

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 5 (2019). Number 3

Historiography in Mass Communication

Editor

Wm. David Sloan

Editorial Board

David Copeland
Elon University

Bruce Evensen
DePaul University

John Ferré
University of Louisville

Terry Lueck
University of Akron

Erin Coyle
Louisiana State University

Thomas A. Mascaro
Bowling Green State University

Michael D. Murray
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Erika Pribanic-Smith
University of Texas at Arlington

Leonard Ray Teel
Georgia State University

Bernell Tripp
University of Florida

Debra van Tuyll
Augusta University

Yong Volz
University of Missouri

Editorial Purpose

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

Copyright

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

Essays

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@gmail.com

We place importance on the credentials of authors and normally expect an author to have published at least one history book. As you consider submitting an essay, please note that *Historiography* does not go through multiple “revise-and-resubmit” stages. In essence, we expect authors to have an expertise and to “get it right” from the beginning.

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

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

Historiography in Mass Communication

Volume 5 (2019). Number 3

Contents

- From the Editor: "Theory and Historical Explanation" page 1
- Thomas A. Mascaro: "Method Karma — Or, Slogging My Way to History" page 9
- Historical Roundtable: "Legal and Historical Understandings of Privacy and Technology" page 17
Erin K. Coyle, Amy Gajda, Jeffery A. Smith, and Heidi Tworek
- Historian Interview: Vanessa Murphree page 29
- Book Award Interview: Bruce Lenthall: *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* page 39

After you download the pdf of this issue, you can go directly to an article by clicking on its title.

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

Theory and Historical Explanation

By Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt ©



Sloan



Startt

The place of theory in history is a matter of continuing debate.

Part of the reason is that theory has various shades of meaning. There are theories in history and theories of history. When some scholars speak of “theory,” they have a specific concept in mind. For social scientists, theory is a key element in the conceptual framework that characterizes their explanations. Sometimes the word “theory” may refer to conjecture, or it may refer to a scientifically accepted general principle or body of principles. In general, a theory might be considered as a device to organize and classify knowledge. Thus, in historical research, the words “idea,” “hypothesis,” and “theory” sometimes can be virtually interchangeable.

Historians disagree on the place of theory in

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 and of a variety of other awards.

James D. Startt, senior research professor in history at Valparaíso University, has written several books on Woodrow Wilson and the press and has served as editor of a number of other books. He won the Kobre Award for lifetime achievement from the American Journalism Historians Association in 2000.

© 2019. The authors own the copyright to this essay.

history. Some explicitly adopt theories to explain history. Others treat theories as useful devices that can provide a means for describing, and possibly for understanding, human behavior. They might also use a theory to provide intelligible connections between related human actions. It is human nature to want to make sense of complex situations, and theory, some historians believe, helps accomplish that goal.

“You have to have something,” Lawrence W. Levine (1933-2006), the author of *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History*, argued, “that tells you what facts you want in and what you don’t, what’s significant and what is less significant, and what is insignificant. Something has to tell you. That filter is often, whether you know it or not, a kind of theory.”¹

Seen in that way, a theory is simply an organizing principle, and there is little disagreement about its use.

It is the use of theory as a formal explanation that causes controversy. In the field of mass communication history it is not unusual to hear calls for the use of theory or of “new theories.” In the broad academic area of mass communication, where social and behavioral science dominates, theory receives particular emphasis in university graduate programs. It is not surprising that historians who studied in those programs should be particularly aware of theory and the special reverence for it.

So when they hear calls for the use of theory in historical study, they may be prone to think that proponents are arguing for the use of theories such as agenda setting or others associated with social and behavioral science.

Few advocates of making mass communication history more theoretical, however, have such theories in mind. In fact, to understand their concepts of theory, one needs to ignore the term “theory” as used in social and behavioral science. Theories in the sciences usually deal with direct cause-effect relationships and are required to be capable of

precise formulation. Researchers in the sciences expect that studies need to be replicable. Social and behavioral sciences tend to reflect those principles.

That is not the case with most theories used in mass communication history. To apply such notions to theory in history, argue proponents of theoretical history, unfairly attempts to hold their approaches to the standard notions of theory held in the social sciences. Instead, they think of theory in looser terms. “Theory” is closer to a general idea than a testable explanation.

Most proponents of theory in communication history work within a Cultural Studies school or with its cousin Critical Theory. The views among theorists in those schools can vary widely. To understand their concept of theory, though, one must go beyond a definition that regards it as simply a “general idea” and recognize that, at heart, it is an ideological perspective.

Cultural and critical studies define “culture” as a shared set of social values, and researchers tend to believe that media messages serve as agents of social control by reinforcing social values. In historical studies of the mass media, for example, theorists argue that history can be explained as a process in which a small group of powerful owners used media content to maintain social control for their own benefit.

“The roots of cultural and critical studies are diverse,” explains one expert, “and stem from sociology, psychology, and political science, among other theoretical perspectives.... [Media] messages, according to critical theory, have tremendous impact on audiences.” Cultural and critical studies researchers draw on such ideas as Marxist theory of elites’ harmful control of the media, psychoanalysis (with claims that media messages represent unconscious desires), feminist research (with claims that communication oppresses women or can liberate them), and postmodernism (with claims that communication messages have no true meaning in the real world).²

It is not difficult to imagine how a commitment to such theory can collide with the canons of historical research. In the study of mass communication history, some of the most prominent adherents of cultural studies and critical theory are, indeed, not trained in historical research and fail to adhere to its normal standards. Their reliance on theory, without corresponding evidence from primary sources, illustrates the problems that can result when historians employ theoretical assumptions at the expense of evidence.

Other historians reject completely the use of formal theory. They believe that it oversimplifies causes, improperly superimposes a structure on the human actions of the past, and thus misunderstands the distinctiveness of the people and events that historians are studying. Moreover, they see theory as a detriment to their own type of rigorous generalization that proceeds from the bottom up. They believe that imposing theory on history results in violation of the foundational principles for the study of history.

Of course, historians, like other scholars, theorize all the time about problems in their inquiries. The term “theory,” however, when used specifically, means something more than theorizing in general. It is used to connote the application of a specific, coherent, structured explanation for a particular problem. One may speak, for instance, of a theory of social mobility, or of economic growth, or of social behavior, or of communication effects, etc.

We should note that some historians make a distinction between a theory and a hypothesis and see the former as broader than the latter. Others choose to consider a hypothesis as a type of theory.

Historians commonly use theories in a number of ways. Some casually adopt them from one of the social sciences. Some treat them as they would handle any interpretation, as an idea to be used or discounted. Some dismiss the use of theory as not only useless but artificial. A few try to apply well-formulated theories in a rigorous manner.

It is difficult to deny the presence of theory in history. When most historians use theory, they do so by applying it to their study of a particular situation. Some work with theory in an explicit manner; others do not. But if you start with the idea that a simple hypothesis or explanatory concept is a theory, then it is clear that theory, whether used in an implicit or explicit way, is part of historical inquiry.

Some historians make the distinction between “small scale theory,” a theory applied to specific problems, and “grand theory,” a theory of a more general type such as Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis or the agenda-setting theory of the mass media. The latter might be part of a historian’s assumptions before he or she begins a particular inquiry.

