

# *Historiography*

in Mass Communication



Volume 6 (2020). Number 1

# *Historiography in Mass Communication*

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## Essays

This journal invites historians to submit essays. They may be original ones written specifically for this journal, or they may be from material that the authors already have (such as classroom lectures, AJHA presidential addresses, etc.).

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

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## in Mass Communication

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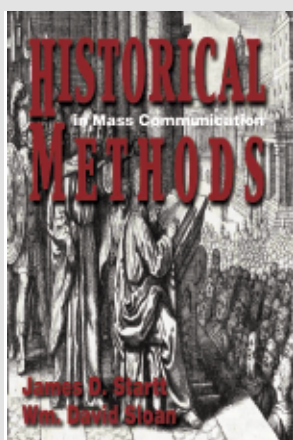
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# Fascination with the Present

By Wm. David Sloan ©



Sloan

**H**.G. Wells’ “Time Traveller” probably envied historians. He was the hero of Wells’ novel *The Time Machine*. The Time Traveller could go forward millions of years and then return to the time (the 1890s) from which he had started.

But as far as we can tell, he couldn’t travel into the past.

Only historians can do that. Leonard Teel, one of our preeminent JMC historians, now retired from teaching, told his students at Georgia State that history is just like “time travel.” Historians can go to any time they want.

That is quite a privilege. Think of all the years and the many centuries, all the people and all the places, that you may visit if you want to.

Unfortunately, many of our historians ignore all but a small number of the opportunities for time travel. They are so fascinated with the present that they never meet any of the intriguing people who lived earlier or get involved in any of the many events that occurred outside a

*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.*

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narrow frame of time. Some seem more interested in the last fifty years than in anything that happened before that. Of course, things of importance did happen in the last fifty years — but in terms of history, fifty years is a blink.

How sad it is that some historians never travel farther back. They miss all the excitement of knowing people who lived a hundred and more years ago. They never experience the events that amazed or agitated those who lived in the 1800s. They never visit the grand places where people over the centuries passed through their lives.

Of course, when I say a lot of our historians aren't interested in anything older than they are, I'm probably exaggerating. But like a number of critics in our field, I notice that a majority of research papers at JMC history conferences and an inordinate percentage of JMC journal articles dwell on the years since the mid-20th century.

Take just one example. At the 2019 national convention of the American Journalism Historians Association, approximately three-quarters of the research papers dealt with the decades after 1940. That compares with one-quarter that had subjects from the previous 300 years. The earliest subject was from the 1850s — meaning that *no* research was presented on anything that had occurred in American mass communication during its first 200 years.

If you're inclined toward numbers, consider these figures: (1) From 1650 to 1850, 0% of papers, (2) from 1850 to 1940, 25% of papers, (3) from 1940 to 2000, 75% of papers.

It's not as if little happened between 1850 and 1940 or that *nothing* happened before 1850. Julie Williams, another of our preeminent historians, can tell you that there was a lively publishing scene in the North American colonies as early as the mid-1600s. Anyone who has studied the periods of 1650-1850 and 1850-1940 can assure you that those

periods abound with fascinating people and momentous events.

Yet most JMC historians are ignoring them.

Of course, again I'm exaggerating. Many of our historians are, in truth, interested in history earlier than 1940. The annual Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression, held in early November at Chattanooga, gives the lie to my complaint. Each year at the conference, historians present thirty or more research papers dealing with the 1800s.

Outside that Symposium, though, our field's gatherings of historians might as well be titled "Symposia on Current Events."

Of course, again I'm exaggerating.

Imagine, though, how little we would know about the history of other major topics if most historians in those fields focused on the last eighty years. Consider the history of Christianity. How well would we understand it if historians studied only what has happened since 1940 but not such important topics as the spread of the church around the Mediterranean in the first and second centuries, the early church fathers, the rise of the Papacy and the growth of the Catholic church, Luther and other Protestant reformers, the counter-Reformation, the transmission of Christianity to the Western Hemisphere, etc., etc.?

Or wars? How well would we understand them if historians focused on the Gulf War and only a few studied World War I, the Franco-Prussian War, the American Civil War, the Crimean War, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Revolution, the Seven Years' War, the Hundred Years' War, etc., etc.?

Or, for a topic whose scope is narrower, how fully would we understand the history of the American presidency if most historians confined themselves to studies of Barack Obama and only a few wrote about Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, etc., etc.?

With earlier history being of immense importance, why, in JMC history, are so many historians fascinated with the recent past?

That is not an easy question to answer, for there are probably a variety of reasons, and some of them are complex.

As for explaining why so many conference papers dig to such a shallow depth, we're tempted to say that the reason has much to do with the fact that dabblers and grad students are often the ones presenting research papers. The dabblers are not really historians, and most grad students are just getting started. Some might never do anything else in history. That's not the case with good books about history, for books require a long commitment to rigorous research. Such is not always true with research papers. A professor or student can devote part of only one semester to researching and writing a paper, and yet produce something that a conference will accept. If one becomes familiar with "history" in such short time, it's unlikely the research topic will be an ancient one. One must have a true interest in history to choose a topic of true history.

Even some professors who show up regularly at conferences and talk of themselves as "historians" may be only talkers. They are more interested in mass communication today than in history. To be a serious historian requires the commitment of a vast amount of time and effort. If one isn't willing to make that commitment, he or she probably won't have the interest to become versed in older history, and that person may decide to do an occasional paper only because it relates to today's issues.

The real concern, though, should be with JMC scholars who really are historians. If we spend most of our efforts researching recent JMC history, the effect can be dangerous. We disconnect our knowledge from most of the past. We truncate history. And, unfortunately, in such



## Fascination with the Present

a state, history can't exist for long. It is like a tree with foliage that spans 100 feet across but with shallow roots and a slender trunk supporting it. Such a tree can't last long. It soon will die and collapse.

