

# *Historiography*

in Mass Communication



Volume 2 (2016). Number 2

# *Historiography in Mass Communication*

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## Essays

This journal invites historians to submit essays. They 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](mailto:wmdsloan@bellsouth.net)

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# The Only Way To Make History Important

By Wm. David Sloan ©



Sloan

For several years, the director of our doctoral program at the University of Alabama specialized in the study of pornography. And what do you think many of the students specialized in during those years? History? No, pornography.

Even though his students found pornography more appealing than history, they offer a good lesson for historians. It is this: Students tend to gravitate toward the research interests of teachers. Especially important are the teachers they meet the first semester.

Groups such as the American Journalism Historians Association and the History Division of the AEJMC have been trying for many years to increase the importance of history from the undergraduate through the doctoral level. In fact, though, sometimes we've not even figured out *why* students are not interested in history.

Here's a simple explanation: Students tend to be interested in the same subjects that interest their professors. And, believe it or not, even at the doctoral level many entering students have not decided what research areas interest them. They are ripe to be manipulated, and a lot of professors are more than willing to manipulate them.

*Wm. David Sloan, a professor emeritus from the University of Alabama, is the author/editor of more than forty books and is a recipient of the American Journalism Historians Association's Kobre Award for lifetime achievement.*

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So in their first semester, the students will tend to accept whatever their instructors tell them they should be emphasizing. If in their first semester they take courses in social science methodology, in which their instructors emphasize the importance and pre-eminence of social science theory and methodology, by the end of that semester most students will have decided that they need to specialize in — what else? — social science theory and methodology.

This situation leads me to reason that the most effective way to promote the study of history is by historians teaching introductory methodology courses. In fact, I will be so bold as to say that the *only* way that history will come to be recognized as important is if historians start teaching the methods courses. I will never suggest that historians (or any other professors) manipulate students, but they should introduce them to the wide range of methods that the mass communication field employs.

Consider what is happening now. Professors who specialize in social and behavioral science for many years have taken on the responsibility of teaching the core courses in theory and methodology. Most teach the standard methods of content analysis, experiment, and survey, and their courses are filled with explanations of statistics, measurement, sampling, and hypothesis testing — the same as the courses those professors took as graduate students. Few really understand other methodologies such as those in law and history. They didn't study them in graduate school because their professors didn't teach them or consider them important. Now, professors themselves, they don't teach them because they don't consider them important.

And should we be surprised at what students conclude: that the legitimate methods for important research are those of S&BS and that history is meaningless in addressing the significant issues in communication?

No wonder most doctoral graduates are uninterested in history.

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And once they become professors, why should anyone expect that they will tell their students that history is important? So we will have the same continuing cycle as far into the future as we can see, a cycle that begins with professors who teach methodology.

Now, imagine a different situation.

What if professors teaching the general methodology course included not only S&BS methods but also historical and other methods that are widely used in the study of communication?

Students would recognize that many subject areas and methods are valid, and more students would choose history as their specialization.

But who are the professors who will teach the variety of methods that the field of mass communication uses?

Don't assume they are S&BS professors. Historians have been using systematic methodology for generations, and yet S&BS professors are, for the most part, unaware of it. If they had any interest in teaching historical methods, they would be doing it by now.

When you think about it, many of the professors now teaching the general methods course really are among the least prepared to teach it. They have invested so much of their education in S&BS that those are the only areas they know. They don't have the background or training to teach other methods.

And who are the best equipped to teach methods?

They are for the most part professors who specialize in such areas as history and law. Most JMC historians took required methods courses in graduate programs that focused on S&BS. At the University of Texas, for example, I had to take four such courses. That is not unusual in graduate programs. Then most people who became historians learned at least one other methodology — history — and perhaps several. Thus, historians know a wider range of methods than do most professors who now teach methods.

That means that the professor in your school best qualified to teach the methods course probably is *you!*

The reason historians tend not to teach methods courses is not because they're unfamiliar with the wide range of methods — but because they are drawn more toward the humanities. Thus, most don't have a lot of interest in teaching the methods of the “sciences.”

It is just the same for professors in S&BS. Most don't have an interest in anything other than S&BS methods — and so they don't teach any methods other than those of S&BS.

The losers turn out to be the students, who are left with the impression that only social and behavioral sciences are legitimate. And ultimately the entire field of communication study, restricted to a narrow range of interests, loses.

So, if you want history to become more important, you must decide how important it is to you. If it is important, then decide to do one thing: Start teaching general methods courses!

We begin this issue of *Historiography* with an insightful essay about teaching history by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Walter McDougall. It is of paramount importance that students study history because history is, he says, “the grandest vehicle for vicarious experience: it truly educates ... provincial young minds and obliges them to reason, wonder, and brood about the vastness, richness, and tragedy of the human condition.” Although he writes about American history, his ideas are just as applicable to JMC history. For our second article, Joe Campbell and Debbie van Tuyl join me in a roundtable Q&A focusing on historical interpretations and their role in helping to explain history. For our continuing series of interviews with winners of the American Journalism Historians Association's Kobre Award for lifetime achievement, we have a Q&A with David Copeland. Then, to finish this issue, the interviewee for our Q&A with an award-winning book author is Leonard Teel.

