

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 2 (2016). Number 4

Historiography in Mass Communication

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The 10 Books That Every JMC Historian Should Have Read

By Wm. David Sloan ©



Sloan

Which of the following movies do you think are among the ten best of all time?

The Avengers

Boogie Nights

Caddyshack

Die Hard

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial

The Matrix

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black

Pearl

The Princess Bride

Titanic

All of them? None of them? How about *Titanic*? It's the film that turned a maritime disaster into a teeny-bopper romance and won the Oscar for the year's best movie. If you were 15 in 1997, you may have thought it was *really great*. If, on the other hand, you can't imagine why Oscar voters chose it, you probably wonder why anyone would choose any of the movies in the list above as one of the top ten ever made. And it would confound you that all of them show up on at least one list.

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 American Journalism Historians Association's Kobre Award for lifetime achievement.

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Ask young people to name their favorite movies of all time, and you will find that most of the films came out in the last few years. My teenage granddaughters will name light romances that hit theaters last week.

Of course, if you were 15 in 1997, you may be offended that anyone would suggest that *Titanic* is not one of the best, *really great* movies of all time. That's the nature of blissful historical ignorance. If a teenager is not familiar with movies made before the 1990s, how can he or she know what the great movies are? Trying to convince the child otherwise may only aggravate. And trying to educate the child about the movies that truly are *really great* will be hopeless.

So it is always a dangerous thing to create a list of the “best” or “greatest” or “most important” of anything. And perhaps one is foolhardy to attempt it.

A few years ago an organization came up with a list of the 100 greatest books in mass communication over the previous 100 years. It was heavy on recent books — but some historians helped choose the list, and fortunately it included a number of histories. It left off, though, obvious choices like William Allen White's *Autobiography*. That book is one of the truly outstanding autobiographies not just in journalism history but also in American history. The reason the list omitted the book is, I'm guessing, that most of the people who compiled the list were unfamiliar with it.

In fact, probably the reason recent works predominated is that the compilers were not familiar with older works. If the list were of works in, let's say, communication theory, we might find the neglect of older works excusable. We don't expect theorists to be much familiar with history. For a list of great history books, though, historians' unfamiliarity with the works in their field is not so easily excused.

Yet, how many people who say they are JMC historians do you think have read the truly classic and important works in the field? My guess

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is that a large number have not.

I suppose we could say that historians should have read all or at least most books in the field. Such a feat, though, probably eludes most of us. For JMC historians who as professors must teach a variety of courses other than history, it is difficult to find the time that reading a large library requires. Yet it is not unreasonable to expect historians to be familiar with a small number of classic works.

Which books, though, are the most important classic ones is not easy to agree on. I say pə-ˈtā-tō, and you say pə-ˈtā-tō.

Nevertheless, since I've already been bold enough to propose that *Titanic* is not one of the ten greatest movies of all time, I'm willing to take the plunge and suggest a list of ten JMC history books that everyone in our field should have read.

To make the selection manageable, I'm arbitrarily going to cast as my main criterion the impact that a book has had. That will help at the outset to eliminate at least 90 per cent of all books. So, even though I think everyone should have read William Allen White's marvelous *Autobiography*, it is not on my list because there are a number of other books that have influenced our field more. And, although it was a tough decision, the list does not include some books that every JMC historian probably should read — such as Edward Bernays' *Public Relations* (1952) and Frank Luther Mott's Pulitzer-Prize-winning, multi-volume *A History of American Magazines* (1930-1968) — simply because they were not quite as influential as the top ten.

I'm also arbitrarily selecting only books published before 1980. That will help me to avoid the appearance of bias in loading down my list with magnificent histories that my friends have written.

And before digging in, I have an apology to make. My background has been heavy on the news media, particularly newspapers, and my list reflects that bias. In defense, I will claim that newspapers were the first JMC topics to receive historical treatment and have been the sub-

ject of a disproportionate number of historical books. So perhaps it is excusable that lists of “great” books have a heavy dose of newspaper history.

All those things said, here are the ten books every JMC historian should have read:

1. *Journalism in the United States, From 1690 to 1872* (1873) by Frederic Hudson
2. *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690 to 1940* (1941) by Frank Luther Mott
3. *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History* (1960) by Leonard Levy
4. *The History of Printing in America* (1810) by Isaiah Thomas
5. *The Era of the Muckrakers* (1932) by Cornelius Regier
6. *The History and Development of Advertising* (1929) by Frank Presbrey
7. *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (1944) by Sidney Kobre
8. *Big Business and Radio* (1939) by Gleason Archer
9. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) by Bernard Bailyn
10. *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954) by David Potter

Let’s begin with an explanation of the book that is number 10 on the list and work our way to the top. By the way, years ago my friend and colleague Don Avery and I had frequent conversations about advertising historiography, and I’m indebted to him for his insights about the work of Presbrey and Potter.

10. *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954) by David Potter

Few books about mass communication history have dealt with

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such a large issue as Potter's *People of Plenty*, and few have been as successful as his in making the argument that mass communication was critical in influencing the nature of American society. Potter argued that the most distinctive feature of the modern American character was materialism, which resulted from affluence and from an abundance of goods that the economic system produced. Advertising was central in such a system. Its role was to stimulate consumers to purchase goods. In doing that, it had been immensely successful. In the early 1900s, as the United States' economy became capable of producing more goods than necessary for people's needs, producers used advertising to encourage the public to shift its thinking from needs to desires, so that the emphasis was on consumption. That change, Potter declared, altered the American character.

9. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) by Bernard Bailyn

In the study of American history, this book is one of the most important ever published. From its title, it might not appear to be about mass communication. However, its thesis and the evidence for it were derived from Bailyn's previous study, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (1965). From the early 1900s until Bailyn's book was published, the Progressive interpretation dominated the study of American history. The interpretation provided a simplistic black-vs-white framework that viewed American history as a continuing battle between conservatives and liberals. Thus, in that view, the American Revolution was mainly the result of a battle between America's social classes. Bailyn concluded instead, based on the ideas he found in the pamphlets published in the years leading up to the Revolution, that "the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle." The book led to a "Consensus" interpretation of American history and provided a successful antidote to the Progressive

interpretation. The Consensus interpretation reasoned that Americans, while they may have disagreed on specific issues, worked within a larger framework of agreement on the fundamentals, such as respect for the Constitution. The Consensus interpretation soon replaced the Progressive interpretation as the dominant framework through which historians viewed the American past. Bailyn's book would rank higher in my list but for the fact that many JMC historians remain attached to the Progressive interpretation, and thus the Consensus interpretation has not caught on as widely in our field as it should.

8. *Big Business and Radio* (1939) by Gleason L. Archer

Archer's book *History of Radio to 1926* (1938) became the early standard in the field of broadcast history. It was the first in his classic two-volume study, and in the second volume, *Big Business and Radio*, he presented ideas that remain popular even today, almost ninety years later. *History of Radio to 1926* was one of the first comprehensive histories of American broadcasting. It provided primarily, though, only a chronological discussion of such topics as technology, governmental regulations, "firsts," and networks. In the second volume of the work, Archer developed a Progressive interpretation of broadcast history. Revealingly titled *Big Business and Radio* (1939) and written from an economic approach, the book provided a history of business' war for control of radio from 1922 to 1939. Businessmen-owners of radio stations and networks, Archer argued, used cut-throat practices to gain command of the industry. They wanted control of the broadcast media not only for the huge profits involved but also to dictate the content and tone of programming. Government aided big business through regulations that masqueraded as being in the public interest but that actually worked primarily for the benefit of media owners. The two major strands of historical interest that Archer provided — the dominance of economic factors in broadcasting and the failure of government regu-

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lation to protect the public interest — provided the model for most Progressive historians, as well as for many others, who followed.

