

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 3 (2017). Number 6

Historiography in Mass Communication

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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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The Lying Internet

By Wm. David Sloan ©



Sloan

“It is an old and true saying, that a lie well stuck to, is as good as the truth. For a time, at least, a lie answers as well as the truth, especially if it comes by the Internet. If it is published, it sells as rapidly and is read with as much zest as if it were the unadulterated truth.”

“The many rumors and contradictions of them received by the Internet are exceedingly annoying to the press, even though it may be impossible to avoid them. One can scarcely determine to make a comment upon a rumor before it is contradicted, and when our office is closed for the night, we remain in an unsatisfactory position from the impression that the next day will probably contradict one half of all we have published.”

The two comments above were published at the start of the American Civil War — although I must confess that I substituted the word “Internet” for the word “telegraph.” Should you wish to read the two articles in their entirety, I’ve included the texts at the bottom of this essay. I’ve also stolen the headline of one of them — “Lying by Telegraph” — for the title of this essay.

Even though Americans’ views about the telegraph in 1861 may

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seem quaint to us, they can serve as a warning about historians' use of the Internet today.

The telegraph — the revolutionary technology for news transmission in the 19th century — proved a great boon for timeliness, but editors found that it also could increase problems. Erroneous, even falsified, reports became commonplace. This new device that had appeared at first to be a divine blessing at times seemed to be a devilish monster. I'm guessing that many JMC historians have at times felt the same way about the Internet.

Soon after the firing on Fort Sumter, telegraph wires running between the North and South were cut. Although the interruption was inconvenient, some editors welcomed the disruption as a relief from lies. The *New York Day-Book* editorialized, "The telegraph has been out of order a few days, and we do not know but it would be a good idea to keep it out of order. It does not pretend to tell the truth any more, and has not for a year past, and between that and the reckless newspapers, one-half of this disturbance has been caused." Newspaper suspicion about telegraphic reports resulted from the difficulty of determining their truthfulness. That seems like a parallel with the Internet.

No historian needs to be told that the Internet has been a boon for research. As with the telegraph, though, the Internet presents problems that historians must recognize and somehow deal with.

One problem is that errors, fabrications, incompleteness of the text, and related shortcomings are more likely to appear in Internet documents than in paper documents. Printed books, as one example of a paper document, usually have gone through an editing and proofreading process before being published.

With the Internet, though, virtually anyone can put a text online without following rigorous safeguards. Errors can be made in the scanning or keyboarding process required in digitizing a text. Parts of a text may be omitted or altered for any variety of reasons.

Texts may even be fictionalized. Print documents — such as edited collections of letters — usually have gone through a review process to try to assure authenticity. The same can't be said for many Internet posts.

A document called the “Willie Lynch speech of 1712” offers an interesting case study. Even though it has been debunked, it can be found on scores of websites without any indication that it was created in the 20th century. The speech purports to be the remarks of a slave owner about how to control American slaves.

Even the Internet Archive, which offers a useful repository of old books and other documents, says of it: “This speech was delivered by Willie Lynch on the bank of the James River in the colony of Virginia in 1712. Lynch was a British slave owner in the West Indies. He was invited to the colony of Virginia in 1712 to teach his methods to slave owners there. The term ‘lynching’ is derived from his last name.”

Several groups have found the text on the Internet, apparently accepted it at face value, and used it to support their agendas. Some describe it with the exact words from the Internet Archive and then repost the “speech” on their websites. After repeating the Internet Archive’s description, one online site urges readers to disseminate it widely. The site declares, “Remnants of Willie’s methods are still in use today. Please pass this [speech] on to as many as possible.”¹

Prof. Manu Ampim, a historian of African and African-American culture, in 2005 dissected the speech and pointed out a number of pieces of evidence indicating that it is a hoax. He noted, for example, that the speech “is not mentioned by *any* 18th or 19th century slave masters or anti-slavery activists.” If you would like to read the speech and examine Prof. Ampim’s analysis, you can find both by Googling “Death of the Willie Lynch Speech.”

Of course, the speech is not the only fraud that appears on the Internet. Snopes.com has made a prosperous business out of exposing

“urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation.”

What’s the cure for historians? For one thing, we can be as diligent in investigating documents as Prof. Ampim has been in analyzing the Willie Lynch speech. One needs only to apply the standard historical rules of evaluating evidence. Historians should be among the last people to be fooled by Internet frauds.

In this issue of *Historiography* we have articles by three of the premier historians in the JMC field. First, Leonard Teel, who has won national awards for two of his books, writes about the study of media history in the Middle East. Along with his work in history, while teaching at Georgia State University he developed a major international program for the education of journalists. He is at work producing a historiography of research that has been done on journalism in the Middle East. We follow his essay with an interview with Julie Williams. Her work in history has been noted for the thoroughness with which she examines primary sources and for the readable narrative writing style that she brings to serious historical study. Finally, we have an interview with Mike Sweeney about his award-winning book *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II*. As with previous issues of *Historiography*, we hope you will find in the present issue much insight into the field.