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# The Three Reasons We Teach History

By Walter A. McDougall ©



McDougall

“If we act only for ourselves,” wrote Samuel Johnson, “to neglect the study of history is not prudent. If we are entrusted with the care of others it is not just.” Prudence and justice are two words conspicuous by their absence in our otherwise verbose debates on how, why, and when to teach which sort of history to American children. The National Standards for History, for instance, have been criticized from many perspectives, but to my knowledge I am the only reviewer to question the strength of those standards as well as their weaknesses. I found them altogether too inclusive, demanding, and sophisticated for high school teachers and students. For instance, I considered the Standards’ repeated invitations to debunk the sainted image of Woodrow Wilson entirely legitimate, but asked whether “it is wise to teach grade-schoolers that Wilson was foolish or hypocritical to proclaim democracy, disarmament, self-determi-

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nation, free trade, and a League of Nations to a war-ravaged world." A college seminar should take a critical stance toward the icons of American history. But is it prudent to turn 11th graders into cynics with regard to the values their nation holds dear?

The sterility of the current debate over history may be explained by the failure of combatants of all political stripes to acknowledge and grapple with the fact that the teaching of history serves three functions at once. One, obviously, is intellectual. History is the grandest vehicle for vicarious experience: it truly educates ("leads outward" in the Latin) provincial young minds and obliges them to reason, wonder, and brood about the vastness, richness, and tragedy of the human condition. If taught well, it trains young minds in the rules of evidence and logic, teaches them how to approximate truth through the patient exposure of falsehood, and gives them the mental trellis they need to place themselves in time and space and organize every other sort of knowledge they acquire in the humanities and sciences. To deny students history, therefore, is to alienate them from their community, nation, culture, and species.

The second pedagogical function of history is quite different, and often seems to conflict with the first. That is its civic function. From the ancient Israelites and Greeks to the medieval church to the modern nation-state, those charged with educating the next generation of leaders or citizens have used history to impart a reverence for the values and institutions of the creed or state. The post-modern critic may immediately charge that to do so amounts to a misuse of history and the brainwashing of young people: just think of the sectarian history taught in religious schools, the indoctrination imposed by totalitarian regimes, or the flag-waving history that hoodwinked young Americans into volunteering for the Vietnam War. But to cite such examples is to beg the question. The civic purpose of history cannot be abolished, since all history — traditional or subversive of tradition — has a civic effect. So the

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real questions are whether American schools ought to tilt toward extolling or denouncing our nation's values and institutions, and how the civic function may be fulfilled without violence to the intellectual function of history.

Those questions are painfully hard to resolve, and are a matter of conscience as much as of reason — which brings us to the third, moral, function of history. If honestly taught, history is the only academic subject that inspires humility. Theology used to do that, but in our present era — and in public schools especially — history must do the work of theology. It is, for all practical purposes, the religion in the modern curriculum. Students whose history teachers discharge their intellectual and civic responsibilities will acquire a sense of the contingency of all human endeavor, the gaping disparity between motives and consequences in all human action, and how little control human beings have over their own lives and those of others. A course in history ought to teach wisdom — and if it doesn't, then it is not history but something else.

I believe it is possible to pursue all three purposes of history in books and the classroom. None of us will do so without friction and shortfalls, because we are no less creaturely than the historical people we teach about. Moreover, the quality of our instruction is limited and skewed by the finite set of facts we know or set before our pupils. But errors of fact and judgment as to what to include or omit are excusable and correctable. What is inexcusable and, as Samuel Johnson wrote, unjust is the willful denial of truth or promotion of falsehood in order to “slamdunk” into students an intellectual, civic, or moral purpose at the expense of the other two. Johnson may have been thinking about statesmen when he referred to those “entrusted with the care of others.” But no one is more entrusted with others' care than teachers, and no teachers more than historians.

There is no magic formula for the concoction of curricula that mix

the three functions of history. But we could do worse than to follow the prescription of eminent world historian William H. McNeill:

One cannot know everything, hence one must make choices. And just as some facts are more important to know than others, so have certain cultures displayed skills superior to those of others in every time and place in history. Imagine living in proximity to a competitor possessed of skills greater than yours. There is no use asserting that your culture is just as good as his. It palpably isn't, and you must do something about it.... Superiority and inferiority, real and perceived, are the substance of human intercourse and the major stimulus to social change throughout history.... And the principle of selection is simply this: what do we need to know in order to understand how the world became what we perceive it to be today?

Thus, we must focus the attention of our students on the principal seats of innovation throughout history, while remaining aware of the costly adaptations and adjustments and in many cases the suffering of those conquered or displaced by dint of their proximity to those seats of innovation. The main story line, therefore, is the accumulation of human skills, organization, and knowledge across the millennia, which permitted human beings to exercise power and acquire wealth through concerted action among larger and larger groups of people across greater and greater distances until we reach our present era of global interaction.

McNeill's principle is no less applicable to U.S. history. An honest history must hear and pass on the laments of those displaced (including many white males) in the course of our nation's growth. But the main story line must remain that of the Euro-American dominant culture, its ideals and aspirations, creativity and service to itself and others in peacetime and war: the good as well as the bad and ugly. For only

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by learning that story will tomorrow's leaders — of whatever race or sex — know the standards they are supposed to live up to, gain the knowledge needed to excel, and begin to acquire good judgment, without which the power that knowledge imparts is a curse.

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# Historical Roundtable: Interpretations in JMC History

By W. Joseph Campbell, Wm. David Sloan,  
and Debra Reddin van Tuyll ©



Campbell

Interpretations affect the way historians explain history. Some historians intentionally apply interpretations, and others use interpretations without being aware of them. No matter how historians use them, interpretations influence the telling of history. In this roundtable, three historians explain how interpretations come about and offer advice on dealing with them.

Each of the three has published a number of works offering new interpretations of major topics in JMC history. The historians are Joe Campbell of American University, author of *Yellow Journalism*; Debbie van Tuyll of Augusta University, author of *The Southern Press in the Civil War*; and David Sloan, professor emeritus from the University of Alabama and author of *Perspectives on Mass Communication History*.