7. *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (1944) by Sidney Kobre

Kobre's book is one of those whose importance, after the passing of many years, we find difficult to recognize. In 1944, though, the study of journalism history was dominated by a view that emphasized the progress of journalism in terms of professional practices. In the twentieth century, only rare studies had departed from it. Kobre, though, trained as a sociologist, believed the nature of the press at any time in history could be explained in large measure by the sociological influences acting on it. It was, he said, "the changing character of the American people and their dynamic social situation [that] produced and conditioned the colonial newspaper." With that view, he almost single-handedly created the Sociological interpretation of journalism history, and over the next few decades he was the most prolific exponent of it. Many years would pass before such a view displaced the traditional interpretation, but today one can find hardly any historical study that doesn't give prominent attention to the environmental factors operating on the media.

6. *The History and Development of Advertising* (1929) by Frank Presbrey

Presbrey's book was not only the earliest important history of advertising, but it also made the case that advertising historically had acted as an unrivaled socializing and civilizing force. That view has remained an essential concept underlying numerous studies of advertising history. Presenting a positive view of the origin and progress of advertising, *The History and Development of Advertising* revolved around two fundamental claims regarding the importance of advertising. First, it argued that advertising historically had been the engine that drove economic development. Second, it considered advertising to be one of

the most important social forces in history. Advertising, Presbrey said, was the vehicle that led America and, indeed, most of the world to prosperity. "That advertising," he said, "has been a substantial factor in the upbuilding of prosperity and in widening the horizon and increasing the happiness of the masses is beyond discussion.... It has led in the expansion of trade throughout the world. A nation is just as enterprising and prosperous as is its advertising. Because of this, advertising is a barometric indicator of a nation's commercial progress." In JMC historiography, one can find few books to match *The History and Development of Advertising* in their success at establishing an enduring framework through which later historians viewed mass communication.

5. *The Era of the Muckrakers* (1932) by Cornelius Regier

Regier's book was the pioneering study of muckraking, and its conclusion about the muckrakers and their motives was the dominant one for many years, and even today it finds numerous adherents among JMC historians. Regier adopted the interpretation that Progressive historians such as Beard and Parrington had developed to explain America's past, and he applied it to muckraking. Told in terms of how the muckrakers exposed numerous social, economic, and political evils, *The Era of the Muckrakers* examined such topics as the conditions that stimulated muckraking and the reasons for its decline. Muckraking, Regier wrote, was "the inevitable result of decades of indifference to the illegalities and immoralities attendant upon the industrial development of America." Americans were in a crusading mood, recognizing that the chief culprits were the selfish and privileged business interests. Muckrakers, Regier said, were on the side of the "people" in an attempt to challenge the dominant and corrupting position of big business and a privileged class in American life. They were attempting to restore both political and economic democracy to the nation. Although Regier dealt only with muckraking, he introduced the Progressive interpretation to

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the history of mass communication in general, and many JMC historians still apply the ideological perspective associated with that interpretation.

4. *The History of Printing in America* (1810) by Isaiah Thomas

Thomas' work demands a spot on any list of must-read JMC books if for no other reason than the fact that it was the first history of American mass communication ever published. In fact, it may have been the first book about media history to be published anywhere in the world. Thomas, a printer and newspaper publisher, wrote the book from newspaper files he had collected, his own correspondence with fellow printers and publishers, and other sources he had amassed. He later donated the material for the founding of the American Antiquarian Society, which remains today one of the foremost archives for the study of early American history. His book also helped to establish what came to be called the Nationalist interpretation of American history, which remained strong for generations and which, combined with the Romantic interpretation, provided the dominant perspective for historians until the beginning of the twentieth century. Even later JMC historians who were not Nationalist historians relied on *The History of Printing in America* as a source for much of their material about the early press.

3. *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History* (1960) by Leonard Levy

Perhaps no other book about JMC history has so abruptly altered the dominant explanation of a major subject as *Legacy of Suppression* did. It is one of the most influential books ever published in JMC history. It had a major impact on historians' thinking about and approaches to the issue of the concept of freedom of the press in early America and thus in the years since then. Before it appeared, historians almost uni-

versally held the view that early thinking about press freedom was libertarian. Levy argued instead that the concept of press freedom was limited in early America, meaning no more than freedom from prior restraint. The First Amendment, for example, was not intended to supersede common law, and even after adoption of the First Amendment, government retained the power to punish criticism. As measured against the libertarian approach to freedom of expression, Levy concluded, the attitude of Americans in the 1790s fell short. The distinctiveness in historiography that Levy's book holds is that — whereas most other books that have attempted to revise historical understanding of major subjects have met limited success — *Legacy of Suppression* almost immediately changed historical thinking about a topic of immense importance. Certainly, every historian didn't accept Levy's argument, and several made an entire career out of trying to refute him, but even their opposition attests the influence that he had. Today we think of freedom of the press much differently than we did in 1959, and the major reason is Levy's book.

2. *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690 to 1940* (1941) by Frank Luther Mott

For generations, nearly every student studying JMC history used Mott's *American Journalism* as the class textbook. It went through periodic revision until the author's death in 1964, but even then it continued as the field's most widely used textbook until the publisher's stock of copies simply ran out in the 1970s. Studied by thousands of students, many of whom became professors who taught JMC history, it served as the source from which almost everyone learned about JMC history. Thus, Mott's views were transmitted to untold numbers of students and influenced nearly every historian. The book tended to reinforce the explanation that JMC history was the story of how journalism evolved in its professional characteristics. Being generally positive about the

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press, it also exercised a major importance by providing a favorable view of journalism and reinforcing a pro-media outlook among communication students and professionals. Mott did not create a new perspective. Instead, probably unconsciously, he applied a perspective to JMC history that placed journalism within a framework of the origin and progress of “proper” professional standards and practices. He wrote the book with a “sympathetic admiration for American journalism” that viewed history from the professional perspective of the present and as the origin, development, and perfection of journalism, with an emphasis on news, press freedom, political independence, mass circulation, support of the common people, and journalism as a profession. The book for many years served as a standard source on journalism history, and its perspective remained the dominant one until eventually displaced in the 1980s. Since most JMC historians now would consider Mott’s perspective outmoded, it is difficult to realize just how pervasive it was for nearly four decades, but it influenced almost every book and article written during that time.

1. *Journalism in the United States, From 1690 to 1872* (1873) by Frederic Hudson

The first survey journalism history written after the appearance of the penny press, Hudson’s *Journalism in the United States* created the Developmental school of JMC history. Hudson had been a staff member of the *New York Herald*, a paper that emphasized news over opinion more than did other papers of the mid-1800s. Writing from the perspective that the penny press was the outcome of the inexorable progress of civilization, he believed that its practices were what proper journalism was supposed to be, and he applied its standards in explaining journalism history. The Developmental interpretation thus views JMC history as the story of the origin, performance, and progress of standards and practices used in the historian’s own time. Many JMC histo-

ries since Hudson's have used his perspective and much of the material in his book. Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism*, for example, employed the Developmental interpretation. By then, though, it had been ingrained in the thinking of JMC historians for almost seventy years. Following Hudson, the Developmental interpretation for the next 100 years provided the underlying assumptions of the majority of studies of American mass media history. As mass communication began to professionalize in the late 1800s, interest in its history began to grow. As a result, historical studies increased in number. Approximately 90 per cent of all works written until the 1970s were from the Developmental perspective. Although differing on a few particulars, they largely echoed Hudson's themes. Likewise, most JMC history textbooks used the perspective, passing on to students and future historians the explanation that Hudson had originated.

