short form by Kate Turabian) before beginning your data collection so you know which bibliographic information to write down from your sources for footnote/endnote purposes. Primary sources in mass media historiography include newspapers, magazines, tapes of radio and TV broadcasts, letters, interviews and archives. The beauty of primary sources is that they record information by witnesses, whose memories and constructions of the past usually are more reliable than those who try to reconstruct history months or years later. However, beware of relying too heavily on newspapers, magazines, and TV/radio broadcasts as primary sources in reconstructing history. Tuchman wrote in her book *Practicing History*, "As to newspapers, I like them for period flavor perhaps more than for factual information. One must be wary in using them for facts, because an event reported one day in a newspaper is usually modified or denied or turns out to be rumor on the next. It is absolutely essential to take nothing from a newspaper without following the story through for several days or

until it disappears from the news.” Also beware of the need to try to get more than one point of view. Many autobiographers and diarists write in a way that casts them in a favorable light. It’s human nature. Good historians ask themselves, “Should I trust what this person is telling me?” If the answer is no, or maybe, seek out other sources. If they do not exist, that may influence how you write your history.

Historians who choose to examine the content of a particular mass medium generally have two choices. If their newspaper or magazine had only a few issues, it may be possible to examine the “universe” of publications for the study — that is, the historian can describe, with confidence, the content of a magazine or newspaper because he or she has read every issue. Such was the case with a graduate student of mine, Kaylene Armstrong, who read all nine issues of *Lucifer’s Lantern*, an anti-Mormon publication of the late 19th century. The other possibility is more common. If a publication produced too many issues for a historian to read them all, he or she must construct a sample for examination. Why? In order to demonstrate for the benefit of the public, and other historians, that the sample is appropriate, be it a random sample or one derived with some particular purpose in mind. In other words, drawing a sample according to a plan guards against the possibility that another historian, choosing other papers or other books, could construct a totally different history, and defend it with footnotes as valid. The author of this essay once examined advertisements in *Life*, *Fortune*, and the *Ladies Home Journal* during World War II. The total number of such ads in all three magazines for the 44 months that the United States was at war was too large to be studied (at least, as long as the author wanted to set aside time each day to eat and sleep). Therefore, the author looked at one issue of each magazine for each year of the war. Those magazines were chosen at random. “Random” is a scrupulously defined scientific term, meaning each member of a population has an equal chance of being selected for a sample. In the magazine study, each issue of each magazine had an equal chance of being chosen for the

A Rationale for What We Do

study. One way to create a random sample for *Ladies' Home Journal*, a monthly magazine, would be to put the words "January" through "December" on 12 small pieces of paper and place them in a hat. Whichever month is drawn out of the hat would be the first edition examined in the study. The researcher could either examine every March issue, for example, or could study March in the first year, April in the second year, May in the third, and so on. The benefit of this second method of randomization, called a "constructed" year, is that it eliminates any periodic anomalies from the study. In other words, if every March issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* is unusual for some reason — if it's the issue that is devoted entirely to child rearing, for example — then the constructed year will minimize the impact of this unusual fact on any analysis of the magazine's content.

V. Decide what it means. Raw data are nearly useless without interpretation. Why are they significant? It's up to you to decide. Your answer may reinforce, or challenge, previous scholarship. The beauty of doing original research in history is that when you're done, you're the expert on your subject. So tell the world why you think it's important. Be careful as you think about causes and effects. Historians like to argue about causality, and you should beware of the impact of long-term, medium-term and short-term forces on your topic. There is no short, simple answer to the question, "Why did the Mormons settle in Utah?" Long-term forces that bear on this question might include America's Constitutional right to free practice of religion, which guaranteed Joseph Smith and his followers a minimum of civil liberties, along with America's long history of intolerance and xenophobia, manifest in the early 19th century in the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant political party known as the "Know Nothings." Medium-term forces might include the Mormons' history of being persecuted in the East, along with the availability of unsettled land in the West. Short-term forces might include the powerful personality, and faith, of Brigham Young as their leader. All of

these, together with many other forces, “caused” the Mormons to settle in Utah, and all should be examined in any history of the question. This LDS/Utah example also illustrates how a work of history might be written differently for different audiences. If an LDS historian were writing strictly for a church audience, he or she might include church-specific words and events that the LDS audience already knows, without needing to stop and define them. For a wider audience, however, the historian might need to explain what “Winter Quarters” was, or sketch the biography of Joseph Smith.