Sloan

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*Wm. David Sloan, a professor emeritus from the University of Alabama, is the author/editor of more than forty books.*



van Tuyll

*Debra Reddin van Tuyll, a professor at Augusta University, is the author or editor of five books. Her most recent work is The Confederate Press in the Crucible of the American Civil War.*

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## Historical Roundtable: Interpretations in JMC History

This roundtable discussion had its seeds in a panel at the 2005 convention of the American Journalism Historians Association. The discussants have taken those ideas and refined and expanded them.

As their discussion demonstrates, JMC history is in periodic need of new interpretations, but in attempting to provide them, historians need to be wary of pitfalls.

Q: *What is an “interpretation”? Is it different from a “theory”? If so, what is the difference?*

**Sloan:** “Interpretation,” at the most elementary level, is the historian’s perspective, the frame one uses to understand the past, or a particular part of it. I suppose one could say that it is simply an “explanation.” However, “interpretation,” in its broadest sense, at least as it is used in historical study, is something like a worldview. “Interpretation,” in that sense, refers to an over-arching set of beliefs that historians have about a subject. Thus, it is more natural to speak of interpretation, not as the ad hoc explanation that a single historian uses with a specific study, but as a perspective that identifies a whole school of historians.

As for “theory,” its resemblance to interpretation depends on how one uses the term. If one says casually, “My theory about it is ...,” theory simply refers to an explanatory idea that one holds. If, at the other end of the spectrum, one uses the word “theory” in a formal sense that states a cause-effect relationship — such as agenda-setting or persuasiveness theory — then it has a very exact definition. In neither of those instances is theory the same as interpretation.

In historical study, there are theories *in* history and theories *of* history. Some historians use theories *in* history as concepts that help them to explain specific subjects. When we speak of theories *of* history, what comes to mind — at least to my mind — are the *grand theories* such as the Marxist theory of historical materialism, Spengler’s cyclical theory

of history, or Toynbee's theory of why civilizations rise and fall — or, on a more limited scale, the Whig interpretation of British political history, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, or the Progressive interpretation of American history. It is such theories that we think of as interpretations. In mass communication history, you can find such big ideas forming the basis for the approaches of the Developmental, Cultural, and other schools of interpretation.

*Q: In your own work(s), did you set out with the intent of providing a new interpretation, or did it just naturally occur as you did your research?*

**van Tuyll:** My objective [in explaining the Confederate press] was to correct the record. I didn't think in terms of interpretation when I was starting my project, only getting the right facts out.

However, as the years have passed, I have started thinking more in terms of interpretation regarding the effect of domestic war on the press. There's surprisingly little scholarship on that topic in the literature — in fact, virtually none. I think maybe that's because military historians focus on the military aspects of the conflict, social historians on the social and cultural aspects, and journalism historians on the war correspondence. Especially for America, most of the major wars have been fought somewhere other than American soil — only the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War have been fought here. So, as I've dug deeper into the topic of the Civil War press, I've been working more on getting past the facts to looking at effects, and they're profound.

That's one reason I chose to study the Southern press. First, it's been dismissed as unimportant and backward by no less a luminary than Frank Luther Mott — which I think was short-sighted on his part, but short-sighted due to what people considered journalism in his day. Second, the Confederate press experienced war in its own backyard.



Why, James B. Sener, who wrote for several Confederate papers, was able to cover all the fighting at Fredericksburg from his bedroom window. He didn't even have to leave his house to cover the battle. When fighting is that close, it's bound to have an influence that would never occur to papers someplace like New York City, which was protected from the war.

**Campbell:** The new interpretations about the yellow press period were extensions of my research, although I did harbor almost immediate suspicions about the famous anecdote of William Randolph Hearst's purported vow to "furnish the war" with Spain. That quote sounded too tidy, too succinct, to be true. As a former journalist, I'd say it didn't pass the "sniff test" — it just didn't smell right to me. It is often considered Exhibit A in the tempting but wholly inaccurate view that the yellow press brought on the Spanish-American War. But the evidence overwhelmingly supports the interpretation that the anecdote is almost certainly apocryphal.

**Sloan:** When I began studying the party press, I had no idea of an interpretation. In fact, my study began as research for my dissertation, and I chose the party press as my subject really just because my advisor told me I needed a subject that no one had studied recently. I started in with the idea that the party press had been a travesty, the "dark ages" of American journalism — an idea I had picked up from Frank Luther Mott's book *American Journalism* and the few other historians of the previous hundred years who had written about the party press. The re-interpretation that I wound up with — that the party press played an important, instrumental role in the United States' early and critical political history — surprised me, for it had never occurred to me at the start of the project.

Similarly, when I began studying the colonial press, I chose the

topic simply because Jim Startt and I were editing a series of books on the history of American journalism, and I felt as if I should write one of the volumes. The natural topic for me, I suppose, would have been the party press — but I already had spent several years on it, and I thought that if I were going to spend several more years researching a topic, I would prefer one that was new to me. So I set out in my research about the colonial press with the idea that newspapers were fairly simple, rudimentary operations with good-vs.-bad cardboard characters, much like the Progressive historians such as Ed Emery had painted them.

*Q: How did you come up with the new interpretation(s) you have provided?*

**van Tuijl:** The interpretation of the Confederate press that I kept finding over and over was that the Southern press is unworthy of study because it was so far out of the mainstream due to backward journalistic practices, technology, and ideology.

