

Copyright © 1989 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by photostat, microform, retrieval system, or any other means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers  
365 Broadway  
Hillsdale, New Jersey 07642

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Startt, James D., 1932-

Historical methods in mass communication / by James D. Startt and  
Wm. David Sloan.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8058-0433-1:

1. Mass media—Methodology. 2. Mass media—Historiography.

I. Sloan, W. David (William David), 1947- II. Title.

P91.S72 1989

001.51—dc19

888-26033

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 54 3 2 1

# HISTORICAL METHODS

IN MASS COMMUNICATION

James D. Startt  
Wm. David Sloan

302.2  
S796 h



1989

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Hillsdale, New Jersey Hove and London

## The Nature of History

Everyone thinks about the past. The habit is a human indulgence. In fact, the reasons an individual contemplates the past are endless. To some, interest in history is a matter of genealogical curiosity about their own family; to others, a matter of civic pride or patriotism. For yet others, it is a matter of interest stimulated in a person or aspect of the past by film, fiction, or some experience of life. Perhaps those courses in history, taken by choice or by compulsion in school, can claim some responsibility for stimulating an historical interest. Let us hope at least that they did not dull interest, for history is a natural form of thought for modern man. As such, it can be a burden or an inspiration, a curse or a blessing, a source of confidence or a source of confusion. History lends itself to both use and abuse. The past is also the object of attention for those men and women who call themselves historians, people who devote their professional lives to a serious study of its many facets. These scholars believe their labor is as important as truth and hope that it will set a standard for others in their treatment of historical knowledge.

### History as a Form of Knowledge

The essence of history lies in present thought about particular things in the past. The Hebrews were the first to think of historical time as linear rather than cyclical (that is, as moving from beginning to end rather than as repeating itself). We normally, however, credit ancient Greeks, despite their cyclical concept, with inventing the study of history. In a sense, historians today still work under the

timeless shadow of Herodotus and Thucydides, those two Greek writers who gave birth to history as a literary form. It has survived as a subject of commanding importance to this day, although it had to endure inhospitable medieval centuries before emerging in its modern form.

What do these two founders have to do with the study of communication history today? The answer is: quite a bit. Herodotus, "the Father of History," opened *The Persian Wars* by explaining that he was publishing his "researches...in the hope of...preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done...."<sup>1</sup> Few historians have written better or told a better story or conveyed more of a sense of humanity than he. Herodotus, curious about the Persians as well as the Greeks, conducted a careful inquiry into the people and cultures involved in the famous war of which he wrote. Although he intended his history to be humanistic rather than mythical or theistic, his interest in cultures led him to include myths and tales in his writing when he believed them to be part of the whole culture he was describing. His subject, however, was the deeds of men. Thucydides, on the other hand, seems even more modern. He turned to man's records for his classic study, *The Peloponnesian War*. As he tells us early in that masterpiece, he measured the accuracy of his evidence against the "most severe and detailed tests possible."<sup>2</sup> Both men sought to produce an account of a singular event worthy, they thought, of contemplation then and in the future.

These two ancient historians provide many clues regarding the nature of history. From its inception in their hands, history has been neither theistic nor mythological. Although religion has been a central idea in the works of many Western historians, history has been primarily a humanistic study, an exploration into what people have done. It is a form of inquiry into the past that asks questions about the things people have done and elicits answers based on evidence. In that process there is a story to be told and truth to be found. Most of all, Herodotus and Thucydides alert us to the fact that when historians deal with the study of the past, they assume that it possesses certain characteristics. What are these characteristics? That short question can produce a long answer. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer a brief response to it, however tentative it might be, by suggesting that historical study contains at least three elements: (a) evidence, (b) interpretation, and (c) narrative. Let us consider each

<sup>1</sup>Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1942), 3.

<sup>2</sup>Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Crawley (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1934), 14.

## NATURE OF HISTORY 3

for a moment.

First, take the matter of evidence. Since the time of Herodotus, evidence has been the basis for history. Without it one does not have history. Beyond that, it should be appreciated that when modern historians speak of evidence they have a certain kind of evidence in mind. This evidence, collectively called "the record," can be described first as a record of reality. It is an account of what real people in the past did or failed to do. Thus history is restricted to the study of the human past and accordingly is viewed as an investigation apart from the natural past, the mythological past, or the theistic past. Beyond that, the evidence historians use is that which has been screened and tested to assure as much accuracy as possible. A major portion of the historian's effort must be devoted to proper use of evidence.

Regarding the matter of interpretation, it stands to reason that references to history as the reconstruction of the past actually refer to reconstruction as an interpretive act. When the historian reconstructs something from the past, think of the material that is never available for the process. How much of the past has been lost forever? How little we know even about great events, figures, and movements that occurred in times past!

Ask yourself, how much do we actually know about many of the famous publicists of the last several centuries, and how much of that does the record prove beyond doubt? Complete sources providing answers to all one might wish to know about some past figure or event are seldom, if ever, available. Sometimes governments, institutions, or individuals place restrictions on records. In other instances, the desired record may never have been made in the first place. Consequently, historians cannot find all the source information they might wish to know about human motive and opinion and many other things. Sometimes historical records have been lost or destroyed. Communication historians encounter this problem frequently. Records needed for their studies may have been too bulky or too expensive to keep.

The problem of incomplete records hinders even probes into the recent past. In his book *So It Was True: The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews*, a study for which one might suppose a full record of publications would exist, Robert W. Ross warns that this was not the case. "All of the periodicals were not available for all of the years between 1933 and 1945," he explains. "Some published in 1933 became victims of the Great Depression and either went out of business or merged with other

existing periodicals."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, think of the amount of published material that he had to distill in order to write that book.

Consider the vastness of the limited, or even small, piece of the total past that remains in the historical record as it is left, collected, and passed from generation to generation. One cannot know it all equally; nor can one make it all a part of historical explanation. Historians select information from the record to include in their studies. Communication historians, because of the extent of records they use, face problems of selection all the time. Consequently, one only has to reflect upon how historians make conscious decisions about the use of evidence to understand that problems of its availability and selectivity guarantee the interpretive nature of their inquiries.

Anyone who has tried to write a serious account of some past occurrence can appreciate the interpretive nature of history. One can understand that the writing of history involves constant decisions about finding meaning in the record of the past and explaining that significant part of the total, available record to an audience. The "facts" of history have explanations attached to them. Take President Woodrow Wilson's first presidential press conference as an example. He held it on March 15, 1913, just eleven days after his inauguration. The simple fact of that conference tells us little. Historians ask and answer a number of questions about such "facts" before employing them as part of their explanations. In this case they might ask: How and why did this meeting originate? Was it intended to serve the interest of the president, the press, or the public? What did it accomplish? Was it a success or failure? How does it fit into larger historical themes such as the nature of the relationship between the presidents, or the presidency, and the press? As one observes historians such as James E. Pollard and George Juergens address these questions in their inquiries, it becomes clear that the simple "facts" of history, in this case that of the first regularly instituted presidential press conference, do not stand alone. They are loaded with explanation.

Thus fact and interpretation, however scrupulous and honest the historian may be in the search for the truth, go together. The early twentieth-century British journalist C.P. Scott used to say, "Comment is free, but facts are sacred."<sup>4</sup> Whether or not one agrees

<sup>3</sup>Robert W. Ross, *So It Was True: The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 305.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Sir Linton Andrews and H.A. Taylor, *Lords and Laborers of the Press: Men Who Fashioned the Modern British Newspaper* (Carbondale:

with Scott's statement, it cannot be applied to history, a study in which fact and opinion are bound together in more ways than one might suppose. Historians select the evidence as they assemble it into their accounts, and finally offer a general interpretation by way of shaping an overall understanding of the subject.