There are many reasons for any historical event or process that you examine. Do not be too narrow in your analysis. Consider, for example, the problem of causality in the most important global events of the late 20th century. If you take too narrow a view of causality, you could blame the Cold War on Queen Victoria. It works like this: Why did the Cold War dominate the late 20th century? Because of the antagonism between communism and capitalism. Why did Russia become communist? For many reasons, but particularly because of Russian inefficiency in World War I and its effect on the home front. Why did Russia suffer so badly in World War I? For many reasons, but particularly because Tsar Nicholas II placed so much responsibility for domestic issues on his wife, Alexandra, while he concentrated on military matters. Why did Alexandra do such a bad job of running the country? Because she took advice from Rasputin, a crazy monk from Siberia. Why did she trust Rasputin? Because he was the only one able to stop the bleeding of her hemophiliac son, Alexis, whenever his life was threatened by injury. Why was Alexis a hemophiliac? Because Nicholas and Alexandra, like so many monarchs in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were descendants of Queen Victoria, and the prevalence of hemophilia genes in the small gene pool of Victoria’s grandchildren gave rise to the disease in many European male monarchs and their sons. So, blame old Queen Vickie for the terror of the 20th century because she had so many kids (nine).

A Rationale for What We Do

Or, don't. It's just not logical to do so, and historians must construct logical arguments — or, at least, arguments that they don't feel silly defending against the attacks of other historians.

VI. Write for a particular audience. As mentioned above, explain things that you think your audience would like to have explained, but don't patronize. Use Chicago Style, which is much like the Associated Press stylebook but differs in several key respects, particularly abbreviations and numerals. And above all, write well. History begins with narrative. If your historical analysis is wonderful but your prose is terrible, few people will bother to read your work, and its impact will be muted.

VII. Rewrite. Edit. Polish your work until it is the best you can make it.

VIII. Submit. Consider submitting your work to a refereed convention of journalism historians, such as the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, or the American Journalism Historians Association. Acceptance of your work by one of these groups will earn you a trip to the convention site to present it in person, and a “vita hit” — a note on your curriculum vita that you had work accepted by such a respected organization. At such conferences, you'll meet other mass media historians who may become lifelong friends as well as helpful critics providing feedback to improve your work. After receiving their advice on improvements, consider sending your work to a journal, such as *American Journalism* or *Journalism History*, so that your work can have a broad impact.

Remember that history informs the present moment. Our lives have been shaped by the past, just as our time today is shaping the future. And the mass media have been one of the brightest, strongest cords in this patchwork quilt of humanity's story. To paraphrase Luigi Barzini, an Italian journalist of a century ago, narrative is a historian's thread, and truth is the fabric.

AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium

By Eugenia M. Palmegiano ©

CLICK
TO RE
TO TH
TABL
CONT

“ONCE UPON A TIME” is still a splendid opening for any history. “Let me entertain you” is another. “Here are the facts” is a third, and “Why did this occur?” is perhaps best of all. Each of these beginnings epitomizes components of what Marc Bloch labeled “the historian’s craft.”¹ To be accurate, to be analytic, to be graceful, if possible, but at least coherent in reporting, above all to be past-minded, these are the hallmarks of the profession. One could as easily ascribe them to journalism in its broadest application.

What has always struck me about the study of media history is that its content is so compatible with historical methodology. By this I mean that the media not only leave us a first draft of history but also school us in its art. Not all historians, I suspect, find such harmony in their specialties.

Today I plan to address these characteristics inherent in the crafting of history because, I submit, they relate to central concerns of media historians in higher education, irrespective of the size and shape of the institutions with which they are affiliated or the aspect of the field that

Eugenia Palmegiano is a professor of history at Saint Peter’s University. She has written a number of books on British media during the Victorian age.

Editor’s Note: Prof. Palmegiano delivered this AJHA President’s Address at the annual convention of the American Journalism Historians Association October 7, 1999, in Portland, Oregon. It challenges JMC historians to master their craft.

© 2015. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

engages them. My aim is to highlight circumstances that currently appear to inhibit the propagation of media history and to make some modest proposals on how the AJHA can intervene in order to secure the survival of our discipline.

What Use Is the AJHA?