That didn't square with what I was reading in Confederate newspapers. True, they were smaller (mostly four pages as opposed to the eight or more pages common for the New York papers), had smaller staffs (especially fewer correspondents), and concerned themselves mostly with politics. However, they were serving much smaller communities that were primarily agrarian rather than urban. The people of those communities had different news and information needs, especially as the sectional divide grew during the late antebellum period.

As the Civil War approached, Southerners had lived and died by politics, so to speak, for nearly thirty years. Further, with the exception of the newspapers in the smallest hamlets, or new start-ups, a large number of Southern newspapers were on par with their Northern counterparts with regard to technology. Most dailies and many of the weeklies printed on steam presses.

**Campbell:** My research into the yellow press period stems from my doctoral studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, specifically the “readings in media history” course that Peggy Blanchard taught. At the time, my principal focus was on international journalism, but the paper I did for Peggy’s course stirred my interest in taking a long, hard look at the yellow press period. It was rather fortuitous, but research can be like that.

**Sloan:** With my research on both the colonial and the party press, my understanding (or interpretation) came very naturally from the research. In each case, I was *surprised* by what I found. On *both* topics, my understanding at the end of my research was very different — in fact, almost 180 degrees different — from what it had been at the beginning. I suppose other historians had their preconceptions before beginning their study of both the colonial and party press, but when I look at their accounts now, I see just how little research into primary sources many of them did, and it is easy to understand why their research never influenced their preconceptions. I will add that, along with trying to understand editors and newspapers, I also tried to understand the cultural context within which they were operating, and that gave me, I hope, a better understanding of what motivated the journalists and of what they were trying to do.

*Q: Is there a periodic need for new interpretations in JMC history? Why or why not?*

**van Tuyl:** Yes, I think from time to time, someone needs to go back and look at “established truth” to determine whether it’s still correct. Time gives us different perspectives. For example, the history written in 1960 of the *Augusta Chronicle*, my hometown newspaper, is very much in the Southern nationalist school. Its chapter on the *Chronicle’s* experience in the Civil War is very clearly a product of the post-Brown “the

South's gonna rise again" attitude that pervaded the South at the time and led Georgia to adopt a new state flag featuring the Confederate battle flag. Such an approach distorts the history of a venerable newspaper just as unfairly as the histories that would declare it unworthy of study for being outside the metropolitan mainstream.

**Campbell:** I believe the field is — or should be — dynamic, constantly churning, and always capable of offering up fresh interpretations. And this is not just for the sake of simply developing new interpretations, but rather because asking searching questions — and challenging assumptions and conventional wisdom — should lie at the heart of all scholarly research. And that contributes to the dynamic that prompts fresh interpretations.

**Sloan:** New interpretations periodically will be presented even if historians don't set out with the intention of providing them. That's because worldviews change. Today, for example, we see things differently than our grandparents did. So new perspectives arise with each generation. Each generation has its own attitudes and outlooks. Each holds to the views distinctive of its own age, the climate of opinion that holds sway in any generation. Those views influence the historians of every generation to look at the past from a particular perspective.

Furthermore, each generation thinks it is more knowledgeable or advanced or sophisticated than the previous generation. That sense of superiority results in historians believing that they can provide a better explanation of history than their predecessors did.

Other reasons for reinterpretations include the emergence of new research methods and the appearance of new sources of research material. The Internet is a good recent example.

Changing interpretations also result periodically from changes within the history profession. The backgrounds and outlooks of histori-

ans change over generations. For example, journalism professor historians of the 1950s felt closer to the journalism profession than most do today. Today's professors have less background working in journalism and thus are not as greatly influenced by their professional journalism experience as professors in the 1950s were.

*Q: What is the value of new interpretations?*

**Campbell:** They offer a fuller, more precise understanding of the role of mass media in a democratic society. It's vitally important to determine whether, for example, the yellow press did or did not bring on the Spanish-American War. If it did, then that's quite a statement about the potential (and malign) power of the news media. If not, then we have a better understanding of how purported news media influence is exerted, and trumped, by other forces and factors in a democracy. If nothing else, new interpretations help us to understand with more precision how news media work and fit in.

**Sloan:** The proper purpose of historical study is to determine the truth about the past. Interpretation, one could argue, actually distorts that purpose because it imposes the historian's view on the past. However, even if one grants for the sake of argument the validity of that objection, interpretation still holds considerable value.

It serves, for example, as an organizing principle. The entire past is made up of innumerable bits and pieces. We could say that the past is simply a massive hodgepodge of details that may or may not have been related to one another. The human mind, however, seeks organization. It looks for relationships. An interpretive framework is one of the most useful devices that historians employ to help the mind make sense of the world of the past. It serves to provide a core concept around which details can be arranged.

Interpretation also helps explain the fundamental factors that operated during particular historical times. Along with describing the past, the key task of the historian is to explain *why* the past was as it was. Without such explanation, the telling of history would tend to be a bare recitation of data. Interpretation acts as a primary explanatory principle. It helps the historian to make sense of a vast array of details and complicated relationships.

Interpretation also provides a means by which historians can reveal the relevance of the past to their own generation. If we did not see any pertinence that the past holds for us today, most people probably would have even less interest in history's old, distant details than they already do. History gains much of its meaning and interest for us when the historian can explain its relevance to today. New interpretations help assure a continuing freshness and relevance to history.

**van Tuyl:** As humanity moves forward, our ways of thinking about things change — sometimes for the better and sometimes not. However, in any case, historians are like everyone else. They start thinking about events differently, and thus they have new and insightful interpretations to add to the record.