Theories of history have attracted many historians. Since ancient times, numerous scholars have been fascinated by the idea that there is a force that determines history and establishes a pattern for human events. Because they ponder the question of the ultimate historical reality, they might be better called philosophers of history. They are the grand systematizers of history, detecting regularities and correlations in and among human actions. Some of their established patterns are cyclical in nature, others linear, and some merely ideological, but, since they impose a systematic meaning on history and explain that meaning by a pattern they believe all history follows, their type of metaphysical conceptualization of history is deterministic. They are interested in discovering the laws behind history. Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee are among the better known philosophers of history in recent centuries.

A more common type of determinism is that associated with the word “progress.” The Whig interpretation of history, which has had numerous proponents in the English-speaking world, is a classic example of using the idea of democratic progress to interpret history. Historians who accept this interpretation view human events as a record of

upward progress, and their ideas have influenced a great deal of historical perception.

In mass communication history, such big theories occasionally show up. The various interpretations that mass communication historians have used — such as the Progressive, Cultural, Developmental, and so forth — are based on underlying assumptions about the fundamental causes behind history.³

Most historians remain unconvinced by deterministic explanations of history. They are dubious about the existence of single causes and laws of history. Determinism, they believe, is a form of reductionism that forces historians to be too selective, even manipulative, in choosing supporting evidence and leads them to organize that evidence in a manner that fails to correspond to the great diversity of human reality. They have serious doubts about the idea that the key to humankind's experience lies in a mechanistic force that is beyond its control. By making other causal factors a manifestation of that force, they contend, determinists impose an inevitability on history that is not there.

Nevertheless, most historians find deterministic conceptualization of history and the grand patterns suggested by a Toynbee or a Marx to have some appeal. Theories can stimulate thought about history and can suggest possible explanations for particular chapters of history. One does not have to be a Marxist, for instance, to recognize that his philosophy of history can help one to understand the nature of capitalism. Or, to carry the example of capitalism a bit further, mass communication historians might well find substantial assistance in Marx's ideas if they wish to inquire into the relationship between business and the press.

It can be concluded that historians in general use theory in some way in their studies. For the most part, however, they use it in a different way than social scientists who shape their studies according to a strict theoretical framework as defined by their various disciplines.

Theory and Historical Explanation

Simply stated, theory does not play the role in historical inquiry that it does in the social sciences. Historians use theories in a more elastic manner than social scientists do. In most cases, they employ theory as they would use any interpretation, as an explanation to be adapted, developed, or rejected. The philosophers of history excepted, their focus is on men and women in the past who lived in endless variety and along the way interacted with the forces that influenced their times.

Welcome to another issue of *Historiography*. We have as usual a line-up of stimulating articles. We begin with an essay by Prof. Tom Mascaro detailing his efforts to determine the truth about the life and career of Ted Yates, a documentary producer for NBC News. It was a challenging task that Tom assigned himself, and his account provides important insights for biographers and historians. We follow that essay with a roundtable, organized by Prof. Erin Coyle, addressing a variety of issues that historians must confront when they attempt to study privacy and technology. For our historian Q&A, Prof. Vanessa Murphree agreed to submit to an interview. She has been one of the main figures in the growth in recent years in the importance of research on public relations history. Finally, for our Q&A with the author of an award-winning book, we have an interview with Prof. Bruce Lenthall, whose *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* received the 2008 AEJMC History Division award.

NOTES

¹ Lawrence W. Levine and Ann Lage, "An Interview with Lawrence W. Levine," *Journal of American History* 93 (December 2006): 800.

² Sean Baker, "Cultural and Critical Studies," Chapter 19 in Shuhua Zhou and Wm. David Sloan, *Research Methods in Communication*, 3rd ed. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2015), 312.

³ Explanations of the interpretations that mass communication historians have used can be found in a variety of places. One of the convenient places is chapter 2, "Interpretation in History," in James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*, 4th ed. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2019).

The Professional



If you want your students to excel at writing *and publishing* feature articles, *Writing for Magazines* will be your perfect textbook.

The author, Cheryl S. Wray, brings a **wealth of experience** to both writing and teaching. She is a full-time freelance writer and has published more than 1,500 articles in a wide variety of publications. She has taught college courses in beginning and advanced feature writing, and she is a frequent conference speaker.

The chapters will **take your students step-by-step through the process**, from getting ideas to seeing their articles in print. This exceptional book also includes Q&A interviews with editors and successful writers, exercises with every chapter, and a variety of other features to help students learn the process — and to help *you* teach your course and see your students' articles published.

A **teacher's manual on a CD** is available with adoption of the book. It includes Internet resources, PowerPoint presentations for classroom use, course syllabi, chapter quizzes, multiple exercises for every chapter, grading forms to lighten the job for you, and a variety of other items.

We think it is the very best textbook in the field. Yet, its suggested retail price is only \$31.95 — less than **one-half the price of most textbooks** and lower than for used copies of many.

To request a free exam copy, email Vision Press at visionpress.books@gmail.com

Vision Press
"Outstanding Books at Affordable Prices"

Method Karma — Or, Slogging My Way to History

By Thomas A. Mascaro ©



Mascaro

Before explaining how I came to develop a history of NBC News documentaries and the career of producer Ted Yates, I beg your indulgence to recall some iconic moments documented by sports photographer Neil Leifer — Muhammad Ali towering over Sonny Liston (1965), Venus Williams victorious at Wimbledon (2005), Secretariat charging to the Triple Crown (1973) — and to take a side trip to Roger & Rod’s barber shop. Several years ago, amidst the scissor snips and incessant chatter, I sat reading one of the many interviews with Leifer in which he attributed his success to luck — right place, right time. The magazine writer, though, saw through Leifer’s feint. What he was really saying is that it takes intense preparation, rigorous methods, and painstaking work to brush away the dust of the mundane and create conditions that could present a lucky shot. As it is for a hard-working photographer like Neil Leifer, it is the same for paleontologists, surgeons, cooks and carpenters, and historians — it’s the burning question, intense curiosity, and

Tom Mascaro is a documentary historian and professor of media and communication at Bowling Green State University. He’s the author of Into the Fray: How NBC’s Washington Documentary Unit Reinvented the News. He’s at work on a new book about NBC News documentaries, 1967-1989, “Hard Truths: The Documentary Odyssey of Bob Rogers and Rhonda Schwartz.” He received his Ph.D. from Wayne State University.

© 2019. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

commitment to the subject, combined with rigorous preparation, that motivates us to slog through dusty pages to imbibe the milieu of the past and construct a theory of others' times. Sometimes we position ourselves to get lucky.

Returning to Their Times

Taped above my desk is a yellowed column of letters to the editor from the *New York Times*, September '99, labeled, "Good Biography Needs Subject and Author." Mark Twain historian Justin Kaplan advises that the biographer "should try to render the experience of another person living in a world partly governed by contingency and accident. The question ... is not why but how: how it felt for the subject of the biography to live his life." Sociology professor Carol J. Auster adds, "[T]he best biographies are those that reveal the connections between individual biography and history" and that help us "understan[d] the ways in which the social and cultural environment and the historical era shape the outcomes of individual lives."

For my research, I needed to place Yates in his times, and I wanted to avoid secondary treatments for historical context by consulting records of his environments. For a program on the 1965 uprising in the Dominican Republic, I went to the Johnson Presidential Library and paged through National Security Council files, an impressive minute-by-minute record of international crises. These documents explain the moment leftists challenged the government, the arrival of U.S. naval and ground forces, and military coordination with reporters. I had seen Yates's documentary, *Santo Domingo, War Among Friends* (NBC, May 28, 1965). Now I was reading the history unfolding in cryptic State-speak documents of the U.S. government.