In this way, I offer another and, I trust, complementary answer to the question asked by Thomas Heuterman in his 1996 presidential address, a question that has nagged me ever since he posed it. Heuterman's query, some may remember, was of what use is the American Journalism Historians Association. He himself gave an important response by calling for intellectual activism, for utilizing the AJHA to generate ideas as well as to publicize research.² I heartily concur with Heuterman. No one could be more devoted than I am to the belief that media history is at base intellectual history, the record of what people thought about the monumental or the mundane and how they determined which was which. Likewise, I hold, as he does, that it is "our responsibility, not an option" to evaluate how previous mass media have performed³ and, I would append, to train the next generation in media history, to share with them the skills of the historian.

The first obstacle to this goal seems to be the oft-bemoaned presentism of students, a perspective that is surely antithetical to doing history. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* typifies this pessimism. The writer, cinema critic James Bowman, focused on financially successful movies. His thesis, which has been expressed by opponents of other visual media, was that loosely researched scripts tend to do more than convey false versions of earlier eras. Such films, Bowman argued, validate a homogenization of concepts over generations, persuading viewers that "the whole of human history is the story of people just like us." The result, he reckoned, is to reinforce the contemporary values of audiences instead of aiding them to make, in phrases pirated from R.G. Collingwood, the "imaginative leap" of historians "entering

into the thought and feeling of past times.”⁴

While one cannot quarrel with Bowman’s conviction that historians have a mandate to “transcend” their own age, to refrain from imposing its ideas on another, one can dispute his categorization of commercial visual mass communication as unhistorical rather than as a-historical. Surely Hollywood and its progeny have introduced students to worlds that their ancestors might never have seen, in the literal sense of that word. Even if such exposure has intrigued only a few to pursue the probe of persons or issues now gone, such a spark should not be overlooked. Moreover, if students are so firmly anchored in today, why should they be otherwise, particularly if they are concentrating in mass communications, whose essence is the momentary? And if this condition is undesirable, is it not our role as educators to help them to expand their horizons by reminding them, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay “History,” that humans are “a bundle of relations, a knot of roots ... intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being”⁵?

Overcoming Presentism

Capitalizing on an interest in history, however generated in order to overcome presentism, is not to be underrated, if a strategy to prompt a past-directed mind set follows. One tactic is to beat the opposition at its own game, for example, by advising filmmakers on productions. As this convention will demonstrate, a carefully documented video can revisit a former age in a mode that is at once authentic and artistic. Consequently, my first proposal is to encourage the AJHA to publicize its members’ skills. Employing its index of their expertise, the AJHA can be pro-active, introducing those outside media history to sage consultants and thereby limiting the damage done by Bowman’s targets.

Another tactic to dilute presentism surfaced in 1997 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* under the headline “Good Journalists Have a Good Grasp of the Liberal Arts.” In this piece, Bill Kirtz, former newspa-

AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium

per editor and publisher, and now faculty member, doubted that reporters could function effectively without a historical framework.⁶ His judgment was hardly new. An illustration from a magazine printed 130 years before will suffice. Spotlighting in 1867 what he called the “trade of journalism,” Edward Dickey described the skilled reporter as a person with “a knowledge of the world, as well as acquaintance with books, and considerable power of diction.”⁷ Over a century and an ocean apart, Kirtz and Dickey testify to the worth of history in the education of those studying mass media.

Perhaps to us as working historians, this solution to stimulate a past outlook is self-evident. Its merits may not, though, be dogma to all our colleagues. Here again, the AJHA can be useful. By gathering and disseminating information on a cross-section of media history education, the association can equip members to prepare a better, dare I say data-driven, case for inclusion of history in the curriculum. Thereafter, the job is ours to persuade students that any intellectual investment exclusively in today is unlikely to reap many rewards tomorrow.

History Is Accessible

A second barrier to passing the torch has been built by historians themselves. By ignoring what I conceive is another attribute of their craft, namely entertainment, they have driven people away from the pursuit of history. Because media history regularly deals with news does not exempt it from meeting this criterion. Max Frankel, in a 1998 *New York Times Magazine* column, recognized this requisite. Reacting to a decision by the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, he jeered at the notion that “news must be, by definition, banal and boring.” Citing as proof of the opposite a mixed company ranging from Homer and Plutarch to H.L. Mencken, Frankel went on to say “[t]he journalist’s purpose, no less the bard’s, is to bring drama and delight into our lives.”⁸ This sentiment too is hardly novel. Sarah Ellis declared in a weekly newspaper in 1845 that the press should fill the imagina-