Finally there is the element of narration to consider. By speaking of the narrative element in history, one is not referring to those majestic narrative histories produced by nineteenth-century historians but rather to the narrative element that is bound up in the writing of history. Since the time of Herodotus, who was a master of narration, the element of "story" and its telling have been an integral part of history. They remain central to historical writing today and help to give history a distinguishable form. As G.R. Elton, one of the most influential of contemporary historians, reminds us, "...if it cannot be told as a story it can no longer be called history....The story may be short or long, simple or complex, but the element of story has to be there if what he [the historian] is producing is to be history."<sup>5</sup>

These characteristics will be covered at greater length later. But even this brief introduction suggests that history is a distinctive study. Yet it shares a common body of information with other subjects, and courses in history are sometimes found in various other academic departments. To make matters even more confusing, a number of courses other than history contain an historical component. The problem stems from perceptions of how knowledge should be divided and from considerations regarding curricular design and structure. Before undertaking serious historical inquiry, students of communication history should understand the reasons for the varied placement of history in a university curriculum as well as the qualities that characterize historical study. Accordingly, let us review a few fundamental considerations.

Most American colleges base their curriculum on fields of knowledge known as disciplines; each has its own type of information and regimen of inquiry. For example, history and geography are disciplines. The various disciplines are accommodated by departments for purposes of teaching, scholarship, research, and administration. Beyond that, disciplines are grouped together into larger subject fields or divisions. These aggregate subject fields normally are designated the humanities, the social sciences, the

arts, the physical sciences, the biological sciences, and the professional programs. There is usually a methodological similarity among the disciplines in each division, but that is not always the case. Some disciplines pose no difficulties regarding where they fit into the larger aggregate groups. Political science, for instance, readily can be designated a social science. History, however, defies such clear classification, as does communication.

The difficulty regarding the placement of history is twofold. First, it involves not only those courses traditionally classified as "history" but also various types of other courses that are difficult to place because of problems of staff, program continuity, and sometimes competition between departments. Communication history is an example of the latter type of course. Should it be placed in a history or communication department, and how should it be taught? Second, what is the proper classification of history itself? Does it belong among the humanities or the social sciences? In order for students to understand the nature of the content and method of a course like communication history, they need answers to these questions.

Should a course in communication history be taught in a history or communication department, and how should it be taught? The answer to the first part of that question is simple. It can be placed in either department; it might even be cross-listed as a course for which one might receive credit in either department. The important thing is not where it resides as a course but how it is perceived and taught. If it is called history, one might reason, then it should be taught as history, though some exceptions to that rule exist. Remember, scholars other than historians deal with the past, but only historians deal with the past as history. Political scientists, for instance, who are studying presidential elections, might extend their investigations to past presidential elections, a topic that interests historians too. When studying such material, political scientists proceed in their own way. They use their own methods, and their work is judged by the accepted standards of political science. Their work is significant and stands on its own merits as political science. It is not history, nor is it judged as history. So it is with the field of communication. Many aspects of the work of scholars in that field lead them to make probes into the past. Valuable as that work may be, one should realize that it is not history if it fails to manifest the distinguishing characteristics of history. If not, then another name should be found for it, for names convey substantive meaning.

There are other considerations that underscore the need to classify communication history as part of history. Its subject content is so integrated into the context of modern society that it is impossible to isolate one from the other. Mass communication,

Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 13.

<sup>5</sup> G.R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 176.

journalism, the press, and such other topics that are a part of communication cannot be separated from the broader society without becoming at best narrow and at worst trivial. Indeed, communication history engages the larger history of the past at so many points that it would appear artificial to classify it as anything other than history. In the first volume of *The Information Process*, Robert W. Desmond claimed that "the history of the press itself is a part of the social history of mankind in his search for information and understanding." Desmond's purpose in compiling his comprehensive survey of world news was to "repair...[an] omission in the social history of man, and to establish its relation to political history."<sup>6</sup> His purpose was as suggestive as it was laudatory, for the story of how people have communicated by the various vehicles of mass media throughout time cannot be removed from history without damaging its integrity. But for communication history to reach its potential as history it should have the hallmarks of history.

Before proceeding farther, several qualifications should be made about whatever designation we choose for a subject such as communication history. First, to some extent the distinction made is artificial. Sometimes it is simply the result of the academic curriculum design. Subjects have to fit somewhere; compromises are made in the process. Second, since all of the humanities and social sciences are worthy studies and all frequently borrow from and contribute to the others, it little behoves practitioners of one field to indulge in scoffing and derogatory comments about areas of study other than their own. Human nature being what it is, such comments are common enough, but they only impair the effort to understand a particular discipline. In a sense, every major discipline can think of many other closely associated ones as auxiliary fields. These qualifications should be kept in mind as one attempts to distinguish between the various disciplines.

Now let us return to the matter of the positioning of history. Should it be considered as part of the humanities? It can be if the term *humanities* is broadly defined. If it is used in reference to the study of mankind in its many dimensions, then history qualifies as a humanities. Moreover, since history contains a definite artistic element and since it deals with some of the great statements of people's achievements, it can always qualify on those grounds as a humanities. But if the definition of humanities is narrowed to mean only an organized study of great achievements in literature, philosophy, and perhaps the fine arts, then history fits less well.

<sup>6</sup>Robert W. Desmond, *The Information Process: World News Reporting To the Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1978), XII.

Although the works of historians such as Herodotus, Macaulay, Trevelyan, and Parkman are themselves considered great literary achievements, the study of history usually encompasses more than a consideration of only such masterpieces. It pushes out into a vast area of people's actions in social, economic, cultural, and political realms. Nevertheless, the relationship between history and what might be called the pure humanities is close and compatible.

Is there a similar compatible relationship between history and the social sciences (more recently the behavioral sciences)? They share a number of common interests. Both historians and social scientists study the past, or, more precisely, they study things in the past. They both deal with analysis, explanation, and generalization. Both employ method in their work, aim for precision, and are concerned with the verification of conclusions reached. To be sure, they tend to go about these tasks in different ways, and the tasks themselves do not necessarily mean the same thing to the one group as to the other. By methodology, for instance, historians usually have something quite different in mind than the social scientist. Consequently, distinctions between them can be blurred. To make matters more confusing, some historians think of themselves as social scientists, particularly, but by no means exclusively, those interested in social history. On the other hand, many social scientists think of themselves as behavioralists. Social scientists, however, do not compose a monolithic group. Some of their scholarly interests are more traditional than they are behavioralist. The various disciplines of the social sciences continue to define and redefine themselves. So does history.

What then are the differences? In answering that question one must keep in mind the variety of interest found among social scientists and the diversity of the definitions of their individual disciplines. It is, consequently, only fair to speak of tendencies in much of their work and how they differ from those found among historians -- who are by no means of one mind regarding the nature of history. Social scientists, for instance, tend to think of themselves as scientists. The tendency is most pronounced among behavioralists.

Do historians think of history as a science? The question is, of course, an old one that carries one back to nineteenth-century debates about the nature of history. It is correct enough to think of history as a science if *science* is loosely construed to mean a rational investigation in which generalizations will be advanced based on evidence, and if it is thought of as a study that is concerned with establishing truth. The scientist, however, can experiment in the laboratory and subject the experiment to a type of verification impossible for historians to use. The scientist seeks laws; the historian

hopes to generalize, and the generalizations are usually qualified. The scientist can measure, but measurement is not always within the province of the historian. Can the historian measure the impact that a war, revolution, or an idea made upon the mind of someone or some group of people who lived in times past? The scientist deals with prediction, but history is not predictive in nature. Historians do not claim that their study of the past allows them to predict the future. They study what people have done, thus helping one to understand what people can do, but they do not predict what people will do. A scientist can observe data objectively. Historians are objective too, but they are also frequently subjective. Historians become involved in the past as they endeavor to understand the mood of a time or the nature of someone's personality or many other intangibles of the past. The material of history, concerned about things such as cultural forces, social contexts, and human beings of the past, is simply different from that of the scientist. It yields a different type of understanding than that which the scientist seeks. So historians differ from scientists -- and also from social scientists to the degree that the latter tend to think of themselves as scientists.