*Q: What are the possible dangers of new interpretations?*

**Sloan:** Despite the vitality that new interpretations offer for the study of history, they involve inherent dangers. The most prevalent one is the inclination to offer explanations without the evidence to support them. I don't think historians ever should start out with the main purpose being to offer a new interpretation. That would be likely to result in a contrived, artificial explanation. Some attempts at reinterpretation have been motivated more by such matters as ideology than by the evidence. When that happens, one does not have reinterpretation in the true

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sense but merely a misuse of history for one's own purposes.

**van Tuyl:** One of the dangers of new interpretations is that they may be politicized — like the Southern nationalist perspective on the Confederate press. History needs to be written objectively, not produced from a partisan perspective. Otherwise, we risk ending up with polemics rather than histories.

**Campbell:** A great danger is that the evidence is pushed too hard, or too far. Or that new conclusions are offered without adequate grounding in the weight of the evidence. Then research is little more than polemical. It is also possible that new interpretations, while solidly grounded, aren't widely embraced or are dismissed for methodological reasons.

*Q: If one were to try to provide a new interpretation, what are the main considerations one should keep in mind?*

**van Tuyl:** You've got to go with the facts that you can document, and you can't stray from them. In journalism history, often that means just cozying up to a warm microfilm machine and reading newspapers (or cozying up to a warm film projector, television set, etc., and plugging in the appropriate media).

I think another big component of interpreting phenomena properly is figuring out and staying true to how people thought and lived in the period you're studying. For example, I study the Southern press. I can't tell you how many negative reviews I've gotten over the years because I haven't used my papers as a platform for condemning Confederate journalists for supporting slavery — or at least not opposing it. But they *wouldn't* condemn slavery. Most Southern editors were products of the Southern culture. They were much more likely to own

slaves than the average Southerner, and if they didn't own slaves, they probably aspired to. We know today that the South's peculiar labor system was evil and wrong. Southerners didn't think about it that way. Southern slave owners were paternalistic. They truly believed, as did most Northerners, even those who opposed slavery, that blacks were inferior to whites. Southerners truly believed blacks fared better as slaves.

I can't change what they thought. I have to take these people where they were at their time and place and deal with what they did and wrote on their terms. I suspect our time will be condemned for something by historians a hundred and fifty years from now — maybe for eating meat. Yet, most of us today have no moral qualms at all about having a piece of chicken or a hamburger or a pork loin for dinner. But, if society transforms into vegetarians in the next 150 years, do we want their interpretations of us colored by their belief system? Or do we want them to delve into our culture and understand us according to the value system we live under?

**Campbell:** I'd say the main consideration is the importance of closely examining primary source material and not being hesitant to challenge prevailing wisdom about eras and practices in journalism history.

It's vitally important to keep in mind the "so what?" question, as in: So what does this research tell us? What does it add up to? Why is it important? What's significant here? Scholars in all disciplines have an obligation, it seems to me, to make clear the significance of their work, rather than assuming their audiences will figure it out themselves. I think more can be done in explaining significance in all areas of journalism history research, to go beyond the descriptive and bring an analytical gloss to research. And I think scholars should be encouraged to think widely and thematically, to move beyond personality-driven research, and to consider fresh methodological approaches.



## Historical Roundtable: Interpretations in JMC History

**Sloan:** If one sets out mainly to provide a new interpretation, there is always the danger of artificiality. Of primacy is always evidence. Interpretations always must follow evidence, that is, always be based in solid and thorough evidence. Without evidence, the proposal of an interpretation must, of necessity, be glib, even amateurish. That's one reason we should be suspicious when people call for such things as "new theories" or "new approaches" to mass communication history.

Interpretation, like history itself, is complex. Whether one is judging a new interpretation or wondering whether an old one is in need of revision, if an explanation seems too easy or too predictable, that should serve as a warning sign. It probably is wrong.

*Q: What do you think are some major areas in JMC history that probably could use some substantial new thinking?*

**van Tuyl:** I think we are already getting beyond the idea that only the metropolitan elite press's history should be studied because that's where you'll find out about the evolution of "real" journalism. Community journalism, like that produced by Confederate newspapers, is every bit as much a part of the fabric of American journalism history as is the history of the New York or Washington press. Perhaps its history is even more important, because that is the kind of journalism most Americans consume any given day. The elite press is important for determining how political policies and decisions are made, but to know how those ideas are presented to the American public and what their response is, you really need to look at how they're covered in local media.

**Campbell:** I suspect the muckraking era of the early 20th century is prime for a thorough revisiting. The reasons advanced over the years as to why it emerged and then faded don't seem especially persuasive or

adequate. Plus, it's a period that could use more conceptual or thematic consideration, beyond the personality-driven approach that has characterized much of the work on muckraking.

**Sloan:** I'm reluctant to suggest any specific topics simply because I think new interpretations need to come about naturally rather than intentionally.

Broadly, however, I would suggest that we need to be alert to any views or values that dominate thinking today. Cultural and political ideologies seem particularly strong in much of the work being done in our field. In hindsight, we can see that at various periods in history certain mindsets dominated the thinking of historians. In the late 1800s, for example, historians had a romantic view of the American past; and, in the first decades of the 20th century, the dominant view was a Progressive one. In the same way, mindsets are probably at work today among JMC historians, but we don't recognize them as frameworks based simply on today's values because we don't question our own mindsets.

It is always difficult for a generation to recognize its own mindset. We always think that the reason we think the way we do is simply because we're right. An unexamined mind is a great danger to historians. So I would suggest that, for historians looking for another way to examine any subject in mass communication, they need to determine what today's dominant, perhaps unrecognized, views are. Chances are, fifty years from now, historians will think that we, who are so confident in our beliefs, were rather quaint.