We JMC historians complain that the public and academics aren't interested in history and deny its importance — but are we the same as they if we concentrate on recent decades only and ignore most of history? A fascination with the present can be disastrous.

The articles in this first issue of our journal in this new year offer a variety of views on the study of history. One thing they have in common, though, is an appreciation of the importance of JMC history. Erika Pribanic-Smith leads off with an essay emphasizing the need for historians to give more attention to dissident journalists of the past, starting with labor and radical journalism in the 1880s. For our Roundtable, Debbie van Tuyl has organized a discussion among five Civil War historians who are involved in the Symposium on the 19th Century Press. They explain how historians can begin to grapple with a topic they have never before studied. We follow the Roundtable with an essay that attempts to explain what it is that historians are trying to do with their studies. I'm pleased to be the co-author with Jim Startt of that essay about the purpose of history. Finally, for our interview with the author of an award-winning book, Tom Aiello, a history professor at Valdosta State University, graciously submitted to our questions. His book on the Scott Newspaper Syndicate, which was founded in the 1930s, won the 2019 American Journalism Historians Association's award for the best book of the year.

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# Alternative Journalism History: Studying the Dissident Press

By Erika Pribanic-Smith ©



Pribanic-Smith

**B**efore dawn on the morning of December 21, 1919, Emma Goldman caught a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty through a small porthole below deck on the *USAT Buford*. Also known as the “Red Ark,” the *Buford* carried nearly 250 deported immigrants from Ellis Island to Finland, where they would catch a train to Russia.

The U.S. government ejected Goldman from the country under an immigration law that targeted anarchists. Her speech and writings brought her notoriety and landed her in jail multiple times. The government also shut down her magazine *Mother Earth* under the Espionage Act.

Twentieth-century Americans considered Goldman “radical,” and they feared the anarchist lens through which she delivered her messages. Essentially, though, Goldman was a champion for her fellow immigrants, for her fellow women, and for liberty in general — including

*Erika Pribanic-Smith, a professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, is the co-author of Emma Goldman’s No-Conscription League and the First Amendment. She is a former president of the American Journalism Historians Association and former chair of the AEJMC’s History Division.*

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unfettered expression for all.

Suppressed voices are often the ones that most need to be heard, and it becomes our job as journalism historians to bring those voices to the forefront. As Ross Collins stated in his 2019 American Journalism Historians Association presidential address, we should be focusing at least some of our attention on the alternative and dissident presses. Rodger Streitmatter noted in his book *Voices of Revolution* that focusing our studies on the mainstream press alone leaves out a large — often crucial — part of the story. He argued that “the dissident press has played a more vital role in shaping American history than has the mainstream press.”<sup>1</sup>

All alternative publications differ from the mainstream. Chris Atton defined alternative journals as those produced “outside the forces of market economics or the state.”<sup>2</sup> However, not all alternative publications are dissident. Streitmatter specified that dissident publications seek to effect social change.<sup>3</sup> Linda Lumsden points to the radical press as “a major instrument of the radical movement, not just a recorder of it.”<sup>4</sup> Radical publications are a primary source for understanding the radical movement in America, much like other dissident publications are a means to understand other movements and groups whose members have felt ridiculed or excluded by the mainstream press.<sup>5</sup>

To begin studying the dissident press, one might have a topic or issue of interest and ask what individuals or groups would be likely to have a perspective on that topic or issue that differs from the mainstream; then, identify what publications existed to advance the dissident perspective. Or, one might identify what dissident movements existed during a time period of interest and what publications served those movements.

Once dissident publications have been identified, one might ask the

following questions: What issues does the dissident press cover? How does the agenda of the dissident press compare to that of the mainstream press? What issues does the dissident press bring to light that the mainstream press might be ignoring? What are their arguments? How do arguments compare among similar dissident publications? How do they compare to those advanced in the mainstream press?

What are the reasons for any differences? Are the differences personal (tied to specific editors or reporters) or ideological (tied to a specific organization or group)? Are they tied to the context of a specific era and place, or do they transcend time and geography? What shaped dissident views, and how might the mainstream view have evolved differently? Did the arguments advanced in the dissident press become more widespread?

A potential barrier to studying the dissident press is that dissident publications may be more difficult to identify and access than more mainstream publications. However, universities and other institutions have recognized the importance of many of these publications and made efforts to collect and preserve them. For instance, the Civil Rights & Labor History Consortium at the University of Washington provides an excellent resource for historians interested in radical journalism from the 1880s through the 1970s via its “Mapping American Social Movements Project” (<http://depts.washington.edu/moves/index.shtml>). The Labor and Radical Press portion of the project explores the history and geography of American Federation of Labor (AFL), Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), socialist, and anarchist publications, providing detailed information that could help researchers identify and locate sources. The Tamiment Library at New York University has extensive labor, socialist, and anarchist holdings, and the Marxists Internet Archive (Marxists.org) provides online access to numerous papers.

I personally have found HathiTrust Digital Library (<https://www.hathitrust.org/>) to be invaluable, providing online access to a variety of newspapers and magazines. That is where I found copies of Goldman's *Mother Earth* for my research. Simply search a topic or movement of interest and filter to journals and/or newspapers to find publications.