In fact, differences between social scientists and historians are numerous. Consider the following statement made in explanation of the study of political behavior by the political scientist David Easton. "There are," he contended, "discoverable uniformities in political behavior. These can be expressed in generalizations or theories with explanatory and predictive value."<sup>7</sup> Such a study of political behavior, indeed, would be scientific, but it would have little to do with an historical inquiry. Easton, of course, did not speak for all political scientists, just as the present writers do not express the opinion of all historians. But the thrust of Easton's comment does underscore a definite difference that exists. There are others. As contrasted to historians, social scientists tend to be more interested in constructing models, in factor analysis, in establishing regularities they perceive present in their data, in linking together theory and research, and in using the past to substantiate theories offered in explanation of social concepts. Historians, on the other hand, study particular things in the past, and, more than social scientists, place greater stress on original sources and on narrative in their studies; and unlike social scientists, they accept intuitive insight as a viable element in their inquiry.

Any consideration of how history relates to the humanities and social sciences and where it should be positioned is useful. It helps to

<sup>7</sup>David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), 7.

sharpen one's understanding of the nature of history and helps to define what history can and cannot do. The novice tackling a serious historical investigation for the first time would be well advised to read a few of the better known statements on the subject by historians.<sup>8</sup> History is sometimes perceived as in part one of the humanities and in part one of the social sciences since it contains elements of both art and science.

But is such a hybrid definition correct? Both science and art were known when Herodotus and Thucydides wrote, yet they thought of their investigations as unique studies. As we have previously seen, history has a number of distinguishing characteristics. They are all clues to its separate identity. The renowned English historian R.G. Collingwood once explained that the "prime duty of the historian" is found in "a willingness to bestow infinite pains on discovering what actually happened."<sup>9</sup> The object of that discovery is some particular thing of the past. History, it should be remembered, is the study of human deeds. It is about real human beings who lived in the past, their lives and sayings, successes and accomplishments, and their sufferings and failures. It is also about particular events and movements and the change that occurs within them. Since no other study of human experience has these hallmarks, one is led to conclude that historical study can be distinguished from other investigations of the past. It can be understood as an autonomous approach to the past.

However the scholar views the various disciplines, one must be careful not to adopt a perspective that is artificially limited. The view adopted recently among some communication scholars and in graduate communication training, that the research methods of social and behavioral sciences are the only truly legitimate ones for the study of communication questions, is shortsighted and holds much potential danger. All research methods have some value, and only the scholar of narrow perspective would argue that only his or

<sup>8</sup>Among the better books on the subject are the following: G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1967); Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *The Heritage and Challenge of History* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1971); G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967); H. Stuart Hughes, *History As Art and As Science* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964); Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Macmillan and Co., LTD., 1970); and Pardon E. Tillinghast, *The Specious Past: Historians and Others* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1972).

<sup>9</sup>R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Clarendon Press, 1946; reprinted, London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 55.

her method is correct. Communication researchers, including historians, must be familiar with all methods that can help shed light on problems and answer questions. The historical method has a number of advantages. First, it can be used, unlike particular social and behavioral science methods, to study a wide range of problems covering many aspects of the human condition. Second, while soft-science methods generally are limited to an examination of situations that presently exist, the historical method provides the only adequate way to study topics from the past. Third, while social and behavioral sciences tend to view the human mind as being mechanistic, the historical method assumes a freedom of thinking apart from the biological mechanics of the brain to account for the diversity of human thought and action. Fourth, the historical method can and should make use of all other methods when they will help study the problem at hand, including the techniques used in behavioral and social sciences.

But the fact that the historical method is so versatile should not mislead the historian into thinking it is easier to master than are other methods. If anything, the opposite is true. Historical method requires more rigorous thinking than any other. While the communication researcher working, for example, with opinion surveys may use established methods to draw a random sample or to determine margins of error, the historian frequently must make sound judgments without such formalized mathematical equations. Historical research, therefore, requires the development of a highly critical mind that must be able to evaluate a wide range of material, subject it to intense scrutiny without the aid of formulae, and arrive at thoughtful conclusions.

### The Purpose of History

Without exaggeration, one can say that people have found purpose in history since the Greeks invented it. For the Romans it was an inspiration for their imperial confidence and vision. Medieval monks and scholars produced various works that kept alive the tradition. And, even if they bent it to their own purposes, who can doubt that it offered the society of their day an historical vision. Following the Middle Ages, history grew in prominence as a form of knowledge until the nineteenth century when it entered its golden age. Whether written as a national epic, biography, science, or a revelation of historical destiny, its purpose was not questioned. It was central to the age. Never before or since has it enjoyed such position. The literature of that century is crowded with the great works written by historians across the Western world.

In the twentieth century people continue to pursue history as a subject worthy of serious investigation. They do so for different reasons. In the United States, for instance, early twentieth-century Progressive historians used history to underscore the progress of enlightened democracy that was so important to their hopes of reforming contemporary society. More recently, "new left" historians have attempted to radicalize history and make it an instrument of social transformation. The Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker claims that history must serve the needs either of the oppressed or the oppressors. To that comment, the well-known Lincoln scholar Richard Current recently responded: "Though that may be good Marxism, it may also represent the fallacy of the excluded middle. Surely there are historians who try, not wholly in vain, to write and teach for the sake of neither oppressors nor oppressed but for the sake of historical truth."<sup>10</sup> He provides an important clue with that comment, for most American historians are neither new leftist nor Marxist nor devotees of any special school of history. Most simply pursue their studies hoping to produce a significant, convincing, honest, authentic, and engaging product.

If in the twentieth century, with many new competitors in the field, history has failed to retain its nineteenth-century position, it surely has held its vitality. It remains today a major form of knowledge pursued both as a popular and professional study. It continues, moreover, to enjoy a flourishing existence in schools and colleges and constitutes a significant genre of writing. Yet, it is still possible and profitable to inquire into its purpose. Like all subjects and forms of investigation, history has its detractors as well as its supporters. Moreover, in a culture such as ours in which present-mindedness, practicality, vocationalism, and materialism are so pronounced, the questions sometimes raised about the value of historical study fail to surprise one. Such questions find their logical answers in an understanding of the purpose of the study.

What is it, then, that historians hope to do when they make their inquiries into the past? The first part of the answer to that question is simple. They hope to explain particular things of the past with fullness and truth. In studying those distinctive things, which might be called historical problems, they seek to produce a rational reconstruction of the particular object of investigation from the inside out. They hope to capture and relate the thought and feeling of a time past as they are associated with the problem under consideration. The meaning sought cannot be imposed from without. Such study,

<sup>10</sup>Richard N. Current, "Fiction as History: A Review Essay," *The Journal of Southern History* 52 (February 1986): 87.



therefore, can subordinate itself neither to religious or anti-religious passion, nor to political or social ideology, nor to deterministic theories, nor to the social scientist's "models," and still be history. History investigates things that have happened and seeks to comprehend them in their fullness of meaning. In that manner it hopes to be informative about human behavior, about how people have related to one another, and about how they have interacted with the conditions of their time.