Palmeigiano

tion with “rich treasures,” not transform it into “a manufactory of miseries.”⁹

Frankel and Ellis could have been referring to history. Should not history, especially media history, bring drama and delight? Should not history, all history, be foremost fathomable? Ponder as proof that it is not this call of a conference that intended to deal with “how ideologies and material practices construct, maintain, and challenge centers and peripheral spaces in geographic, political, and psychological terms.”¹⁰

Couched in jargon, scholar speaking only to scholar, history will win few converts among students and even fewer among administrators accountable to tax and tuition payers. Worse, historians who sculpt arcane history betray their self-imposed obligation to be the keepers of the human chronicle. This betrayal is more treacherous for those of us in media history since we are the guardians of cultural barometers. For dominant people or groups, there is ordinarily other documentation; for the socially marginalized, where media may be the only annals of their existence, obfuscation is high treason.

Schemes for reversing a propensity to obscure are diverse, notwithstanding that it is easy enough to identify the problem. Francis Bacon neatly summarized it four centuries ago when he commented that “[I]t is an ability not common to write good history ... In no sort of writing is there a greater distance between the good and the bad.”¹¹ This ability, as that of having a sense of the past, is rarely innate. As Sean Wilentz, of Princeton’s American Studies Program, stated in his *New York Times* tribute to Alfred Kazin, only “the remarkable” naturally pen history as “magnificent and confident writers.”¹² For those of us not among the immortals, and for the majority of those whom we anticipate as our heirs, writing must be learned and constantly practiced.

Certainly if a 1999 report of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication on *Journalism Educators: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* is correct, writing is central in the lives of such faculty and hopefully that orientation influences their teaching.¹³ We

AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium

who are media historians have an advantage insofar as we routinely peruse succinct and lucid prose. As E.S. Dallas noted in an 1859 magazine, “the simplicity and the clearness which are the essentials of periodical writing frequently imply a much more perfect grasp of the subject ... than ... more ambitious performances.”¹⁴ Clarity and simplicity are the keystones of good journalism. As historians we should reflect these traits for veracity and adopt them for comprehensibility.

Good History Writing Is Difficult

In this regard, the AJHA has a long tradition of being effective, a tradition that should be not merely maintained but extended. The association has agents and agencies to ensure that history is enjoyable. The membership, at large and in interest groups, is a cadre of colleagues ready to critique each other’s work in a spirit combining respect and scholarship, and AJHA publications disseminate successful techniques for teaching. Equally significant, the association has always welcomed graduate students, spurring them to enter the lists with faculty and honoring them for their achievements. The AJHA should continue this custom but can also open venues to stimulate good writing by creating more regional conferences.

All this having been said, yet composing history is difficult. As Peter Gay wrote in his *Style in History*, “[a]s a writer, [the historian] is under pressure to become a stylist while remaining a scientist; he must give pleasure without compromising truth.”¹⁵ Deriving pleasure from the bowels of science sounds a very large burden. In fact, Gay isolated the most crucial problem in every genre of history, the tension between historian as investigator and as interpreter. In media history, the strain is intense.

The very nature of the sources can be the worst enemy of those who seek to understand them. We are all familiar with the hazards. Newspapers and magazines have title shifts, anonymous scribes, changing editors and publishers, and missing issues, such that the peri-

odicy of periodicals often makes them a nightmare to track, much less to explicate. Broadcasts and films similarly have incomplete tapes and partial transcripts, not to mention the wishes and perhaps whimsy of producers and directors.

Coaching students to become patient detectives when dealing with this morass has always been a challenge, complicated now by an environment where speed in communication is a priority. Hearing a professor's tales of shifting through collections, of sitting what seemed endless minutes waiting for materials in the New York Public Library or what were endless hours in the British Museum Reading Room may charm, but they do not substitute for inspiring the requisite determination and inventiveness necessary to do media research.

Using Technology to Tell Stories

Now, fortunately, technology can play a role. Instead of decrying the destructive effects of electronics on education, I celebrate its capacity to connect students to primary sources in a medium with which these neophyte historians are comfortable. After all, their traveling into the past is much more likely to ensue if they can do it on an Internet highway.

Here, I suggest, the AJHA needs to innovate, not because it has been remiss but because the rapidity of this development has been so great. Consider that *The Times of London* launched its steam-powered printing press in November 1814, and that 32 years later, the paper published only 23,000 copies on an average day.¹⁶ Place that statistic against the career of the Web, and no one can fault the failure to foresee that mass communications, as we have experienced them in this century, would fast become archaic.