Of course, the dissident press is not limited to anarchists, socialists, and labor organizations. Historians of the dissident press point to a number of groups — including African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, feminists, pacifists, environmentalists, etc. — who have sought to effect change through their own publications. As Lauren Kessler noted, all of these groups' ideas should be welcome in the marketplace of ideas,<sup>6</sup> and they certainly warrant a place in journalism history.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), x.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Linda Lumsden, *Black, White, and Red All Over: A Cultural History of the Radical Press in its Heyday, 1900-1917* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Streitmatter, *Voices of Revolution*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Lumsden, *Black, White, and Red All Over*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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# Historical Roundtable: Opening New Doors: Researching Unfamiliar or Under-studied Areas of Journalism History

By Debra Reddin van Tuyll, Michael Fuhlhage, Bill Huntzicker,  
Mary Lamonica, Jennifer Moore, and Katrina Quinn ©



van Tuyll

**W**e've all been there, either by choice or necessity. We've decided on a new area of study (or maybe chosen a dissertation topic), and we have to grapple with gaining an understanding of something we know little about. The problem is compounded when the area has not received much scholarly attention. In this roundtable, five scholars talk about their experience in opening up a new area of research — the role and function of the press in the West and Midwest during the American Civil War. While more has been written about the Civil War than just about any other topic in American history, journalism historians have focused far more on the Northern press than that of any other region. The five gallant (to use one of the favorite words of Civil War-era journalists) scholars on this

*Debra Reddin van Tuyll, a professor at Augusta University, is the author or editor of five books. Her most recent is [The Confederate Press in the Crucible of the American Civil War](#). She received the [American Journalism Historians Association's 2019 Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement](#).*

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Michael Fuhlhage earned his Ph.D. in mass communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is an assistant professor at Wayne State University, where he teaches media history, news reporting, and editing. His book *Yankee Reporters and Southern Secrets* has just been published by Peter Lang.

Fuhlhage



William E. (Bill) Huntzicker is the author of *The Popular Press 1833-1865*, *Dinkytown: A History in Four Blocks*, and "The Frontier Press 1800-1900," a chapter in David Sloan's *The Media in America: A History* through eleven editions. A Minneapolis freelance writer, he has taught reporting and media history for thirty years at campuses in Minnesota and Wisconsin and has also been a regular participant in the Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War and Free Expression and its publications at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Huntzicker



Mary M. Lamonica is a professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at New Mexico State University. Her research focuses mainly on 19th- and early 20th-century press performance issues. She publishes as Mary M. Cronin. Prior to entering academia, she worked as a reporter, copy editor, and assistant news editor at newspapers in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Florida.

Lamonica



Jennifer E. Moore received her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. She is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where she teaches courses in media history, social media, and digital journalism. Her research interests include journalism and media history, visual communication, digital news preservation, and participatory news practices. Prior to academia, she worked as a radio reporter and a production manager for Minneapolis-based interactive media agencies.

Moore



Katrina J. Quinn is a professor and chair of the Communication Department at Slippery Rock University. Her methodology is interdisciplinary, bringing critical literary perspectives to journalistic texts. She has published a number of articles and chapters on 19th-century journalism, including works on epistolary journalism, sensationalism, narrative, and first-person travel writing from the American frontier.

Quinn



Roundtable are working diligently to contribute to a two-volume study of the press in the West and the Midwest during the Civil War. The first volume, which deals with the Western press, will appear in spring 2021 and will be published by Peter Lang. The second volume, which will deal with the Midwestern press, will appear in spring 2022.

**van Tuyll:** *When you're starting a brand new research project that's maybe a bit out of your wheelhouse, how do you get it started?*

**Fuhlhage:** I look to required readings from my own doctoral study. Some of that is canon written decades ago, and some of it was the cutting edge as of my time as a student. I then run searches of scholarly databases to find the current secondary lit that cites that material. That shows me the lineage of the topic and helps to keep me from overlooking primary sources and also keeps me from reinventing the wheel.

**Huntzicker:** The first thing to do is build a bibliography to see what has been done on the subject already. In this process, you can develop your knowledge, locate sources, develop points of view, and explore questions for your own research. Watch for references to your subject and for new possible sources and perspectives as you read these sources. For example, you may find sources that are more racist and/or closed to diverse perspectives than we would see today.

**Lamonica:** The first thing I always like to do is go to the primary sources. If I am doing a paper or chapter that involves primarily newspapers or magazines, I look at those. I don't want my initial assessment influenced by other scholars' views, no matter how strong their scholarship may be. I also find that context is helpful. What does an editor

think about a topic? What other articles from other sources are in the publication and on what page. If letters or diaries are available, I examine those as well. Then I move onto scholarly sources.

**Moore:** First, I go to the literature of those who have written on the subject before me. I find it helpful to think interdisciplinarily as well. What can other approaches to research teach me about this topic? Then, I look at their citations and bibliographies and span out from there. I also like to jump right in and look at primary documents. If I'm using newspapers, for example, I try to consider how a contemporary viewer might have read and interpreted the content. I also try to find popular writings about the topic from literary magazines and longform journalism work, when they're available. I also like to use "The Conversation" — a website that defines itself as "academic rigor with journalistic flair."

**Quinn:** No life, no news — and thus no journalism history — takes place in isolation. Therefore, my approach to every topic, and certainly those that lie outside my normal research areas, is to start with the primary sources. I open a newspaper and read, focusing not only on targeted articles that might have a subject or author of interest, but also on the peripheral content on the page, which illuminates the political, cultural, social, economic, and rhetorical context of that reportage. I attempt to draw organic conclusions about the content before considering secondary scholarly or theoretical works.

**van Tuyll:** *How do you find sources for an under-covered topic?*

**Fuhlhage:** I start with a concept map: Identify the disciplines associated with the new project, then find secondary databases that are strong in

the fields that are on the periphery of the main topic. For *Yankee Reporters and Southern Secrets* [Fuhlhage's recently published book on newspapers as open source intelligence sources], that meant going and looking in military and political science databases that have information about intelligence gathering and interpretation. It also sent me to archives.gov, the U.S. National Archives website, to run searches for historical articles in bulletins that serve the current intelligence community.