Indeed, it is possible to perceive a number of purposes in a study of particular things of the past pursued from the inside out. Within the context of the problem under investigation, it affords the opportunity to produce wholeness and to be informed about the nature of man and historical truth. The purpose of history is neither to justify an action of the past nor to offer facile judgments about the past nor to suggest careless analogies between past and present. It is rather to provide reasonable explanation for the complexity of evidence for some part of the past. As such, its purpose involves the painstaking willingness to search for the truth of a past situation and, by doing so, to set a standard of excellence in comprehending the subject of the inquiry.

By their separate inquiries, historians contribute to the authentic record of human experience. But is that record worth the effort? What use does it have for society? Consider the proposition that history has purpose from a slightly different angle than that found in the previous discussion. Most historians believe that their discipline provides information important for identity and background. It helps us to know ourselves both individually and collectively, and it provides knowledge valuable in helping us to understand the world as we find it.

By way of example, consider a few events much studied by historians. The revolution that began on the field of battle in 1775 gave birth to our American republic. No one expects our country to experience another revolution of that sort. Since it probably will not recur, should it be studied? Can Americans living more than 200 years after the event be informed about themselves as a nation by studying this event? Or, consider the Soviet Union today. Given birth by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, it is in fact the product of a revolutionary movement whose roots reached far back in Russian history. By studying that movement and the upheaval of 1917, are there significant things to learn about the Soviets today? In the 1930s the Nazi movement surfaced to disrupt Western society and to occasion one of history's bloodiest wars. No one expects a Nazi revolution to happen again in Germany or elsewhere, though it is always possible that it might. Should that terrible historical event be studied? Everyone hopes for international peace. Is there any profit

to derive from studying the causes of previous wars or the success and failure of peace settlements? They will never occur again in exactly the same way they did in the past. Or, take the case of Britain, the first country to industrialize in the modern world. Can we benefit from a knowledge of what the results of that industrialization were and what policy measures were made in an effort to cope with the problems inherent in the new industrialized order? One could ask hundreds of questions of this type, and their answers surely suggest that history has a purpose for anyone who hopes to be a responsible and informed person, particularly in a democratic society.

The purpose of history involves the significance and particularity of the object studied. Its significance lies in the historian's conviction that something selected from the past for study has an ongoing importance. Its particularity stems from the idea that it investigates things in context, things about particular problems, people, places, and times.

### History and Communication History

Scholars involve themselves in historical investigation for many reasons. Some seek to close gaps in some important segment of the existing historical record. Others aspire to advance a new idea. Whether the aim is to supplement or to supplant previous historical knowledge, they know that they will produce no final answers, for none exist in historical study. The object of the historian's quest is to provide an honest understanding of something in the past based on the best evidence available. The past, of course, is a vast domain; no one can know it all. Serious-minded specialists, each moved by his or her own particular interest, select what amounts to slices of the past to study.

The great variety of history now becomes apparent. Some specialists choose to work within the framework of an established period limited by time and place. One might, for instance, be drawn to a study of nineteenth-century America or to twentieth-century Europe. Others are drawn to national history or to area studies; and yet others to special topics such as reform or industrialization. Biography attracts some; social groups, others. Some incline toward economic studies; others, toward political, diplomatic, religious, or military ones. There are viable historical dimensions to practically every major contemporary entity or institution, and they too attract the historian's attention. All historians pursue special interests of some sort in the past.

Communication history, with its particular focus on mass



communication, is one such specialized study. Nevertheless, the more one inquires into its nature, the more it can be understood as a part of the mainstream of history. In a sense, it is more general than communication studies, which mostly deal with current problems and tend to employ the methodology of the social and behavioral sciences. Communication history can be broadly defined as part of history because its subject matter is integrated into the general currents of history and, as we explained earlier, cannot, with integrity to its subject, be separated from it. Communication history has a natural position in general history and can be considered a part of it.

It is a vast area of study that can accommodate numerous interests. For instance, within its scope fall a great variety of subjects related to the news media in the past. Communication historians are concerned with these media in terms of their content and audience and the various forms they have taken. They are interested also in the development, control, and effects of those media as well as with the people who have influenced their existence. The formation of opinion interests communication historians as well as the circulation and influence that opinion has had in society.

It is, in fact, difficult to place boundaries on communication history. Its study is an invitation to investigate not only the media in the past but also subjects such as publicity, propaganda, public opinion, censorship, and civil liberties. Communication historians are interested also in opinion-policy relationships. Their studies, consequently, deal with many aspects of how people communicated and how communications interacted with society in the past. Therefore, their inquiries have little validity if they concentrate solely on communication media.

Communication history is the pursuit of a certain dimension of the past. It examines something that happened in the past and cannot be understood if separated from the context in which it occurred. Historians interested in this variety of history must inform themselves about "historical time"; they have to acquire a sense of the particular time in the past associated with their inquiry. They must acquire knowledge of the personalities, events, and forces that influenced not only the object of their investigation but also those that influenced the particular time in which it existed. Can one understand figures such as William Cobbett, William Lloyd Garrison, James Gordon Bennett, Edward R. Murrow, or Frank Capra without knowledge of the times in which they lived? The more one appreciates the many dimensions of communication history and the way they connected to so many aspects of the past, the more it becomes clear that communication history has a place in the mainstream of social, economic, cultural, and political history.

Some scholars have recognized this claim for many years. The American historian James Ford Rhodes once wrote: "The story of the secession movement of November and December, 1860, cannot be told with correctness and life without frequent references to the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Charleston Courier*. The *Mercury* especially was an index of opinion and so vivid in its daily chronicle of events that the historian is able to put himself in the place of those ardent South Carolinians and understand their point of view."<sup>11</sup> How many other occurrences of the past can be vivified and given meaning by use of the media as record?

Let us consider just one additional example. It is perhaps the most famous case of its kind, and it demonstrates that to construct the historical record without including a place for the media would grossly distort the record. The case deals with the Spanish-American War. In explaining that war, historians place a special emphasis on the role newspaper sensationalism played in causing the conflict. The newspaper war between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, they reason, helped to cause war between Spain and the United States. Other interpretations of causation notwithstanding, this contention has some merit. To understand it, however, one needs to know a good deal about the nature of the press and the society at that time. Who and what forces were involved in the sensational press? Was "yellow journalism" a thing of the moment or had it been long in coming? Our questions cannot be limited to the press alone, for the press exists in society. Accordingly, we must know something about the public of that time. Why was it so receptive to sensational journalism? Then, there is the factor of government to consider. Did the influence of the sensational press reach into the chambers of political power? If so, can that influence be documented? Once one has answered such questions, then alternate explanations for the cause of the war can be sought and studied in order to place the factor of the press in its proper perspective. To remove that factor from consideration, however, would damage the history of the event under investigation.

Historians are interested in communication history for many reasons. Just as the media today help the public to gain understanding of current issues, so the media of the past enlighten historians about past public problems. Today's media influence the public's perception of the present world. So it was with the media in the past. Media are a part of the past that cannot be removed from it. To some degree, they have always reflected public whim, taste, and opinion,

<sup>11</sup>Lucy Maynard Salmon, *The Newspaper and the Historian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 471.

and to some degree they have shaped public and individual perceptions and opinions about aspects of society too numerous to mention. Have they been a mirror of society, a source of entertainment, a branch of commerce, or a forum for news, opinion, and business? Obviously they have been all of these things, though the mix varies according to time, place, and circumstances. Mass media are essential elements in modern political life. What modern revolutionary movement has neglected them? Or, consider modern democracy. Its history is bound up with the history of the media. In a democratic society journalists have the responsibility to report and interpret news and to watch authority from the perspective of the governed. They exist as an irreplaceable unit in the public debate. Consider how important the media were to the revolutionary mentality that emerged at some point before the start of the American War for Independence. Think of the role the media played in every great issue (expansion, slavery, reform, isolation, entrance into wars, etc.) that has permeated this country's history.

