

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 3 (2017). Number 1

Historiography in Mass Communication

Editor

Wm. David Sloan

Editorial Board

Louise Benjamin
Kansas State University

David Copeland
Elon University

Bruce Evensen
DePaul University

John Ferré
University of Louisville

Michael D. Murray
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Erika Pribanic-Smith
University of Texas at Arlington

Robert A. Rabe
Marshall University

Michael S. Sweeney
Ohio University

Leonard Ray Teel
Georgia State University

Bernell Tripp
University of Florida

Debra van Tuyll
Augusta University

Yong Volz
University of Missouri

Editorial Purpose

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

Copyright

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

Essays

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

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

To submit an essay for consideration, email a Word file to the editor at wmdsloan@gmail.com

We place importance on the credentials of authors and normally expect an author to have published at least one history book.

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

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

Historiography

in Mass Communication

Volume 3 (2017). Number 1

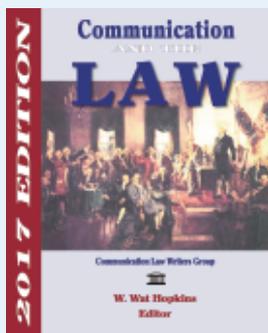
Contents

From the Editor: "A New Year"	page 1
Michael D. Murray, "Characters I Have Known: Reflections from CBS News (and the AJHA)"	page 3
Historical Roundtable: Studying the Colonial Press David Copeland, Roger Mellen, David Sloan, and Julie Williams	page 15
Kobre Award Interview: Mike Sweeney	page 27
Book Award Interview: Peter Hartshorn	page 36

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

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

GET A FREE DESK COPY OF THE 2017 EDITION



ISBN 978-1-885219-56-5

Communication and the Law is entering its 20th year of publication, and it has been used at 126 schools. New schools have been adopting it with each new edition. We believe its popularity confirms that professors recognize its superior quality.

A distinguishing feature of *Communication and the Law* is that a **new, updated edition is published each year**. Thus, you can be assured that your students will have the most timely information in one place, rather than in a textbook and a separately published supplement.

Each year, the **prices of other books continue to go up**, but the suggested retail price of *Communication and the Law* is only \$52.95. That is **lower than for any other textbook in the field** — in fact, less than for used copies of other books.

If you do not already have a copy of the 2017 edition, to request a free exam copy please email Vision Press at vision.press.books@gmail.com

Vision Press

“Outstanding Textbooks at Affordable Prices”

A New Year

By Wm. David Sloan ©



Sloan

Each of us, and every generation, lives on a narrow sliver of time. Our life is, as Shakespeare said, just an “hour upon the stage.”

But one of the bewitching benefits of being a historian is that it extends one’s life — at least in the imagination. We are not confined to one generation only, but we can live over hundreds, even thousands of years.

Historians can go where and to any time they want. Leonard Teel, one of our preeminent JMC historians, tells his students that history is just like “time travel.” Through Herodotus, we can watch the Greeks fighting the Persians. With Edward Gibbon, we can observe the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Through Barbara Tuchman we can get a front-row seat to the German army’s invasion of Belgium and France in August 1914. We are reminded of Emily Dickinson, the reclusive poet who lived her entire life in the small town of Amherst, Massachusetts. “There is,” she said, “no frigate like a history book.” Pardon me for amending her quotation — but, to misquote another writer, I’m in a New Year state of mind.

Is it any wonder that working as a historian is such pleasurable toil?

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

© 2017. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

Sloan

In the stream of history, one year is but an infinitesimal plop. Nevertheless, here at *Historiography* we are pleased to say that we have completed a full calendar year, and we have now begun a second. A few months ago we began laying plans to build, in 2017, on the foundation we laid in 2016. We have enlarged our Editorial Board, and we already have scheduled articles for the entire year. In each issue you will find thoughtful essays, at least one roundtable discussion, a Q&A with an outstanding historian, and an interview with the author of a notable book.

We still will have room, though, for essays from readers. To submit an essay for consideration, please email a Word file to me at wmdsloan@gmail.com. Essays may be original ones written specifically for this journal, or they may be from material that you already have (such as classroom lectures, AJHA presidential addresses, etc.). Essay length may vary from 500 to 5,000 words. We place importance on the credentials of authors and normally expect an author to have published at least one history book.

In this, our first issue of the new year, Mike Murray, one of today's top historians of broadcasting, reminisces about some of the notable people he has known and suggests some insights that historians and students can gain from personal contacts. For our roundtable, David Copeland, the most prolific historian of colonial journalism that our field has ever had, assembled a panel of other historians to discuss issues in studying the early American press. Mike Sweeney, one of the most eminent historians of our present generation, is the subject of our Kobre Award interview. To cap off this first issue of 2017, for our book interview Peter Hartshorn has done a Q&A for his award-winning biography *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens*.

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

Characters I Have Known: Reflections from CBS News (and the AJHA)

Michael D. Murray ©



Murray

At this stage in the life of the American Journalism Historians Association (AJHA), we are obviously starting to lose some of our early members. We lost Joe McKerns and Peggy Blanchard years ago; but more recently, both David Spencer and Sam Riley passed away and will also be very sorely missed by those of us who knew them. These are just *names* to some of you, but they were scholars who were emblematic of this organization because of the research projects they pursued and the level of involvement and collegiality they encouraged from many of us here. Those among you of a certain vintage really miss these folks because of the special bond we had with them in terms of what they added to this organization and also by way of their outgoing personalities, good humor and fellowship. In some cases, their service contributions and willingness to hold important organizational positions included editorial and administrative and board positions or even hosting meetings, as both Sam Riley and David Spencer were willing to do in Virginia and Western Ontario. In their service, they went well beyond what you

Michael D. Murray, a professor at the University of Missouri - St Louis, is a founding member of the American Journalism Historians Association and received its Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2003. This essay is taken from remarks he made as part of a 2016 AJHA convention panel on TV news research.

© 2017. The author owns the copyright to this essay.

might expect of such productive and prolific scholars. And of course we remember them especially because of their research status in our field. Both Joe and Peggy contributed encyclopedic works that formed preliminary benchmarks for further study. Joe edited the *Biographical Dictionary of American Journalism* for the Greenwood Press in 1989. For that project, I was invited to write about Walter Cronkite and some other CBS News folks I had known, and then for Peggy's *Encyclopedia of Mass Media* again I was able to contribute articles about key broadcasts of both *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and Walter Cronkite on the *CBS Evening News*. These assignments helped me to start to re-establish ties with major figures, and I used them as a stepping stone to later interview them, and I also used those contacts to conduct oral history interviews with their former bosses later on.