**Huntzicker:** If you cannot find previously published research on your subject, then you can begin by exploring the terrain in which your subject is located. Like an investigative reporter, you start further from the main subject and work your way toward the main object of investigation. Geographically, you may want to explore physical context and the climate the city or county in which the publication or person is located. For example, a place with extreme heat or cold could be relevant to your subject's behavior. Intellectually, you may explore the social or professional circles of your subject or person of interest. Economically, look at the physical and economic conditions of the town in which your subject operates and for possible relationships between our subject and people who would be both above and below them in the socioeconomic structure. Along the way, look for perspectives and facts that may add color and context to your findings.

**Lamonica:** I really, really dig with database searches using a variety of key words. I'm very badger-like in this respect. I also don't discount old sources, but I always double and triple check what people say and verify. There are under-studied subjects still out there, and sometimes the primary sources become the main sources of information. I try to find out

all I can about who produced those sources to learn of any potential biases, political leanings, and worldviews, when possible. Personally, I think it's great when scholars get away from the same old topics and same sources and view under-studied materials. I needed—and had—a sabbatical to engage in the lengthy search. I'd say the search took up about half as much time as reading the sources.

**Quinn:** It's surprising how much journalism history has yet to be tackled by scholars, and I've found many of my projects to be "under-covered." Once I've digested primary sources, it may be possible to identify scholarly works that can inform my historical study with theoretical approaches from alternate temporal or academic contexts. As an example, in researching 19th-century breaking news reportage, I found compelling studies that addressed breaking news and crisis reporting in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that provided useful models. I've found that contemporary and interdisciplinary approaches can often transform and energize historical research.

**Moore:** Like many, I assume, I begin with a broad, online search. I then continue to narrow using Google Scholar and historical databases available through my university's library. I also rely on the fabulous research librarians at my institution to help me find resources I might not otherwise find on my own. As experts in finding information, I find librarians to be invaluable — and often underutilized. If it's a topic I know enough about to begin preliminary research, I'll put together "research in progress" proposal to panels at conferences. I don't have colleagues on my campus who do the same kind of historical work that I do, so it's imperative that I can present ideas to those who share interests and can provide meaningful feedback.

**van Tuyll:** *Where do you go for primary sources (i.e., newspapers, diaries, letters) besides the obvious archives? What are some of the best online sources to consider?*

**Fuhlhage:** The Library of Congress and National Archives are adding an astounding amount of primary material all the time, so you always have to go back to them. Newspapers.com and Genealogybank.com are my mainstays for digitized newspapers. Moving to Michigan and looking for material associated with it has reminded me that since we were on the nation's periphery during the Civil War, a lot of our material hasn't been digitized. The Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library has been a real trove of well-preserved local materials that media historians have neglected.

**Huntzicker:** The growing number of databases containing 19th-century publications and other sources is exciting. Two of the most common ones for newspapers are the Gale Database of Nineteenth Century Newspapers and Newspapers.com. Generations of historians have been criticized for their bias toward New York newspapers, especially the *New York Times*, because they are more accessible to libraries around the country. Today, there seems to be a bias among researchers toward the publications collected in the databases. Normally you will have to go to an academic library to access many of these databases. Newspapers in the collections may not be representative of the nation's newspapers. For example, Gale does not have the major newspapers in Minnesota because the state's historical society has been possessive in its ownership of them.

To compensate for online database bias, you can go to individual state and county historical societies for perspectives closer to your re-

search subject. Many of these sources are online, even though they're not accessible by Google or the national databases. They may be accessible through other portals. When looking for sources, watch out for collections of related materials that include the people and institutions you're researching.

Rich collections of primary materials are available free to the public online from the National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/>) and the Library of Congress (most especially through <http://memory.loc.gov>). These portals provide access to hundreds of varied resources — both primary and secondary.

For perspective and possible illustrations, I like to visit [www.harper-week.com/](http://www.harper-week.com/). Through an academic portal, this is the best source of any publication that covers the entire run of the publication from 1857 through 1912. Quality illustrations are scanned and entire articles typed into the database for searching and copying. The public portion of this site provides a number of completed studies, such as presidential elections and racial stereotypes, based on *Harper's Weekly*. These also include potential class exercises and games using the publication.

**Lamonica:** Many universities and historical societies have digitized newspapers, magazines, letters and diaries, which are wonderful sources of information. Some of my favorite online sources are the Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. I also find the resources of the Hathi Trust to be an excellent resource. State librarians throughout the nation have been digitizing newspapers for a couple of decades, so I use Google searches to find these, such as the Colorado Historical Newspaper Collection. The University of North Texas's Portal to Texas History is a real gem — letters, documents, photographs, maps and loads of digitized newspapers from

throughout Texas History.

**Moore:** I find presidential library archives to be places to find unexpected materials. For example, I recently visited the Herbert Hoover library in West Branch, Iowa. Their latest exhibit features Hoover's tour of Central and South America as the U.S. President-elect. The exhibit relied heavily on domestic and foreign newspaper coverage of his travels. Some of the smaller, specialty libraries, such as county historical societies or city municipal archives, also have treasures that can lead you to items you might not normally come across in the larger libraries.

**Quinn:** Though my research is heavily focused on primary source periodicals, I've used a variety of alternate sources to elucidate contextual issues and individuals. These have included memoirs and other first-person literature, available in library archives or online; secondary sources from the period, including essays, speeches, and treatises, as well as contemporary primary sources, such as convention proceedings and Congressional records, available from the Library of Congress; and contemporary biographies, either published in periodicals, as pamphlets, or as books, available from a wide variety of sources including the Smithsonian Libraries and Project Gutenberg.

**van Tuyl:** *What have you learned about the Western or Midwestern press between 1861 and 1865 that has really surprised you? How can historians make the best use of such surprises?*

**Fuhlhage:** I'm astonished by the ways readers in the Midwest used newspapers to communicate their desires to their lawmakers in Washington and by the extent to which the public sphere was alive with

debate during the war.