The record of the mass media, consequently, is one of the richest of historical sources, and it deserves the serious attention of historians. In order to study these media as parts of the past, historians must acquire a workable knowledge of their characteristics at a particular time in the past. How were they organized? What type of influence did they have and why? Take the case of one medium, the newspaper. Historians need to know much about a newspaper to understand it as an historical source. Who produced it and how and why? What type of influence did it have and why? Was it known equally for all of its contents? Were there restraints placed upon its opinion, or did that opinion conform to some outside interest? There are, of course, many other questions that can be asked about a newspaper as an historical source or as an object of historical inquiry. Such a medium -- and it is but one among those that attract the attention of communication historians -- must receive the same scrutiny that historians devote to other historical sources and subjects. Historians, however, are not the only group to have a special interest in communication history.

Journalists and other participants in the mass media have a special interest in their professional predecessors. As the distinguished British journalist and writer Sir Linton Andrews contended, there is much for one to learn from the career and lives of key figures in journalism history, even those whose work falls within recent generations. It is important, he said, to know "what made them journalists? What qualities made them excel? What did or do they see as the proper function of the press? Have they expanded its influence? Have they made it more powerful for ensuring the public good?" Once these questions can be answered, he explained,

"the better equipped we shall be to face present challenges in the world of communication."<sup>12</sup> He might have added that one does not have to read far into the history of the twentieth-century media to discover that many of its successful practitioners have themselves had a lively curiosity about their own predecessors.

It stands to reason that communication professionals themselves should have a natural curiosity about the development of that which they are a part. As in any other craft or profession, it is valuable to have a knowledge of how things were done previously in the field, or to have an awareness of problems that once existed (and perhaps still exist) and how they were handled, or some grasp of past successes and failures, or some understanding of how the forces and features of modernization such as technology have influenced its development. Principles and problems, potential and pitfall can all be underscored by such knowledge. At the very least, knowledge of what others have done before helps one to understand what it is possible to do.

The appeal of communication history is obviously many sided and well deserved. Like any other division of historical study, its record goes back into time. In order to comprehend that record, in part or in full, one must also understand the historical setting with which it is associated. If the media have influenced society, they surely have been influenced by society in return. The fact of interaction between media and society has to be one of the fundamentals of communication history. There is, however, another fundamental to grasp. If communication history is to reach its potential and acquire the stature it deserves, it must reach the standards of excellence of any serious historical investigation. In ensuing chapters those standards will be discussed along with many practical matters. They all contribute to the construction of sound history. But first, let us consider how previous historians approached the subject of communication history.

---

<sup>12</sup> Andrews and Taylor, XX.

## Interpretation in History

History is more than the story of what happened in the past. It is not simply an account of certain events occurring on certain dates and of certain individuals doing certain things. Dates, names, and places provide little more than the raw data for history. Anytime we advance beyond such basic details, we soon realize that history well researched and effectively told does more than provide chronologies and lists. If we attempt to determine, for example, whether a particular journalist or an event had an impact on American journalism or if we attempt to explain what that impact might have been or the extent of the impact or its value, we immediately find that history is no longer a simple statement of what happened. It has become an attempt to explain what happened.

In that process of explaining, historians have not always shared the same views. One historian might approach a subject from a starting viewpoint that varies either in small or large degree from that of another. Thus, in the nearly two centuries that American historians have been writing about their media's history, they have given accounts that differ widely. One historian might condemn the party press for its partisanship, while another might praise it for its contributions to the American political system. One historian might rebuke the media for propaganda during World War II, while another might salute them for contributing to Allied victory. Such differences can frustrate students who wish to have the "true" history of communication, but they actually provide one of the most valuable features of historical study. Differing perspectives among historians result in pictures and explanations that are multi-dimensional rather than flat, multi-colored rather than

monotone.

The most valuable historical writing is always interpretive. Every time a historian selects material or advances a generalization based on that material, interpretation occurs. Every time one attempts to explain causation or to probe into the nature of change, one interprets. Without interpretation, historical study remains superficial, with no probing beneath the surface of facts to determine why events occurred and why people acted as they did. With no attempt to determine why, historical study provides mere chronology. Too frequently, the study of history is approached with the attitude that the past is a static story of facts, names, dates, and other details -- a study of "how things were" -- rather than a dynamic, changing story. The truth is that the story of communication history is an ever-changing one. One purpose of good history is to provide understanding of change. That it does through interpretation. It is the need for interpretation that accounts for the periodic rewriting of various episodes in history. As the present views and perspectives on communication change, so also do our understanding and explanations of communication history. The notion that history needs no rewriting is held only by those people who believe that the world does not change or that historical study can determine the precise truth. It cannot.

Yet, interpretation should not be predetermined. The good historian does not set out with a theory and marshal facts to fit the theory. The best history is always a search for truth. As facts are gathered to find the truth, they may lead to a theory, but theory should never be used to determine facts. Interpretation arises implicitly from the gathered facts. Spurious historians ask how they might select and interpret facts to fit their theory. The result is, at best, didactic history. It offers little benefit except to those historians who have a particular view to propound. The historian should gather all the relevant facts and then ask what conclusions may be drawn from them.

Differing interpretations of communication history have arisen for three primary reasons. The most important is that historians' attitudes have been influenced by the conditions and beliefs of the times in which they wrote. Successive generations of historians have tended to view the past in terms of the ideas of their own time. Every generation believes that it knows more than the previous generation, that it has a more penetrating and accurate view than the generation that preceded it. Every generation is influenced by events and conditions of its own time. The existing conditions of mass communication -- not to mention politics, social situations, economics, and a multitude of other aspects of the surrounding culture -- have helped determine the ways historians have looked at the

past. In effect, the way in which historians explain history reflects, to some degree the culture of their own times. No historian is immune to those conditions that shape his or her own day. At the same time, historians within the same generation have brought to their study different beliefs and assumptions. Therefore, historians writing at the same time have taken the same body of material and have come to differing conclusions about the past.

The second reason is that new material, new facts, from the past is being discovered constantly. One would think that generations of study of the press in the American Revolution would have exhausted the resources, but then an historian turns up letters in a depository heretofore overlooked. Or a student of the penny press of the 1830s discovers copies of a newspaper long forgotten. Or another scholar examines radio program transcripts in a university archives never before seen by historians. Or, as so often happens, a historian thoroughly reads the files of a newspaper taken for granted by others and provides a whole new insight into the paper and its era. The new information makes possible a fuller insight than has been possible before and sometimes provides a startling new explanation that turns on head long-held assumptions.

② The third reason for new interpretations is the availability of new research tools for examining the past. A new generation of scholars may be trained in new techniques of inquiry. In the 1970s, for instance, many historians began to use quantitative methods in their studies as well as computer technology as it became available. They borrowed both methods and theories from social scientists and, to some extent, from historians in other countries and applied them where feasible in their investigations. As a result, historians today have heightened awareness of methodological options of inquiry, and their studies reflect that diversity.

Thus, the idea that history is a static account of dead details from the past is made meaningless. Historians disprove that idea in all they do. They not only use the skills of interpretation in constructing all the elements in their inquiries, but they are also aware of the broader interpretations into which communication historians can be grouped. Awareness of these schools of history is essential. It helps historians to delineate the changing nature of their subject, to grasp the reasons that explain that change, and to respond to the broad achievement of previous scholars according to the dictates of their own judgment.

Based on their perspectives or interpretations, communication historians may be grouped into several schools. By understanding these schools, the student not only may recognize why historians present such diverse explanations of the past; he or she may draw from the various schools those perspectives that seem best to explain

history, apply them to one's own study, and thereby provide a fuller, deeper explanation in one's work.