Sam Riley is so greatly missed, at least to me, because, when I completed my Ph.D. and first started teaching full-time at Virginia Tech, right out of graduate school in the 1970s, I was able to place a "Journalism History" course on the books at Virginia Tech. Sam very generously credited me for that initiative, and I've never forgotten about that. As you know, with some assignments, "when you're gone, you're gone," but that wasn't true in Sam's case. He was a gentleman and a scholar — a Southern gentleman of the first order. But also, in contributing to some of Sam's major publishing projects, of which there were very many, I got to know him as a very direct but also diplomatic editor. Like most of us, Sam liked to talk a lot about his research and publishing projects, and he always found ways to involve scholars from the AJHA in those efforts about print journalism, even if your "first love" might be in some other area — in my own case, mostly in broadcast news and issues related to media regulation. On one occasion at one of our annual meetings, Sam asked me to name some influential newspaper columnists from our Midwestern region who were very good writers but who also might have contributed a lot to the better understanding of our

region and our particular community.

One name came to mind: Bill McClellan from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. He coincidentally will soon be honored as the “Media Person of the Year” in St. Louis. This assignment for Sam forced me to consider how the contributions of local print journalists are recognized: what are their special subjects, and how do they address them to make an impact in a community? This led to a visit to our campus by McClellan, sponsored by our campus’ Humanities Center, at which McClellan addressed the subject of “Characters I Have Known.” It turns out that Bill is a very low-key but also very funny guy and that many of the “Characters” he has written about showed up for his talk, and he proceeded to comment on the kind of attention he had given to them — and how, from the perspective of his subjects, it had frequently changed their lives.

So, starting with the request from Sam, I have given some thought to some of the “Characters I Have Known” — both inside and outside of academe — and will try to outline the nature of my interaction with some important sources. These are just a few comments about people who were invaluable to me on various assignments.

For some of Sam Riley’s research projects, including his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Vol. 91), I got to write about several *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* contributors, including its Pulitzer Prize editorial cartoonist, Daniel Fitzpatrick, and also its famed Washington, D.C., Bureau Chief and author, Marquis Childs. When the AJHA met in St. Louis, I was able to interview James Lawrence, the longtime editor of the Editorial Page or the “Dignity Page” as the Pulitzers called it, and Jim also spoke to our meeting. For Sam’s other volumes, including those about publishers and magazine journalists, I was able to contribute an essay about the controversial magazine editor, known in his day as “The Man in the Mirror,” William Marion Reedy, editor and publisher of *Reedy’s Mirror*. And during the six years that I taught at the University of

Louisville, I wrote for Sam about (George) Barry Bingham of the *Louisville Courier Journal and Times*. When I had my first summer fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in San Diego, California, on the UCSD campus, Sam asked me to write about publisher Edwin Self (Vol. 137) and his celebrated writer, Harold Keen, for Vol. 127 of Sam's biographical work on publishers. These projects turned out for me to be very enlightening because, in the course of completing the different assignments for Sam, I discovered some unappreciated cross-over between print and broadcast journalists in essays I prepared for his *Regional Interest Magazines of the U.S.* in 1991. This included one entry on America's first city magazine, *San Diego*, with an emphasis on travel, art, architecture and contributors who worked in many areas of the media. Because Sam's introduction forced me to examine my own backyard, I had the experience of researching first-hand some of the major figures who had an impact on their communities and their field. This brought home the importance of making and using personal contacts and the value of establishing a parallel track-record in another field — media-related, regulatory issues.

Because of the influence of some of these subjects, I tend to always want to review local material first — work used in my classes — and, whenever possible, to focus attention on the “Characters I Have Known,” either personally, professionally, or especially through research projects. At this stage, we recall their unique approach to involvement in research projects in which many of us became immersed and how we interacted about those projects, including, at least in my case, the contacts we made as a result. At the national level this has included Edward R. Murrow, Fred Friendly, Ed Bliss, Dr. Frank Stanton, Don Hewitt, Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Ed Bradley and Byron Pitts. Like so many of you, my first really serious research journey began with a dissertation examining the *See It Now* broadcasts about Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism. The approach was to examine the

series of programs Ed Murrow and Fred Friendly did as part of their broader persuasive campaign about civil liberties issues in the nineteen sixties. What I did not fully appreciate at the time was the number of interviews this would require well beyond the mastery of the content and the basic facts. The professors on my doctoral committee insisted that I could not complete the project until I had communicated with each of the remaining participants in those programs including some of the initiators: the husband and wife team of Joe and Shirley Wershba highlighted in the film *Good Night and Good Luck*, and Palmer Williams, whose marriage and then divorce from a former Communist Party member had highlighted some of the difficulty the Murrow team at CBS had in combating McCarthy and McCarthyism. I also connected with the Murrow biographer, Ann M. Sperber, who had written *Murrow: His Life and Times* and retained documents some of the “Murrow boys” had provided.

These interactions eventually led to other projects in which I also tried to tie in some of the CBS television documentaries I had studied and then written about as well as some of the details about how those broadcast projects came to develop and the fall-out they received. Some of them like “The Selling of the Pentagon” had national impact, and some others had an impact at the local level. You may have heard how one of the chapters for *The Political Performers* book focused on the CBS documentary “Sixteen in Webster Groves.” But what you may not recall is the residue from that series in the suburban community in which it was filmed. The impact still remains for some people. And that includes the original program and the follow-up CBS did to try to avoid fall-out or a license challenge to the FCC. In interviewing Dan Rather recently, and joking about the program’s impact, he talked about how the “statute of limitations” must have run out on it. Not so. People from that era are still bitter about the way they were portrayed in those programs, especially those stereotyped as either spoiled brats or conserva-

tive clones of their parents, or the parents themselves who were “stung” by the attention to their beliefs, attitudes and values reflected in the films. Media coverage of the initial program is included in the book and in class reviews as well as the interviews with those involved, which help to understand why many of the participants had felt deceived in the story telling and then the re-telling of that story.

Another documentary from that same book, *Black History: Lost Stolen or Strayed*, is another one I still review regularly with students because of the material, the cast of characters involved in the production, and the dynamic way it was researched and written, with an emphasis on Hollywood films. For background preparation, I received the text of that broadcast and also some comments about its effectiveness as a favor from Dr. Frank Stanton. I also interacted with the late Andy Rooney of *60 Minutes*, who wrote the script and then negotiated on the production with the program host, Bill Cosby, focusing on how the material was to be rewritten and then delivered. Many of you will recall that Andy Rooney was well known as a great writer and for years a creative force behind the scenes.

As with so many of my projects, the interaction with an important source began when I wrote a very short letter. My first correspondence with Andy Rooney contained about six of the most important questions I was seeking to pursue, and so I also placed them in the form of bullet points. And I left enough space for him to answer briefly in the letter itself, if time warranted, and included a self-addressed stamped envelope. As with other projects, I usually mentioned a few things that I had explored and published at the top of the letter and some of the major people I had spoken to in producing these works. Because of the decent track record I had established and some shameless name-dropping of leaders at CBS News, this approach usually did the job in eliciting some kind of a response, at least in the era before e-mail. And in some instances, it resulted in very lengthy responses and offers to add more

Characters I Have Known

material to what I had already gathered. But in the case of Andy Rooney, I just received the self-addressed, stamped envelope with a short note: "I'm cleaning up my office and found your envelope. You must have had some questions, but I don't know what they might have been. Sincerely, Andy Rooney."