**Huntzicker:** In researching editor Jane Grey Swisshelm of St. Cloud, Minnesota, I discovered that she considered herself a friend to Native Americans. She wrote about some who came in canoes to visit her in her home near the Mississippi River, but after the Dakota War of 1862, she called for the extermination of the Dakota people (called Sioux in those days) while Ojibwe (then called Chippewa) should be spared. She wrote: “We can live in peace with the Chippewas — if the Sioux are exterminated, but if they are allowed to roam through the State, any Chippewa is liable to be shot by the men who will shoot Sioux and may mistake one for the other.” (*St. Cloud Democrat*, October 16, 1862).

Many nuances can be explored about racism with her example. She advocated abolition of slavery, equal rights for freed slaves, but extermination of some native peoples. Another prominent white woman defended Native American rights while defending Southern slavery.

**Lamonica:** What surprised me the most was how tightly and dearly American-born settlers held on to their ties with relatives in the East or South. Although settlers’ letters and diaries revealed that individuals went west for a fresh start or for excitement or in the hopes of making a fortune, they still were informed by the values and views with which they were raised. And, they brought their beliefs and values with them. Those viewpoints often led to clashes with neighbors who may have hailed from different regions or states. Although the Civil War was a distant affair for many westerners, they had great interest in war news. Individuals who couldn’t read or who didn’t have the money for a newspaper listened intently as others read news to them by stage coaches, in taverns, and even at churches and town meeting halls. The other



thing that surprised me was the amount of legal and extra-legal press suppression that occurred. Again, despite the distance from the war, strongly held partisan opinions led settlers to call for the silencing of opposition voices.

**Moore:** I'm approaching my work on the West as an archaeological dig. It's a matter of excavating materials and making interpretations based on context. What are they reporting on about their everyday lives that went beyond war coverage between the North and the South. The West was as mysterious as outer space is to us today. I am trying to embrace a mindset like those historical figures might. Walk in their shoes, so to speak.

**Quinn:** I was struck most deeply by the palpable human element in the reportage. In researching the coverage of the end of the war and the death of Lincoln, for example, the transition from exhilaration to grief was central to the reportage and deeply moving. Perhaps historians always find this. Through historical research, the modern reader can inhabit a rhetorical place in history, and follow the unfolding news in an immediate and personal way. The value of this experience is to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of historical research as a window into the past *and* the present.

**van Tuyl:** *After doing this project, what are the questions you think Civil War-era journalism historians still need to address?*

**Fuhlhage:** Donald Shaw has done yet more groundbreaking work on the melding of agendas between news outlets and their readers in contemporary times. More work is needed on the ways newspapers medi-

ated debate about support for and resistance to the war efforts of both the Union and the Confederacy. Some regions have been overlooked, too. We hear all about print culture and the journalism ecosystems of Virginia and South Carolina and Alabama, but much less about the periphery out in Arkansas, Missouri, Oregon, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

**Huntzicker:** The Civil War was the most cataclysmic event — or series of events — in American history. A good source for seeing many perspectives on the Civil War and the media is the annual Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. The website (<https://www.utc.edu/west-chair-communication/symposium/index.php>) lists topics and some abstracts from previous symposia. People who have presented here and the books of collected papers can elaborate on the range of Civil War-related topics.

As settlers moved west, they (and their editors) encountered many new and unfamiliar places and cultures. As our understanding of the past becomes more sophisticated, we can take new values to look at old questions. At the same time, contemporary social and political issues will raise new questions reinforcing long-time racial, cultural and geographical similarities and differences. As Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

**Lamonica:** Wartime newspapers from the Midwest and far West offer a wealth of topics to be explored. Boosterism, women’s issues, manifest destiny, partisanship, and the relationship between editors and public opinion are all worth exploring. As I read James E. Potter’s excellent work, *Standing Firmly By the Flag: Nebraska Territory and the Civil War*,

1861-1867, I realized that most of my knowledge about the prairie region focused on the conflict before and during the war in Kansas. Similarly, comparatively little has been written about Oregon and the territory of Washington during the war. Editors were tremendous boosters of their regions, sought to gain political influence, and, as part of their efforts, often called for the extermination of Native Americans. Many scholars haven't made great use of the Western and Midwestern press.

**Moore:** A surprise, for me, should not have been a surprise: Life goes on — as the sheer amount of news that was unrelated to the battlefield indicated. I'm in the middle of a project now where I'm placing questions about domestic news reporting at the center of my research. The opening of the West was a different struggle. How was it being reported? What can we learn about the past to inform today's media ecosystem? Did they distinguish among local, regional, national and international news stories?

**Quinn:** In my mind, the most pressing pragmatic issue for Civil War-era journalism historians is the quality and breadth of the archives, as many of our primary sources are turning into dust at this very moment. We need to find ways to actively support efforts to identify and protect these precious resources, which disproportionately represent ethnic, special interest, and small-town presses. There are many important voices to discover before they end up silenced in the “dustbin of history.”

**van Tuyl:** *You're working on a project for a book about newspapers in the West/Midwest during the Civil War. That means you have to contextualize the war coverage with information about a part of the country that was*

*underpopulated and where the press was likely underdeveloped (with a few exceptions). How do you approach a topic that deals with a seeming wasteland?*

**Fuhlhage:** I actually don't think the Midwest *was* a wasteland in terms of press development. The western-most of the states that we're conceptualizing in the book as "Midwest," Missouri, had active partisan presses. St. Louis had a boisterous newspaper scene, with competing Republican and Democratic dailies that functioned as nodes in a journalism ecosystem that connected abolitionist Kansans and pro-slavery Missourians with their political and economic patrons in New England, New York, and the Cotton South. Further, we've all been so conditioned to think of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia as the print centers of antebellum America that we tend to overlook Cincinnati's status as the third most important print center in the country at that time.