To my utter amazement, I spotted the name of my subject, "Ted Yates." A series of NSC missives recounted the arrival of the press. Some took advantage of U.S. naval transportation to the Dominican capitol.



Ted Yates, NBC News
Documentary Producer
(1931-1967)

Yates, who enjoyed NBC's financial resources, flew in from Puerto Rico, which allowed him to avoid military restrictions of movement and proved fateful for Yates and his crew. They were able to film street fighting and the breathless report of a U.S. Marine whose comrade had been killed. The young soldier told Yates they would wait until dark to recover the body.

Other U.S. Marines had set up checkpoints for entry into combat zones, including one that stopped a *Prensa* (Press) vehicle carrying two *Miami Herald* reporters. When marines challenged the driver to halt, he panicked, reversed course, and guards opened fire and injured the two reporters. Yates arrived with a film crew moments later and recorded an interview with one victim, while also establishing that U.S. forces had fired upon American journalists. All of this was recounted in the NSC documents, which included the names of dozens of reporters. It was my first grasp of military-press-government relations during crises. They rely on one another for intel and sources, but they are also adversarial, operating independently to accomplish their different missions. Yates routinely ignored U. S. officials in pursuit of stories.

So in addition to developing a primary-source account of Yates's situation in Santo Domingo, I also discovered the depth of detail entombed in NSC and government records in terms of relations with and movement of members of the press. Searching for context I found a new line of inquiry, which led to troves of primary source documents related to my subject.

What's In a Name?

Having found Yates's name in the LBJ files, I became reluctant to skim, no matter how thick the folders or how high the cartons. To narrow my search at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, I decided to continue to focus on NSC, State Department, and Press Relations documents covering periods leading up to documentary airdates. For instance, the program *Congo: Victim of Independence*, aired April 3, 1966, meaning the crew would have been in country in the autumn months. I would target a timeline from when I knew the crew was on scene and continue through a few weeks beyond the broadcast, in case fallout from the program appeared in cable traffic. Using this method to find sources for a documentary series on Southeast Asia, I exposed a brief note in State Department files introducing one Judy Bird Williams, as working for NBC producer Ted Yates and who would be researching in Indonesia and should have the embassy's assistance.

"Judy Bird Williams" was a lucky find. Yates hired Judy Bird as a researcher in 1961. She married John Williams and became Judy Williams, as she was identified in NBC releases. For several years, I'd been trying to find threads tied to surviving members of the Yates crew. Online searches for "Judy Williams" produced everything and nothing. So, when I found her name in a cable at the National Archives, I leapt to the public computer, searched "Judy Bird Williams," and got three hits: two for the same unrelated source and a third that mentioned "Judy Bird Williams" in a newsletter for Cornell University, Class of '57. Judy was living in Hawaii, where she had shepherded some former Cornell classmates around the Big Island, as noted in the newsletter. I contacted the editor and asked her to forward my info. Judy called a few days later. This serendipitous contact opened a treasure of photographs, documents, a Hawaiian interview, and a steady stream of emails and phone chats about Indonesia in the mid-1960s. It was also the beginning of a new line of inquiry about women working in documentary journalism.

Challenging Theories

When Judy divorced, she also decided to challenge herself professionally. Yates had been over-protective regarding international assignments, but Judy had expertise on Indonesia pertinent to the proposed documentaries on Southeast Asia during the escalation in Vietnam. She pushed Yates to let her reach out to her contacts and won authorization to go to Jakarta and research a program she would write. She received her first on-screen writer's credit for *The Battle for Asia, Part III: Indonesia: The Troubled Victory* (February 19, 1967). Among the personal records Judy Bird has shared with me are her 50-page "spot sheet," the detailed first pass of the documentary script, and a personal letter to her parents on the occasion of Yates's death in Jerusalem during the June 1967 war.

Like many of Yates's associates, Bird was aware of his bravery, which many attributed to a stint as combat correspondent during the Korean War. Numerous obituaries and tributes praised Yates's courage, dedication to journalism, and combat experience. Based primarily on these testimonials, I conducted research and developed narrative theories on the basis of courage under fire in Korea translating into bravery at documentary sites. I wanted to flesh out his military record as a Marine Reservist and knew Yates had worked on the Camp LeJeune *Globe*. I located microfilm of the paper in Quantico, Virginia, which is near life-long friends of mine. I dispatched them to Quantico to search for issues that overlapped Yates's military service, which they scanned and sent. To my surprise, I learned that Yates served his entire stint for the Reserves in North Carolina. He served *during* the Korean War, as he consistently reported on his resume throughout his life. Still uncertain, I acquired Yates's service records listing dates of his enlistment and discharge, assignments, and his service awards — nothing about Korea. Experts on military records I consulted confirmed: never in Korea.

Evidence of a New Theory

I needed a theoretical framework to organize the life and times of Ted Yates and his Washington, D.C.-based documentary unit. Yates was officially classified as a “combat correspondent,” as were all public information officers of his day. A combat correspondent was the liaison between troops in theater and home, unlike a “war correspondent,” whose job is to report firsthand evidence from battlefield to news desk — even when information flouts the line pushed by government and military officials.

Working from records of the totality of Yates’s career and life, I was able to explain his transition from public relations writer to journalist, cub reporter to famous documentary producer, frolicking rodeo cowboy and outdoorsman to outspoken environmentalist, and from being stuck at Camp LeJeune to how he became both a war and combat correspondent — April 1965, on the streets of Santo Domingo, where Ted Yates came into his own as a courageous documentary correspondent, producer, and director. He reported under fire and liaised with reporters and soldiers in harm’s way back to their families and friends. And he challenged practices of the U.S. Marines. I was able to document that moment because method had revealed a lucky find in LBJ’s and other archives.

* * *

Ted Yates remains for me a complex, fascinating historical subject. He reminds me of Jon Hamm, owing to their similar appearances, and to some extent Hamm’s *Mad Men* character Don Draper — handsome, center of attention, kind, mercurial, and carrying a secret about his past. I never found evidence of Yates intentionally misleading others about his Korean-era service. I concluded that those who had seen his accurate bio — “combat correspondent during the Korean War” — deduced he’d been there. I found rare instances where Yates was misintroduced and he chose not to correct the mistake. It seemed to me

Slogging My Way to History

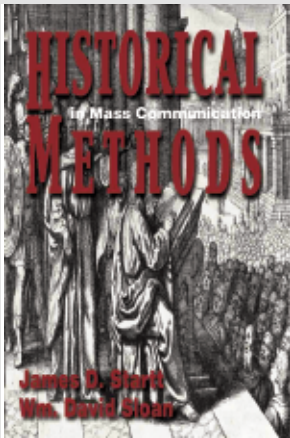
that as Yates gained experience as a documentary producer, he wanted to lead a professional life that matched the mythology others had developed around him, and which he used to his advantage. Based on his work, historical records, and numerous conversations with people who knew and worked with Yates, I have presented his story as that of a notable journalist whose flaws are significantly outweighed by his talents.