This correspondence coincided with a trip to New York to receive an honor from the International Television and Radio Society (IRTS) in the form of the Dr. Frank Stanton Fellowship Award, which carried a cash award. Just before Dr. Stanton arose to sing my praises before a large assembled group of professors, he leaned over to me at dinner and asked me to read through what he had written about me before he delivered it, and then he apologized profusely for having forgotten to bring the check with him. I said that the honor of carrying a fellowship in his name was enough and not to worry about it. He introduced me, and then I gave a brief talk in response, one in which I repeated, except out-loud, the experience I had just had with Andy Rooney, concluding with: "And that's why Frank Stanton is President Emeritus of CBS, Inc., and Andy Rooney is ... Andy Rooney," which got a big laugh. A group of professors from the program went over to Broadway and to the Theatre that evening; and when we returned to the hotel, I had this call waiting for me: "Mike, this is Andy Rooney. I understand that you've been talking about me. Could you please give me a call?" By the time we finally connected I was back at school the following week, and he asked that I submit the questions again. He then did a careful and thorough job of answering them. Then my big worry became whether he would include our correspondence in his next book, which he often did during that period of time

You may wonder about the prospects for interaction with people from the media industry and especially my history with CBS News. In that regard, I could not stress enough the importance of the usual counsel about the need for having a passion for your subject and in identify-

ing and investigating particular stories — research topics to most of us — but in doing so, focusing on the people responsible for important programs, those we are aware to have had an important impact. Beyond CBS, in writing about Alistair Cooke, I was brought into contact with BBC Archives, his papers at Boston University and many conservative authors and friends of Alistair, including William F. Buckley, who once visited Virginia Tech when I was on the faculty there, where he was grilled about Senator McCarthy. You will recall that Buckley co-authored the book *McCarthy and his Enemies* with his brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell. I had discussed this book, which was a defense of McCarthy and his methods — and some particular case studies and people including Annie Lee Moss, which one of the professors at my wife's school, Washington University, has studied more recently in great detail. When the Virginia Tech student questioned Bill Buckley about his position, his first response was to say that he was really shocked that anyone would remember that case and the controversy surrounding it. Then, when the student admitted that we had just gone over it in a "Media History" class, Buckley provided details on the situation from his perspective. I remember this because years later, he and I spoke about again it at a reception for Alistair Cooke. In this instance, I was the one who was shocked that he would remember being grilled by one of my students about something that had happened twenty-five years earlier. We concluded our talk with Buckley offering to buy me a drink. I said, "No, thanks, Bill. I've had enough — and have to get back to school for class tomorrow." To which my wife commented the following morning on the way out the door: "Wait just a minute, Mike. WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY offered to buy you a drink — and you turned him down?"

By now, you have surmised that the "Characters I Have Known" are part-and-parcel of the many stories I like to tell, especially in the classroom. That approach has turned out to be an effective strategy in reinforcing the importance of some of the folks I have been fortunate

enough to meet along the way, to discuss some of their work — and its impact — in some detail. It's worked well and has provided many opportunities to expand a body of knowledge on a small and specialized area of media history, one that students will sometime retain. So I always encourage young scholars to consider using it. As long as they are not viewed as pointless “war stories,” there are a number of active broadcast journalists who were involved in covering very important historical ground, some even recently. On the political side, there are some remaining correspondents with a long tenure in important roles.

NBC's Andrea Mitchell comes to mind in that context. The “Clinton-Trump UNLV Debate” moderator, Chris Wallace, is turning into a senior citizen like some of us and has both an important and meaningful career, not to mention an interesting personal life (with a dad like Mike Wallace; and stepdad, CBS News President Bill Leonard). On stories such as Civil Rights, some of the participants still remain active: John Lewis, of course, but also Charlene Hunter-Gault and Dan Rather. Starting a day, as some of us do, with Charlie Rose on *CBS This Morning* and ending up with Judi Woodruff and *PBS News Hour*, we see people who have made contributions worth exploring, if you can make connections in a timely way.

On visits to both Columbia University and Harvard University, members of two fellowship programs in which I participated benefited from discussions about support of academic programs in broadcast news, the first of which was sponsored and then discussed with us by Jane Pauley. She had initiated research support to examine why some students were poorly prepared. “If we found out about a school for truck drivers,” she said, “in which the graduates completed their course of study and could not drive a truck, we would investigate that and expose it as a scam.” In that context, “Why aren't student reporters better prepared from Schools of Journalism?” One of our AJHA colleagues, Maurine Beasley, had served on the committee to investigate those con-

cerns and to issue conclusions; and my own response, articulated to Jane at that meeting, was that many of the leading national reporters were not coming from schools of journalism. And as someone teaching in a smaller media program, I tried to communicate that we are always trying to improve the knowledge base and the skill set students had when they arrived from high school. “We don’t all have the benefit of working with the most competitive students with the kinds of background in debate, for example, that she (Jane) had when first attending Indiana University.” The response to my comment was carefully and thoughtfully reviewed, and it communicated a willingness to consider other variables and curricular decisions we made as a result.

In the second instance, Don Hewitt was invited to the Harvard campus and the John F. Kennedy School of Government to receive some recognition for his many contributions in starting up and leading *60 Minutes*. He joked about the irony of a college dropout such as he being honored at Harvard for a lifetime of work. But in both instances, the discussions we had as a result expanded on some historic and unique commitments they had made to their field and the people who helped along the way in acknowledging mentors. Prior to one of the last formal interviews I conducted with Dan Rather, he asked me about the courses I taught beyond “Media History,” and I told him that I periodically still enjoyed teaching the various journalism “skills” courses such as “Broadcast Writing and Reporting.” To my total surprise and amazement, Dan asked me what textbook I was using in that course currently, and I mentioned a book I developed to keep costs down. We also discussed a couple of the older books that I retain and use for reference purposes because they are so well written with excellent historical examples. I noted *Writing News for Broadcast* by Ed Bliss and John Patterson, and Dan said that was the same book he used as a student and that he was honored to later work with both of those authors when they were also at CBS News. This provided an added frame of reference

for our talk and one that I did not at all anticipate. I had similar “off the record” conversations with one of those two authors — Ed Bliss. We discussed his work with both Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, and a great number of other people I interviewed going back as far as Fred Friendly and Bill Leonard.