So, I see three ways to begin to narrow down the search to the most vital newspapers of the region. The first is to look at letters, diaries, and journals of people at the epicenters of the struggle over the expansion of slavery, as well as the letters of roving correspondents who covered the anti-slavery struggle on the moving frontier. Which cities did their letters originate in? Journalists were, as they are now, social people who establish a sort of field office in places that have the amenities they need to gather news and get it back to the East. These include newspaper offices where they could read the out-of-town exchanges, postal service, and outfitters where newsmakers frequented to resupply — these are the places where reporters would get word-of-mouth.

The second is guides to newspaper circulations. My favorite in the antebellum period is a lengthy appendix in *Livingston's Law Register* for 1852, which lists every newspaper in the U.S., including circulations

and “character,” which is a shorthand for either political leaning (if a partisan paper) or for which niche it served (religious, literary, and so on).

The third is to look at period maps, preferably those that show ports, rail lines, and telegraph lines. Any place with all three is a good bet to have a lively print culture.

**Huntzicker:** Finding published sources is particularly hard, of course, if nothing was being published in the territory or state at the time you’re studying. Here again, secondary sources are important because historians have studied the memoirs of early explorers and settlers. In addition, those written memoirs can be valuable sources for you. Correspondents from major newspapers on both the East and West coasts wrote travelogues or followed some of those earlier explorers. These articles can also provide hints of the extent to which the Civil War was considered remote or immediately relevant to the cultures of settlers.

**Lamonica:** What’s surprising about the West is that it wasn’t a wasteland and many people indeed wanted to feel connected to the bulk of the nation back east. I found that I had to seek out a number of excellent sources about the Civil War in the West, such as Alvin M. Josephy, Jr.’s *The Civil War in the American West* and Andrew E. Masich’s *Civil War in the Southwest Borderlands, 1861-1867*, and read extensively to make all the connections—partisanship, changing migration patterns, relations with Native Americans, economic and socio-political issues, etc., to gain as full of an understanding as possible. I read a number of state and territorial histories as well, and I also examined many digitized letters and diaries from before and during the war years. Some were penned by settlers and others by soldiers. I thought I knew a great deal

about the West before taking on this project, but now I have a much more detailed, nuanced understanding.

**Moore:** As scholars, we need to ask questions about how newspapers in the territories reported on the war and how reporting shaped public discourse about American citizenship. Living and publishing in places that were working towards admittance to the union, what kind of country did they envision emerging out of the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy?

**Quinn:** In the case of this particular project, my doctoral work engaged a wide array of relevant content that focused on the 19th-century West through fiction, journalism and other first-person nonfiction, and ecocriticism. This scholarly framework demonstrated how the West only became “The West” through intensely personal physical and rhetorical immersion — through the individual footstep, the daily struggle, the touch of rain or snow — and the subsequent efforts of individuals to articulate that experience. Similarly, the Western press maintained this anthropocentric paradigm, so that reportage during the Civil War focused on human consequences despite the expansive landscape on the margin.

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# The Purpose of History

By James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan ©



Startt



Sloan

**W**ithout exaggeration, one can say that people have found purpose in history since the Greeks invented it.

For the Romans it was an inspiration for their imperial confidence and vision. Medieval monks and scholars produced various works that kept alive Western civilization tradition. And, even if they bent it to their own purposes, who can doubt that it offered the society of their day a historical vision?

Following the Middle Ages, history grew in prominence as a form of knowledge until the 19th century, when it entered its golden age. Whether written as a national epic, biography, science, or a revelation of historical destiny, its purpose was not questioned. It was central to the age. Never before or since has it enjoyed such prominence. The literature of that century is crowded with the great works written by

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historians across the Western world.

Today, people continue to pursue history as a subject worthy of serious investigation. They do so for different reasons. In the United States, for instance, early 20th-century Progressive historians used history to undergird their ideas of enlightened democracy that were so important to their hopes of reforming contemporary society.

More recently, “new left” historians attempted to radicalize history and make it an instrument of social revolution. The Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker claims that history must serve the needs either of the oppressed or the oppressors. To that comment, the well-known Lincoln scholar Richard Current responded: “Though that may be good Marxism, it may also represent the fallacy of the excluded middle. Surely there are historians who try, not wholly in vain, to write and teach for the sake of neither oppressors nor oppressed but for the sake of historical truth.” (Richard N. Current, “Fiction as History: A Review Essay,” *The Journal of Southern History* 52 [February 1986]: 87.)

He provides an important clue with that comment, for most American historians are neither new leftist nor Marxist nor devotees of any special school of history. Most simply pursue their studies hoping to produce a significant, convincing, honest, authentic, and engaging account.

Even in JMC history, where some historians adopt approaches such as Cultural Studies theory or the Progressive interpretation, most historians do not consciously write from specific perspectives — other than just trying to produce the best accounts they can.

If in the last hundred years, with many new competitors in the field, history has failed to retain its 19th-century position, it surely has held its vitality. It remains today a major form of knowledge pursued both as a popular and professional study. It continues, moreover, to enjoy a flourishing existence in schools and colleges and constitutes a significant genre of writ-



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ing. Despite the fact that the number of schools offering JMC history has gone down in recent decades, more than half of JMC schools still offer history courses, and many still require it of their students.

Yet, it is still possible and profitable to inquire into history's purpose.

Like all subjects and forms of investigation, history has its detractors as well as its supporters. Moreover, in a culture such as ours in which present-mindedness, practicality, vocationalism, and materialism are so pronounced, the questions sometimes raised about the value of historical study fail to surprise us. Such questions find their logical answers in an understanding of the purpose of historical study.

What is it, then, that historians hope to do when they make their inquiries into the past?