Generally speaking, interpretation of mass communication history in the United States has gone through six broad stages: Nationalist, Romantic, Developmental, Progressive, Consensus, and Cultural. Although a handful of historians have written within Marxist and other schools, historians in the first six have provided by far the most extensive work.

### The Nationalist School

The historians of the early nineteenth century, writing during an era in which pride in American progress and achievements was popular, took a nationalistic approach and explained the mass media, primarily newspapers, and journalists as influential and important patriotic figures who contributed to the progress of America and her institutions. These Nationalist historians looked on the history of America as the advancing revelation of the nation's leadership role in mankind's improvement. To them, America was the nation chosen to lead the world to the fulfillment of mankind's destiny: greater and greater freedom and liberty.

Influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on natural rights and progress and the people's role in determining their government, these historians displayed a particular interest in the subject of freedom of the press. Working within a framework of the unfolding advance of mankind and its social and governmental institutions, they attempted to reveal the progress of freedom of the press within an overall story of the developing liberty of mankind and, in particular, of the American people. Most Nationalist historians wrote about freedom of the press in terms of the political splits of early America, between colonists and British authorities and between Patriots and Tories. Their attention centered on the colonial and revolutionary periods, when Americans had struggled to free themselves from oppressive British rule, and they virtually ignored the early years of American independence. Fulfillment of human freedom, they believed (unlike many historians in the twentieth century), had been accomplished with the separation from England. The sides in the conflict over freedom were pictured as those who advocated the natural rights of liberty and those who supported authoritarian government.

Isaiah Thomas, America's first journalism historian, expressed the Nationalist interpretation of the struggle in classic Enlightenment terms. Thomas had been a leading Patriot printer during the Revolution. In *History of Printing in America*

published in 1810, he explained that "the rulers in the colonies of Virginia in the seventeenth century judged it best not to permit public schools, nor to allow the use of the press and thus, by keeping the people in ignorance, they thought to render them more obedient to the laws, and to prevent them from libelling the government, and to impede the growth of heresy, &c."<sup>1</sup> Like Thomas, most other Nationalist historians viewed the history of the press in terms of America's struggle for freedom and the advance of mankind against repressive British authority. They identified the great forces in that history as liberty, progress, and the American nation.

### The Romantic School

While the Nationalist interpretation continued strong throughout the nineteenth century, it was altered beginning in the 1830s by the influence of Romanticism. Romantic historians shared their predecessors' belief in the progress of mankind, in liberty as the ultimate goal of history, and in America's special role in leading the world to that goal. The press, they believed, was one of the institutions of primary importance in mankind's advance, and they considered America as the high point in the development of civilization. But they added a new flavor to history. Most Romantic historians were men of leisure who had spare time to pursue historical study as an avocation, men of the professional classes, or journalists who had an inclination toward historical study. Frequently, they had known their subjects or had participated in the episodes about which they wrote. Personal reminiscences therefore often served as the basis for their histories.

While the Romantic historians usually were amateurs, many attained a high degree of chronological accuracy and literary quality. The Romantic movement in the arts -- with its emphasis on pictorial descriptions and narrative, its fascination with the past, and its accentuation of the role of great men in history -- greatly influenced these historians. They thought of history as one of the literary arts, and they mainly wrote narrative biographies in a romantic style designed to appeal to larger audiences.

Romantic historians frequently told the history of the press against the panorama of politics. Primarily from New England and New York, they took as their predominant subject printers and editors from those same regions and described them as men larger than life who imprinted their newspapers with their own characters.

Since Romantic historians typically were gentlemen from socially and politically elite families, they especially favored printers and editors who respected established values and traditions. Tending to be conservative in politics, they reacted negatively to the shift away from the aristocrats' participation in government which had occurred with Thomas Jefferson's and Andrew Jackson's elections to the presidency. As a result, they tended to treat conservative printers and editors (Federalists and Whigs) favorably, while blaming Jeffersonian Republicans and Jacksonian Democrats for the exclusion of men of higher principles from public office and for their replacement by men who pandered to the desires of the mass public.

The Romantic interpretation was readily apparent in the work of Joseph T. Buckingham. A journalist who, among other achievements, founded the *Boston Courier*, a pro-Whig newspaper, in 1824, he had worked with many of the journalists about whom he wrote and was intimately acquainted with many of the episodes. One of the earliest histories of the American press, Buckingham's *Specimens of Newspaper Literature: With Personal Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Reminiscences*, published in 1850, combined narrative history with autobiography. Composed primarily of pleasant and anecdotal descriptive biographies, it emphasized journalists whom Buckingham had known and extracts from their papers, most of which were in New England.

Romantic historians' predilection for respectability was typified by another major work of the mid-nineteenth century, James Parton's *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. Published in 1864, it provided one of the earliest biographies of an American journalist. Sometimes called the father of American biography, Parton drew a revealing contrast between Benjamin Franklin and his older brother, James. He especially praised Ben's competence as a businessman, editor, and owner of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and his success in making it the best newspaper in colonial America. His achievement was based on his talent and respectability. But for his brother James, Parton had few kind words, in contrast with most twentieth-century historians, who have praised James for his defense of freedom of the press against encroachments by the political and religious establishments. Parton was a critic of radical democratic movements in American history and thus was not inclined to agree with James' attitudes and practices. He criticized James' *New-England Courant* for being the first American newspaper based on sensationalism and roundly condemned it for its sarcasm and ridicule of civil and religious authorities. By the time Parton's biography appeared, however, a change was taking place in American journalism, and with it a change in historical interpretation.

<sup>1</sup>Isaiah Thomas, *History of Printing in America* (Worcester, Mass., 1810), 7.

## The Developmental School

In 1833 Benjamin Day had founded the *New York Sun*, America's first successful general-interest penny newspaper. It created a revolution in journalism, in attitudes about what the nature of newspapers should be, and in historians' views about communication history. From this changed perspective emerged what came to be the predominant, most pervasive, and longest-lived approach to communication history, the Developmental interpretation. Beginning with the publication in 1873 of Frederic Hudson's *Journalism in the United States, from 1690 to 1872*, the Developmental interpretation has provided the underlying assumptions of most histories of American mass media and continues today as the most commonly held perspective.

It is based on the concept of the professional development of the press, viewing the history of journalism as the continuing evolution of journalistic practices and standards. While other interpretations have been strong at various times, the concept of the developmental progress of the media has been persistent since the last decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to working as an independent interpretation, it also has operated in combination with the other interpretations and frequently served as an underlying assumption of historians in the other schools. Thus, Nationalist historians, for example, thought of the development of the press as an aspect of the progress of mankind, while Progressive historians in the twentieth century evaluated the press as it developed as an instrument of reform. In its purest form, however, the Developmental interpretation has been based on the concept of the professional, journalistic progress of the press. How the press became a journalistic instrument was the primary concern of Developmental historians. Like other historians, they tended to view the past in terms of the present, but they attempted to explain and evaluate history by its contributions to present journalistic standards.

Hudson's *Journalism in the United States* was the first survey history of American journalism written after the appearance of the penny press in the 1830s, and in its interpretive basis it provided the approach used by most later historians. Hudson had been managing editor of the *New York Herald*, the newspaper which more than any other emphasized news over opinion as the proper function of newspapers and which had been the most successful mass newspaper in American history. Assuming that such characteristics were the appropriate ones for newspapers, he tended to explain earlier journalism in terms of how it performed in accordance with the successful practices of the *Herald* and how those practices had developed in the past. His Developmental perspective can be made clear by an

examination of his evaluation of the party press, which immediately preceded the penny press in American history.