When I first met Fred Friendly and interviewed him for one of the first issues of the journal *Journalism History*, I asked him off the record about some tricky management decisions, and he summed up his style in some ways as one based on deferring to others: “Hire the best people. Then leave them alone.” The same could be said of discussions I had with Don Hewitt who was notorious for taking a “hands-off” approach at *60 Minutes*, relying on his producers and reporters whom he always said were a lot smarter and better educated than he.

I also recall interviewing Bill Leonard at his home in Georgetown, and he shared a photo-book he had kept and also discussed his days at CBS as both a reporter and then the CBS News President. He explained how he always had been “in the right place at the right time, with the right skill set” and the particulars about how he had gotten the *CBS Sunday Morning* program underway. I questioned him at that time about how the morning time slot on Sunday morning would work out and how he was so proud of having it work out with an emphasis on the arts and sciences, just the way that it was designed. This led to questions about thorny personnel decisions he made, such as when he had to replace Walter Cronkite as the CBS News anchorman and then take some flak he caught from placing Dan in that position. At the other extreme, an interview with Byron Pitts for *Television Quarterly* gave me the chance to hear how Dan had mentored the younger staff, Pitts included, giving specific counsel on handling coverage of Afghanistan after covering the destruction of 9-11 first-hand, and thus adding to the incredible culture of CBS News. At the end of the day, identifying contemporary benchmarks gives you a unique perspective that you cannot

Murray

always pick up from our media history books. In some cases I think it provides the incentive to investigate further. That's been my experience — both with CBS staffers and colleagues of the AJHA. In any case, that's my story — and I'm sticking to it.

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

Historical Roundtable: Studying the Colonial Press

By David Copeland, Roger Mellen,
David Sloan, and Julie Williams ©



Copeland

The press of British colonial America developed slowly. *Publick Occurrences* began and ended with its September 25, 1690, issue. It was more than a decade later that the next paper, the *Boston News-Letter*, began publication, but after the introduction of a series of public prints in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York from the end of 1719 and into the 1720s, newspapers would soon be established in the major ports from Charleston, South Carolina, northward. Though these papers, which were predominantly weeklies, never obtained large press runs, they were influential in colonial society. Papers were read aloud in homes, taverns, coffeehouses, hotels, and on the streets. And people shared their copies with others. Early estimates say that a typical newspaper in America ended up about twenty miles or more from its origin, shared along the way with multiple families or groups. As issues arose, the public turned to newspapers to debate issues that affected them, from smallpox to political discontent. Printer James Parker announced to his *New-York Gazette* readers on January, 22, 1750, something most colonials already knew: that the “taste” for news that existed in the colonies was something “we can’t be without.”

In this roundtable, three historians explain why the study of the colonial press remains relevant in the 21st century. Each has published substantive books and articles on the colonial era, shedding new light on

© 2017. The authors own the copyright to this article.

Copeland, Mellen, Sloan, and Williams



Mellen

elements that made the early press so integral to the establishment of the United States. The historians are Roger Mellen, New Mexico State University; David Sloan, professor emeritus, University of Alabama; and Julie Williams, Samford University.

Q: Why is the study of colonial media important?



Sloan

Williams: Oh, wow, that's such a hard question, as to me the colonial era is just SO interesting, why would anyone not want to study it? And it's so easy to study because there aren't all that many newspapers left from the era, and the ones that are left are not all that many pages long. I think it's just plain fun to know how colonists and revolutionaries saw the world ... in their own words.



Williams

But the obvious fun aside (wake up to it, people!), I'd have to say that the importance of the colonial press is that it was the foundation and spark of our mass media. Don't be fooled by historians who suggest the "real" press didn't start until 1833 with the Penny Press. That simply ignores the media of 1690-1832 in

David Copeland, a professor at Elon University, is the author of numerous books about the colonial press.

Roger Mellen is the author of The Origins of a Free Press in Prerevolutionary Virginia: Creating a Culture of Political Dissent and multiple articles on the development of the constitutional right to a free press.

David Sloan has written a number of journal articles about the colonial press and is the co-author, with Julie Williams, of The Early American Press, 1690-1783.

Julie Williams, in addition to her work with Sloan, is the author of The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America and a series of popular histories.

Historical Roundtable: Studying the Colonial Press

this country and earlier in others. That's just laziness, I think. Or ridiculous. Or both.

So much about the colonial press is of interest today — the first women newspaper editors happened in that era, for example, as did the careers of key people such as John Peter Zenger (whose wife Cathrine, interestingly, was one of those first women editors) and Benjamin Franklin (who for all his achievements thought that his gravestone should indicate he was a printer). (Here's a side note: Only those who actually read Cathrine Zenger's newspapers will realize she went by her middle name, "Cathrine," and not "Anna," her first name. Many historians therefore wrongly call her "Anna.")

Mellen: The very concepts of journalism and freedom of the press, which are so important in today's United States, have their genesis in the struggles in the American pre-revolutionary period. The more we know about how these ideas developed, the more we can understand about today's important issues. The roots of our important democratic tradition of a free press lie in our colonial past, and the more we understand them, the better we understand this important institution and freedom.

Q: Related to question one, what relevance have you found in the works on the colonial press that would be valuable for someone looking at the current media landscape?

Sloan: Colonial printers, along with many other colonial Americans, had a sophisticated understanding of the role of the press in society. In fact, I would say their understanding was more sophisticated than that of most people today. So studying their ideas will help us clarify our own thinking.

Mellen: Several things — first, we have much to learn about why our founders thought that freedom of the press was so important. Journalism is such an important force to help balance a potentially corrupt government, a danger the colonists saw in the British ministers to the king. Both sides of our current political spectrum could learn from this, as this concern does not need to aim at any one party or president, but rather the potential for corrupt power in the future, which should be challenged by a free and unfettered press.

Secondly, as we look at a current press that is not always objective and balanced, it serves us well to look back at early media before the concept of journalistic objectivity had even been developed. Examples from the early American republic of a noisy and nasty partisan press might be valuable examples from which we can learn.

Williams: I mentioned the women editors above. John Peter Zenger is related to our contemporary concept of press freedom (although his fuller story is much more interesting). Heck, even the colonial Puritans helped formulate our view that the press should tell all sides and that truth is a cure for libel. I've heard many people compare modern blogging to colonial media, which was all written under pseudonym. Today we see that hiding behind a fake name brings on more vitriol. Therefore did anonymous writing help spark the Revolution after all? Oh, and colonial journalists had no problem with giving their opinion. That, too, sounds familiar today. In other words, many unsettling “new” trends in journalism were pioneered in the colonial era.

Q: Is there new research that you think people should read? Are these works revealing any new interpretations about the press of the colonial period?

Sloan: Unfortunately, there is not a lot of publishing about the colonial

Historical Roundtable: Studying the Colonial Press

press. In part, that's because many JMC historians are interested primarily in recent topics. That means, though, that those historians who do study the colonial press tend to be serious, and almost any scholarly book or article is worth reading.