NOTE

¹ Nyanseor’s Dukpa at <https://dukpa.wordpress.com/2009/09/23/willie-lynch’s-1712-speech-on-slave-control/>

TEXTS OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

[Telegraphic News “Leaves Us in a State of Uncertainty”]

Daily Milwaukee Press and News; April 21, 1861

The many rumors and contradictions of them just now received by telegraph are exceedingly annoying to the newspaper press throughout the country, even though it may be impossible to avoid them. We can scarcely determine to make a comment upon a rumor before it is contradicted, and when our dispatch is closed for the night, we remain in an unsatisfactory position from the impression that the next day will probably contradict one half of all we have published.

South of Washington, the telegraph being in the hands of the secessionists, we cannot of course expect to hear any but their views on the matters that occur, and even the Washington dispatches are very uncertain. The other evening we received what we supposed reliable reports that Harper’s Ferry was taken, and in a very short time after, that all reports of its capture were untrue.

On Friday night we received a report that [Confederate president] Jeff. Davis with his army was within twenty four hours’ march of Washington, and in a few hours after we pen these lines (Saturday at noon) we may receive the news that the report was untrue. Nor can we now say what a twenty-four hours’ march means.

In the olden time a march was what it purported to be, but now, with railroads and improved modes of conveyance, such information carries no definite idea of distance, and leaves us in a state of uncertainty as to where the enemy is supposed to be. We would suggest that those who collect the news for the telegraph should try to make their accounts more definite, though they might thereby give us a less amount of matter to publish....

We do not ask or expect that all coming over the wires shall be correct, but we think, in these exciting times, it is due the public, that as

great accuracy as possible should be aimed at.

Our paper is kept open to the latest hour to receive all the news, and we would be glad for the sake of our readers, that it were more reliable. Great interest is felt in this matter, and we therefore beg of those at the other ends of the lines to use every effort to give us what may, in the main, be relied on.

The Milwaukee writer in the above commentary blamed the problem of errors on the carelessness of the people telegraphing the reports. Some newspapers, however, blamed the telegraph itself. Soon after telegraphic service was cut in April 1861, the *New York Daily News*, in an editorial titled "A Big Liar Gagged," declared, "The telegraph wires being destroyed, the 'special and general Washington dispatches' cannot come. Thank Heaven! The biggest liar in the land is gagged. The liar that made the war is silenced. The false witness is dumb." Against such thinking, the *Daily Journal* of Dayton, Ohio, offered the following analysis. It explained that readers needed to differentiate between the source of news and the medium by which it was transmitted. The telegraph transmitted many false reports, it said, but the solution lay in reporters going to greater efforts to verify their stories.

Lying by Telegraph

Daily Dayton Journal; May 29, 1861

It is an old and true saying, that a lie well stuck to, is as good as the truth. For a time, at least, a lie answers as well as the truth, especially if it comes by telegraph. If it is published it sells with as much rapidity and is read with as much zest as if it was the unadulterated truth.

The perpetration of that great lie about the capture of Sewell's Point, leads us to make a few reflections upon this too common species of lying. The telegraph has often been termed the "tell-lie-graph," by persons who were unable to distinguish between the liar and the bear-

er of lies. The telegraph company is a common carrier, and is no more responsible for the canards which are sent over it than the post office or express company is responsible for any falsehoods carried by them. They are all of them open to the public. In regard to the news transmitted by telegraph, the telegraph company is in no wise responsible. It receives and transmits news for the associated press for a certain contract price. The news matter is made up by agents of the associated press, or by special agents of such papers, as prefer exclusive and special telegrams. The telegraph company acts in the capacity of a common carrier only.

The lying is all done by the news agents, but very often they no doubt are the victims of others, and are as badly sold as are the reading public.

At Washington City the news agents catch at every floating rumor and without waiting to hear the confirmation, they rush to the telegraph office and give lightning wings to everything they think may or ought to be true, and we have no doubt in a majority of cases they telegraph whatever will sell, without much regard to its truth or falsity. Thus it is that the country is flooded with unfounded rumors and downright lies, almost daily by telegraph. We are unable to suggest a remedy to this lying by telegraph, unless the members of the associated press throughout the country will speak out upon this subject, and insist upon the employment of truth telling reporters at the great emporiums of news, who shall be prohibited from telegraphing anything without a reasonable foundation, if positive confirmation cannot be had, and in all doubtful news to qualify it with words which shall class it among simple rumors, which may be weighed by the readers as well as the reporter.

The news of the capture of Sewell's Point was a splendid lie. It gave Butler's loss so exact, eighty-four killed and wounded. It gave such a gratifying loss upon the part of the rebels and by way of a clincher said

the war department had received a similar report, that scarcely any one doubted its truth. There was much exultation over the fact, that the New England boys had so completely flaxed out the gasconading hot blooded Virginians.

Alas! what a let down to get a telegram on Sunday night announcing that there was no truth in the reported capture of Sewell's Point.