Speaking of must-read books, in this issue we continue our series of interviews with authors of award-winning histories. For this issue, Dave Nord agreed to do a Q&A about his book *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*. It won the American Journalism Historians Association's award in 2005 as the year's outstanding book. We also have a roundtable discussion about the challenges in studying recent history. Terry Lueck, recently retired from Akron University, put it together. Other members of the roundtable are David Davies, Jim McPherson, and Donna Stephens. Perhaps no history is more difficult to write than recent history, and the roundtable addresses a variety of issues that historians must confront. We follow the roundtable with an immensely helpful essay by Mike Conway about the use of oral history as both a research method and a classroom tool. It is based on Prof. Conway's experiences researching television history. Finally, for our Kobre Award interview, Wally Eberhard graciously consented to do a Q&A. As he points out, we need to know our roots — something we hope the Kobre interviews help us to do.

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Historical Roundtable: Challenges in Studying Recent History

By David Davies, Therese Lueck,
James McPherson, and Donna Stephens ©

In contemplating “What constitutes history?” scholars often proceed from a historical, or pre-historical, point. However, academics steeped in student inquiry about historical relevance may find themselves contemplating the question from the other end of the timeline.

It would be a rare convention of media historians at which professors were not relating anecdotes about students demanding to define history as “whatever happened yesterday.”

Along with students, many historians likewise have a strong interest in the recent past — but studying recent history presents issues that are not typical for most historical study. For example, historians usually have a larger abundance of sources for the recent than the distant past, and yet they also face more difficult challenges in getting access to some sources (such as personal documents) that they would like to use. Furthermore, the interest in the recent past appears, in many instances, to be primarily because of an interest in contemporary conditions rather than purely an interest in history. As a result, historians sometimes have had difficulty separating the recent past from their concerns about contemporary events. Their accounts, therefore, have sometimes shown the effects of their passions and biases more than accounts of most earlier periods have.

A panel on “The Challenges of Writing Recent History” at the 2015 national convention of the American Journalism Historians Association elevated historical consideration of the past fifty years or so from convention coffee klatch to a more formal level of discourse. It attempted to

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address many of the questions that both historians and students have. The following roundtable continues that discussion. The discussants have taken ideas from the panel and refined and expanded them.



Davies

Q: When does the recent past become history, or in other words, a subject appropriate for study by historians rather than a contemporary subject?

Davies: For the first few years of teaching graduate students, I used the “20-year standard,” arguing that an



Lueck

David R. Davies, a professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, specializes in the history of American newspapers since World War II and media coverage of the civil rights movement. He has written two books dealing with recent history: The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement and The Post-war Decline of American Newspapers, 1945-1965. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Alabama.

Therese L. Lueck, a professor emerita from the University of Akron, co-edited the two-volume Women’s Periodicals in the United States and has written numerous articles and book chapters about magazines in the 20th century and about women and journalism in the decades that frame the 20th century. She received her Ph.D. from Bowling Green State University and is a former president of the American Journalism Historians Association.



McPherson

James Brian McPherson, a professor at Whitworth University, has published two books about journalism in the recent past: Journalism at the End of the American Century, 1965-Present and The Conservative Resurgence and the Press. He writes a blog about contemporary media and politics. He received his Ph.D. from Washington State University and is a former president of the AJHA.



Stephens

Donna Lampkin Stephens, an associate professor at the University of Central Arkansas, is the author of the book If It Ain’t Broke, Break It: How Corporate Journalism Killed the Arkansas Gazette, which covered the newspaper’s history up to 1991. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Southern Mississippi.

Historical Roundtable: Challenges in Studying Recent History

event must be at least 20 years old before it can be considered to be “history.” I needed such a rule because graduate students seemed to be naturally drawn to very recent events, and I found myself in the situation of always having to push them to study events further in the past.

But then I had a student who insisted on covering a topic that fell within the 20 years, and the more the student argued the more I found my position softening. I relented (OK, I’m a softie when it comes to topic selection), the student did the paper he wanted, and the resulting paper was accepted at the AJHA. It even won an award. So I figured it was time to change my rule.

The rule I settled upon was this: A historical event had to be “settled,” i.e., to have a logical beginning, middle, and end, to mark it as an event appropriate for historical study by a student in my class. By this standard, the 2008 presidential election — to cite just one example — would be appropriate for study, recent though it may be, because it’s a contest that is settled and is done and over with. The Iraq war, on the other hand, despite the fact that it began nearly 15 years ago, would not be, given that it continues to this day and that we as a society still grapple with its meaning and consequences.

I’m certain that my reasoning lacks nuance, but I believe it works for graduate students by giving them a wide degree of freedom in doing topics that interest them. If students are indeed drawn to recent topics, and if historical methods can logically be seen as shedding light on these topics, then it makes sense to me that students would have the leeway to explore them.

Lueck: A demarcation of years seems to provide an inadequate answer for such an intriguing question. For me, consideration of the question conjures magical realism, that genre epitomized by Gabriel Garcia Marquez that richly weaves eliding past and future realities of time and space in order to give meaningful expression to an evolving present.

Similarly, fluid nonfiction boundaries may be ripe for articulation by journalism historians grappling with recent history. Engaging in such “rethinking” of history challenges us to create a media historiography that is accountable to a living past.

Stephens: This is a difficult question to answer because I’m not sure there is one answer. I would say the minimum length of time after the event would need to be 10 years. That would enable some perspective, some dying down of any emotional embers from a hot or controversial topic. One important thing to know when you are working with recent history is to realize and accept that many of your critics are still living and will chime in. That, too, can add to the historical record. So be prepared to defend your conclusions. And have a thick skin.

Q: When historians are still living in the time they are studying, how does one decide which topics are truly of historical importance?

McPherson: To begin with, we can look to history. Some aspects of public life have consistently proven themselves to be relevant. For example, presidential elections always affect the future to varying degrees, and therefore are of historical importance. That’s especially true for a presidential election in which a “first” occurs — the first African American president, or an election in which the winner will likely be either the first woman president, or the first “reality television” star with no previous political experience.

The “War on Terror” matters from a historical perspective because it has cost thousands of lives and billions of dollars, and because terrorism shows no signs of ending. War always matters, of course, though in an era in which the nation is always “at war” it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what will matter in the long run. Supreme Court decisions that affect large percentages of the population in regard to an

expansion of civil rights — such as *Brown v. Board of Education* or recent decisions regarding gay marriage — also fit into this category. Of course the gay marriage issue is part of what seems to be a bigger trend, with more emphasis on GLBT issues. Several related events suggest this is an issue of long-term historical significance, including the removal of the ban forbidding gays to openly serve in the military, the “coming out” of former Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner as transgender woman Caitlyn Jenner, and legal battles in various states over which restrooms transgender people can legally use.

I would argue that events that mirror historical issues of the past may also be likely to be significant. For example, recent “Black Lives Matter” protests stemming from racial unrest in major American cities show that issues that were of concern decades ago have never been fully resolved, but social media, cell phone cameras and the Internet have the potential to make us more aware of those issues. It can be more difficult to determine the significance of events that seem to be a “big deal” when they’re happening, but which may be simply minor trends, such as some specific types of social media or technology.