Of all the work that has been done recently, I think the most original is Julie Williams' book *The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America*. It makes a good case that people gave a lot of thought to the printed word and that printing was integral to many facets of colonial life.

I don't know if we are getting what might be called new "interpretations." By *interpretation*, I don't mean simply explanations but rather explanations using large frameworks. Most work, though, does (unlike much work done in the 20th century) place the colonial press within the context of its cultural setting, rather than within a framework of the origins of journalism. That emphasis on context has led to a heightened understanding of the importance of the press in colonial society.

Mellen: *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, by Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin. The academic journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*. (These are not about the colonial press, per se, but rather offer us different ways of looking at media's effects.)

Q: What classic studies are important for those interested in understanding the era of colonial America and what was produced on printing presses?

Sloan: Despite the small number of publications in recent decades, the colonial press actually was a fairly popular subject with earlier historians. As an introduction to the colonial press, I suggest, among the earlier work, these books: Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*

(1810), Elizabeth Cook, *Literary Influences in Colonial Newspapers, 1704-1750* (1912), Sidney Kobre, *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (1944), and Clarence Brigham, *Journals and Journeymen* (1950). A more recent book that I think is extremely important in helping us understand the dynamics of how news traveled and reached America from Europe is Ian Steele's *The English Atlantic 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (1986).

Mellen: Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; Hugh Amory and David Hall, eds., *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*; Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740*; Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*; Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications*; Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*; David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and their Readers*; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News and The Sociology of News*; Jeffery Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom: The Ideology of Early American Journalism*; Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*.

Williams: THE must-read is Isaiah Thomas's 1810 *History of Printing in America*. It's fat, but it's fascinating. It's worth the read. It's also easy to pick out parts relevant to your interest and skip other parts — it's set up well for that in sort of an encyclopedia approach. And the sometimes gossip stories in it are so interesting!

Q: What are the biggest challenges in studying the colonial press?

Sloan: The biggest one I've confronted is that, beyond the pages of newspapers themselves, the amount of primary source material is limited. Often it comes only in bits and pieces. One can find discussions of

newspapers and printers in the writings of contemporary outsiders, but the private papers of printers themselves are almost non-existent. So it's difficult to know with certainty what the printers' ideas were.

Another challenge is the same one that all historians have of immersing themselves in the period they are studying. Because, though, the colonial period is so distant from our own time and our ways of thinking, understanding the setting and the mindset requires a great deal of time — or, at least, it required for me a lot of reading of both secondary and primary sources about the general cultural context before I ever started trying to understand the press.

Williams: The biggest challenge, I believe, is the fact that students are so daunted when they see a colonial newspaper. It's not how they think it should look. The type is tiny. The paper is golden with age, making that tiny type harder to read. There are no headlines and little "white" space. And then there are typographic structures that we don't use any more, such as a conjoined *c* and *t*, a conjoined *a* and *e*, an elongated squiggle for an *s* (sometimes), and something that looks like an *f* (but not quite) for an *s*, too. I think these things are visually off-putting, so students consider an exploration of the colonial press as something of a bitter pill you have to take just to get an assignment done.

Also, the colonial press is somewhat difficult to access. There are some online now, and you can find them on microfilm or the like in research libraries. However, it often takes digging to find the one you think you want to see. But it's hard to access in other ways, too, such as the alphabetic structures mentioned above, non-standard spelling, difficulty of reading it physically due to darkening, torn paper, etc. But also there's an access question regarding interest — the colonial newspapers were from the Eastern seaboard, and that means students from further inland may not find an immediate spiritual connection with an early paper — that early media may not seem relevant to their interests

in their own state's history.

Thus, the biggest challenge is to make sure everyone knows that the colonial newspapers are not dry, dusty, or dull.

Mellen: Of course, when examining printed materials more than two hundred years old, many of the more ephemeral prints are no longer extant. It is also quite difficult to place the content and the format of the printed newspaper page into the proper historical content, rather than view it within the modern norms to which we are more accustomed. (Not to mention the difficulty in deciphering the descending *s* in Caslon type font!)

Q: If any JMC historians — or graduate students — are looking for a period to study, why might they wish to choose the colonial era?

Sloan: One value of studying the colonial press is that it makes you think of history as important simply because it is history. I realize that some people in our field want to study recent topics because the topics have a burning contemporary concern for us. Unfortunately, if one chooses a topic mainly because we are involved in it today, he or she may never be able to approach it as pure history. For graduate students who want to be historians, probably the best topic they can choose is one that is so old that they wouldn't be interested in it unless they were interested in history for its own sake. For American mass communication history, you can't get earlier than the colonial period — unless, of course, you want to study its predecessors in Europe.

Mellen: It is really quite amazing to go to an archive and actually hold newspapers, almanacs, and political pamphlets that were printed three hundred years ago, plus the chance to see handwritten notes by the likes of Thomas Jefferson or Ben Franklin. Studying these period prints

really brings alive our important colonial history.

Q: What new insights into the colonial press has recent historical research provided?

Sloan: You don't have to do anything other than look at the works produced by David Copeland and the two other members of this roundtable to get a sense of how much vitality historians are bringing to the study of the colonial press. I think all JMC historians should become familiar with their work, if they are not already.

Speaking for myself, I'll confess that in my research I was surprised to find just how complex and sophisticated colonial journalism, and the thinking about it, was. When I first began studying the colonial press, I had read most of the journal articles and books that had been written about it. The few book-length biographies were good, but I must confess that I went in influenced by the views found in journal articles and a couple of popular textbooks. They gave simplistic, black-and-white explanations — in fact, explanations that were embarrassingly erroneous. One such explanation, for example, was that Benjamin Harris founded *Publick Occurrences*, the first colonial American newspaper, to oppose the Puritan clergy in Boston. The true story, as it turns out, was exactly the opposite. You can find similar popular errors in various textbook accounts of, as well as journal articles on, the colonial press.

Accounts also tended to conclude that colonial journalism offered little more than the crude beginnings of later, more developed practices. In fact, colonial thinking about journalism was anything but crude. That is what surprised me once I got into actual research into the colonial press — that ideas were extraordinarily well thought-out and the publishing situation was complex and complicated.

Mellen: I think we have managed to place print media of that time

within the overall ecology of colonial life, better understanding its importance, especially leading up to revolution. We have also come to better understand the limitations of media's influence, as well. I think several recent works have helped us to better understand the sources and influences behind the constitutional right to a free press, including David A. Copeland's *The Idea of a Free Press* and some of my own research.

Williams: There's been an interesting look at Loyalist printer James Rivington as a spy for George Washington. I myself had followed Rivington's career as a Loyalist newspaper publisher, and believe me, he came across as loyal to the British crown during the American fight for independence. Apparently he was also an opportunist, as research is now venturing into his role as a spy for the American side. Fascinating! A recent book about that is *George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution*, by Brian Kilmeade and Don Yeager. It's written for the popular market, so is not formalistic research, but it's very accessible to a newcomer.