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## Kobre Award Interview: David Copeland



Copeland

David A. Copeland won the Kobre Award for lifetime achievement from the American Journalism Historians Association in 2010. He is the A. J. Fletcher Professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the School of Communications at Elon University. He is the author of twelve books and series editor of twenty-six others, including a number of anthologies of original newspaper content. He is also the editor of the eight-volume "Greenwood Library of American War Reporting," for which he wrote the books on the French and Indian War and the War of 1812, and the editor of the eight-volume "Debating Historical Issues in the Media of the Time" and nine-volume "Mediating American History" series.

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

**Copeland:** I was born and grew up in Edenton, North Carolina, a small town in the northeast part of the state. Edenton reached its peak of importance in the 1700s, and living in a town rich in history, I grew up immersed in the value of preserving, studying, and reading about the past. There were pre-Revolutionary War houses everywhere. There were cannons that had been dumped in the bay in 1778 and later mounted at the water's edge that became the climbing toys of youth. There was a courthouse that had been in continual use since 1767 and an Anglican church with tombstones, some legible and some not, that included signers of the Declaration of Independence and first members

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## Copeland

of the U.S. Supreme Court and Congress. There was this teapot that commemorated the first protest by American women in 1774 against the British Tea Tax. I even had a friend kick up a coin with a picture of King George III on it about ten steps from those cannons. So, history, especially of 18th-century America, helped form the fabric of my life.

I earned a bachelor's degree in history from Wake Forest University. I got a master of divinity degree and a master of theology degree in church history from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. After that, I received my Ph.D. in mass communication research from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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

**Copeland:** My professional life has followed three paths: journalism, education, and music. I worked seven years as a reporter, sports editor, and city editor for a weekly and daily in Wake Forest and Elizabeth City, N.C., respectively. I taught middle and high school history, language arts, and research methods for eight years. I also worked as a professional musician in Nashville for a while and as a minister of music while I was working on my master's degrees and in the first seven years that I worked as a college professor.

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

**Copeland:** I have taught at Emory & Henry College in Virginia but have spent the past fifteen years in the School of Communications at Elon University. I have taught media writing and reporting, information gathering, editing and design, persuasion, graphic design, media and society, media in a global age, communications capstone research courses, and media history on the undergraduate level. On the graduate level, I teach multimedia storytelling and a course called "Interactive

Project for the Public Good,” which entails working with a team of students and an international NGO [non-governmental organization] and traveling to that country to complete the course.

*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?*

**Copeland:** Well, if you look back at the first section of this interview, you’ll see that I’ve been interested in history for as long as I have had memories. The past simply was always a part of my present because it permeated my childhood and adolescence. Since I majored in history as an undergrad and then focused on history with the MA degrees, I feel that I was well prepared to continue working in media history on the doctoral level. Immediately after college, I worked for a time with Colonial Williamsburg on archaeological sites, which offered a different perspective on being a historian.

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

**Copeland:** Several people shaped my work as a historian. The first was Thomas Halbrooks, for whom I was a church history TA at seminary. He required primary research for almost every assignment. So I quickly became acquainted with microfilm and microfiche, along with original copies of primary documents.

The late Peggy Blanchard, my mentor at UNC, probably did the most, though, as an influence. She instilled a work ethic that demanded you read all the literature, look at all the primary sources, and then write as compellingly as possible. She taught me that every little piece of your work — even your commas — is critical in producing the best

## Copeland

research you can. She also taught me that those of us who are educated through state universities have an obligation to give back since we've been afforded the opportunity for an education that is largely funded by taxpayers. We were to use our education and expertise to produce research that could be used by others.

I must also say that David Sloan has been a huge influence. Because my focus initially was on the press of colonial America and the early republic, I read all that he had written because he had already completed or was completing research about a number of topics that were essential for my understanding of the press of those eras.

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

**Copeland:** I have focused mainly on 18th-century America, but I've also studied the people, ideas, and concepts that led to the ideas of free speech and press from the Enlightenment forward, and I've looked at the press in the antebellum period. My research has sought to reveal the way individuals and society have used media as tools to shape thought and stimulate debate on issues as they have arisen.

The end result that I hope that I've pointed out is that media have been principal instruments that we've used to shape the direction of the country. It's a cultural phenomenon that is not limited to the United States, but I think that in America — especially in the 1700s and 1800s — media were much more successful in playing a role in shaping the direction and the outcome of events.

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

**Copeland:** I've written or edited eleven books of history and another

on visual theory and practice along with eighteen book chapters. I have also published twenty journal articles related to history.

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

**Copeland:** You know, there's always a great amount of satisfaction whenever you finish any large project like a book.

I think that the first two that I did, *Colonial American Newspapers* and *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers*, helped set the course for my approach studying media and society. *Colonial American Newspapers* dealt with the news of everyday life in America, avoiding issues of politics because that had been the focus of most works about the press in America before its publication. *Debating the Issues* looked at how colonial Americans in the eighteenth century faced issues and events, and it established an agenda for me that I was able to follow for the next decade-plus in research — how citizens turned to the pages of the public prints to persuade one another no matter the subject or event, from deciding to separate from Britain to the implications of gambling and government-run lotteries.

I found satisfaction in a couple of other books, too, *The Idea of a Free Press: The Enlightenment and Its Unruly Legacy* and *The Media's Role in Defining the Nation: The Active Voice*. Both of these books expanded my areas of research. *The Idea of a Free Press* allowed me to go deep into the developing concepts of free expression as it related to media and to religion. *The Active Voice* let me take the concepts about the power of media to affect the agenda of the nation that I had applied to a survey of the United States in the eighteenth century into the twenty-first century.