The first part of the answer to that question is simple. They hope to explain particular things of the past with fullness and truth. They hope to capture and relate the thought and feeling of a time past as they are associated with the problem under consideration.

The meaning sought cannot be imposed from without. Such study, therefore, can subordinate itself neither to political or social ideology, nor to religious or anti-religious passion, nor to deterministic theories, nor to the social scientist's "models," and still be history.

History investigates things that have happened and seeks to comprehend them in their fullness of meaning. In that manner it hopes to be informative about human behavior, about how people have related to one another, and about how they have interacted with the conditions of their time.

The purpose of history involves the significance and particularity of the object studied. Its significance is suggested by the historian's conviction that something selected from the past for study has an ongoing importance. Its particularity stems from the idea that history investigates things in con-

text and things about particular problems, people, places, and times.

Indeed, it is possible to perceive a number of purposes in a study of particular things of the past pursued from the inside out.

Within the context of the topic under investigation, historical study affords the opportunity to be informed about the nature of humankind and historical truth. The purpose of history is not to justify an action of the past, to offer facile judgments about it, to shape the evidence to fit a theory, or to suggest careless analogies between past and present. It is rather to provide reasonable explanations for the complexity of evidence. Thus, its purpose involves the painstaking willingness to search for the truth of a past situation.

By their separate inquiries, historians contribute to the authentic record of human experience. But is that record worth the effort? What use does it have for society?

Consider the proposition that history has purpose from a slightly different angle than that found in the previous discussion. Most historians believe that their discipline provides information important for identity and background. It helps us to know ourselves both individually and collectively, and it provides knowledge valuable in helping us to understand the world as we find it.

By way of example, consider a few events much studied by historians. The revolution that began on the battlefield in 1775 gave birth to our American republic. No one expects it to experience another revolution of that sort. Since it probably will not recur, should it be studied? Can Americans living more than two centuries after the event be informed about themselves as a nation by studying this event?

Or consider the Nazi movement that surfaced in the 1930s to disrupt Western society and to occasion one of history's bloodiest wars. No one expects a Nazi revolution to happen again in Germany or elsewhere, though

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it is always possible that it might. Should that terrible historical event be studied?

Everyone hopes for international peace. Is there any profit to derive from studying the causes of previous wars or the success and failure of peace settlements? They will never occur again in exactly the same way they did in the past, but why should anyone not want to know about them?

The creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 set off a series of conflicts that continue to this day. Would knowledge of the relationship between Israel and its neighbors since the Hebrews settled in the region more than 3,000 years ago — not to mention knowledge of the why and how of the establishment of the modern Israeli state and Arab opposition to it — help one to understand the nature of that conflict today?

Take as another example the case of Britain, the first country to industrialize in the modern world. Can we benefit from a knowledge of what the results of that industrialization were and what policy measures were made in an effort to cope with the problems inherent in the new industrialized order?

Or consider the impact that the advent of television had on newspapers. An identical episode will not happen again, but is there anything that we can gain by studying its history? Surely, a knowledge of the media revolution wrought by television helps us to understand how the appearance of a major communication technology — such as the Internet — has a substantial impact on other technologies.

One could ask hundreds of questions of this type, and their answers surely suggest that history has a purpose for anyone who hopes to be a responsible and informed person, particularly in a democratic society.

Scholars involve themselves in historical investigation for many reasons. Some seek to close gaps in some important segment of the existing historical record. Others may aspire to advance a new idea. Whether the

aim is to supplement or to supplant previous historical knowledge, they don't assume they will produce final answers. They know they will never learn all there is to know about their probes into the past. The object of the historian's quest is to provide an honest understanding of something in the past based on the best evidence available.

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# Book Award Interview

By Thomas Aiello ©



Aiello

**T**homas Aiello received the 2019 American Journalism Historians Association’s award for the best book of the year for *The Grapevine of the Black South: The Scott Newspaper Syndicate in the Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement*. He teaches at Valdosta State University in the Department of History and the African American Studies Program. Along with *The Grapevine of the Black South*, he has written eight other books. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas.

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

**Aiello:** In the summer of 1928, William Alexander Scott began a small four-page weekly in Atlanta. In 1930, his *Atlanta World* became a semi-weekly, and the following year, W.A. began to implement his vision for a massive newspaper chain based in the city, the Southern Newspaper Syndicate. Advertisements proclaimed “Negroes Are Different In Dixie.” Finally, in March 1932, the *Atlanta World* became the nation’s only black daily. When the Syndicate’s reach began drifting beyond the bounds of the South in 1933, Scott changed its name to the Scott Newspaper Syndicate.

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In the generation that followed, the literally hundreds of papers of the Syndicate helped formalize knowledge among the African-American population in the South. They gave black readers in Atlanta, for example, much the same news that they gave readers in New Orleans. The Civil Rights Movement then exploded throughout the region after World War 2, with black southerners finding a collective identity in that struggle. It was a collective identity that couldn't come solely from skin color or resentment of Jim Crow. The relative uniformity in post-*Brown* activism in the South was built in part on the commonality of the news, and the subsequent interpretation of that news. Or, as Gunnar Myrdal explained, the press was "the chief agency of group control. It tells the individual how he should think and feel as an American Negro and creates a tremendous power of suggestion by implying that all other Negroes think and feel in this manner." (Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* [1944], 911.) The opinions of individual editors about syndicated news was by no means monolithic, so southern newspaper syndication didn't create a complete homogeneity in black southern thinking, but it did give thinkers a similar set of tools from which to draw.

The book argues that the black southern press in the post-World War I period became the modern version of antebellum kinship networks. They looked much the same and served similar ends. Syndicate newspapers dominated in small towns of the southern countryside. Calls for land reform were replaced with calls for voting rights, but the authors of that new network had learned from earlier racial crackdowns. In a pragmatic effort to avoid confrontation developing from white fear, newspaper editors developed a practical radicalism that argued on the fringes of racial hegemony, picking their spots, urging local compromise, and saving their loudest vitriol for tyranny that wasn't local and

thus left no stake in the game for would-be white saboteurs.