Q: What are the biggest questions that remain to be answered about the colonial press?

Mellen: I think that the whole area of colonial almanacs has been understudied, and we could learn much by examining this genre much more closely. As the most widely disseminated output of the colonial American presses, it has received relatively little attention. We might also learn more about the people of the time by looking at what the readers have written in their copies. (Almanacs were often used as a poor man's diary, and there are very interesting notes written into many of the surviving copies.) Also, I think that much could be gained by studying the output of the first American presses. The Spanish lan-

Historical Roundtable: Studying the Colonial Press

guage press from the colony of what was then Mexico came before the English presses, and we could add a lot to our knowledge by more closely examining the earliest prints. American historians have largely focused on the English press — and especially the printed material from the Northeast. I think there is much to learn from broadening our focus.

Sloan: It could be that we have fooled ourselves into thinking we already have answered the biggest questions. Of course, it is possible we don't have any of the answers right.

Nevertheless, rather than going over the same ground now, I think a gratifying course of study would be to write histories or biographies of all the newspapers and publishers of the colonial era. Outside Benjamin Franklin, only a handful of publishers have been the subjects of book-length studies. If enough primary material doesn't exist for a book, an article could provide valuable insight, and the research would be fascinating to any historian.

Q: Are there any other issues related to the historiography of the colonial era that you'd like to discuss?

Williams: I'll violate the rules just enough to advise people not to sweat the existing historiography. Just dive in and fall in love with the colonial press itself. Once you've found an interesting facet of the colonial media, then you can find historians who have published in your particular area of interest. Because the colonial era is so brushed over between the opening and closing of the era, that may be the best path of all — discover something about it by reading it first ... then look for historiography that matches your interest.

Mellen: I would suggest that the online archives of historical material

have opened the field up to greater ease of research. However, I would suggest to any young scholar that the advantages of seeing the actual printed archival materials are difficult to specify, but can be very substantial. Whenever possible, supplement any online research with actual visits to the archives. Had I not done so, I never would have been able to study one newspaper that was recently uncovered nor would I have found an almanac not known ever to have been published — finds that led to new insights and scholarly publications. Begin with easily available online reproductions, but make sure you eventually spend time in the actual archives.

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

Kobre Award Interview: Mike Sweeney



Sweeney

Mike Sweeney received the American Journalism Historians Association's Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2015. He is a professor of journalism at Ohio University. His book *Secrets of Victory* won the AJHA's Book of the Year award and received a Choice award as an outstanding academic book. Along with his Kobre Award, in 2001 the Freedom Forum selected him as one of the top ten journalism professors in America. He has received a variety of other awards.

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

Sweeney: My father was a veterinarian. He got his degree in 1945 at Iowa State University. He wanted to be a large-animal vet and treat farm animals. But the war was still under way, and it was impossible for him to buy a car. So he went to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He got a job in downtown Kansas City and walked to work. There he met my mother, a farmer's daughter. They had four kids; I was the youngest, born in 1958 in Madison, Wisconsin, and started life in a small dairy town nearby: De Forest, Wisconsin, where the high school mascot was the Norski, a Norwegian on skis. So, I guess you could say I was raised in the quintessential Midwestern family and town. My dad's job focused on maintaining high quality in large-animal vaccines, aimed at eradicating diseases such as brucellosis and cholera. The work required him to travel a lot, and to relocate from time to time. I spent

© 2017. The author owns the copyright to this article.

some of my childhood in suburban Washington, D.C., and delivered the *Washington Evening Star* to the student housing at the University of Maryland in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I spent my high school and college years in Lincoln, Nebraska. I met my wife, Carolyn, in an honors English class during freshman year. I always wanted to be a reporter or editor; so I majored in journalism at the University of Nebraska. It took me thirteen years to figure out my calling was in teaching journalism more than doing it. I got a master's degree from the University of North Texas at night, while working during the day at the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. Then I moved to Athens, Ohio, in 1993 to get my PhD. After I defended my dissertation in 1996, I moved to Logan, Utah, to teach journalism at Utah State University.

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

Sweeney: My first job out of college was in 1980 at the *Springfield, Missouri, Daily News*. That is where I had interned in the summer of 1979, right before my senior year. I started out covering cops and schools. After a few months, I switched to the regional beat and covered twenty-two counties in southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas. In October 1981, Carolyn and I moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where I spent thirteen years as a copy editor, copy desk chief, entertainment editor, weekend guide editor, sports copy desk chief, columnist, and occasional reporter. For a while I had a daily column called "Idle Talk and Observations." That was fun. I got to make jokes about the news, kind of like Jon Stewart, but in print. One of my favorite memories of Fort Worth is driving in my car and hearing one of the top DJ's read my column on the air. The item he read related to a news clip that said McDonald's would begin serving Italian food at selected locations. I had made a list of "Things overheard at the McDonald's that serves Italian food." One item was, "Boss, the wine machine is clogged again." Another was, "Ronaldo will

seat you now." I smile as I remember this.

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

Sweeney: I spent thirteen years at Utah State, including four as department head. I taught virtually all courses associated with print journalism: beginning reporting, reporting public affairs, sports reporting, editing, feature writing, etc. I also taught online journalism, reading the textbook chapters carefully before teaching in the classroom. I returned to Ohio University in 2009 as associate director for graduate studies. At OU, I have taught the undergraduate course in the history of American journalism as well as the graduate course in mass media historiography. I also have taught beginning reporting, editing and advanced editing, magazine writing, Honors journalism courses, and media ethics.

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?

Sweeney: When I was young — we're talking twelve, thirteen years old — I started reading history books for fun. I gravitated toward the history of journalism, and in particular toward biographies of journalists. My heroes were Margaret Bourke-White and Edward R. Murrow. One of the first journalists I recall investigating was Ernie Pyle, whose "Death of Captain Waskow" column of 1944 appeared in my sophomore year high school journalism class. I got interested in historical research when I arrived on the OU campus in 1993. I had thought I might write a dissertation about ethics or politically correct speech, but I had lunch with Dr. Pat Washburn at a Chinese restaurant a couple of weeks before classes started, and he got me excited about doing historical research. To me, history and journalism have much in common, and I was in-

trigued by the idea of telling important stories that had not been told before. I took Dr. Washburn's media historiography class in spring quarter 1994 and was hooked.

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

Sweeney: Dr. Washburn is my mentor, role model, and friend. He is absolutely brilliant, although I think he hides it behind an aw-shucks personality. Among the lessons he taught me was the importance of writing well. If nobody reads your book, it has no impact, he said. I also was influenced by my earning a certificate in the Contemporary History Institute at OU under John Lewis Gaddis, who is probably the foremost historian of the Cold War. Gaddis is incandescent. I don't think I have ever had my mind stretched so much, day after day, as I did when I took his classes. Between the two of them, I gravitated more toward models of history rather than specific theories, and I gained skills in parsing how we know what we know about the past, and judging and testing various historical methods of inquiry. Among the classic names in our field, I must admit I am a big fan of Walter Lippmann, whose 1922 book *Public Opinion* should be required reading. I also admire E.H. Carr, Marc Bloch, Pamela Shoemaker, David Hackett Fischer, and Noam Chomsky. Among those who write popular history, I have been partial to Washburn, Gaddis, and my two favorite popular historians, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Barbara Tuchman.