Regardless, the historian who deals with recent history must constantly check her/his assumptions, including with other historians (perhaps especially with historians who might have different biases). Even so, every historian should be comfortable with the idea that s/he may be wrong. That’s nothing new, of course. As new records or diaries or other materials become available, we continually find out new things about such things as even the Colonial Press or the Civil War, or World War II. More recent scholarship may be informed by a wider range of historical artifacts, even taking advantage of interviews of those directly involved in events, but is — probably even more than history dealing with previous periods — necessarily tentative. If you are not comfortable with ambiguity, you may not be well suited to historical research.

Q: Faced with a huge number of resources, how does one decide which sources to examine?

Stephens: There are many similarities between source issues for journalists and those for historians. Historians, just like journalists, must find and then evaluate as many sources as possible. Evaluate everything — human sources, oral histories, archival holdings. Multiple memories or physical accounts of the past can be used as checks on each other. Unfortunately, as so much of the world goes digital, future historians will not have the treasure trove of archival material that we have had. J.N. Heiskell, owner and editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* from 1902 until his death in 1972, obviously was keenly aware of the importance of history. His papers at the Arkansas Studies Institute have been an invaluable source for me and other scholars. He made carbon copies of many of the letters he wrote, and he saved correspondence that came to him. I was able to piece together much of the *Gazette's* drama over the Little Rock Central Crisis simply through the correspondence in his collection.

Many topics of recent history will yield another problem — too many sources. As I did as a professional journalist, I have found that it is better to err on the side of having too much material rather than too little. But at some point, you just have to stop researching and start writing. When something new comes in, add it to a later version or save it for another project.

Q: How does one get access to sources that might be held privately?

Davies: Three words: Librarians, librarians, librarians. Good reference and archival librarians know their own collections but also know the people and places connected to the events and people in which their collections specialize. They can serve as go-betweens to introduce you

to people you need to know who might have access to additional material. Plus — to state an obvious point — they will know their own collections so well that they can point you to materials that you otherwise would not have found. In addition, it's not difficult to understand the importance of building relationships with people who are kind enough to help you in your research. The stronger your relationship with people you're interviewing, for example, the more likely they are to lead you to other people and to printed material that you may find useful.

Stephens: Building relationships is perhaps the most important key. There is no substitute for making a personal connection, whether with a source for a news story or for historical research. When people like you, they will want to help you. Also, be open to unexpected opportunities. Just last week, I read a message to one of my Facebook groups about an estate sale for an old friend who died several years ago. He had been the last managing editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* and wrote his master's thesis on Mr. Heiskell. I had used his work as part of my research. When I dropped by the estate sale, really just for a quick look, I found that it contained important, rare papers, photographs and other memorabilia. I spent more money than I should have, and as I was checking out, the worker told me of a large folder on Mr. Heiskell that had been locked in a cabinet. I said, "Give it to me." That \$50 turned into another mother lode of material I can use for future projects. On the final day of the sale, I left a couple of bids for other material that I really didn't need but would certainly take if no one else bought. This morning, the sales executive called to tell me not only had I won those bids, but also that she would give me anything else, paper-wise, I wanted. "I think you should have it since you're the historian of the *Gazette*," she said. That personal connection made a huge difference. Otherwise, I hate to think about what would have been thrown away, lost to history.

Q: What effect has historians' interest or involvement in recent events had on their ability to explain the recent past?

McPherson: For one thing, this brings up problems associated with memory. Most of us now recognize that sources' memories may be faulty or incomplete. But especially with issues in which we have been involved or have a particular interest — the kind of interest that might make us more likely to pursue a topic as a research subject, in fact — we must be equally skeptical of our own recollections. We all like to be the heroes of our own stories, and our personal or political biases may color our memories.

Stephens: One's closeness to a topic can be both a pro and a con in historical research. Often the researcher won't even realize that life experiences can indeed be legitimate topics for historical research. On the other hand, involvement offers built-in knowledge and sources as well as another important entity — passion for a topic.

My dissertation, *"If It Ain't Broke, Break It": How Corporate Journalism Killed the Arkansas Gazette*, published by the University of Arkansas Press in February 2015, detailed the 20th-century history of the *Arkansas Gazette*, where I'd worked from an internship in 1984 until the day the doors closed and the paper died on Oct. 18, 1991. My closeness to this topic actually kept me from pursuing it as a research project for a long time. It wasn't research to me — it was life — and I had lived it, losing, along with several hundred others, my job when the paper closed. Fifteen years later, I fell into this research topic by accident and good fortune. I had been too close to it to realize its historical and research value.

One of the happiest days of my academic career was the day I realized my research areas could include what I had lived through at the *Gazette*. I had plenty of human sources. I knew them, or at least knew of

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them, which automatically got me into some places another historian might not have been able to go. One thing that I have found through my research is that my experience with the *Arkansas Gazette* gives my research a passion that is too often missing from history. That has been the common theme as I have presented my book. Audience members always comment about how passionate I am about the subject, and I think that helps bring in some interest from non-historians.

But be aware of some extra pressure when working with recent history. I have found that readers either love my book or hate it, depending largely on which side of Arkansas's Newspaper War they were on. For example, I've gotten a few bad reviews from, shall we call them, "Gannettoids."

Q: Is it appropriate for historians to be more deeply motivated by their interest in the present than in the past?

Lueck: It seems natural that, as academics and involved citizens, historians would be motivated by current events to mine our cultural past seeking parallels for media issues and perhaps even answers to societal problems.

Is a motivation derived from the present to explore the recent past really so different from the passion that historians bring to interpreting a certain era or their fascination with a particular historical personality?

McPherson: I'm not sure that anyone calling her/himself a historian would agree that an interest in the present outweighs an interest in the past, particularly in terms of research. Still, especially when dealing with the recent past, it is impossible not to consider the effects of history on the present. Just as a historian might look to the events during and just after WWI when trying to understand the events of WWII, a histo-

rian of today — especially one who teaches other media courses, as many of us do — will naturally look to events of twenty or forty years ago to try to understand what is happening now.

Q: Is it possible for historians to provide accurate assessments of events before a certain length of time has passed?

Davies: Clearly, there's the risk of adopting a certain amount of presentism in any interpretation of very recent events, but recent events also allow us many possibilities for data collection, specifically interviews with participants or observers whose memories could still be quite fresh. If history is never perfect, and if any interpretation should be regarded as a product of its time and place, as I would argue, then good history with sound sources and a balanced and fair interpretation is good history even if you're dealing with relatively recent events.

McPherson: I frankly doubt that any historian has provided an absolutely accurate assessment of events at any time. While time provides context, it also helps solidify accepted myths. New sources may be found, but others may be lost. Memories are faulty, and sometimes key participants go missing. Records are incomplete. History is never perfect. The best we can do is to try to make it better.

Q: What must be done for historians to provide meaningful assessments of events that occurred during their own lifetime and in which they may have been deeply involved?

Stephens: The key is to cross-check. Cross-check human sources with other human sources, human sources with archival sources, archival sources with other archival sources — and your own memory against all of the above. Let them all provide checks on each other. We've all

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seen discrepancies, but just because you find some errors in a human source's memory doesn't mean the source should automatically be deleted from then on.