The AJHA can and should take the lead in setting standards for electronic scholarship in media history because our members are well qualified and have a duty to history and to our successors to do so. Standards, in my judgment, must cover two areas. First, the disintegra-

tion or obsolescence of electronic archives demands our attention as much as does the disappearance of printed and celluloid holdings. Second, with the aid of electronic access, students will encounter more primary sources, ones in media history with which they opine that they are acquainted and thus presume their own sophistication. In the aftermath, the rigor with which historians have approached the sources may erode unless we act on guidelines. To borrow from David Spencer's 1997 presidential speech, cyberspace is "a new tool for the spreading of knowledge. The challenge is to learn to use it with a degree of exactitude and intelligence."¹⁷

Who Were the Fools?

A necessity for accuracy equal in magnitude to amassing extensive evidence is handling it scrupulously. This rule so absolute to us is often initially alien to prospective historians. To nurture its application, one might commence by again stealing the thunder of the other side. For instance, media can be violently partisan. Although overt bias may be poison to professors bred on objectivity and eager to convey it, blatancy may actually be an asset by reducing students' misunderstanding of the sources, notably on first contact with them. Opening with the obvious may also enable students to discern manipulations less deliberate and nuances more tantalizing. If deception of the public is sinister, as J. A. Scott warned in 1863 when taking the measure of the American penny press,¹⁸ such deceit is scintillating for the historian who must discover who was fooled and how that mattered.

Even when an older medium wears a cloak or contains a core of neutrality, the historian has the dilemma of context. How to read the gazette, hear the broadcast, or watch the film in the same mood as contemporaries did, how to capture immediacy and specificity of crises or cares long over, and, concurrently, how to set the reading, hearing, or watching dispassionately in a larger milieu of which those at the time were usually themselves unaware are both crucial for conceptual syn-

Palmegiano

thesis. To catalyze discussion on abetting these techniques essential for accuracy among students, the AJHA provides several fora. There have been sessions on pedagogy at the annual and regional meetings and columns in the *Intelligencer*. Other outlets that I envision are occasional pamphlets and detailed postings on the Web.

Still, gathering the facts, whether exciting or dismal, and even entering them in sound language within their epoch's frame is futile unless one can analyze them. If few would claim, as did G.R. Elton in *The Practice of History*, that one of the two "intellectual pillars" of modern society is "analytic history," surely most historians would agree with James Startt's assessment in the *Intelligencer* that "history is part of the coordinating core of the modern mind."¹⁹

To reconstruct the past so as to link it intellectually beyond its own time and space is, we all understand, the stuff of history. And herein I would contend lies the danger intimated by Peter Gay. How do we square notions of authenticity and of interpretation to novices? For historians are not antiquarians. We do not merely assemble artifacts; we cast them in the bronze of interpretation, or rather bronzes, for controversy among us is common.

Working the "Little Gray Cells"

Do not these divisions at worst distort truth or at least confuse it in the minds of students? Should we expect them to understand the Revolutionary War, much less its newspapers, or the Vietnam War, much less its television tapes, when the number of conflicting histories of either conflict, or indeed only of their causes, could alone validate that distortion does occur?

Should we reply with a shrug that we are only mortal and therefore mistake-prone? Should we retort with a sigh that, as with Albert Einstein, or more likely Hercule Poirot, at some point our "little gray cells" work their magic? Should we compound confusion by citing Max Weber's convoluted distinction between idea and ideal?²⁰ There are many

AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium

rationales for the maze of interpretations, but none that I have chanced upon fully satisfy me.

The one that I prefer is a variation of another well-known text: in the beginning is the idea. That is to say, the historian starts with a hypothesis much like the scientist, lets the evidence lead where it may, and finds frequently that the hypothesis is altogether wrong. Nonetheless, in contrast to the scientist, the historian must fit the pieces together, not as mechanical nature directs, but as human logs reflect.

No one ever said about gravity what Crane Brinton said about revolution, that it is “one of the looser words.”²¹ To take joy in preciseness of language is fundamental to interpretation. To glory in contradictions is equally so. As John Stuart Mill alerted in “On Liberty,” “the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race.”²² To accept that historians bring their own baggage to every endeavor is also essential to weaving and unraveling and reweaving interpretation in order to ascertain what happened in the human past and why.