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

Sweeney: I look at how censorship shapes how and what we learn about war. I started with World War II and have moved backward in

time to World War I and what some historians call World War Zero, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

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

Sweeney: I have published twenty-two books and monographs, with about a third of them academic and the rest aimed at popular audiences. Among the long-form academic works are “Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II,” “The Military and the Press: An Uneasy Truce,” the monograph “‘Ain’t Justice Wonderful’: The Chicago Tribune, Its Battle of Midway Story, and the Government’s Attempt at an Espionage Indictment in 1942,” and another monograph, “War Correspondent Ernie Pyle’s ‘Beloved Captain’: The Life and Death of Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas, and the Column That Touched America.” The Ernie Pyle monograph is assigned reading at West Point and is used as a teaching tool by PBS. In addition, I have eleven published journal articles, mostly on wartime journalism, and two more in the works. My popular-press books are by the *National Geographic*. For the Great Golden Rectangle, I have written about war correspondents, transportation, the brain, the peace symbol, dogs, Utah, and the Lost Boys of Sudan.

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

Sweeney: My first one, of course. *Secrets of Victory* came out of my dissertation, and seeing it in print (as well as a complimentary review in the *Washington Post*) made me proud. I only wish my father, to whom the book is dedicated, could have lived to read it. I also must cite *From the Front*, my first *National Geographic* book, and *God Grew Tired of Us*,

the memoir of a Lost Boy of Sudan. Among the readers' comments about *God Grew Tired of Us* that were posted to Amazon.com was one that said reading the book had convinced the anonymous author of the comment to not take his own life. He said the book put his life, and its tribulations, in perspective. That was very satisfying.

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?

Sweeney: I think there are two. One is that *Secrets of Victory* shows that, under the right circumstances, the news media can be trusted to do the right thing in wartime, even while they keep the home front informed. Two is my service as editor of the quarterly publication *Journalism History* since fall 2012. I believe I have maintained the journal's high standards while helping many young scholars get published.

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

Sweeney: Wow. I can't think of a thing, except maybe asking my wife out on a date long before I did. So many things that seemed bad or unfavorable have turned out to be blessings in the long run. If we eliminated my mistakes and misfortunes, I would not be the person I am now.

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.

Sweeney: I believe history is the most important subject to teach and

study. It is the story of humanity. If we want to learn about people — what makes us tick, why we act the way we do, what happens when we act this way, or that — then there are two possible areas of inquiry. One is the present, and an investigation into such fields as sociology, political science, economics, journalism, etc. Two is history. The past is a much, much larger and richer field to learn about *Homo sapiens*. And much of the past colors who we are today, and where we are headed tomorrow. For a longer take on this, I would refer you to my Kobre acceptance speech in 2015.

As for my thoughts on how one *does* good history, I fall between those who embrace theories and those who don't. I see three key models that describe history. The classic American model, with its roots in Judeo-Christian history, favors a narrative of continual progress and enlightenment. Picture a graph with an arrow ascending as it moves from left to right. This model bothers me because if every moment is *sui generis* (always bigger and better), then prior events have little to teach us because they bear little relation to the present. On the other hand, the Eastern model of history as a great wheel bothers me too. If everything is cyclical, then we are locked into events in an ever-repeating routine, and nothing we can do short of achieving nirvana can break us free. In this scenario, history may suggest to us what we will experience in the future, based on the past, but we are helpless to change our destiny. My compromise is what I call Sweeney's Bedspring. Picture history as a coil, like an old-fashioned bedspring or Slinky toy. Each loop of the coil circles above the loop below, but it does not duplicate it. There are points where a spot on one loop is immediately above the same spot on the loop below or above. So they are similar, but not identical. To me, it is the historian's job to sort out the similarities and differences among selected past events, and to carefully draw what truths (small "t") she might find in such comparisons.

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

Sweeney: Oh, no question, the work today is clearly superior to that of thirty or forty years ago. JMC history has much more rigor in its structure and method. The logic of selection, the understanding of limitations, the carefulness of argument — all are considered the norm today, thanks in large part to AEJMC, AJHA, and our academic journals. Add to this the explosion of previously unavailable or hard-to-find material that sprang from the Internet, and you have a rich, diverse, and high-quality field for JMC historians.

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?

Sweeney: We need to find ways to excite students, not only in college but also in high school. History too often is taught by people who view it as a chore instead of a calling. We need to find ways to tie issues and personalities of the past to ongoing questions. Nellie Bly, William Randolph Hearst, Byron Price — these are people everyone should know about. And the fundamental shifts in human understanding brought about by new media today have antecedents in the Gutenberg press, the telegraph, the radio, and so on. I think that we as JMC historians should evangelize beyond our discipline about the ways in which media have shaped our world. And we should fight any lingering notions that we are like the kids at the card table at Thanksgiving while the History Department professors are eating with the grown-ups. Wake up. Be proud. Can we get armbands and caps with snappy slogans?

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

Kobre Award Interview

Sweeney: As a former department head, I have a ready answer for this. Tightening budgets, linked to economic downturns and the declining population of eighteen-year-olds, mean colleges will be pressured to trim what they consider to be non-essential courses in order to survive. We must maintain that an understanding of media history is essential to professional journalists.

Q: Finally, if there are any comments you want to make or issues you want to address in addition to the ones above, please feel free to do so.

Sweeney: I think I've rambled enough. End of sermon. Thank you.

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

Book Award Interview: Peter Hartshorn



Hartshorn

Peter Hartshorn won the American Journalism Historians Association's award for the year's outstanding book in 2012 for *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens*. The book also received the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's award for the year's Best Journalism and Mass Communication History Book. Prof. Hartshorn, who teaches English at Showa Institute in Boston, is also the author of *James Joyce and Trieste*.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

Hartshorn: *I Have Seen the Future* is a full biography of Steffens, covering his childhood of wanderlust in the Sacramento Valley, his rise as a muckraking journalist who relentlessly probed political corruption nationwide, and his later years in Europe and back home in California, where he wrote the acclaimed autobiography that brought him his final days of fame. Steffens, virtually a household name by his mid-30s, uncovered some of the most notorious public scandals of the time. He also mentored Walter Lippmann, befriended Theodore Roosevelt, advised Woodrow Wilson, interviewed Lenin and Mussolini, and was a best-selling writer. The book's title refers to Steffens's infamous remark, "I have seen the future, and it works," following his trip to Russia in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, which he saw with hopeful eyes as a brutal but transforming moment in political history.