For example, last fall my university hosted a panel discussion featuring four reporters for the *Arkansas Gazette* who were involved with the coverage of the 1957 desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, for which the *Gazette* won two Pulitzer Prizes in 1958. Joining us in the audience that night were two members of the Little Rock Nine, Elizabeth Eckford and Thelma Mothershed-Wair, as well as the younger sister of a third member of the Nine, Minnijean Brown. Phyllis Brown was 9 years old in 1957.

As the journalists, by then all well into their 80s, talked about the coverage of the story, they made the point that their editors had made the conscious decision to simply report names and ages of the Nine — no other details. The students were covered, they said, like “cardboard cutouts” — an issue, perhaps, for its own ethical discussion — but these reporters all agreed that they thought the reasoning was to protect the students from the rabble-rousers. But Phyllis Brown stood up that night and challenged those memories, saying that “the papers” had printed the Nine's parents' names, addresses, employers, etc., leading to understandable fear and upset in those homes and the community.

So who was right? The reporters were unanimous in their contention that neither the *Gazette* nor the rival *Arkansas Democrat* — the legitimate media of the day — had done so. Phyllis Brown was just as adamant that they had. What the reporters determined later was that she likely had remembered the White Citizens' Council's propaganda sheets — not the newspapers — and that that frightened 9-year-old had lumped the legitimate media in with the Citizens' Council's propaganda.

That was not the time or place to try to engage Phyllis Brown in this discussion. In fact, she told me when she left that evening, “Donna,

you're not going to invite me up here again." I told her, "Oh yes, I am." Phyllis Brown — as well as the former *Gazette* reporters — is still a legitimate source. But like all human sources, their memories need to be validated by others and by archival material.

Q: In a democratic society, has the preferred role of the journalist been as detached observer or as an adversary of other institutions?

Davies: I'm going to straddle the fence on this one. To credit one approach as the preferred one would reflect a presentist approach, to my mind at least. I'd argue it's better just to evaluate the press on the terms it operated under in the time period under study, and then go from there. How's that for dodging a scholarly bullet?

Lueck: A robust democracy depends on a chorus of voices in the press as well as the public; yet 20th-century America came to prefer, or expect, the role of the journalist to be one of detached observer. Respect for modern journalistic practice developed within a paradigm that privileged science and its perceived objectivity. Derived from cultural norms that drove education, training, and professional experience, the role can be viewed as an artifact of that paradigm. However, the journalist as watchdog of government and potential adversary of that institution can be seen as one expression of the evidence-based, fact-finding practice. I would say that journalists as advocates of underrepresented groups more than as adversaries of institutions furthered the paradigm shift, but that those roles have yet to be fully appreciated as expressions of the craft.

As we emerge from the shadow of the scientific paradigm, this question is being reframed. As fewer and fewer journalists come to the practice without grounding in traditional education, training, and newsroom experience, the role of the journalist in society is being rad-

ically redefined.

Q: If one believes that the preferred role of the press in a democratic society is an adversarial one, what is the basis for determining that a professionalized press serves the interests of the public better than elected government representatives?

McPherson: It seems to me that the Founding Fathers, in setting up a free press, knew that elected representatives were inevitably faulty — prone to ego, graft, and a desire for power, among other things. In other words, they are human beings. And, by the way, so are members of the press. I believe that those who pursue journalism typically do so because they want to serve a greater good, but an institutionalized press has many of the same problems as any other institution. So perhaps the question is not whether the professionalized press serves the interests of the public *better* than elected government representatives, but whether it serves the interests of the public *in addition to* elected officials. Just as more voices provide better context, from a “marketplace of ideas” perspective, so, too, do more public servants have the potential to give citizens a better understanding of government.

Having said that, I think the modern “professionalized press” has become problematic. A need to attract readers and viewers, the costs of doing investigative or in-depth journalism, and an increasingly entertainment-driven media landscape all make me fear that for many Americans the press has become decreasingly relevant.

Q: More generally, should media historians adopt the views of professional journalism, or should they be historians without commitment to the principles of journalism?

Stephens: I am a big believer in the principles of journalism, and I use

them as my guide regardless of what I am writing. Accuracy and objectivity are two of the absolute keys, as is the need for an editor. You must constantly remember to build your conclusions on the evidence. Strive for objectivity, but don't go overboard. For example, as I worked on the history of the *Arkansas Gazette*, my involvement with the newspaper as well as my training as a professional journalist made me extra careful — too careful, as it turned out, for David Davies, my dissertation chair/ editor. At first, I was so determined to be objective and fair that I had a hard time drawing real conclusions. As we were wrestling over my conclusions, Dave gave me this advice, which I will never forget: “You're writing like a reporter. You're too objective. Here, you need to write like an editorial writer.” Having always been a reporter and never an editorial writer, that was difficult for me. But his insistence made my work far better.

Q: Should historians bring an ideological perspective to their study of the recent past? Is it possible for them not to do so?

McPherson: Ideally, no. And absolutely not. An unbiased historian is as much a mythical being as is an unbiased journalist. The best we can do is to seek ways to counter our biases (including having other readers review our work). I am frankly torn on how obvious we should make our biases to the reader. In the case of textbooks and academic papers, I think we should do our best to “weed out” the bias so that it becomes virtually invisible to the reader. But in works aimed at helping a broader audience understand the significance of recent history, because bias is inevitable, I think it can be valuable to make one's own bias clear. You still need to back everything up with good, clear research — so that someone who may have a different bias can at least understand how you reached your conclusions.

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Oral History Interviews as a Classroom Tool

By Mike Conway ©



Conway

“It was gorgeous. It was absolutely beautiful. Delicate. Compared to what RCA first put out in their color, which was garish and intense and ugly, CBS color was perfectly beautiful.”¹

Sitting in her Hendersonville, North Carolina, home, Frances Buss Buch leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and retrieved memories from more than a half-century in the past. Buch played an important role in the early days of American commercial television, not only as the medium’s first female director, but because she also sat in the control room and called the camera shots on many significant programs and firsts for the medium. In her opening quote, she is talking about the battle over color television standards. Both RCA and CBS produced special programming in the early 1950s to convince the Federal Communications Commission that they had the best format for color television.

“Of course the problem was that CBS color was not compatible,” said Buch. “And if you owned a black and white set, you had to buy

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Conway

another set in order to see CBS color. So no wonder the FCC turned it down. It wasn't compatible with what was in existence." ²

Buch's oral history interview is valuable in two key areas: scholarship and student engagement. First of all she is able to add specific details to parts of early television history, an area that can be thin on primary sources. Her reminiscences help contextualize and personalize events. Her contributions bring about a more accurate picture of the development of television. In the quotations above, her views on the quality of CBS color are enlightening because RCA eventually won the color war. So the common perception (pushed by RCA at the time) was that CBS had an inferior product. Buss makes clear that the quality was fine, but compatibility was the issue. Secondly, since I videotaped my oral history interview with Buch, just two years before her death at age 92, I can show students what she looked like, her facial expressions, and her tone when she answered my questions. I have found that sprinkling clips from my oral history interviews in classroom lectures and discussions helps keep the students engaged. They can look in the eyes of the person who witnessed a specific moment in media history.



Mike Conway interviews Frances Buss Buch in 2008.