The AJHA's Important Role

To fine tune the capacity to explain why, to enhance in the next generation of historians the ability to think critically, we each have our methods, albeit all probably spring from our individual and collective perennial exercises in evaluation. Nevertheless, I postulate that the AJHA can contribute to that outcome. By encountering new research at each convention and in our publications, we have the tools to stun students, to watch them discover that history does not have upper case truth.

Because review of the literature, after the sources themselves, is central to increasing analytic skill, I would like to advance another initiative that the AJHA might undertake, that is, to circulate emerging and differing assessments or reassessments of media history, to air as it develops, ongoing historiography. I am convinced that the Web can expedite the process, reaching students where they are at ease but liberat-

ing them from the habit of haphazard reasoning and the susceptibility to bogus history. Such a project would enlarge the dimension of the AJHA and reinforce it, in Tom Heuterman's phrase, as "a forum crackling with ideas."²³

Much of what I have said today is a reaffirmation that the AJHA is a dynamic organization well positioned to augment its services to its associates in the next century. One, of course, must not be too confident. To paraphrase that popular pundit Yogi Berra, the future is not what it used to be. Alternatively, the proposals that I have made are but extensions of others' motifs, echoes of earlier presidential messages.

In 1984, J William Snorgrass (the AJHA's second president), observing that the AJHA had grown dramatically in its maiden years, concluded that "the acorn is just beginning to sprout."²⁴ Therefore, he added, much work lay ahead. Thanks to him and my other predecessors and their constituents, the association is now an oak in the academic forest. To keep it hardy requires the commitment of its members to sustain its many benefits, to proffer new ones, and, above all, to guard the integrity of the record, which is ultimately the centerpiece of the historian's craft.

NOTES

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage, 1953).

² Thomas H. Heuterman, "1996 Presidential Address: AJHA and Its Responsibility to the Future of Journalism," *American Journalism* 14 (Winter 1997): 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 107 and 108.

⁴ James Bowman, "The Oscar for Historical Accuracy Goes to ...," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 March 1999, A18.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," *Essays and Frills*, International Collectors Library ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, n.d.), 85.

⁶ Bill Kirtz, "Good Journalists Have a Good Grasp of the Liberal Arts," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 February 1997, B6.

⁷ Edward Dicey, "The Trade of Journalism," *Saint Paul's* 1 (1867-68): 312.

AJHA — A Modest Agenda for the Millennium

HERE
TURN
E
OF
ENTS.

⁸ Max Frankel, "Macho Man vs. the News," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 November 1998, 40.

⁹ Mrs. [Sarah] Ellis, "Thoughts on Popular Literature," *Hogg's Weekly Instructor* 1 (1845): 354.

¹⁰ Call for Proposals, Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies, Fifteenth Annual Conference, 2000.

¹¹ Quoted in Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Francis Bacon: The Temper of a Man* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963): 211.

¹² Sean Wilentz, "He Heard America Singing," *New York Times Book Review*, 19 July 1998, 31.

¹³ Daniel Riffe, Kandice Saiomone & Guido H. Stemple, III, *Journalism Educators: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Columbia, S.C.: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, January 1999).

¹⁴ E.S. Dallas, "Popular Literature — The Periodical Press," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 85 (1859): 102.

¹⁵ Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1976), 4.

¹⁶ "Literature of the People," *London Review* 13 (1859-60): 7, 9.

¹⁷ David Spencer, "1997 Presidential Address: History and the Age of Cyberspace," *American Journalism* 15 (Winter 1998): 115.

¹⁸ J. A. Scott, "The British Newspaper: The Penny Theory and Its Solution," *Dublin University Magazine* 61 (1863): 365-66.

¹⁹ G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), 1; Jim Startt, "The President's Desk," *Intelligencer* 15 (February, 1998): 3.

²⁰ Quoted in S.M. Miller, *Max Weber* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1963): 31.

²¹ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 3.

²² John Stuart Mill, Chapter II "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," *On Liberty* (1869).

²³ Heuterman, "AJHA and Its Responsibility ...," 107.

²⁴ J William Snorgrass, "President's Message: Growth and the Future," AJHA Annual Report, 1983-84, 1.

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

Kobre Award Interview: Maurine Beasley

CLICK
TO RE
TO TH
TABLE
CONT

Maurine Beasley won the Kobre Award for lifetime achievement from the American Journalism Historians Association in 1996. She recently retired from the University of Maryland, where she is a professor emerita. She has published a number of books and for many years has been recognized as a leading expert on the subject of women and the media.