With his news-oriented background, Hudson evaluated earlier newspapers in terms of how they conformed to the concept of a newspaper as a news medium and a journal popular with the masses of readers and independent of influence by political parties. He concluded that the party press, although important and influential in politics, was primarily political in nature, that it was vituperative, and that the partisan period was a negative one for journalistic development. The primary problem, he said, was that politicians controlled the press and prevented it from developing professional standards. Newspapers had been necessary to build a solid political foundation for the nation, but journalism "had not yet become a profession." The press "was a power with the people," but it ultimately failed because "it was managed by ambitious political chiefs, as armies are maneuvered by their generals." During the party period, Hudson admitted, the press had progressed in some areas, but "its views and opinions on public affairs were the inspiration of politicians and statesmen....Editors...were bound to party. Independence of opinion and expression, outside of party, was political and financial ruin." Despite such problems in journalism, Hudson could see with the historian's hindsight that the penny press would emerge soon, and thus he observed that "the world was moving, and its soul was marching on."<sup>2</sup>

As mass communication began to professionalize in the late 1800s, interest in its history began to grow. As a result, historical studies increased in number. Although differing on a few particulars, they largely echoed Hudson's themes. Most later historians came out of the mass communication professions, and many in the twentieth century taught in professionally oriented college programs in journalism, broadcasting, and advertising. Because of their professional perspective, they considered the penny press, with its emphasis on news, mass appeal, and political autonomy, to have been the origin of the "modern journalism" of their own times. They believed the professional standards that had developed over time to be the appropriate and proper ones for the media, and they began to apply even more universally the concept of professional progress in the history of communication.

The Developmental interpretation had a pervasive impact on historical assumptions because most textbooks for college courses in communication history were cast in terms of the professional

<sup>2</sup>Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States...* (New York: Harper and Row, 1873), 142.



framework. With textbooks such as James Melvin Lee's *History of American Journalism*, published in 1917, and Willard G. Bleyer's *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism*, published a decade later (1927), the Developmental interpretation became entrenched in historical thinking. Studied by generations of students and future historians, they tended to reinforce the explanation that the history of American mass communication was the story of how the media evolved in their professional characteristics. Developmental historians focused often on determining the origins of media practices and on the individuals who had made contributions to media progress. Textbooks and other studies, being generally positive about the professions in mass communication, also exercised a major importance by providing a favorable view of the American media and reinforcing a pro-media outlook among communication students and professionals.

Although Bleyer's was the most widely used of the early textbooks, it was superseded by Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism; A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 150 Years: 1690 to 1940*. Through its three editions (1941, 1950, and 1962) Mott's book provided the basis for the historical study by most students for four decades. The foremost practitioner of the Developmental interpretation, Mott primarily concerned his study with documenting the progress of journalism and its practices. The concept of progress provided the thematic structure for Mott's entire narrative, and he established it with his treatment of America's earliest newspapers. Viewing the past as the story of how journalism had reached its modern state, he entitled his narrative of the colonial press "The Beginners, 1690-1765." The chapter illustrates the essence of the Developmental interpretation.

Mott detailed such topics as the earlier European patterns upon which American publications were based, pamphlets and other forerunners of the newspaper, and early episodes involving freedom of the press. Among the journalistic "firsts" he chronicled were the first American newspaper, Benjamin Harris' *Publick Occurrences; Both Foreign and Domestick*; "the first continuous American newspaper," John Campbell's *Boston News-Letter*; and the appearance of entertainment and the first American newspaper crusade, both in James Franklin's *New-England Courant*. To these were added narratives of such items as the "first American newspaper consolidation," the "first serial story in an American newspaper," the "first titled series in an American paper," the first illustration, and so on.

While Mott appreciated the fact that colonial newspapers operated under journalistically unsophisticated conditions, he tended to explain the early press in terms of later standards. Thus,

he observed that the *Boston News-Letter*, because of its content and writing style, "seems very unexciting to a modern reader" and that Campbell's "theory of the presentation of foreign news [emphasizing an organized historical record over recency] gave little consideration to timeliness." Methods of newsgathering, page appearance, the job of the editor, the absence of editorial pages, and other such aspects of the colonial press -- Mott explained all with an implicit comparison to later practices.

In general, Mott evaluated the colonial press as relatively crude by twentieth-century standards, but found satisfaction in the fact that it had provided a solid foundation for journalistic practices and achievements that were to come later. While he found much lacking in the toddler attitudes and performance of many early printer-editors, he believed some -- such as James Franklin with his attempt to free the press from control by authorities, Benjamin Franklin with his several innovations, and the Bradford family of Pennsylvania with their high standards for printing and their sense of the role of the press -- had recognized what journalism was supposed to be and do and had made contributions to the quality and development of the American press.<sup>3</sup>

Mott's work provided the apex of the Developmental school, and most later historians labored in his long shadow. To a large extent, they provided elaboration or extension of his ideas. After World War II, several events contributed to the expansion of the professional concept of the news media as entities which ideally should be autonomous from outside authority and independent of other parts of society. Influenced much by the media's role in such episodes as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate political scandal, Developmental historians -- while retaining the concept of professional progress -- sometimes viewed history as a clash between the media and established institutions such as government, religion, the military, big business, and the white racial majority. Thus, whereas Progressive historians, for example, had emphasized the media as a means of working within society to achieve social and political change, Developmental historians tended to emphasize such historical trends as press freedom and media-government relations in which the media confronted other units of society. In the view toward nationalism the newer Developmental historians differed markedly from their predecessors. Earlier historians had viewed nationalism positively and the media as contributors to it; recent historians sometimes seemed

<sup>3</sup>The quoted material is taken from Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism...* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 3-70.



anti-nationalist. The devotion of the media, they suggested, should be to journalistic ideals rather than to a nation. Thus, they showed considerable concern with such issues as the media's autonomy in the area of national security, press freedom during wartime, and the media as propaganda agents for governmental activities.

### The Progressive School

Contrasting with the Developmental interpretations, a fourth school -- that of Progressive history -- emerged around 1910. In place of the Developmental school's professional progress explanation of history, Progressive historians substituted a concept of ideological conflict. The Progressive school grew, in part, out of a change that had taken place in the study of American history in the late 1800s. Professional historians began to replace the gentlemen historians and amateurs; and, under the impact of discoveries in the natural sciences, they began to think of the study of history as a science rather than as an art. While professional journalists continued to write many of the historical works, many communication historians in the early 1900s were educators from the emerging departments of journalism at various universities. Because American universities opened their doors to everyone, the new professional historians came from various levels of society. Representing various geographic regions, they began to shift some of the emphasis away from journalism in New York and New England to that in other sections of the country.

Influenced by the ideas of such Progressive American historians as Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, Claude Bowers, and Vernon L. Parrington, many reform-oriented communication historians began to view the past as a struggle in which editors, publishers, and reporters were pitted on the side of freedom, liberty, civil reform, democracy, and equality against the powerful forces of wealth and class. They believed the primary purpose of the media was to crusade for liberal social and economic causes, to fight on the side of the masses of common, working people against the entrenched interests in American business and government. The fulfillment of the American ideal required a struggle against those individuals and groups which had blocked the achievement of a fully democratic system. Progressive historians often placed the conflict in economic terms, with the wealthy class attempting to control the media for its own use. Progressive historians, as earlier historians had done, viewed history as an evolutionary progression to better conditions. They thought in ideological terms, perceiving the media as an influential force in helping assure a better future.

Sympathetic with the goals of the Progressive reformers of the early twentieth century, these historians wrote in such a way as to show the media as tools for social change, progress, and democracy. They explained the past in cycles of democratic and journalistic advance, which occurred when the media improved in serving the masses in America. They praised journalists and episodes that had contributed to greater democracy, while criticizing those favoring an elitist society and political system.