We're not typically covering sporting events that have unknown but definitive outcomes. We know how the race ends. Instead of snapping a picture at the right moment, we're trying to assemble the scattered pixels of history into a legible picture or movie that explains the past and its influence on the present. We often make our luck and find something earth shattering. Usually, though, like Neil Leifer, we rely on a lot of hard work. I could not have written the history that I did had it not been for the method that took me to lodes yielding shining inspirations, including my local barbershop.

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

NEW, 4TH EDITION JUST PUBLISHED

With its first edition, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication* quickly became the standard manual for research in the field.



This highly praised book guides historians and history students in the methods of proper research. Its underlying concept is that communication historians must master the well-prescribed methods that have proven themselves in the general field of history.

The new, fourth edition retains the qualities that made the earlier editions so successful, but it adds features that make it even better. You will find substantial revisions in several chapters, an expanded chapter on Internet research for historians, an updated bibliography, an expanded index, and other improvements.

To request a free exam copy, please email Vision Press at visionpress.books@gmail.com

Vision Press

“Outstanding Textbooks at Affordable Prices”

Historical Roundtable: Legal and Historical Understandings of Privacy and Technology

By Erin K. Coyle, Amy Gajda,
Jeffery A. Smith, and Heidi Tworek ©



Coyle

The authors of “The Right to Privacy,” an 1890 *Harvard Law Review* article commonly credited with providing a foundation for legal privacy rights in the United States, called for American law to protect individuals against intrusions by the press and intrusions due to developments in technology. For examples, the authors, Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, pointed to French and British legal principles that protected individual property and privacy rights. Laws in all fifty U.S. states subsequently have recognized privacy interests. Nonetheless, contemporary commentators have criticized intrusive practices for privacy invasions by media practitioners and developers of technology.

Publishers have been challenged for sharing sensitive personal information in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In recent years, news coverage has addressed sexual affairs and allegations of inappropriate sexual conduct. Some of the stories relate to Warren and Brandeis’s warnings about publishing sensitive information that once only was whispered in private settings. Other stories are relevant to politics, government, and allegations of sexual harassment.

Privacy concerns also recently arose after individuals lost control

© 2019. The authors own the copyright to this article.

over how their data was accessed and shared via technology. Hackers' unauthorized access to data and social media companies' sharing of information with third parties inspired fears that personal information could be disclosed to undesired audiences. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation started providing EU citizens with greater control over uses of their data in 2018. In 2019, Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive officer of Facebook, called for U.S. regulators to consider similar protections over ways personal information is accessed and shared. Zuckerberg also envisioned a future with greater protections for private communications on the Internet.



Erin Coyle is an associate professor at the Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication. A former journalist, she is the author of the book *The Press and Rights to Privacy: First Amendment Freedoms Vs. Invasion of Privacy Claims*. She also has published scholarly articles on First Amendment, privacy, and access issues.

Gajda



Amy Gajda is a former journalist and the current Class of 1937 Professor of Law at Tulane University. Her work focuses mostly on privacy and media and includes multiple books, law review articles, and popular press opinion pieces.

Smith



Jeffery A. Smith is a professor emeritus in the Department of Journalism, Advertising, and Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. His “Moral Guardians and the Origins of the Right to Privacy” appeared in the spring 2008 issue of *Journalism and Communication Monographs*. The study received the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication History Division's top faculty paper award and Covert Award.

Tworek

Dr. Heidi Tworek is an assistant professor of international history at the University of British Columbia as well as a non-resident fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and Canadian Global Affairs Institute. Her book *News from Germany: The Competition to Control World Communications, 1900-1945* was published in March 2019 by Harvard University Press. She is the lead for the hate speech and violent extremism section of the High-Level Transatlantic Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression (<https://www.ivir.nl/twg>).

Historical Roundtable: Privacy and Technology

This roundtable recognizes that contemporary calls to protect privacy against practices by the press and developments in technology echo concerns previously voiced at various points in history. For this roundtable, three scholars who have explored historical and legal issues related to privacy and technology discuss their research methods and the contributions this research makes to our understanding of privacy and technology.

Coyle: *What is your approach to researching privacy or technology?*

Gajda: I think what has benefited me the most in my research is questioning and reconsidering others' assessment of the history of privacy and its key people. When I started on the tenure track, for example, I reviewed all older court cases that mentioned key words I knew I'd be interested in, such as "privacy" and "journalism." That look at historical court decisions took time, as you might imagine, but that foundational research has guided my work from the very beginning through to today. And from that and research like it I've found occasional differences between what scholars thought and what the reality was. So, I guess I would say that I take a journalistic approach to privacy research, and I think that that sort of approach has benefitted my work.

Smith: I try to understand what leads up to the creation of protections such as the First Amendment and restrictions such as the privacy tort. Looking into the "whys" and "hows" can tell us something about what human beings expect from laws intended to control future actions. Experience shows that rights and restraints do not always turn out as planned. For example, Congress did not wait long to pass a statute abridging press freedom, the Sedition Act of 1798, and the privacy tort has been difficult to use against the press.

Tworek: Counterintuitively, my research does not necessarily place technology at the center of my narratives. Rather, I embed technology within broader political, economic, social, legal, and cultural forces, seeing it as one strand in an interconnected web that creates the news.

I try to write the history of technology in several ways. First, I try to expand the Social Construction of Technology approach to incorporate political economy. The meaning of wireless technology was not just socially constructed but also shaped by German political and economic views of how news should be distributed. Those views were informed by German geopolitical ambitions to become a great power in news as well as German economic ambitions to supply news around the world to promote German exports.

Second, I weave the history of technology into a wider history of the political and military institutions that invested in technology in the first place. I did not expect wireless telegraphy to play such a crucial role in my book, *News from Germany*. Rather, it became clear through my archival research that German elites from 1900 invested in innovation in wireless technology to bypass the apparently British-controlled submarine cable system. The most important elites initially were politicians and the Navy. Both consistently subsidized research and development in wireless telegraphy in its early years, shaping how the technology became point-to-many, rather than remaining point-to-point.

Third, I use the history of technology to find new ways to study communications across political regimes. By following an understudied technology like wireless, I could show how German elites were invested in the combination of news and technology across three political eras (semi-authoritarian/semi-democratic Imperial Germany, the democratic Weimar Republic, and fascist Nazi regime). Despite massive political upheaval, German elites continued to see wireless technology as a way to send news from Germany around the world. That news changed dramatically, but the beliefs in the power of wireless technology re-

mained the same. Technology, then, offers a way to trace continuities concretely rather than speculatively.

Finally, I have brought this historical perspective on technology to policy analysis of contemporary developments in social media and the Internet. Many policy debates see the Internet as unprecedented, while I bring a different analytical lens that contextualizes the Internet within a longer history of how technological innovation intertwines with broader political, economic, legal, and cultural forces.

***Coyle:** How have you overcome challenges when studying privacy or technology?*

Gajda: I'd say that the biggest challenge I've faced is technological. When I write a piece, historical or otherwise, I want to be sure that I have access to all of the relevant court decisions or all of the relevant newspaper articles, and I depend upon the databases that I'm using to have everything. But new older information is added to online archives as it becomes available and, with regard to court decisions, there are differences in published newer and older cases between the Westlaw and Lexis databases. This means that each time I want to survey court decisions about a particular topic, for example, I look in both legal databases just to be sure, and then hope that no "new" older case will be added the very next day.