Oral History as a Research Method

Oral history has become one of the most versatile research methods, both in the academy and among the public. Oral history gained favor in

historical research in the second half of the twentieth century by scholars who wanted to shift the focus from the powerful (who often had written archives) to the general public, or more specifically, marginalized groups that had been invisible in traditional historical archives.³ Interviewing people for their lived experiences is a strategy for those historians who, as Gwyn Prins put it, “seek to scan the stars from the gutter.”⁴

While some question the importance of oral histories given the fallibility of human memory, scholars point out that the same scrutiny should be employed for written records. The permanency of the printed word does not shield the document from deceptions at the time of creation. Both forms of historical research need to be understood for their strengths and weaknesses. For Paul Thompson, oral history can be empowering for those involved in the event, by concentrating on their stories, scholars “can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.”⁵

Oral History in the Classroom

One of the strengths of oral history for college professors is that its value does not end with the research publication. These in-depth interviews are great additions to classroom discussions. One of the key components separating oral history from other interviews is that the interaction must be recorded and saved. The Oral History Association notes that each project “begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account.”⁶ Since the interview is not just a written transcript, you can now use those audio or video interviews to bring to life your class presentations.

My background and research area is television news. So I have recorded most of my interviews on digital video. While recording moving pictures involves more preparation on the front end of the research

process, I've found the students are much more engaged when I can show them a video clip as compared to an audio interview or text. They can watch Walter Cronkite talk about his first years in local television news, Richard C. Hottelet recount his dangerous flight over the Normandy beaches on D-Day to provide CBS listeners with a first-person account, or Shirley and Joe Wershba reliving the historic CBS *See it Now* broadcast on Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Historical Sources Exercise

I also incorporate a specific oral history video interview as part of an exercise I use to demonstrate the importance of triangulation and assessment of sources when conducting historical research. This interactive session involves the CBS television coverage of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Commercial television was fewer than six months old on that date, the CBS signal only reached hundreds of sets in the New York City area, and there are no transcripts or recordings of the broadcast. So the researcher has to look to other sources to explain and understand the broadcast.

I begin the exercise by showing the students an oral history interview with the late Robert Skedgell, who was the writer for CBS television news in 1941. Normally, the CBS television studios were dark on Sundays, with no programming. The students watch Skedgell confidently recount that chaotic day, when the crew raced to the studio and put the station on the air after hearing about the attack in the early after-



Robert Skedgell during an oral history interview

Oral History Interviews as a Classroom Tool

noon. He talks about broadcasting from around 4:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. the next day, roughly eight straight hours on the Japanese attack.

Next, I give them four more CBS-TV Pearl Harbor historic documents, ranging from textbook pages to a Federal Communication Commission report. I break the students into groups and ask them to triangulate the sources and report on the CBS television broadcast on Pearl Harbor day. As they start going through the written documents, they realize there is a strong discrepancy on how long CBS was on the air that day. Three sources (including the Skedgell video interview) indicate 7-8 hours on the air, but two sources claim the program did not begin until later in the evening and lasted less than 90 minutes.

As we work through the exercise, they recognize the sources written not long after the event, a CBS report to the FCC and a book written the next year by CBS's first TV newscaster, are more credible and the evidence suggests a shorter broadcast starting in the late evening.

That discovery then leads to a discussion of the intricacies of human memory, especially the interference of events that happened after a specific moment. I make sure they know Mr. Skedgell was not lying about the longer broadcast. Instead, it is likely that he was involved in so many breaking news broadcasts in the decades after Pearl Harbor day, when eight hours was not a significant amount of time for a major story, he confused the hours of preparation on that day for actual broadcast hours.

The exercise also shows the danger of relying on just one source. Two of the written sources they studied were also based on Skedgell's memory, since he was one of the last people still alive involved in that Pearl Harbor television newscast.

Next, we talk about the questions a historian would ask after this exercise, including why would CBS-TV wait until 8:45 p.m. to go on the air that day when they were all in the studio by the early afternoon? Could it be the transmitter took hours to warm up in that era? Could it

be they did not have much information to report since we later learned that much information about the attack had been censored?

The investigation brings us back to the woman we met at the start of this essay, Frances Buss Buch. She did not work in news. So when I interviewed her, I was looking for general information about early CBS-TV, since she was hired at the beginning of commercial television in July 1941. But luckily, I thought to ask her about that day. Her memory was much stronger than Skedgell's, and she revealed one hint into what took the crew so long to get on the air.

The news set for CBS-TV news in 1941 was built with large maps of Europe as backdrops, since World War II was concentrated in that area before U.S. involvement. The maps were filled with battle lines, tanks, planes, and other war symbols. Newscaster Richard Hubbell would point to various locations on the map, depending on the latest news.

The attack on Pearl Harbor could not be visualized with the existing set. The crew first had to find an atlas showing the Pacific Ocean, and then it proceeded to build an entirely new set, featuring the geographic area where the Japanese attacked the U.S. military base. Frances Buss Buch helped put together the new maps on that Sunday afternoon. The staff was also concerned about limited and conflicting information from the wire services. So they wanted to wait for more details. From today's perspective, building a new set instead of getting right on the air is a curious decision, but then you remind students that historians must immerse themselves in the period they are studying and not impose today's sensibilities on a different period of time.

Comparing the Skedgell and Buch oral history interviews also reveals another important distinction for oral historians that I point out to the students. Skedgell spent his entire career at CBS. So his memories of that day are colored by everything that he did after that date. One reason Buch had such clear memories is that she walked away from television in the mid-1950s and never worked in the industry again. So

she could more easily compartmentalize her television experiences.

I have used this exercise in both undergraduate journalism history courses and also graduate research methods classes, and both groups of students usually get into the spirit of the investigation. The use of the video oral history interviews from Skedgell and Buch help bring that period alive, especially since I can not show them the actual broadcast.

Television History

The oral histories interviews that I have recorded are great for classroom use when we happen to be digging into the early years of television news. That area only encompasses a small part of what I teach. So I am always looking for more sources for historic broadcasts and media oral history interviews. Because of copyright restrictions and archive limitations, it is not always easy to find specific broadcasts or get easy access to audio or video oral histories.

If you study or teach television history, one essential resource is the Archive of American Television (www.emmytvlegends.org). This archive is valuable because it caters to the historian, the classroom instructor, and even the casual web surfer. If I have a specific topic, I can quickly find short interview clips from various people in the television industry discussing that topic from a variety of viewpoints.

The archive began in 1997 when members of the Television Academy Foundation, including Grant Tinker and David Wolper, made a push to “collect and preserve the stories of television’s legends and pioneers, and make them accessible for future generations.”⁷ In twenty years, the Archive of American Television has conducted more than 800 interviews with people involved in all areas of American television, including actors, producers, and technical staff. The Archive boasts more than 3,000 hours of interviews, produced with professional video and audio standards. So they visually fit in with the programs being dis-

cussed. The site has become a popular source for information when a television veteran passes away, with clips from their Archive interviews often used in obituaries.

With so many interviews, the Archive has succeeded in its “preserve” mission, but the “accessible” aspect is what makes it such a great resource. The site adheres to the twin sensibilities of the historian and the classroom instructor. If you are researching some aspect of Dan Rather’s career, you can easily access close to eight hours of his oral history interview, unedited, in fifteen video files. But if you are looking for a specific incident in his career for a classroom topic, such as replacing Walter Cronkite as CBS anchor, or his 1974 confrontation with Richard Nixon at a press conference, the site will find the specific clip within the video files and allow you to play only that section. For larger topics, the site will list all the people who have discussed that issue in their interviews and line up those clips for you.

The Archive is run by just four full-time and one part-time staff members. The depth and accessibility of the site is not by chance. The Archive staff has fought hard to serve both the scholar and the casual viewer. Senior Producer Jenni Matz has spent many years in television and film documentaries and also has a Masters degree in Library and Information Sciences. Senior researcher Adrienne Faillace has a Masters degree in TV, Radio, and Film from Syracuse University. They interview roughly 25 people a year and then concentrate on how to make the interviews, or specific topics within the interviews, most accessible to online users.