*Q: We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the*

## Copeland

*most accomplished people are often the most modest — but if you had to summarize your most important contributions to the field of JMC history, what would they be?*

**Copeland:** I think that the biggest contribution that I've made to the field is being able to land a number of series editor positions that then opened the door for others to publish their works. The success of *Debating the Issues* with Greenwood Press led to creating a proposal for a series based on its format but applied to periods in U.S. history from the Revolution through World War I (seven volumes). Then I proposed a series to Cengage on media coverage of all wars in which the country was involved. The *Library of American War Reporting* turned into a fifteen-book, eight-volume, 4,000-page resource on every war from the French and Indian through Iraq. Another series that has outstanding publications is the *Mediating American History* series from Peter Lang. Currently, there are thirteen volumes published in that series. I am happy, too, that nearly every author in these series is a member of AJHA.

One other contribution that I think is important deals with the digitization of newspapers. I worked as chief editor of the *19th-Century American Newspapers* database from Gale. This resource has more than 1.7 million pages of U.S. papers that are fully searchable online. As the chief editor, I worked with five AJHA members to select newspapers from around the country to be considered for inclusion, and I was able to make the final decisions on which papers and from what time periods would be included. It's a wonderful resource, but it's also interesting to realize that 1.7 million pages is only a humble beginning to the total number of pages of public prints that existed during this century.

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



**Copeland:** I really don't think I'd do a lot of changing. The varied jobs I did before entering academe, I think, made me a better classroom instructor, taught me to write, and opened me to a varied world of people. I suppose I might have started on the road to my graduate degrees sooner in life, but had I done so, I don't think that I would have been as driven — as I became — to do research and publish. I also do not think that I would have realized the significance and reach that editorships provide as a vehicle to move quality research from its authors to a wide audience.

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

**Copeland:** History, especially the history of the media, is not a passive study of the past. It is active because people have actively used the media to affect each other, culture, social institutions, and government for more than three hundred years. Media have been employed to persuade, to describe events and issues, to sell things, to entertain. I think that media historians, because of the way that people have used media, have the ability to offer a unique perspective on the past. It is possible, I think, to tell the history of every aspect of the nation through the primary documents that media have left behind. In a way, and especially for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it becomes the people's history, to steal a term from Howard Zinn. But it's not an alternate history of the United States. It's the history of the United States as the people experienced it, talked about it, reported about it, debated it. It's an amazing lens and one we need to promote and use our skills as media practitioners to deliver in the most compelling and accurate way we can because people from every element and strata of society turned to the media because of their reach and power.

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

**Copeland:** One of the great results of AJHA has been to offer a venue for research, and that research seems to continually get better. At some point there were faculty members at universities who made history a priority for their grad students and were encouraged to so. It's probably related in some way to James Carey's 1974 article in the first issue of *Journalism History*, where he said that media historians needed to look at history beyond the history of a medium, those who work in it, and technology. They needed to realize that what appeared in media reflected the culture of those creating media content and those reading, watching, and listening to it. Because faculty accepted Carey's challenge, I think, they instilled this broader understanding of what encompassed media history and varied research skills into their students, who, in turn, began to look at subjects through a media lens that had not been of great concern to most "traditional" historians or most media historians of previous generations. This push for a broader research agenda, combined with the AJHA and the AEJMC history division, have created a body of researchers and scholars who have definitely elevated the quality of the literature related to media history.

I think our weakness is that we are still too insular with our research and its dissemination. We feel comfortable presenting to media historians, but often do not attempt to expand presenting within other history venues. Of course, there are exceptions among media historians in terms of where they present, but for most of us, we rarely stray from our main presentation avenues, the AJHA convention or the AEJMC history division.

*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 histo-*

*ry in general?*

**Copeland:** The value of media history as a required part of the curriculum has been under attack for many years, and the course has been a victim in more cases than we'd like to acknowledge. I think that too many of our colleagues in other areas of communications expertise still think of media history as a history purely of media, its practitioners, and its technology — the pre-James Carey understanding of what media history comprises.

“We need something a little more ‘modern’ for our students” is a way I've heard the removal of media history from the required curriculum justified. Media historians need to hammer home some points with faculty who think media history really has no relevance in a curriculum that also needs students to understand coding for web pages, web analytics, and search engine optimization along with all the “time-honored” skills of the media professional as well as other competencies needed to produce information in the digital age. We need to remind our colleagues of a couple of important points that have been said by many in multiple ways. One is what Brink and Kelley said in 1963, “Studying a subject without an appreciation of its antecedents is like seeing a picture in two dimensions — there is no depth. The study of history gives us this depth as well as an understanding of why things are as they are.” Another is what Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* said to a group of our students at Elon over breakfast, “The best reporters at the *New York Times* are those who are steeped in history and literature.”

As for the wider field of history, I think I touched on that in the previous question in relation to weaknesses.

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

**Copeland:** I think that the last two questions outline the challenges JMC

history faces. When faculties in our schools and departments begin considering media history as irrelevant — or at least not of much value — to undergraduates majoring in journalism or communications, and as faculty are required to teach a wider selection of skills courses, history is going to move farther down the list of priorities. If the same thing occurs on the graduate level, then the gains made in quality research that reaches beyond J-schools will decline, and that will likely leave a void in the body of literature that uses media as its focus in understanding our past.

We've been talking about this issue for more than a decade as AJHA members. We have addressed the issue. We have to continue to find ways to interject media history into our curriculums even if it is not with the traditional media history course.