Now, we do solemnly protest against this system of lying by telegraph. It is a gross outrage upon the people, who have a right to the truth, who are willing to pay for the truth, and who love the truth, whether it be good or bad.

We hope that those who can apply the proper remedies to this growing evil, will do so, before the press of the country loses the confidence of and is visited with the scorn and contempt of the people.

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Internationalizing Journalism History

The Development of Journalism in The Middle East

By Leonard Ray Teel ©



Teel*

This essay was framed by a challenge put to journalism historians earlier this year in *Historiography's* third issue. Professor Yong Volz discussed the movement among American journalism historians to internationalize journalism history. “Concerted institutional efforts have also been made to promote international journalism history,” she wrote, “not only as a legitimate subfield of journalism history but also as critical opportunity to revitalize the agenda of journalism and communication

research.”

Volz acknowledged that several American historians have documented journalism history overseas, but stressed the need to cast a wider geographical and cultural net. “But in general, we media historians seem to have little knowledge of — and have barely investigated — journalism histories in Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East, and thus lack an empirical foundation from which to address important

Leonard Teel a professor emeritus at Georgia State University. He has served as the president of the American Journalism Historians Association and received its Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement. In 2001 he won the Frank Luther Mott-Kappa Tau Alpha Research Award for the year's outstanding book for his biography Ralph Emerson McGill: Voice of the Southern Conscience. His most recent book, Reporting the Cuban Revolution: How Castro Manipulated American Journalists (2015), won the AJHA's award as the year's outstanding book.

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* Photo by Imad Hmoud

historical questions concerning the role of media in the process of modernization in non-Western countries.”¹

I am attempting a historiography of journalism in the modern Middle East, leaving Asia, Africa and South America for others in the field. This project has been developing for a few years. I have been working with journalists and journalism historians in the region since 1994, a relationship that began serendipitously, as if by a genie. I had applied for a grant to return to work with journalists in South Asia. One afternoon I received a call from the grant manager. He explained that the South Asia project was awarded to another university. Then, he asked, “Could you be enthusiastic about the Middle East?” I thought it prudent not to answer with a quick “yes.” After a discussion with the Georgia State University faculty, we started traveling there in 1995. Since then I have worked in nearly all the Middle East countries, cooperating with journalists, journalism educators, students and non-governmental organizations. Early on, the university professors met together and founded the Arab-U.S. Association for Communication Educators (ausace.org), which this year held its 22nd annual research conference in Cairo.

In the essay Professor Volz made another relevant point about journalism history and culture that resonates with my research in the Middle East. She stated that “journalism is always a product of negotiation, adaptation and hybridization” between cultures. In the Middle East, evidence supports that view. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the journalistic culture was transmitted from West to East, from France and England to Turkey and Egypt in the Ottoman Empire. Scholarship on the Ottomans has verified that the French introduced a Western newspaper model in Istanbul in 1795. Ever since, journalism has undergone adaptations and hybridization in response to the region’s politics, economics, religion, society, intellectual movements and aesthetics.

The early history of Western journalism in the Middle East exemplifies the processes of local adaptation and hybridization of foreign concepts. One evidentiary trail begins in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, and more specifically in Pera, the city's principal residential quarter of the European communities with the foreign embassies and fashionable shops and hotels.² There, from 1795 to 1796, an official French journal, the *Bulletin de Nouvelles [News]*, was printed by the *Palais de France* during the embassy of Verninac Saint-Maur, envoy of the new French Republic. While the *Bulletin* was a newspaper, its content was not journalistic reportage; it focused on the changing politics in post-Revolutionary France, especially of interest to French residents so far from home. The *Bulletin* was later heralded as "possibly the pioneer of all Turkish newspapers."³ From 1796 to May 1797 the *Bulletin* was published as the *Gazette française de Constantinople* and then from May to July 1797 as the *Mercure Oriental*.⁴

French influence continued with the launch of more newspapers in the Ottoman Empire. In 1825, the *Spectator de l'Orient* was founded at the Ottoman port of Smyrna by a French citizen, probably Alexander Blacquet, who afterwards published the paper "under the titles *Courier* and *Journal de Smyrna*." In 1831, Blacquet started the *Monitor Ottoman*, "the first strictly Constantinopolitan journal." In 1840, an Englishman, William N. Churchill, published *Cerede-i Havadis (Journal of News)* that presented details of Western politics, finance, cultural and technology.⁵ By 1876, there were 76 journals of all kinds in Istanbul, including 20 in French and 16 in Turkish. By 1890, the city had 19 newspapers, most of them dailies, in various local languages. In 1900, the *Stamboul* and four other dailies were in French, three dailies were in Turkish, and one bilingual daily was published in English and French.⁶

The French also tried to publish a newspaper in Egypt. In 1800, during France's brief military occupation of the country, the military arranged to start a newspaper in Arabic, *al-Tanbih* (The Alert), one pur-

pose of which was to disseminate the ideals of the French Revolution. The newspaper project was headed by French General Jacques-Francois Menou, who appointed the editor, an Arab, Ismail al-Khashab. However, owing to the abrupt French withdrawal, the newspaper may never have been printed. After Alexandria was besieged in 1801, General Menou capitulated.