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

**Aiello:** I was actually working on a separate project years ago, and in the process I worked with a variety of southern black newspapers. I was struck by advertisements that proclaimed “Negroes Are Different In Dixie,” and made the case that black southerners who went north were somehow inauthentically black. “Northern Negroes (including those who packed their handbags down in Dixie and got that way) may pass up the Northern Negro papers because white dailies print Negro news, or because they feel a certain guilt in reading Negro medium. But the Southern Negro pores over Southern Newspaper Syndicate presentations,” explained one advertisement. “While his northern brother is busily engaged in ‘getting white’ and ruining racial consciousness, the Southerner has become more closely knit.” That line of thinking was fascinating to me, so I collected all of the advertisements I could find, then saved the project for when I had time to devote to it.

The other real impetus was the fact that northern black newspapers play a large role in the historiography of the black press, but because so many of its newspapers were small, or didn’t last long, or weren’t saved, or didn’t leave behind business records, southern black newspapers receive short shrift in that historiography. I wanted to remedy that, at least to a small degree.

*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?*

**Aiello:** This book was a ten-year process. My point of departure for re-

search was Emory University, which holds the papers of the *Atlanta Daily World*. Only some Syndicate records are extant, but the ones that remain are truly helpful. I used cash receipt books to make a list of papers involved in the Syndicate, then tracked their payments over two decades to chart when each paper existed. It was a harrowing effort, but once I had a complete spreadsheet, I began going through the list to discover which papers left a trace in the historical record. For those that did, I traveled across the country, as far north as New York and as far west as Austin, to track those traces, often finding only single issues or lone pages from single issues to get an idea of those papers. I then chose some of the most telling, representative stories to drill down on to explain the role of the black press more broadly and the Syndicate papers more specifically.

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

**Aiello:** My biggest regret is not missing any papers that survived. It is instead missing out on the ability to review all of those papers that didn't survive. More than half of the newspapers involved with the Scott Newspaper Syndicate have no surviving issues. I was only able to track their survival through their participation in the Syndicate itself.

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

**Aiello:** My advice would be to not assume an inability to evaluate a given journalistic source simply because that source wasn't saved in any kind of systematic way. There is much to learn, for example, from single



issues of small black newspapers that reside in a lone archive somewhere away from more comprehensive journalism archives. It is those smaller issues, those pieces of journalistic literature that never made it into the proverbial canon, that can best help us to challenge that canon, push back against ingrained assumptions, and alter the historiography of journalism in the process.

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

**Aiello:** Access to the papers themselves was an obvious challenge, as I've mentioned. But along with that, another challenge was finding secondary materials in the historiography itself that treated issues of black southern journalism in a comprehensive manner. Often, when we are dealing with subjects that have not been well-trod by those who came before us, finding proper contextual material can be its own challenge, and that was certainly the case here.

*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?*

**Aiello:** It can be a thorny issue. Especially when doing race history, it is easy to see good guys and bad guys, to want to defend the oppressed against their oppressors, rather than analyzing the specific reasons for the historic dispossessions that have accrued over time. When added to the general historian's plight of spending so much time with the subjects of research that there becomes a temptation to defend them over and against their own frailties and faults, being conscious of our role as collectors and interpreters of various arguments, and that the

debts and credits of such arguments will uplift or fell the arguers for individual readers on their own, is paramount. Race history isn't melodrama, and the righteous anger that sometimes develops over the consequences of white supremacy can often lead it into that territory. The righteous anger is good, of course. It makes us human. But realizing that those who persecute others will hang themselves with their own argumentative rope if careful retelling and analysis is applied is what makes us historians.

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

**Aiello:** The Scott Newspaper Syndicate, run by the owners of the *Atlanta Daily World*, included more than 240 black newspapers between 1931 and 1955. It became after World War I the modern version of the nineteenth century kinship network, the grapevine, and it looked much the same and served similar ends. In a pragmatic effort to avoid racial confrontation developing from white fear, newspaper editors developed a practical radicalism that argued on the fringes of racial hegemony and saving their loudest vitriol for tyranny that wasn't local and thus left no stake in the game for would-be white saboteurs. But the Syndicate did not remain in the South. Its membership followed the path of the Great Migration into the Midwest and West. The comparative reach of the SNS and its hundreds of newspapers was simply unparalleled. This book examines that reach, and in the process reexamines historical thinking about the Depression-era black South, the information flow of the Great Migration, the place of southern newspapers in the historiography of black journalism, and even the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the civil rights movement.

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

**Aiello:** I think the biggest surprise for me was the Syndicate's move outside of the South. It followed the Great Migration as its readers went north and west with papers as far north as Connecticut and as far west as Arizona. In July 1932, less than a year-and-a-half after its 1931 founding, the Syndicate added the *St. Louis Argus*. The following month it added the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the *Newark Herald*, and the *Detroit Independent*. That the spread of the SNS would mirror the spread of the black population during the Great Migration is not surprising. Instead, the interesting fact of the spread is that a company that originally sold itself as uniquely and fundamentally southern in order to compete with more radical northern competitors like the *Chicago Defender* sending editions down South would in relatively short order move outside of those bounds in order to compete with those established northern syndicates emanating from Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and New York.

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

**Aiello:** I think my best advice would be to do the book. There are so many great stories and so many holes in the historiography just waiting to be filled. It is such a fruitful area of research, and one that bears directly on the issues still weighing on us today. I would also encourage them to lean on those who are steeped in the existing historiography. We have come to this work because we think it is important. We are a community. And we are eager and ready to suggest directions, texts, or other helpful avenues for those hoping to engage with the material.