I was born and grew up in Sedalia, Missouri, where I went to high school. When my father, a circuit judge, would drive me to school, he would look at the inscription over the door — “Knowledge is the lamp that lights man’s path to God” — and sometimes growl “to the devil, too.” He meant knowledge can be used for good or ill. To me history comprises knowledge because all knowledge lies in history. After two years at Central Missouri State College (now University of Central Missouri), I felt fortunate to transfer to the world-famous University of Missouri School of Journalism only 60 miles from Sedalia. I received two bachelor’s degrees — one in history and one in journalism. Subsequently I got a master’s degree from the Columbia University School of Journalism and a Ph.D. in American Civilization from George Washington University.

Q: What did you do professionally before going into teaching?

I taught high school English, journalism and history for one year in Michigan, worked briefly as a reporter for the *Kalamazoo* (Michigan) *Gazette* and about three years for the *Kansas City Star*. I was education editor when I left to go to Columbia University. From Columbia I moved to the *Washington Post* and put in about 10 years there, working on my Ph.D. at night at George Washington. I covered a variety of beats — courts, welfare, education for the local *Post* staff.

Q: Where, and what courses, have you taught?

Kobre Award Interview

HERE
TURN
THE
OF
ENTS.

My entire college teaching career has been at the College of Journalism of the University of Maryland College Park. I have taught a variety of journalism reporting and writing classes, courses in women and the media, and journalism history on the graduate and undergraduate levels as well as classes related to media theory and doctoral studies. Since retirement, I still am teaching to a limited degree in lifetime learning programs.

Q: Tell us about your background in history — When did you first get interested in history? How did your education prepare you to be a historian?

I always loved history in college. It tells us where we as a people have come from and provides a path (although an uncertain one) to where we are going. Even in professional schools like Missouri and Columbia, journalism history was my favourite subject. I had four concentrations in my American studies program — English literature, social and intellectual history, African American studies, and American studies — but history drew my greatest enthusiasm.

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

I have been drawn to women's history because standard historical works during the period of my education overlooked, trivialized or demeaned the contributions of women in general to society, let alone to journalism. I have wanted to call attention to women's experiences and set them within the broader context of social change. So I have specialized in the participation of women in media, particularly print journalism, linking the participation of women to their portrayal. I have been especially interested in the portrayal of first ladies as role models for women in general.

Q: We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the most accomplished people often are the most modest — but if you had to

summarize your most important contributions to the field of JMC history, what would they be?

I am so glad I had Ph.D. students at Maryland who have enlivened the field of JMC history by producing excellent dissertations that have been expanded into scholarly books. I hope that I have played a part in the scholarly conversation of our field through publication of books and articles on Washington women journalists that have tried to show the relationship between women reporters and the political process revolving around the White House. I have treated Eleanor Roosevelt the way she described herself — as a woman journalist.

Q: Tell us about your “philosophy of history” or what you think are the most important principles for studying history.

Wasn't there a character in Chaucer who “gladly learned and gladly taught”? I think the most important principle is eagerness to learn — and to pass on to others what you have learned. The journalist is busy trying to find out what is happening. The historian tries to find out why it happened. If you want to be an historian, you have to love what you are doing and think it is important to tell others what you have learned. There is no particular right or wrong in history, barring false facts, blatant misinterpretations, fraudulent theories, sloppy writing, etc. History is knowledge that can be used for good or evil and ends by employing the creativity of both the producer and the audience.

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

I do not have a ready answer because I have not done a study of the articles published in our journals since my retirement six years ago. My general view is that the quality of the work is higher than it was two decades or so ago and that increasingly it endeavours to incorporate media theory, partly because many of our Ph.D. programs are located in colleges of

Kobre Award Interview

HERE
RETURN
HE
E OF
ENTS.

mass communication. University history departments also seem to be offering one or two courses that are more theoretically driven than in the past. There may be a danger here, however: we don't want to get so wedded to the language and theory of cultural constructs that we overlook the need for narration based on factual primary sources. History must remain a story free from the jargon of academic popularity.

Q: 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?

(1): We need to make sure our units continue to teach history by insisting that it is relevant. Perhaps we will have to alter our approach to focus more on the history of technology since we are teaching more and more hands-on courses preparing students for a technologically driven work force. Also, we need to think in terms of broadening our history courses to reach all university students — not just journalism or mass communication students.