In 1828, with Egypt firmly within the Ottoman realm, the Khedive [governor] of Egypt, Mehmet [Muhammed] Ali, ordered reforms, including the establishment of the bilingual gazette *Vekayi-I Misriye* (*Egyptian Bulletin*), published in Ottoman Turkish on the right columns with Arabic translation in the left columns. Later, it was published only in Arabic under the title “*al-Waqa’i` al-Misriyya*” (*The Egyptian Affairs*). The newspaper’s mission, one historian asserted, was “creating public opinion under the control of state in accordance with the Ottoman social and economic structure.”⁷

By the 1850s, evidence indicates that the Ottoman “receiving culture” could no longer contain the proliferation of voices, many of them discordant and discontented. As Western models proliferated, with younger voices calling for modernization and constitutional rights, Ottoman rulers in Istanbul reacted rather than negotiate, limiting freedom of expression. In 1857, the regime installed a press code; in 1858 it added “accusatory publication” to the criminal law; in 1862 it issued a stricter press code “inspired by the French press law” enacted under Emperor Napoleon III. In 1878, reacting to protests favoring a “constitutional system,” the Ottoman government “closed down all newspapers critical of their programs and policies.”⁸ Then and since, the press has functioned and adapted, with variable freedoms, contending with control, coercion, bribery and assassination.⁹

Today in the Middle East, this historical process is clearly evident. The negotiation, adaptation and hybridization continues, testing, expanding and restricting Western ideas about journalism, its reach

and its boundaries.

My method for developing a historiography for the region utilizes a model developed by Greek historians: It considers six major categories of activities common to most civilizations: the politics, economics, religion, society, intellect and aesthetics, a model easily remembered, as my Greek history professor noted, by the acronym PERSIA. Meanwhile, I offer a look at the beginnings and welcome assistance.

NOTES

¹Yong Volz, "Beyond the Euro-American Sphere: Internationalizing Journalism History," *Historiography* 3:4 (2017): 5-14.

²Alexander van Millingen, "Constantinople," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Co., 1910), Vol. VII, 8. See also Clifford Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, Bernard Lewis, and Charles Pellat, eds., *Encyclopedia of Islam*; and E.J. Brill, *First Encyclopedia of Islam* (1987), 1913-1936.

³Hugh Chisholm, "Newspapers," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Co., 1910), XIX: 581. Chisholm was also editor of the 11th edition.

⁴Leften Stavros Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (London: Hurst & Co., 2000 [first published 1958]). See also Gérard Groc and Ibrahim Gérard Çağlar, *La presse française de Turquie de 1795 à nos jours: histoire et catalogue*, 1985 (in French).

⁵Ágoşton Gábor and Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 432.

⁶Chisholm, "Newspapers," XIX: 581.

⁷Gábor and Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, 431.

⁸*Ibid.*, 433.

⁹*Ibid.*, 433. See also David E. Long, *Culture and Customs of the Middle East* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005); Naomi Sakr, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression* (I.B. Tauris, 2004); Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (Yale University Press, 1997); Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: the Formative Years and Beyond* (State University of New York Press, 1995); Camron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna, and Elizabeth B. Frierson, *The Modern Middle East: A Sourcebook for History* (Oxford University Press 2007); *Contemporary Egypt: Through Egyptian Eyes*, Charles Tripp, ed. (Routledge, 1993); Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (Palgrave,

2001); Richard Leslie Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (Oxford University Press, 1959); L.S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (Holt McDougal, 1958).

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Historian Interview: Julie Hedgepeth Williams



Williams

Julie Williams, who teaches at Samford University, has written or co-written five books, including two popular ones — about the *Titanic* and about Orville and Wilbur Wright. She served as national president of the American Journalism Historians Association in 2008-2009. In 1997 her doctoral dissertation, “The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America: Colonists’ Thoughts on the Role of the Press,” won the AJHA’s inaugural award as the year’s best dissertation. In 1995 she won a Choice Outstanding Academic Book Award for *The Early American Press, 1690-1783* (co-authored with David Sloan). In 2014 her book *A Rare Titanic Family* won the Ella Dickey Literacy Award for books that preserve history.

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

Williams: I was born in Dayton, Ohio, to parents who loved to tell family stories about when they were children and who slowed down and made my sisters and me read each highway historical marker. We also loved visiting historic sites. Maybe coolest of all was the fact that my great-uncle Albert Caldwell had survived the *Titanic*, and we were all crazy about him and his story. He was 26 at the time of the *Titanic* and lived to be 91. He died when I was a senior in high school, just before I

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Williams

enrolled at Principia College. Apparently I pinned many friends there against the wall and told them Uncle Al's *Titanic* story. I don't actually remember doing this, but I've been told by several that I did! I was a history major from my first quarter in college — I took a course in American Revolution and loved it. Eventually I added an English major by accident, because I realized most of my electives had been in English. So all I had to do was declare the major and take a course in practical criticism, and I'd be a major.