© 2017. The author owns the copyright to this article.

Book Award Interview

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

Hartshorn: In much of my reading in the fields of history and journalism, I noticed that Steffens's name came up with remarkable frequency in connection with politicians, journalists, authors, and even movie stars. (He was a good friend of James Cagney and once danced with Mary Pickford.) Out of curiosity, I read Steffens's autobiography, a fascinating account of a life that repeatedly touched major political events from the late 1800s up to the Wall Street crash. And as there had been no major biography of Steffens in decades, I felt his story should be presented to modern readers.

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?

Hartshorn: I wrote the first draft of the book largely based on primary sources, namely, Steffens's personal letters, autobiography, and newspaper and magazine articles. From there I looked at the abundant secondary sources that were available, particularly memoirs and letters from many of the movers and shakers who befriended Steffens, as well as historical works on muckraking and the elections and revolutions that Steffens seemed to be forever chasing. I received valuable input from other scholars who had written biographies of influential friends of Steffens, particularly Ronald Steel (Walter Lippmann), Robert Rosenthal (John Reed), Alice Wexler (Emma Goldman), and Melvin Urofsky (Louis Brandeis). All graciously agreed to answer my queries. Many libraries also aided me in my research; the Steffens archive in the Butler Library at Columbia University proved to be an invaluable resource, as did related materials in the Bancroft Library at UC-Berkeley and the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Overall, the research and

writing took about eight years, during which I was also teaching full-time.

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

Hartshorn: Yes — as Steffens's work brought him in contact with so many important figures and momentous events, there seemed to be an endless number of letters, memoirs, and historical works that were of interest, with more coming out during the course of my research. I wish I could have checked all of these sources, particularly those concerning his days in Greenwich Village as a mentor to John Reed and other radicals of the time, and his rather unexpected success as an influential public speaker on nationwide tours. But after working for a number of years on the book, I simply had to limit its scope and length for practical reasons.

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

Hartshorn: Mainly, keep digging. Numerous times I stumbled on useful sources while looking in another direction. For instance, I visited the Hemingway archive at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum to read some letters that Steffens had written to Hemingway. In the files, I found other letters from Ella Winter, Steffens's second wife, to Hemingway that I had not known about. One of the letters from Winter included notes from a warden and a young inmate at San Quentin State Prison expressing thanks to Steffens for his heartfelt concern for the young man's plight, helping me to better understand Steffens's uncanny ability to strike up friendships with people of all walks of life. (Steffens had given the inmate a copy of *The Sun Also*

Book Award Interview

Rises.) Also, librarians remain an invaluable resource, both in their knowledge of specific library collections and in their ability to suggest further avenues of research. As research and writing can sometimes become a grinding process, time saved by pointers from librarians may be much appreciated.

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

Hartshorn: One of the challenges in writing a biography is how to approach family members of the book's subject and how much cooperation to seek/expect from them. In writing biographies of Steffens and James Joyce, I've had two very different experiences. In the case of Steffens, things went quite smoothly. His son, Pete Steffens, a very affable man, was most supportive of my work and willing to provide answers to a number of questions. Interestingly, he said he himself learned some things about his father from my work, such as the nature of Steffens's relationship with a German friend who left Steffens a fairly substantial inheritance at a young age. Other family members were helpful as well. Regarding the Joyce biography, the keeper of the Joyce estate is his grandson, Stephen Joyce, who has gained a well-earned reputation as a staunch protector of his grandfather's work and reputation. While Stephen Joyce did not inhibit my work, my correspondence with him led me to the conclusion that it was best to tread carefully in that direction.

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?

Hartshorn: I think that the important point for me was to see Steffens as a human being and not as a hero, although at the height of his fame,

many Americans (probably not including the vast majority of politicians) saw him as quite heroic. I came to admire his fearlessness in reporting the truth as he found it, whether it was in the halls of power or in his own workplace. Following a dispute with legendary publisher Sam McClure, Steffens wrote, “No man and no employer buys my mind. When he hires my pen, I shall not sell my liberty for any price.” On the other hand, Steffens’s treatment of women, even considering the chauvinistic time he lived in, was too often inexcusable. The extent of his neglect and insensitivity toward their own lives, including that of his first wife, is hard to accept. Steffens led two women to believe he would marry them (he never did): one affair lingered, off and on, for three decades, and the other began as his wife was gravely ill. Mabel Dodge astutely observed that Steffens had a “small devil in him that liked to play with dynamite in human souls.” He was a complex man, which helps explain why he was such a fascinating figure. As Steffens did in his own writings on the lives of others, I tried to present him as I found him, no more and no less.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

Hartshorn: I wouldn’t call this a “new” insight, but in the book I tried to provide the view that a recognition of the past can be very helpful in assessing the present, a necessary learning experience for each generation. For people who believe that the current political and economic systems are rigged, Steffens, who made his name in reporting how undemocratic — and truly rigged — much of America’s democracy actually was, might have offered them some cautionary words. After a long, private talk with the chief attorney for the Southern Pacific Railroad and hearing how the immensely profitable railroad had controlled the state of California for years, Steffens admitted, “That moment was the first time I realized the effort required to make the world go wrong.”

Book Award Interview

While much indeed remains wrong today, it was the work of Steffens and other muckrakers who helped bring America out of a cesspool of corruption and toward a brighter, if far from perfect, future.

Q: What findings most surprised you?

Hartshorn: One thing I expected to gain from my research was a better understanding of Steffens's unyielding support for the Russian revolution. As Steffens had seen the appalling flaws in the political system of his own country, it was not surprising that he would have a strong desire to see if another system might actually produce a better future for its people. And there were certainly many others on the left who praised the rise of communism — Steffens was hardly alone. Yet Steffens had a determined wish to see communism succeed even when it was not only failing but millions were suffering and dying under the tyranny of Lenin and Stalin. I wondered how Steffens, who personally knew American presidents, could witness the dictatorial Russian leadership and the misery of the people and still see reason for hope. But I found no single explanation for his persistence, just the stubborn belief of an aging man that Russia, given time, would find a better way forward. Perhaps he had seen so much corruption, and had invested so much of his energy and hope for progress in two major revolutions in Mexico and Russia, that he could not accept the harsh reality that confronted him: governments chose power over ideals almost every time.

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

Hartshorn: I would say that any book reaffirming the necessity of a vigilant media would be time well-spent by the author. Among others, journalists such as Steffens and David Graham Phillips at the turn of the

20th century, and Seymour Hersh, Jack Anderson, I.F. Stone, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of a later era, have well-deserved fame as pursuers of the truth. While the media world is far more diversified now, the need for investigative journalism remains strong. Any work that can use history, including the very recent past, to illustrate the vital role that journalists have played (or should have played) in keeping the public informed and educated will be of great interest and value.

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