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## Book Award Interview: Leonard Teel



Teel

Leonard Teel won the 2001 Frank Luther Mott-Kappa Tau Alpha Research Award for the year's outstanding book for his biography *Ralph Emerson McGill: Voice of the Southern Conscience*. His most recent book is *Reporting the Cuban Revolution: How Castro Manipulated American Journalists* (Louisiana State University Press, 2015), for which he did the following Q&A. Dr. Teel has been nominated to be a professor emeritus at Georgia State University.

*Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.*

**Teel:** When Fidel Castro won his revolutionary war in 1959, he awarded gold medals to thirteen American journalists. Why? Because their interviews with Castro in the Cuban mountains and their stories — in major U.S. newspapers, magazines, and on national television and radio — had helped him win American public opinion to support his battle against the dictator Fulgencio Batista. *Reporting the Cuban Revolution* is the untold story of what the thirteen did to deserve Castro's gold medal and how their work misinformed the public and misled Congress and policy makers, with lasting consequences.

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

**Teel:** A primary source, a newspaper article of three paragraphs published on April 19, 1959, caught my attention, headlined, "Castro Hails Newsmen: Gives Medals to Americans Who Interviewed Him." The United Press International story named the thirteen and their affilia-

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tions. My research question then was: What did the thirteen do to deserve a gold medal from Castro?

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

**Teel:** For primary sources, I needed the stories — and books — written by the thirteen, as well as archival papers and interviews.

The time-consuming task was to round up those influential stories written by the thirteen and conduct interviews with whomever was still alive. For the articles, I was helped greatly by my graduate and undergraduate assistants and from research librarians at Georgia State University.

Five of the thirteen also wrote books — three of which were given to me from the library of my friend and colleague Joseph B. Treaster, Professor and the John S. and James L. Knight Chair in Cross-Cultural Communication at the University of Miami School of Communication.

For interviews, I found three key persons still alive: one of the thirteen medal winners, plus the wife of one medal winner, and one journalist who had been in Havana in the 1950s and knew a few of the thirteen.

For archival documents, I visited and was assisted by archivists at Columbia University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library in New York. For the Peabody broadcast awards, I was assisted by the staff at the University of Georgia Library in Athens.

For secondary sources, I read widely about Cuban politics, including three previous revolutions and Cuba's experiment with democracy from 1940 to 1952. I read about economics, society, religion, and intellectual life. A recent biography about one of the thirteen, Herbert L. Matthews of the *New York Times*, was helpful in that it also mentioned three more of the thirteen. But no biography or other book ever dealt with more than two or three of the thirteen. This discovery confirmed that my book filled a vacancy in the history of U.S. foreign correspon-

dents in Cuba.

Finally, I found it very helpful that I had been to Havana and environs in 1957 and, further, that I had become friends with Cuban exiles during the early 1960s at the University of Miami. Coincidentally, my four-day trip to Cuba was during the revolution, in August of 1957, when as a teenaged newspaper delivery boy, I won the trip by selling a lot of subscriptions to the *Miami News*. That summer, Fidel Castro and his rebels were still fighting in the distant southeastern Sierra Maestra mountains, and no one in Havana mentioned his name.

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

**Teel:** Well, yes, I wish I had interviewed more of the thirteen. However, only one of the thirteen, Karl E. Meyer, was still alive fifty years after the event.

*Q: Did you have any false starts?*

**Teel:** Yes. The book started as a conference article for the AJHA that, as originally focused, was rejected in blind review, revised, and rejected a second time. I got the point. The reviewers' comments caused me to reconsider my focus. That was when I rediscovered in my files of primary sources the three-paragraph story that named the thirteen. It was an Aha! Moment. When I submitted a conference paper with that focus, it was accepted for presentation. Further encouragement for the book followed from Patrick Washburn, from Louisiana State University Professor John Maxwell Hamilton, and from Robert Mann, Media and Public Affairs Series editor at the LSU Press. *Reporting the Cuban Revolution: How Castro Manipulated American Journalists* was published by LSU Press on December 16, 2015.

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

**Teel:** I credit my success in research to my good fortune in having student, faculty, and archival assistance. Also, it was vital to the project that I presented my preliminary findings to other historians at conferences.

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

**Teel:** One challenge was to locate enough biographical information to develop the character of each of the thirteen, in part to indicate their experience, methods, and motivations. Another challenge was to show the relationships among the thirteen. I needed to blend in secondary characters who were involved — the gatekeeper editors at the U.S. newspapers and magazines and broadcast organizations — and others such the novelists who went to Cuba to write, among them Graham Greene, who was then in Cuba composing his satire *Our Man in Havana*. And I wanted to blend in what was actually happening in Cuba in the 1950s, especially in 1957 and 1958.

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

**Teel:** The book documents how Castro's 26th of July Movement — with offices in New York, Washington, and Miami — worked effectively in recruiting journalists and conducting them secretly to the mountains, and in successfully lobbying Congress to cut military aid to the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

*Q: What findings most surprised you?*

**Teel:** I discovered how the thirteen were influenced by each other's work. As Herbert Matthews stated, his scoop in finding Castro alive — he had been reported dead by United Press — “set the stage.” As each one followed and published or broadcast, others were inspired to follow. And in Cuba, some assisted the others.



## Book Award Interview

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

**Teel:** Allow me to pass along the advice mentioned by one of my very early supporters in this book project, Professor Patrick Washburn at Ohio University. In his beautiful Foreword to this book he tells what he learned as a graduate student at Indiana University on the first day of a graduate history class. The speaker, Richard Kirkendall, a former officer of the Organization of American Historians, stated, “There are many things in history that have not been studied, but who cares? Study something that people care about, study something that is significant.”

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