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

Williams: I worked at a small-town newspaper in North Carolina for most of the 1980s. It was a small daily, which allowed me to do everything — I wrote news, features, a column, plus I designed pages and was managing editor. People assumed I became a journalist due to the English major, and I'm sure it helped, but it seemed to me that the history major was far more relevant with its emphasis on gathering, dissecting, and writing about the truth.

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

Williams: At Samford University, my main courses have been Senior Thesis, History of Mass Media, Mass Media Writing, and Core Communication Arts, also known as Freshman English. At the University of Alabama's Community Journalism Program, I taught Media History at the Master's level. While I was a grad student at the University of Alabama, I taught News Reporting and Mass Media Writing.

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?

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Williams: As I said, my family was into history, telling our family *Titanic* story all the time, reading roadside historic markers, traveling to historic attractions, entertaining ourselves with family history. It's interesting that at least snippets of that family history have wound up in my three popular-market historical books.

But in a formal setting, I first was assigned to look at original historic resources my freshman year in college in that American Revolution class, when I was told to read Thomas Jefferson's papers to figure out why he failed as governor of Virginia. I remember thinking, "Oh no! How will I get those! Do I have to travel to Monticello?" This would not be easy — I was in school in southern Illinois and didn't even have a car! I was so relieved to find out Jefferson's papers had been printed as books. Phew! Interestingly, I couldn't find a smoking gun in the papers as to why Jefferson failed. So I had to infer from the evidence that he blamed himself for the deaths of his wife and daughter, and that made him distraught and unable to govern well. When the class's papers were being returned, the professor said he wanted to read parts of one, and he read mine. I panicked for a minute, thinking he would say I had messed up ... but he said it was a great conclusion based on evidence. That first paper made a big impression on me about how to do historical research. And later, in grad school, David Sloan encouraged me in media history and propelled me into publication. He had a goal that his students would be published, and boy, that was the greatest!

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

Williams: That history professor in that American Revolution class was Brook Ballard. His enthusiasm for my work and for original resources was key. Also, his colleague Charles Hosmer made history of all eras entertainingly contemporary. Oh, heck, that's what my parents

did in entertaining us with family stories! As to my writing, I have to thank David Sloan again for being so hands-off as an editor ... something I need to remember to do with my own students. He kindly encouraged my own style, and history is all about style of storytelling.

I was influenced over and over again by reading historic works that were written like stories. And what stories they were! I can hardly understand why people read fiction, when the true story is so remarkable.

The most important influence on me is very specific: I had asked David Sloan to sign a book I had written (he had written a blurb for the back), and as he was autographing it beside his name, he said, "Too bad you didn't think to write about the *Titanic*. Didn't you have a relative on it?" The light bulb went off, and I dashed away to email my publisher. The resulting book has been my most successful one to date.

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

Williams: I have always loved colonial and American Revolutionary history, and I've always thought perhaps I should have been born in that time. Then again, I also think it's part of a person's character to love history. So if I had been born then, I'd have thought I should have come along 200 years earlier.

But beyond that, I've parlayed those family stories and that family history into books for the popular market. I was born on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and North Carolina, all of which claim the Wright Brothers as their own. Thus, I've written a book about the Wright Brothers' time in Alabama. Yes, they spent time in Alabama!

Of course I had to write the book David Sloan suggested about my *Titanic* great-uncle and his family, and my upcoming book on the found-

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ing of Southern literature (it's largely about media history!) starts with my grandmother's hilarious memory of thinking the entire Atlanta school system had been excused from class for her birthday, when in reality they were out to observe the birthday of author Joel Chandler Harris.

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

Williams: Although I've published a few articles, mainly I have published books:

* *Three Not-So-Ordinary Joes: A Plantation Newspaper, a Printer's Devil, an English Wit, and the Founding of Southern Literature* (NewSouth Books, in press)

* *A Rare Titanic Family: The Caldwell's Story of Survival* (NewSouth Books, 2012)

* *Wings of Opportunity, 1910: The Wright Brothers in Montgomery, Alabama* (NewSouth Books, 2010)

* *The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America: Colonists' Thoughts on the Role of the Press* (Greenwood, 1999)

* Co-authored with Wm. David Sloan, *The Early American Press, 1690-1783* (Greenwood, 1994)

* Co-authored with Wm. David Sloan, Patricia C. Place, and Kevin Stoker, *The Great Reporters: An Anthology of News Writing at Its Best* (Vision Press, 1992)

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

Williams: I've loved the Wright Brothers book and the *Titanic* book,

because my publisher put my name out as a speaker on these topics. And then the Florida Chautauqua asked me to do a one-woman show on my family *Titanic* story, which I've performed ever since. I have absolutely loved creating entertaining shows on those topics. I'd speak/perform every day if I could.