(2): We need to continue efforts to reach out to university history departments, possibly by exploring ways of team teaching or offering joint on-line instruction. Whatever happened to our [AJHA] efforts to hold a session — or perhaps a joint conference — with the American Historical Association? Part of the problem is financial. People cannot afford to pay dues to several organizations or to attend more than one or two conventions, especially since travel funds are drying up. We may need to investigate ways of participating in virtual conventions. It seems clear that we must increase outreach efforts to survive in the changing world of higher education. Having useful materials posted on our website certainly is a worthy goal.

Book Award Interview: Carol Sue Humphrey

CLICK
TO RE
TO TH
TABL
CONT

For her book *The American Revolution and the Press*, Carol Sue Humphrey won the AJHA's award for the outstanding book of the year in 2014. She received her ph.d. in history at the University of North Carolina and is a professor of history at Oklahoma Baptist University.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

My book addresses the role of the press in the American Revolution. It shows the important role that newspapers played in keeping people informed about how the fight was going and thus keeping them engaged in the fight for independence (even when the fighting was far away). The press provided the political and ideological unity needed to help Americans win the fight for independence and to create a new nation.

Q: How did you get the idea for your book?

The idea for the book grew out of my doctoral dissertation, which was a study of the role of the press in New England during the Revolution. I have known since childhood that I was interested in the American Revolution. So I knew that something related to that would be the topic of my dissertation. Don Higginbotham, the Revolutionary War specialist at the University of North Carolina, had a stack of index cards in his desk that contained topics that he thought would be good ones but not ones that he wanted to research himself. One of those cards referenced picking up a study of the press where Arthur Schlesinger had stopped in *Prelude to Independence*. That idea intrigued me, and that launched me on my research path about the role of newspapers during the American Revolution.

Q: Tell us about the research you did for your book — What were your

Book Award Interview

CLICK HERE
TO RETURN
TO THE
LIST OF
EVENTS.

sources, how did you research your book, how long did you spend, and so forth?

Obviously, the research for this book took place over many years. I completed my dissertation in 1989 and finished the book in 2013. There were a number of related projects in between the two big ones. Throughout the entire research process I read many newspapers on microfilm, but I also read many originals. I did research at the American Antiquarian Society on two occasions and also at the Library of Congress, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and a number of state historical association libraries. I always read the newspapers first and then looked for other materials related to the newspapers and the Revolution so that I focused on the content of the newspapers rather than content in letters and other documents related to the press. I wanted to see what the newspapers said and then see what comments were made about things that influenced the newspaper content and reactions to the newspaper content.

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

I looked at as many newspapers as possible, but it would have been great to see all of them. Of course, all of them have not survived — so that would not be possible. I also wish that the people who actually worked on the newspapers had left more documents so that it would be possible to see what they thought and how they worked in more detail. Finding letters and other materials by the printers in the 18th century is very difficult and almost impossible in some cases.

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

The biggest challenge was accessing the newspapers because many are just available in archives, and even the online ones aren't always easily available. Also, the gaps in coverage, because of missing newspapers, could produce some issues in trying to gain a full sense of what was

Humphrey

being printed and why. And the fact that it took weeks for news to travel from one end of the colonies to the other made it somewhat complicated to compare the impact from colony to colony.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

When one thinks about the American Revolution, it is really surprising that the colonies hung together for so many years until Great Britain got tired and quit. My book shows the role of the newspapers in that process. It shows how the colonials kept in touch with what was going on hundreds of miles away. This knowledge kept them engaged and excited about the possibilities of what a victory in the Revolution would bring to them.

Q: What findings most surprised you?

I was really surprised by how much stuff got reprinted throughout the colonies. There were pieces that originated in Massachusetts that got published in Georgia, and this happened over and over again. I was also a bit surprised at how crucial newspapers proved to be in relation to ultimate victory. I assumed that newspapers would provide lots of information and thus would be important, but I did not think they would be so essential in keeping people engaged in the conflict. I had never really thought about the impact of distance on people's interest in the war and how the newspapers would overcome that problem.

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

I would encourage people considering writing a book in JMC history to do a sort of preliminary project to test the waters about the topic they are interested in exploring. I would also encourage them to immerse themselves in the media they are studying as much as possible and to not reach any conclusions until they have done that for awhile.

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THE TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)