Using the Archive of American Television

Here’s one example from a class I taught last semester. In my Broadcast Media Analysis class, we spent part of the semester on portrayals of African Americans on television, using Aniko Bodroghkozy’s book, *Equal*

Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement. I found that my students had watched *The Cosby Show* and some even knew about *Good Times*, but they were having trouble grasping the importance of *Julia* from the 1960s. In addition to the reading from Bodroghkozy's book, I went to the Archive of American Television site and searched for the program. A simple search for *Julia* led to a specific entry devoted to the show. The page included history of the program from The Museum of Broadcast Communication's *Encyclopedia of Television*. The page also listed all oral history interviews in which the program has been discussed. It even included an embedded YouTube clip of the program itself. For more specific information, the Archive has separated out parts of the oral history interviews. So you can view actress Diahann Carroll discussing her concerns about auditioning for the program or producer Hal Kantner talking about how he created the program after hearing an inspiring talk by the NAACP's Roy Wilkins. Digging deeper, Casting Director Eddie Foy III relates how he chose actors for the program and agent Meta Rosenberg goes into her role in getting the groundbreaking *Julia* program on the air. I was able to easily mix in some of these short clips as we talked about some of the broader themes of the program.

Incorporating oral history interviews in media class presentations works on two levels. First of all, you are able to add insights from the people responsible for creating the content, helping to add context to the document or broadcast itself. Just as important, the history becomes personal because the students see and hear the people who were intimately involved in the topic. Many of the people whom I have interviewed have since passed away. So I see their video interviews as a small way to keep their contribution alive. Famous people including Walter Cronkite or Don Hewitt may not need any help in keeping their legacies strong, but by showing students Frances Buss Buch or Robert Skedgell, I feel as if I am honoring their contribution to media history as

well as giving the students a specific person to see, beyond just anonymous content. The use of oral history in the classroom help keep these people relevant and possibly provide students with a specific person to identify with as a potential role model for their careers.

NOTES

¹ Frances Buss Buch, interview with author, April 17, 2008, Hendersonville, N.C., digital videotape.

² Ibid.

³ Mike Conway, "Oral History: Advantages and Challenges in Employing Oral History Interviews as Part of a Research Project" in *Research Methods in Media Studies*, Fabienne Darling-Wolf, ed: 155-178. Part of *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies* series. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

⁴ Gwyn Prins, "Oral History," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Peter Burke, ed. (State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): 149.

⁵ Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. (London: Routledge, 2009) :26.

⁶ "Principles and Best Practices," Oral History Association, October 2009, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/> (Accessed May 25, 2016).

⁷ Jenni Matz, "The Archive of American Television: Capturing Television History, One Voice at a time," presentation for "Augmenting Curriculum with TV Academy Foundation Archive Videos" panel, Broadcast Education Association (BEA) annual conference, History Division, Las Vegas, Nev., (2016).

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Book Award Interview: David Paul Nord



Dave Nord won the 2005 American Journalism Historians Association’s award for the year’s outstanding book for his *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*. Dr. Nord is a professor emeritus of Indiana University.

Nord

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

Nord: *Faith in Reading* tells the story of the noncommercial origins of mass media in America. The theme is how religious publishers in the early nineteenth century learned to work against the flow of ordinary commerce. Religious publishing societies such as the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday-School Union believed that reading was too important to be left to the “market revolution”; they sought to foil the market through planning and management — that is, through the “visible hand” of organization. And they were remarkably successful, churning out millions of Bibles, tracts, religious books, and periodicals. At the same time, they tried to teach people to read these new media in the most traditional way. Their aim was to use new media to encourage old reading habits.

Faith in Reading is also about reader response: how ordinary readers received and read religious books and tracts in early nineteenth-century America.

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

Nord: My interest in religious publishing was sparked in the early 1980s by my teaching about the antislavery movement. I was intrigued by the fact that abolitionists who were active in mass printing activities in the 1830s had learned their lessons from the Bible and tract societies. So I began to look into the activities of those evangelical publishers of the 1810s and 1820s. Gradually, it occurred to me that I was looking at the first genuine mass media in America — that is, media targeting everyone. All of the important technological and organizational innovations in mass publishing were pioneered by those societies. So, I wrote about them in a 1984 article titled “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America” — and that was the beginning of an on-again, off-again research project over the next twenty years.

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?

Nord: My 1984 article on religious publishing was based almost entirely on the annual reports of the American Tract Society and American Bible Society, which I read at the Newberry Library in Chicago. At first I was interested mainly in statistics because I wanted to explore publishing economics, especially the value of new technology and economies of scale in mass printing and distribution. But the obvious weakness of this economic approach was that it said nothing about reception: Did people actually read these cheap tracts and books and, if so, how did they respond? Furthermore, I wanted to understand the religious doctrines that led these evangelical publicists to idealize printing and reading. Therefore, much of my research in the 1990s involved searching for evidence of reading and readers. The best sources on

reader response were the reports of colporteurs (traveling agents). I continued to use the organizational publications of the Tract Society and Bible Society, and I also began to explore the publishing efforts of the American Sunday School Union and several Protestant denominations: Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. I worked at the libraries of the American Bible Society in New York; the American Tract Society in Garland, Texas; the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass.; the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia; the Methodist Archives and History Center at Drew University; and other libraries.

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

Nord: The main missing element in my research was Catholicism. *Faith in Reading* is relentlessly Protestant. Of course, it was the Protestants who were most devoted to the doctrines that led them to promote reading: *solo scriptura* (scripture alone) and the priesthood of believers. Still, a comparison with Catholic publishing would have been useful, especially because Catholics had somewhat different notions about reading. I also wish I had located more memoirs and personal letters written by colporteurs about their experiences. Most of the colporteurs' official reports that I used were published as excerpts in organizational reports and periodicals.

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

Nord: For me the most interesting sources were the colporteur reports describing their interactions with readers. They were rich and revealing. But I always had to remind myself that those reports on reader response were second-and-third hand observations. They were not the

readers' own thoughts and comments on their reading. They were colporteurs' observations filtered through a biased editorial process at the societies' headquarters. I searched for more unfiltered evidence, such as unedited colporteur reports and readers' own accounts. But, except for a few manuscript colporteur reports, I didn't find it. I should have searched harder. In the end, my advice to historians of reader response is to try to get as close to the reader's own experience as possible. But if you can't get very close, well, blunder ahead anyway. Go with what you've got. But don't overstate the significance of the evidence you do find.

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

Nord: My biggest challenge was deciding when to stop doing research. Over the years, I did a lot of work that never found its way into the book. For example, I worked with the American Home Missionary Society collection at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, but then I used none of that research in the book or anywhere else. I also did much more research on the denominational publishers — Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians — than found its way into the book. I learned from this experience that I should have planned and organized the book itself much earlier, rather than publishing discreet articles and then continuing to make open-ended research trips. On the other hand, I had a lot of fun in the libraries of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, Worcester, Mass., Madison, N.J., and Garland, Texas.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

Nord: The book is about both the production and the reception of religious publications. I hope it provides a few insights into both parts of

that enterprise. On the production side, I'd say that my book, perhaps more than any other history of media, stresses the importance of the noncommercial, not-for-profit origin of mass media in America. The religious publishers actually understood the economic nature of media content pretty well and thus were able to develop fairly rational pricing and distribution strategies. So, I hope my book contributes something to American business history. On the reception side, the book describes the interplay between expectations and actual outcomes in reader response. My exploration of the publishers' and colporteurs' expectations about readers and reading may be as important as the readers' own use of the materials they received.