It was also particularly fun to write the *Titanic* book. David Sloan gave me the idea to write it in February 2010. My publisher said he could have it out by 2012 (the century anniversary of the *Titanic*) if I had it to him by October 2010. I blithely said, "I know this story like my own name!" But by the time I got done researching my great-uncle's wife, whom I never knew, I realized I had hardly known the story at all. I had never known my *Titanic* family was fleeing their missionary jobs in Siam, with their boss tracking their every move. When they finally got off the rescue ship in New York, the boss's agent was waiting for them. My great-uncle had kept this part a dead secret all those years. And I did have the book done by deadline. What a terrifically fun whirlwind of research and writing it was that summer!

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?

Williams: I believe it might well be my upcoming book, tentatively called *Three Not-So-Ordinary Joes*, about the three guys named Joe who staggered and stuttered their way into founding Southern literature.

The key character is the second of the three Joes, Joseph Addison Turner, who was named for Joe #1, Joseph Addison, the famous colonial-era British journalist. Turner reluctantly ran a plantation during the Civil War, but all he really wanted out of life was to become famous as the founder of Southern literature. He tried and tried and tried again

to do that, but he failed, failed, failed, and had to fall back on Plan B, which was — darn it all! — running that plantation. Finally during the war it occurred to him that, hey, he owned a plantation — so why not throw up an outbuilding, put a press in it, hire a printer, and start his own newspaper? At last, this was a success. He directly copied Addison's rules for good writing and made a big deal about that. As his newspaper said, the South needed to be known for more than just fighting; it needed to be known for its literature, and here it began! Well, the South lost, and J.A. Turner thought the cause for Southern literature was lost.

However, his teenage printer's devil on that plantation newspaper was a poverty-stricken local waif (and Joe #3) named Joel Chandler Harris, whom Turner took under his wing and taught to write. Harris went on to write the first widely acclaimed Southern literature, the Uncle Remus tales. He got those tales from his time on Turner's plantation. So I contend that Turner really did start Southern literature — he just didn't live long enough to see it. I love that all three Joes who came together to start Southern literature were journalists.

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

Williams: That's a good question. I was going to say I'd be full-time as a professor. I've been part-time from the very start. I married and had children fairly late in life, and for many years it was an advantage to be part-time so I could raise my boys. I don't regret that for one minute. However, now that they've flown (or almost flown) the coop, I wish I made enough money to go to Europe or to live the life of a snowbird (since one son lives in Chicago and the other son declares his intent to follow his brother). However, I also have discerned that being full-time would have forced me to choose one area of research specialization,

and my books for the popular market would have been disdained (even though they are completely based on original sources). I'm so glad that didn't happen to me! So ... I guess I would say I'm glad things turned out the way they did.

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.

Williams: The most important thing to me is diving straight into the original sources and not even looking first at the larger theories and conclusions scholars have come to. My thought is that each individual sees events as an individual and not through the lens of scholars' conclusions. Thus, people on the ground in, say, 1732 didn't see a larger conclusion about the colonial era. They saw things as they unfolded. This is the true view that we need to look at, without regard to analysis from the larger, later view that they didn't have. I know many would blanch at me saying that, but I think it's the most important angle to take.

Also, I believe that history should be written as entertainingly as possible. That is, history IS entertaining — so historians should embrace that and write it as something to be read and enjoyed. That old dry academic stuff, well, that's just dry and academic. We need to embrace the story!

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

Williams: My view is skewed by the fact that I often see historical work by students, and much of that is not published. However, in those works I see both halves:

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1. There's a tendency — a weakness — to try to sympathize with current thought or current tenderness. For example, my students often want to take the stance that minority newspapers are always right and good, and traditional media owned by white males are automatically prejudiced and wrong. Neither of those things is automatic. I had one student break through that tendency with the argument that the black press in Birmingham, Alabama, didn't become strident after the horrific bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963. Instead, he recognized that the black-owned newspaper had relied solely on wire service coverage and meekly called for law and order. Meanwhile, he saw that the white-owned *Birmingham News* was almost in a panic, when the black-owned paper should have been. In the end, they both had a similar message: Peace, peace. Sadly, the public, segregated into two newspapers, simply didn't realize how close they were in outlook.

2. Here's a strength: Some of the approaches of young historians are so fresh and enlightening. Their interests are vastly different from mine, and I'm always learning something new from them. For example, an intern at the *Birmingham News* in recent memory found a box of photographic negatives from the Civil Rights era that were never published. One of my students compared pictures that WERE published to those that WEREN'T, and the result was very enlightening as to how the *News* tried to frame this struggle. It was fascinating to open a fresh window into this era. I love that students are required to find a new angle on any historical research project, which means I'm not just seeing rehashes of the same old themes.

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?*

Williams: Sadly, my school no longer offers media history. Offering me-

dia history is key! I think we have a good opportunity to promote history (and media history) today, with many politicians being decried for having a simplistic understanding of history, or a complete lack of understanding of history. Actually, I could say the same about politicians having a simplistic understanding of the media as well. All the accusations of fake news hurled at professional journalists have confused both the public and politicians. Those things stick in the craw for many in the public. Let's turn that dismay into an insistence that history is CLEARLY important as a field of study, and that media literacy is CRITICAL! And of course, the two combine at media history.