Smith: One challenge for any historian is finding and reading the relevant secondary literature to know what has been done before and to figure out what could be the most useful now. We are right to prize primary sources, but secondary ones should be cited to acknowledge earlier studies and to explain exactly how our work is advancing knowledge. As gaps and debates in the scholarship become apparent, a research question can be formulated to make the inquiry as fresh and

focused as possible.

Searching and organizing skills are especially important for large projects. As I locate sources, I put briefly annotated printouts into piles and files. I add reviews I have torn out from my copies of the *Journal of American History*, the *New York Review of Books*, and other publications. If my writing is far enough along to see where something might fit in a manuscript, I may use a source immediately while its significance is easy to recall.

Tworek: There are several key challenges in studying technology and, indeed, privacy. First, how do we make histories of technology (and law) relatable to non-specialists? Of course, this problem is inherent in all scholarship, but it is more present in certain subdisciplines that other scholars may assume are dry, technical, or overwhelmingly detailed. I've tried to combine a light touch in explaining technical aspects with compelling stories to illustrate the larger forces at work. More generally, it is incumbent upon us to make clear why historians need to incorporate these aspects into their work.

Second, how do we understand technology not just from the side of innovators but also those observing or using that technology? My research has often focused on the international, geopolitical aspects of communications, particularly news from Germany. If I had only used German archives, I could have detailed how Germans believed that their news had affected geopolitics. But only multi-archival, multi-lingual research could uncover how the British, French, Austrians, Americans, Poles, and others reacted to German use of wireless to disseminate news around the world. It was a major challenge to visit so many archives and research in so many languages — plus hard to know when to stop! Those archival visits were, though, a critical aspect of writing an international history of communications that upends some of our assumptions about historical Anglo-American dominance in news and

communications technologies.

Third, how do we remain precise about what is and is not unprecedented about the Internet? It is tempting to claim that there is nothing new under the sun. Yet the Internet has created some new phenomena, whether micro-targeting or commoditizing surveillance. I see my task as a historian to explain clearly which patterns are new, which parallel older developments, and which follow a longer history of path-dependency. It is also our job to push back against misconceived nostalgic reminiscences of a media “golden age” before the Internet.

Coyle: *How do you research social, cultural, or journalistic changes that historically have inspired calls for privacy protection or technological change?*

Smith: I believe in understanding contexts and digging deep into many types of sources from the past. I appreciate, for instance, the way Patrick C. File’s *Bad News Travels Fast: The Telegraph, Libel, and Press Freedom in the Progressive Era* (2019) mines cases, statutes, treatises, documents, trade journals, journalism, and scholarship. My monograph on the history of privacy before the famous Warren and Brandeis article in 1890 cites more than 350 sources in 30 pages. A variety of primary and secondary sources helped me to argue that Victorian values, which can seem old-fashioned in today’s world, were key motivators for extending existing privacy protections.

Coyle: *How can legal histories contribute to modern discussions and legal decisions about privacy or technology?*

Gajda: I think it’s important to look back at what privacy meant in the early days: from early court decisions about privacy, through to the famous law review article “The Right to Privacy,” through to cases that

were later overturned because of their lack of understanding about the importance of press freedoms. We can learn a lot from knee-jerk past mistakes as we look toward the future of privacy and its seemingly increasing conflict with First Amendment interests.

Smith: New technologies can stir up fears and attempts to impose controls. History shows, however, that government actions can be futile or legally flawed. If we consider broadcast regulation, for instance, we can see how deregulation occurred and how much eventually was left to the business marketplace and to self-regulation. Television and radio became less well-behaved, but the audience had, for better or worse, more choices.

The result of more legal freedom may be less fairness and propriety, but can we allow only nice expression in a democracy? The First Amendment leaves content matters to the media and to individuals who use and assert their rights rather than to government. Public officials should have little or no control over what is said, but may be legitimately interested in antitrust enforcement, communication infrastructure, and other affirmative ways of supporting a marketplace of ideas. Yet, in the late twentieth century the government had difficulties trying to preserve newspaper competition and to deal with monopolistic companies such as IBM and Microsoft.

Other countries recently have taken on Big Tech by requiring more privacy and seeking more competition. Substantial fines have been imposed. Americans may want to curtail perceived abuses of power, but at the same time like what industry giants can do for them. Searching, shopping, and socializing are easy, but snooping, corporate bullying, and barriers to entry can occur. The harm to consumers may be tolerated as long as the benefits seem considerable.

Tworek: I never thought that I would write legal history when I first

began my work nor that my scholarship on legal history would foreshadow contemporary developments. When I presented my dissertation prospectus on news agencies, one legal scholar presciently asked about intellectual property rights in news. At the time, I had no answer. But the question inspired me to watch out for that topic in the archives. I found an abundance of material in Germany that I might otherwise have overlooked. The emergence of radio had triggered a German attempt in the late 1920s and early 1930s to create a law establishing copyright in news. The law was never passed, but debates around it showed eerie parallels to German discussions that had started in 2009 about *Leistungsschutzrecht* (ancillary copyright law for press publishers). With a communications scholar, Christopher Buschow, I've now co-written several articles that compare the 1920s with the present to explain why the *Leistungsschutzrecht* is problematic and highly unlikely to work. The historical analysis lay at the core of our arguments and showed me the importance of history in current discussions about law, communications, and technology.

Legal scholarship so often focuses on cases that created precedent or laws that were passed. Studying intellectual property rights in news means looking at the many proposals that never became law and understanding why news providers were so eager to entrench advantages using law or to fight back against new technologies through legal measures. Legal histories are critical to comprehend the roads not taken as well as the broader context in which legal decisions are made.

Coyle: *What advice would you give to others considering researching the legal history of privacy or technology?*

Gajda: I would tell others considering historical legal research on privacy to think for themselves and not necessarily accept others' sense of that history. Second, and this one is mostly for those who do not have a

law degree, I would advise scholars to use more than Supreme Court decisions in their work. Lawyers know that there are very interesting lower court decisions regarding privacy or any other topic — including decisions from influential federal trial courts — and many times those decisions are harbingers for what higher courts will be deciding in future years. There is a wealth of material out there awaiting comment by researchers with appointments in schools outside of law schools.

Smith: We may be able to contribute to current decision-making processes with legal, ethical, and historical perspectives. Individuals, we can point out, may want to share personal facts. In the past, plenty of people wanted their society and wedding stories in newspapers and their names, addresses, and numbers in telephone books. More recently, we can see how celebrities and social media users reveal private information.

The Internet has been able to develop with few restrictions, but now demands are being made for change. Organizations are mobilizing. Congress is considering legislation. Agencies are acting. Tech companies, as private governments, are making and enforcing policies that may help to ward off legal actions. Mark Zuckerberg recently said that the future of the Internet is “privacy-focused” communication rather than open platforms.

The history of self-regulation as an alternative to laws is a relatively neglected area. What have ethics codes and decisions done or not done in the past with privacy and technology issues? What business and individual choices have brought us to the point that so much personal data is collected and mishandled? What lobbying and influence campaigns have media and tech companies used and what can the outcomes tell us?