Q: What findings most surprised you?

Nord: I was surprised that the religious publishers, especially at the American Tract Society, were so savvy about how to organize large-scale businesses that operated against the flow of the commercial market. And I was surprised at the diversity of reader response on the American frontier. Some readers treated the new religious media with great reverence; others treated religious tracts and books as ephemeral, throw-away products. The thinking behind that diversity was something I really wanted to understand. Another interesting surprise involved the research process itself. I learned, for example, that the American Tract Society, founded in 1825, was still in business, with headquarters now in a warehouse and print shop in Garland, Texas. The folks there invited me down and gave me complete access to their library and archives, much of which was still stored in boxes that had been shipped from New York when the society had moved years before. They encouraged me to unpack the sealed boxes to see for myself what had survived. This was the only time in my life when an X-Acto Knife was a tool of research. It turned out that the modern ATS did not have

much material from the early-nineteenth century, but what a wonderful time I had, each box like an unopened Christmas present!

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

Nord: Context is key. Because *Faith in Reading* is about religion and reading, I knew I needed to get connected with the fields of religious studies and the history of the book. In the 1990s, I hung out with specialists in those fields more than with people in mass comm history. And I read their work. I imagined my principal audiences to be scholars of religious studies and book history. I don't think historians in our field need to aim as much as I did at audiences in other subfields of history, but I do think they should avoid construing their subject too narrowly. Certainly, with *Faith in Reading* I wanted to say something significant about mass media. But I also tried to keep asking myself: What does this research tell us about the history of religion and reading — and about the history of society in general in nineteenth-century America?

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Kobre Award Interview: Wallace B. Eberhard



Eberhard

Wallace “Wally” Eberhard received the Kobre Award for lifetime achievement from the American Journalism Historians Association in 2007. He taught journalism at the University of Georgia from 1970 until he retired in 2000. Along with the Kobre Award, he has received the Graduate Students Faculty Teaching Award at the University of Georgia and an Editorial Excellence Award while publishing the *Galien River Gazette* at Three Oaks, Mich. While serving in the U.S. Army he was named to the Field Artillery OCS Hall of Fame and received the Legion of Merit.

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

Eberhard: I grew up in Niles, Michigan. We were a reading family: four newspapers, the major magazines — *SatEvePost*, *Colliers*, *Life* — plus all the books I could handle from our Carnegie Library. I enrolled in the University of Michigan, where I majored in journalism and the *Michigan Daily*, with a break for Army service during the Korean War.

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

Eberhard: I was a newspaperman in what some call its Golden Age. For a decade, I was a reporter and editor at small, medium and metro dailies when newsrooms were staffed with talented, funny, quirky, disciplined and committed journalists. And my wife and I owned a small weekly in my home county, where I learned a book full about face-to-

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face journalism.

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

Eberhard: I joined the Bowling Green State University faculty in the '60s. I taught basic and advanced newswriting, reporting and editing and advised the student daily. After graduate work at Wisconsin I taught writing and editing at Georgia for 30 years. I also introduced the first media history and law seminars at UGa and taught those regularly.

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

Eberhard: I grew up in a period of great historical crisis and upheaval. I carried a Wendall Wilkie sign at a whistle stop in Niles in 1940. We were glued to the news when Pearl Harbor was attacked. My big brother was on duty there (and lived to the age of 83). The stereotypical “I read a lot” and “my professors made it interesting” worked with me. So opting for a research interest in media history was natural, interesting and satisfying. I earned a master’s degree in American Studies at BGSU, where the professors added the skills and discipline of an historian to my thinking. Or at least they tried to.

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

Eberhard: Prof. Harold (“Bud”) Nelson was a calm, thoughtful, inspiration when I began doctoral work at Wisconsin. Approach history as a set of questions. Wander the library in search of background reading. Collect relevant information but don’t ignore what else comes to you.

Strive for verisimilitude. Follow your instincts and interests. That was Bud. Seminars with Dwight Teeter and my adviser, David Clark, built on those thoughts, along with just about every other historian I've read since. Barbara Tuchman, David McCullough and Bruce Catton remain models for all of us.

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

Eberhard: Two: The American newspaper, and the media and war. We are just beginning to understand the role of the newspaper in American life. Only the surface has been scratched on understanding media and a nation at war. The question remains: What role(s) do the mass media play in a democracy, peace and war, small or large, general or specialized?

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

Eberhard: One dean — not my favorite — said I was “all over the place,” research-wise. Guilty, and happily so. But I've enjoyed being an historical grasshopper. The articles I've published and papers presented do, however, center on the people who produce the news and their connection to the larger world, plus the press in wartime.

Q: We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the most accomplished people are often the most modest — but if you had to summarize your most important contributions to the field of JMC history, what would they be?

Eberhard: I'm one of those who lived through the emergence of re-

search productivity as part of journalism education. The most important part of what we do, in my opinion, is teach the next generation of journalists. The requirement to be active in a research field came on from 1970 forward. I've been a willing part of AEJMC and AJHA activities since that time, a steady contributor to programs and conferences. I learn from and share with other presenters, whether they're newbies or senior scholars. If there was one, bright shining moment in there, it was taking over *American Journalism* when it was foundering. It is an important scholarly endeavor, and we — and that means many in the AJHA community — put it back on track.

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

Eberhard: I doubt I would change much. I've done what I like to do and juggled life events — teaching, research, advising the SPJ chapter for decades, pursuing a dual career as an Army Reservist, raising a family. It's been satisfying. My first goal was to be a journalist. Later — inspired by the Michigan faculty of the time — I decided it would be a challenge to teach the next generation of journalists. I've done both, and now, retirement is good. I can pursue history, spoil grandchildren and explore the wider world.

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

Eberhard: We are historians first. Thus, we should follow the universals of historical method and apply them with integrity as we ask questions about the role of media in the life of this — or any other — nation. I favor evidence-based inquiry over theory, which is not to say that theory-building is unimportant. More primary sources — archives, docu-

ments and the like — are becoming available to enable better grounded work.

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

Eberhard: The output is hard to keep up with. The quality and sophistication of today's research is light years ahead of where it was in the 1960s. Today's scholars — junior and senior — are under a ton of pressure to publish. Some research is less durable than others, but isn't that inevitable? Many solid books and articles come from other disciplines, and that's refreshing. What we don't do often enough is step back and reassess where we are, in a candid, honest way. Meta-studies and essays are in order.

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?

Eberhard: (1) We are fighting the good fight to keep journalism history courses in the curriculum in an era when the social sciences seem to dominate. Mass media students need to know their roots, and media's historical role. Undergrads are not dull, but they don't seem to know much about history. Period. (2) We have too few publishing breakthroughs into the ranks of better recognized, larger works. We forget to bring narrative skills along when we sit down to write. Dullness creeps in.

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

Eberhard: We need to encourage scholars in their lonely pursuit of

Eberhard

media history through academic meetings, research grants, and more constructive criticism and rethinking where we are.

We've become a more mature subfield of history, and should try to assume scholarly responsibility to reach out to others who pursue history, such as archivists and librarians who make our work possible, and the public at large.

Q: What advice do you have for media historians?

Eberhard: Follow your own interests with integrity and diligence. Work at projects that give you satisfaction at the end of the day.

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