Also, I should add what a friend from the realm of "pure" history said to me once at AJHA. I referred to her being in "pure" history as opposed to most of us, who were in "media history." She said, "You all sure have an inferiority complex! What you do IS pure history!" She's right!

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

Williams: People need to think of JMC history as relevant, but unfortunately they often don't. There's a legitimate push to have mass media students understand how to work across many media platforms, but sadly, as a result, the intellectual topics related to mass media (including media history) seem to be pushed to the background. And yet, understanding history is important in many real-life situations. I could make philosophical declarations about understanding history so that we know why we are where we are and see where we might want to go or might want to avoid. Those things are true. But parts of the media need to have an immediate and practical understanding of historical research. Films and television, for instance, often delve into historic topics and need to be based on original sources in order to look and sound authentic. History is *practical* in those cases.

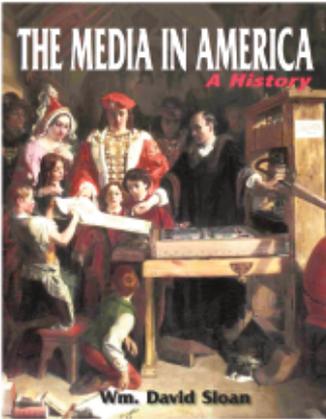
It was stylish for awhile in many universities to discredit journal-

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ism as a “skills” course so not of university quality (which was silly, as nursing and engineering could be described as skills courses, too!). I think it’s extremely important to anchor journalism/media studies into the academy with intellectual courses, and media history fits that bill perfectly. It requires research, critical reading, thinking, argument, persuasion, clear writing, smart conclusions — all of those intellectual skills are not solely traditional journalistic “skills” but are skills every educated person needs for the general challenges ahead.

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Book Award Interview: Michael S. Sweeney ©



Sweeney

Mike Sweeney won the American Journalism Historians Association's award for the year's outstanding book in 2002 for *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II*. He is a professor of journalism at Ohio University.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

Sweeney: The American press is famously allergic to government interference in the news business. Yet in wartime, the government has a legitimate interest in keeping certain kinds of information out of the news. Imagine, for example, if during a modern war the Washington radio station WTOP or the *Washington Post* announced in advance the time of the departure of a transport filled with Marines from Norfolk, Virginia. That would provide the enemy with a target. However, if the federal government tried to force the press to distribute or withhold news, or if it tried to review and censor news stories before they could be printed or broadcast, journalists would howl.

And yet in World War II, censorship was effective but harmoniously administered. How could this be, given the Home Front's tremendous desire for war news and journalists' desire to provide it? How was censorship run so efficiently and so well that neither the press nor the gov-

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ernment raised serious objections?

That is what my book examines. It is a history of the Press and Broadcasting divisions of the federal Office of Censorship. That office was created shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor and halted its work on VJ Day. The Office of Censorship was headed by Byron Price, who had been executive editor of the Associated Press. I consider him a savvy and skilled manager. He organized and directed the self-censorship of American newspapers, magazines, radio, and other communication. My book examines his and his staff's work and its impact on the news that Americans received. It focuses on certain issues and stories — such as the development of the atomic bomb, the president's travels, and weather news — that challenged but did not break the voluntary structure of domestic censorship. I think the biggest take-away from the book is that under the right circumstances, the press and government can work together and even trust each other.

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

Sweeney: I entered the PhD program at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University in the summer of 1993. I had a wife and child (still do!) depending on me for income. The Scripps stipend was generous, but it wasn't enough to provide for a family. So I knew I would have to take out federal student loans and minimize the time I would spend in the program. Basically, I wanted to be certain I could get a degree in the three years.

When I arrived at OU, I had no ideas for a dissertation topic. Five months later, of course, I had a dozen. But back in July 1993, I wanted to nail down a topic and get started as quickly as I could. I had met Dr. Patrick S. Washburn the previous year, and I love history and respected his work as a historian. He was the E.W. Scripps School's graduate director, so I wanted to pick his brain about possible topics. We met for

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lunch at a Chinese restaurant above a bookstore. Over kung pao chicken and hot-and-sour soup, he told me that nobody had written a thorough history of the Office of Censorship. From his experience working in the National Archives, he knew there were plenty of primary documents available for such a study. I found the topic idea a great fit with my own research interests. And *voilà*. From that lunch (I can't remember who paid!) I was launched on a research career focused on wartime journalism, with a particular focus on wartime censorship.

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?

Sweeney: I started reading secondary sources in late summer 1993. Over the next two years, I read everything in Alden Library related to censorship in World War II — books, magazine articles, journal articles, and the *New York Times*. In late 1995 I visited the Wisconsin State Historical Society, which houses the collection of Byron Price's private papers, and the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, which houses the records of the Office of Censorship as well as other agencies that interacted with it, including the FBI, FCC, Office of War Information, etc. I defended at the end of the 1995-96 academic year. So you could say I spent three years on the book. That may not seem like a lot, given the amount of material I had to process and synthesize, but my background as a newspaper reporter and editor proved to be immensely useful. I worked on the dissertation most nights and weekends. I felt comfortable keeping a steady, quick pace.