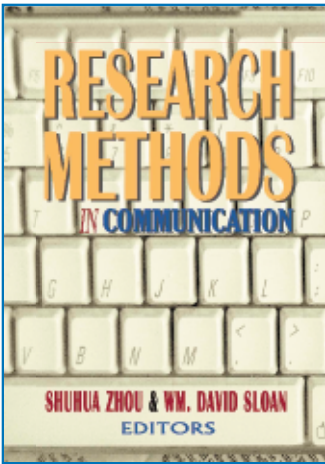
Tworek: First, you will not always find the most important aspects of

legal history in the archives of a country's Justice Ministry or in case law. I uncovered critical material in the company archives of news agencies like Reuters and the Associated Press or in the files of the German Interior Ministry. Will Slauter's excellent recent book on intellectual property rights in news, *Who Owns the News?*, similarly goes beyond the court cases to look at publishing practices.

Second, be very careful not to take rhetoric at face value. News publishers often made arguments to push for copyright in news that they later contradicted or that the facts belied. Rhetoric was (and is) often very different from the reality of how news was made or reproduced.

Third, be brave about taking on legal history! It has proven a very useful lens for me in many unexpected ways from writing about intellectual property rights in news to my current work on the steering committee of a high-level Transatlantic Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression, where I have analyzed the German *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (NetzDG, Network Enforcement Law, colloquially known as a hate speech law) that came into force in 2018. I had initial trepidations about entering the field but have found it to be endlessly fascinating and fruitful.

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



The Best General Methods Book for History Students

Research in communication offers a wide array of methods. Social science methods remain important even as methods in the humanities – such as *historical methods* – and professional studies have gained increasing emphasis. Yet most textbooks barely mention the latter methods.

Research Methods in Communication includes them all. We think you will find that it is clearly the best book for covering the wide range of methods – not only the quantitative but the qualitative ones also – that scholars in the field use.

To make certain *Research Methods in Communication* provides your students the best instruction, each chapter is written by an expert on the chapter topic. So you can be confident that, as your students begin to study methods, they will have the very best guides.

A **teacher's manual** is available when you adopt the book. The CD contains sample syllabi, 25 PowerPoint presentations, and multiple-choice quizzes for each chapter.

To request an exam copy, email vision.press.books@gmail.com

VISION PRESS

Outstanding textbooks at affordable prices

Historian Interview:

Vanessa Murphree ©



Murphree

Vanessa Murphree, a prominent historian of public relations, is an associate professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she received her Ph.D. in mass communication. She is the author of the book *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations*, along with a number of journal articles. She has been one of the main contributors to the growth in the importance of historical research on public relations during the last few decades. In addition to Southern Mississippi, she also has taught at Loyola University New Orleans and the University of South Alabama.

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

Murphree: I was born and raised in Oneonta, Alabama, a town of 5,000 about an hour north of Birmingham. In a way, I began my historical work there while working on the high school yearbook staff. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was creating a history while working on our award-winning book. This experience would also provide a foundation for my work as a public relations professional. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to learn early in life that I enjoy writing, design, and photography.

I initially attended Walker College, a community college in Jasper,

© 2019. The author owns the copyright to this article.

Alabama. I had the opportunity to serve as editor of the yearbook and continue to advance my writing, editing, and design skills. I transferred to the University of Alabama in 1986 and served as student life editor of the *Corolla*, the university yearbook, for two years. So being a part of the yearbook staff played a significant role in both my college and high school years.

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

Murphree: Most of my work experience is with non-profits. I worked for almost four years in Birmingham for the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, a professional medical society. Those were interesting and learning-filled years. I was fortunate to work with world-class physicians who were at the forefront of advances in reproductive medicine. I spent most of my time writing and editing patient education materials and newsletters and organizing the annual meeting.

I also worked for almost six years on staff at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in a grant-funded center focused on worker health and safety. Again, I spent lots of time writing educational materials and newsletters. I frequently traveled to Hanford, Washington, the location of our partner training center. While there, I helped organize training events and also managed our first distance learning master's program. Of course, all distance programs are now online. But at that time, around 1995, video conferencing was cutting edge. I think we were one of only a few universities that were doing live distance learning. We had an industrial hygiene master's cohort in Washington state, with additional students and faculty in New Orleans. It was a productive and useful partnership.

I remember Dr. David Sloan, my thesis advisor, encouraging me to pursue a doctorate when I completed my master's degree. He emphasized the need for historical scholarship in public relations and ex-

plained that most topics had not yet been explored. But at that time — I was 23 — I wanted to pursue a public relations career. Plus, I was not ready to take on such a challenge. But the idea resurfaced about ten years later while I was working at Tulane in New Orleans. Dr. Sloan was in town for an AEJMC conference. He continued to encourage me to pursue a doctorate degree. Though reluctant at first, I warmed to the idea. And a few months later, I made the decision to leave my job and enter the doctoral program at the University of Southern Mississippi, where I now teach. Dr. Sloan was right. It's a great job. And I'm thankful to have so many opportunities to work with wonderful colleagues and students and opportunities to learn and grow as well.

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

Murphree: My first position was at Loyola University New Orleans. I was there from 2001 until 2005. I taught media writing, introduction to mass communication, and public relations writing and campaigns.

I moved to the University of South Alabama in the fall of 2005 and began teaching graduate courses including qualitative research and media history. I also taught undergraduate media history (my favorite class) and all classes in the public relation sequence — introduction, management, campaigns, and writing.

At USM, where I've been since the fall of 2012, I teach general media courses such as introduction to mass communication, media writing, and media history. I've also instructed graduate courses in media history and public relations.

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

Murphree: I landed in David Sloan's media history class by chance when I was working on my master's degree at the University of Alabama. At that time, 1987, there were only a handful of students in the public relations graduate program. I was struggling to find a thesis topic and was discouraged to the point of almost quitting the program. Thankfully, Dr. Sloan introduced me to historical research, which I didn't previously know was an option for my thesis. I thought I had to do something statistical; so it was a great relief to discover another option.

I didn't think of myself as an historian prior to that. But I'd always enjoyed history classes, books, and films. And, even as a child, I enjoyed looking at old magazines and newspapers. Dr. Sloan encouraged me to research media coverage of public relations in national magazines during the Great Depression. And I absolutely loved doing this research. I remember looking forward to going to Gorgas Library [the University of Alabama's main library] every afternoon and immersing myself in those magazines — *American Mercury*, *Forum*, *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and many more. And with Dr. Sloan's help, I was able to craft these primary sources into a meaningful thesis — and *graduate!*

I didn't do any more historical work until around 1999 when I began my doctoral studies at the University of Southern Mississippi. Again, I was fortunate to have a great teacher and mentor (and now colleague), Dr. David Davies. And I was also fortunate to land in his class during the semester that he had the entire class work on a topic related to the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer. Though I thought I had a strong background in civil rights history, I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn. And looking at Freedom Summer provided a broad and meaningful platform for all of us. Moreover, our university library and archives as well our community turned out to be incredible resources. So many civil rights events took place in Hattiesburg. And simply being in that location made the research more interesting and meaningful

Historian Interview

and even exciting. The class was especially insightful because we were all working on a similar topic and could help each other as we addressed our own more refined areas. My topic — “The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations” — would become my dissertation topic and later my book. It’s still one of my favorite things to talk about.

I attended my first AJHA conference in 2000 in Pittsburgh. Though I’ve enjoyed many wonderful conferences since, this meeting is still my favorite. I met so many wonderful people who would become both mentors and friends who continue to support me in so many ways.

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

Murphree: I’ve continued to look at civil rights over the years. But I’ve also expanded my work to include the birth control movement as well as public relations case studies.

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

Murphree: My most recent publication examines news coverage of Edward Bernays’ 1929 “Torches of Freedom” march and concluded that the coverage was not nearly as celebratory as Bernays claimed and the impact of the event was likely never as extensive or persuasive as Bernays and other historians have suggested. Interestingly, this article connects to my master’s thesis (completed 28 years previously), which looked at magazine coverage of public relations during the Depression. As one would expect, Bernays was a frequent subject of those articles. So that early research effort played a role in this recent publication.

As I mentioned, I was working on my thesis in the late 1980s.

Bernays was well into his 90s at that time. The highlight of my thesis research was speaking to him on the phone. I wrote to him requesting an interview and was surprised when he immediately wrote back and agreed to speak to me. If I had it to do again, I would have made every effort to do an in-person interview. I still have his note and treasure the memory of our conversation.

As I mentioned earlier, my dissertation (and 2006 book) addressing public relations and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has been central to much of my research. I also published an article about the organization's newspaper, an article that summarized the public relations efforts, and a third article that looked at how public relations influenced the black power movement. The black power article won best *American Journalism* article in 2006, a tremendous honor for me.

I was also fortunate to work with Karla Gower, one of our most accomplished public relations historians, on two articles that examined how Margaret Sanger used public relations to advance the birth control movement.

I've lived in New Orleans for many years. So, after the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina and the resulting levee breaches that caused the New Orleans flooding, I, along with two co-authors, researched FEMA's public relations efforts, specifically the framing of their press releases.

I'm currently working on an article about New Orleans community radio station WWOZ. Essentially, I'm examining the role the Internet has played in creating an international audience for community programming. Most anyone who lives in, or who has visited New Orleans, will tell you about the significance of the music. So this topic has lots of media angles, including public relations. And it's important to me because the station and the music have been a part of my life for 26 years.

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?

Murphree: I think my civil rights research has broadened our perspective regarding public relations history and shows us how central public relations is to social change. The research makes it clear that the SNCC public relations efforts were well thought out, deliberate, and mostly successful. Though it's not surprising to learn that public relations played such a strong role, the research (along with the research of others who have looked at PR and social change) adds a new dimension to public relations and civil rights history.

I'm also especially proud of my Bernays article that I mentioned earlier. For many years, I was a firm believer and propagator of the myth that I've since debunked. So this was an especially fun and insightful piece to write that I hope will eventually change one of the most commonly told "stories" in public relations history.

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

Murphree: I would have made an effort to travel more and made retirement planning a much bigger priority during my 20s and 30s.

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

Murphree: My central philosophy, which is, of course, not unique to me, primarily revolves around the idea that the truth is evolving, and I

think all of my research has helped me better understand that concept. And I think that's the most fun part about doing historical research. When I set out to do the *Torches of Freedom* article, I had no clue that the whole thing was a Bernays constructed myth. In fact, it took me a while to believe what I was seeing in my primary sources since I, like many others, was attached to and loved telling the Easter parade story.

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

Murphree: I am continually impressed with the rising level of scholarship in our field. Thanks to the work of many outstanding mentors, we have even more rising scholars who are contributing creative, thought-provoking, and innovative work to our growing body of media history knowledge. For example, I've seen historical articles in the past couple of years that address important First Amendment questions that lend tremendous insight into today's troubling relationship between the White House and the press. There's also an expanding body of literature that helps us better understand the long-overlooked contribution of women and minorities.

One weakness that comes to mind is our growing reliance on Internet resources. I know that I am more inclined to approach a topic when all of the sources are available online. But the convenience of online primary sources may sometimes make it easy to overlook essential sources that are not online. For example, when I presented my Easter Parade paper at a conference, I had not yet looked at Bernays' documents in the Library of Congress and thought that I had a pretty good paper without doing so. However, that visit and those findings changed the primary thesis of the paper and revealed a number of interesting historical avenues.

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?

Murphree: As I mentioned in the previous response, I'm continually impressed with the work of today's media historians. But we do need to work harder to integrate our findings into the broader historical story. I don't think we need to change the research, but we could do a much better job of explaining the importance of our research to our colleagues, both next door and across campus as well as at other universities, including internationally.

As educational platforms change, media historians need to work to create materials suited for these platforms. At my university, media history is one of several "values electives" that mass communication students can choose. It's always been a popular choice. But when we put it online, we've had a nearly full class every semester for the past five years.

With that in mind, I was excited to see the new AEJMC History Division and Journalism History podcasts. These professionally produced resources are an incredible asset to both online and face-to-face learning. I've used them in my online classes and will likely continue to do so for many years to come. Other sources, such as Brooke Kroeger's Women's Suffrage and the Media website, which includes videos, primary sources, articles, and podcasts, are rich and valuable resources that can be easily and effectively incorporated into online learning. We need more of these kinds of professionally produced and historically sound tools.

As far as the wider field of history, we can do the same things: Communicate the importance of our research in person and use online tools — podcasts, social media, website, videos — to make our material more accessible and appealing.

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

Murphree: I think our biggest challenge is to convince students, colleagues, and administrators that media history is an essential component of a mass communication education. As our field continually evolves, there's a push for more technically oriented classes in some programs. Though some of these classes are important, several studies conclude that "critical thinking" and writing skills are the most sought skills in the workforce. From a personal standpoint, I get the same response when I talk with professionals. With that in mind, if we can teach our students the essential nature of historical research and mass communication history, we can encourage critical thinking and help prepare them for successful and meaningful careers.

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

Book Award Interview:

By Bruce Lenthall ©



Lenthall

Bruce Lenthall received the 2008 AEJMC History Division award for the best book of the year for his *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture*. He is Executive Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and an adjunct professor in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his Ph.D. in American Studies. Prior to returning to Penn, he taught in the history departments at Bryn Mawr College and Barnard College.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

Lenthall: My book examines radio's significance in the 1930s, considering what the newly burgeoning medium of radio meant to people whose lives it reached in the 1930s. Radio expanded the unsettling hold of America's modern culture, but the meanings many discovered in the medium simultaneously helped them find their way within that world. For many Americans, the Depression decade — and radio — brought home an increasingly centralized, vast and standardized society. But for many, radio also offered a means of addressing the challenges of their age and of re-envisioning their culture in ways that they believed worked for them. Considering radio in popular and political arenas, in

the ideas of various intellectuals and writers who took to the air, I find that many Americans felt radio could enable them to personalize an impersonal public sphere; it might enable individuals to discover ways to communicate meaningfully within a mass culture. This process of interpreting broadcasting and incorporating it into American life blurred the boundaries of the public sphere and revised the very meanings of communication and democracy.

Because I focus on those who received and made sense of radio, my book is a history of the people whose lives the mass media influenced. As such, it is not only a lens into the history of media, but an examination of the United States meeting the Depression and a changing society in general. The story of how Americans found their way in the new mass world is an important part of the story of the 20th century. Looking at the ideas of diverse groups that experienced radio as it grew into a powerful cultural force helps us more fully understand the United States in the 1930s and the modern era at large.