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

Sweeney: So many of the key figures in World War II censorship had died. I would have loved to have interviewed many people. Byron Price, of course, and some of the managers of the Print and Broadcasting divisions.

I would also have liked to explore more details the case of the *Chicago Tribune's* Battle of Midway story in 1942, which led to an attempt at an indictment under the Espionage Act of 1917. I had the government's and Navy's accounts of what happened, but the *Tribune* records of the case were unavailable at the time.

Lastly, I would have loved to have found the principals in an event that occurred shortly before D-Day. The "official" history says that a clerk in England accidentally sent a message to the American wire services announcing the invasion had begun. Retractions followed. An oral history with a Broadcasting Division censor said that the news release was not an error, but rather an intentional way to see how the German forces in continental Europe would react when they received the news. Boy, that would have been something if I could have pinned that down.

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

Sweeney: I would repeat the advice of Barbara Tuchman, one of my two favorite historians. Tuchman advised in her book *Practicing History* that a historian should immerse herself in the secondary literature of the research topic in order to be grounded in background knowledge and have a good idea of what questions to ask and where to seek answers. After that, she says, it's best to work as much as possible in primary sources. I also take this advice of hers to heart about newspapers, where I have an extensive background and which have a particular appeal to me: "As to newspapers, I like them for period flavor perhaps more than for factual information. One must be wary in using

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them for facts, because an event reported one day in a newspaper is usually modified or denied or turns out to be rumor on the next. It is absolutely essential to take nothing from a newspaper without following the story through for several days or until it disappears from the news.”

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

Sweeney: I had to rely on written artifacts. Here is where Dr. Washburn’s tutelage paid dividends. When I combed through the archives, I kept getting glimpses of shadows and ghosts — events referred to obliquely or briefly. I assumed that when the Office of Censorship handed over its archives, Price and others did not want the record to upset certain journalists or politicians. I had to triangulate sources to figure out what was missing. Then I had to figure out where I might find that information. A good example was a reference to a reporter who had a lot of knowledge of the atomic bomb and caused both the Print and Broadcasting division several headaches. Who might that be? I guessed syndicated investigative reporter Drew Pearson, who had a radio and newspaper column. A dip into his archives at the University of Texas proved I was right, and also provided conclusive evidence that Pearson knew about the development of the atomic bomb in 1943.

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?

Sweeney: I had one reviewer of my book manuscript declare that I had made a saint out of Byron Price. I do admire the man. I tried hard to find negative opinions about his work. I found none. So, is it “objective” for me to write so positively about him? If well-tested evidence suggests a

person was an angel or devil, it seems to me that a historian should be willing to say so. Of course, the historian must always be on the lookout for contrary evidence and opinions.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

Sweeney: Oh, my. Aside from some interesting anecdotes about particular events involving censorship, I think my conclusions are the most insightful. The Office of Censorship tried to be as transparent as possible. Instead of trying to impose censorship from the top down, Price and others invited comments from every group that might be affected by censorship, in order to create the censorship *Code of Wartime Practices* delivered to all mass media. The censors laid out what they were doing, and why, and demonstrated the need to keep certain news stories secret or delayed. As a result of this openness, journalists did not think they were being tricked or used by the government. They bought into and supported self-censorship. And they enforced it themselves, with peer pressure. Journalists were OK with following the codes as long as everyone followed them with equal rigor. Journalism is a business, at least in this country, and nobody wanted to see a competitor get an exclusive by breaking the code. So, I would argue that in World War II, journalists were as patriotic as any other group, and that their reasonableness when confronted with Price's transparent methods, coupled with the economic and competitive forces supporting self-censorship, greatly contributed to the success of domestic wartime censorship. I am not a big fan of counterfactuals, but I have to wonder whether anything might have happened differently if the president in World War II had not been such an effective communicator or so popular with reporters; if the United States suffered serious setbacks in battle for many months; or if prominent journalists chose, deliberately and defiantly, to violate the code.

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Q: *What findings most surprised you?*

Sweeney: I was surprised by how virtually everyone (I'll discount the comments of Westbrook Pegler, a columnist and notorious S.O.B.) hailed the job done by Byron Price and his staff. Even the ACLU said after the war that it could find nothing significant to complain about the way censorship was run. And I was surprised, also, by a few of the choices Price made. He could have, for example, seized control of all American radio stations. That would have guaranteed that no information of value to the enemy would leave the United States by radio — by speed of light. Price chose not to do so, and he kept that fact secret for many years. I find it refreshing that when offered a great deal of power, some people are wise enough to turn it down.

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

Sweeney: You cannot make bricks without straw. Know your topic intimately. That means, assemble a lot of good information from primary sources. And then, tell a good story. So many historians write poorly, and others write without concern for narrative style or reader interest. If you've found a story that you find fascinating, then tell it in a fascinating way. Write, edit, then edit some more until your prose sings.

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