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

Lenthall: I worked as a journalist prior to going to graduate school in history. So perhaps it was no surprise that I would gravitate toward a project in media history. I was not, however, consciously thinking about my own past when I developed this research focus. Rather, I was thinking about cultural history projects that would be narrow enough to be feasible, but also would offer broad insight into life in 20th-century America. Media history suggested a powerful lens. Media, after all, is one of the major ways people understand the world beyond their daily sphere. Studying how we learn about and engage that wider world offers a vital understanding of how we function in it. From a smaller research project I had previously taken on, I knew that — back in the 1990s when I started this work anyway — there had been relatively lit-

tle historical inquiry into radio in the pre-television era. That struck me as a gaping hole. For several decades, radio was a dominant mass medium. It had radically changed Americans' experiences. When I talk with non-specialists about this, I ask them to imagine a world in which they had never heard the president's voice or a world in which they had not heard music other than live performances. What did it mean to Americans when this changed so rapidly? This led me to my central question: how did ordinary folks make sense of this radically new medium in their lives? That answering that would help me understand the ways we shape our lives — and the constraints on us doing so — made the project doubly exciting.

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?

Lenthall: Figuring out how to answer my central question was challenging. I wanted to tell the story of ordinary people making sense of radio, but where would I find those accounts? There are many excellent histories that interpret the meaning of a cultural source — such as a radio program — through a subtle reading of that source. There are other very strong works that look at structures of production to understand constraints on meaning. But neither of those approaches fully considers how radio's listeners may have interpreted meanings for themselves. To get at this, I began by looking at the social science research into radio done in the late 1930s. That was a valuable starting point, but it revealed at least as much about the perspectives of those researchers as it did about ordinary listeners. Considering that led me to decide that I should also include several chapters about how various intellectuals came to understand radio, which, in turn, led me also to look at the discourse among public intellectuals and the work of artists

who saw radio as a new art form. Returning to the question of ordinary Americans, though, I dug deeply into archives of listener letters to programs and radio personalities. I worked extensively with letters to a popular soap opera, a quiz show, a newscaster, government regulators of radio, and to Franklin Roosevelt, following his fireside chats. The caches of letters that exist are idiosyncratic and certainly shaped the story I could tell — I had originally hoped to look more widely at sports on radio, for instance — but they are also incredibly rich and revealing. Whatever else they indicate, they show that radio mattered deeply to its millions of listeners in the 1930s.

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

Lenthall: My dream source would have been to discover a trove of diaries in which listeners recorded their feelings about radio. That was never a likelihood, of course. More realistically, I wish I had been able to find letters written to a wider variety of programs. I looked, for instance, at what African-American intellectuals had to say about radio and race, but it would have been terrific to see how listeners thought about racial constructions on radio through letters to programs that addressed race, directly or indirectly. I developed some thoughts on this from scattered accounts, but would have benefited from more materials here.

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

Lenthall: I have three suggestions, none of which may be surprising. First, be prepared to revise your project based on the source available to you. Ultimately, you need to shape your question so that you can

answer it based on what you know. Very early on, I expected to look at the meanings of lots of different types of programs. It quickly became clear that that was impossible (and — based on the letters I located, letters which shared many similarities — not necessary) because I could not locate materials addressing those genres of programs. Second, be patient and creative. Plenty of questions do not have sources that speak directly to them. Think about a variety of ways you might get at those issues. The way you will answer a question isn't always the way you imagine a question should be answered. I only looked at letters to government regulators because of the limited listener letters to programs I could find — I had to imagine other possible sources — but these materials proved incredibly valuable for my understanding in the end. Again, as you think and rethink the kinds of sources you might use to get at your question, be open to refining your question. Finally, talk with the archivists. I found my first trove of listener letters not through a finding aid — which was not developed — but through a conversation with an archivist who recalled seeing relevant materials. That conversation led to sources that made clear the value of such letters for my project.

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

Lenthall: Finding sources was, of course, a major challenge. As many readers know, when you are working in an area where few have been researching, collections may not be organized to showcase their value for your work. Researching in the FDR library, for instance, was straightforward: the materials are well cataloged and I could find relevant files to review. Researching the archives of a long-defunct social research organization, though, involved rifling through overturned file cabinets locked in a basement room that had not been opened in years — without knowing exactly what I was looking for.

As most researchers can sympathize with, organizing all the materials and figuring out the story I had to tell was also incredibly challenging. For me, teaching classes in which I could have assigned my book — had it been written — was a vital part in making sense of the argument I wanted to make and how it fit into a larger context.

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

Lenthall: From my perspective, these questions slightly miscast the issue. It is extremely difficult to engage in a major research project over several years if you are not close to your subject. We need to bring a deep interest to our work. And part of what makes for a good piece of historical writing is the author's argument and perspective, not neutrality. To me, it makes more sense to say historians should strive for honesty in interpreting sources — honesty about what those sources say and mean, and honesty in changing their interpretations and even questions in light of those sources. That is not quite the same thing as neutrality. The very questions we chose to ask reflect our distinct perspectives, our historical judgments. But if we approach those questions with a real curiosity — a desire to learn something we do not already know — and with a commitment to intellectual honesty, we can conduct meaningful research and offer interpretations that grow out of our evidence in compelling ways.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

Lenthall: On a big-picture level, my work suggests the importance of the changing relationship between the individual and a mass culture in the mid-20th century, with radio one of the forces reshaping the rela-

tionship between individuals and larger wholes, whether an imagined community of sorts or a national polity. My book provides evidence of the complex balancing act between personal autonomy and distant sources of authority.

To dig into these broad insights, my book opens up a variety of related themes. It explains just how listeners forged relationships with mass culture — and the ways in which they made those relationships work for them. It explains the new meanings of democratic participation that emerged at this time, and offers insight into specific ways media was sometimes used to enlist the public's support for a kind of demagogic populism (an idea that resonates differently today than it did when the book came out). It makes clear contemporary debates about the potential for mass communication — and the changing ideas of what that communication might mean. Related to that, it suggests the unrealized possibility of a new idea of art, one that resonated with the politics of the 1930s and Modernist forms. All of that is framed with insight into the understandings of America's nascent mass culture.

Q: *What findings most surprised you?*

Lenthall: This is a hard one to answer in retrospect. Things that were unexpected when I first encountered them came to make more sense over time. That said, perhaps the most surprising thing I wrestled with was the deep engagement people had with the voices they heard on the air. Listeners felt those voices, whether real people or fictional characters, were genuinely a part of their lives. They forged what felt like real relationships with those voices, whether it was turning to a newscaster to provide career advice, inviting a quiz show host to dinner, sending a soap opera character the name of a doctor who might help with a vision problem, or counting on a medicine-show charlatan to solve their social ills. What was striking was not simply that Americans built these ethe-

real connections, but that they often found genuine benefits in them. Sometimes listeners were out-and-out duped by the radio voices, but often, they reported ways the voices had improved their lives, from offering models for managing personal tragedies to giving them a sense of understanding of the national political arena. Even as I was struck by listeners' reliance on what were fictional relationships, I had to respect their feelings about what they gained from those ties.

I have also been surprised to see how much more relevant some of the themes I discussed in my book have become in the decade since it came out. When I wrote it, I wondered how the Internet (and later social media) would change our media landscape and mass culture. Those changes have been substantial, but it is very clear that understanding our relationship to media, to public communication and, through that, to democracy and the public in general, has become all the more important in the past few years.

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

Lenthall: Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to recognize the importance of how we have communicated and continue to communicate publicly.

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