While Progressive historians reevaluated every major period in American communication history, works by three historians in the 1920s and 1930s epitomized their ideological approach and their use of history to change conditions of their own time. The first was Oswald Garrison Villard. Deploring what he considered to be crass materialism on the part of most of the American press, he argued that the best newspapers were those that led the fight for improved social conditions. In *Some Newspapers and Newspapermen*, published in 1923, he claimed that newspapers too often had deserted their leadership role in molding public opinion and instead appealed to public tastes in scandal, racial hatred, and social animosities -- all because owners thought the best way to make money was to appeal to public passions. He described, for example, Adolph Ochs' New York Times as racist and a promoter of discriminatory separation between blacks and whites. In *The Disappearing Daily*, published in 1944 as a revision of his earlier book, Villard argued that fighting crusades was more important than providing news, and he scorned the trend toward pictures, features, and a generally soft approach to news. Believing that the role of the media was to keep a wary eye on the government in order to protect the public, he claimed that too few newspapers championed enough causes. The problem with American journalism, he concluded, was that newspapers treasured profit more than principle.

The second historian, George Seldes, in two major works in the 1930s, attacked wealthy owners' self-serving use of their newspapers. In *Freedom of the Press*, published in 1935, he argued that big business' control of the media was destroying press freedom. A big-business, big-money oligarchy owned and manipulated the American press, he claimed, and its intent was to destroy the democratic foundation of the American political system. No section of journalism went untouched. Advertisers, public utilities, big business in general, and propagandists colored and suppressed the news and corrupted both the media and the public. The Associated Press, Seldes declared, always sided with authority, no matter how corrupt, while the New York Times spoke without exception for the conservative status quo, and William Randolph Hearst advocated privilege and possessed no social conscience. Seldes denounced the

media for their opposition -- despite the great need for social reforms -- to the rights of organized labor, support of child labor for purely financial reasons, emphasis on scandal, invasion of privacy, interference with trial by jury, and critical treatment of the American Newspaper Guild (the reporters' labor union). When a majority of American newspapers published propaganda, he concluded, simply because to do so was profitable, it was impossible to have freedom of the press and unconcealed truth. Seldes followed his first work with *Lords of the Press* in 1938. Employing the same theme of the pernicious effect of wealthy moneymakers' ownership, he argued that the media typically were ultra-conservative and failed to ensure fair news treatment of labor or social and economic reforms.

One of the most trenchant Progressive attacks on the conservative media came from Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior under Franklin Roosevelt and director of the Public Works Administration. In the 1939 book *America's House of Lords*, a caustic criticism of publishers who opposed Roosevelt's New Deal, Ickes argued that the shortcomings of the press resulted from modern publishers being businessmen more interested in running their newspapers as business enterprises than journals of news. Publishers, he said, imparted to their papers an upperclass outlook and sought to make them profit-seeking businesses rather than public-spirited agencies concerned with social good. As a result, the emphasis on business endangered the free press required by a democracy and led to a lack of fairness in newspaper pages, unreliability, suppression of information, and fabrication of news.

### The Consensus School

While the Progressive interpretation greatly influenced the study of American history in the first half of the twentieth century, the fact that America faced major crises during that same period encouraged a diametrically opposing interpretation. With the nation confronting external threats from world war and domestic problems caused by the Great Depression, a number of historians sought to present a picture of America and its mass media that was characterized by basic agreement and unity. These Consensus historians reasoned that America's past was marked more by general agreement than by conflict and that Americans, rather than sundered by class differences, tended to be more united than divided. While Americans from time to time might disagree on certain issues, their disagreements took place within a larger framework of agreement on underlying principles -- such as a belief in

democracy, human freedom, and constitutional government -- that overshadowed their differences. Generally, Consensus historians claimed that American history was not marked by extreme differences among groups; and in their hands the Progressives' villains such as industrialists, businessmen, and media owners were molded into less evil people who made constructive contributions to America, while Progressives' heroes such as reformers and the labor press were painted as less idealistic and more egocentered.

Forsaking the critical attitude that had characterized much Progressive writing, Consensus historians tended to emphasize the achievements of the United States and its mass media, with the intent of showing a national unity among Americans. The Consensus outlook had a major impact on the interpretation of numerous aspects of communication history. It explained the American Revolution and the press' role in it, for example, as democratic rather than economic or social, as Progressive historians had argued. It viewed the media's role in America's entry into World Wars I and II in terms of the general agreement among Americans that involvement was necessary. Consensus historians viewed the media's performance during the World Wars positively, crediting the media and government for providing adequate information in a way that helped make possible the defeat of democracy's enemies. They praised media owners, whom Progressives had castigated for their conservatism, as entrepreneurs who had made the American media system into the freest and most effective in the world. In these explanations as in others, Consensus historians generally approached communication history from the viewpoint that the media should work with the public and government to solve problems rather than create divisions by emphasizing problems and conflicts.

The foremost advocate of this interpretation was Bernard Bailyn. He expounded the argument first in his 1965 work *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* and then elaborated it in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, the 1967 winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for history. Pamphlets provided the most important forum for the expression of opinion during the revolutionary period, according to Bailyn. They revealed that the American Revolution, rather than being a class struggle, was above all else an ideological, constitutional, and political struggle. Colonial leaders feared that a sinister conspiracy had developed in England to deprive citizens of the British empire of their long-established liberties. This fear lay at the base of the views expressed in the pamphlets. The ideas in the pamphlets then became the determinants in the history of the revolutionary period by causing colonists to change their beliefs and attitudes. These ideas challenged British authority and argued that "a better world than

had ever been known could be built where authority was distrusted and held in constant scrutiny; where the status of men flowed from their achievements and from their personal qualities, not from distinction ascribed to them at birth; and where the use of power over the lives of men was jealously guarded and severely restricted."<sup>4</sup>

The Consensus viewpoint tended to be especially strong at those times when the United States faced grave dangers. Thus, a number of studies of the media during World War I, for example, appeared in the years surrounding World War II. Consensus historians believed that the media should aid in defeating the threats and solving the problems faced by the nation. To them, history revealed that the media had performed best when they contributed to national unity. They believed that the media's endorsement of America's entry into both World War I and II had been responsible and reflected the consensus of the American people and that the proper role of the media during the wars was to support the aims of the nation. Against the Progressive argument that propagandists, profiteers, and reactionary publishers misled the public and led America into the wars, Consensus historians declared that the position of the media mirrored the opinions of the majority of the American public and that the enormity of the threat from America's and democracy's enemies fully justified media support of the war effort.

Consensus historians also broke sharply with the views of Progressive and recent Developmental historians on the issues of freedom of the press and government control over information. While other historians sometimes argued that freedom of the press should be absolute or that cooperation of the conservative media with government posed the danger of compromising liberal, honest journalism, Consensus historians believed absolute freedom and independence of the media could result in an irresponsible journalism that ultimately could endanger the nation and the democratic system that made press freedom possible. To merit freedom, Consensus historians argued, the media must perform responsibly in relation to the rest of the society, with the welfare of the nation as a whole rather than of the media alone of primary importance. This view led Consensus historians to the natural conclusion that restrictions on media freedom during wartime may be acceptable and that such restrictions -- because of the circumstances under which they are implemented -- do not abandon the concept of freedom in a democratic philosophy.

<sup>4</sup>The quoted material is taken from Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), "Introduction."

Similar to the Consensus interpretation -- indeed, sometimes classified as part of it -- has been the Neo-conservative approach to history. Beginning in the 1920s, it provided an abrupt departure from the interpretation of Progressive and some Developmental historians. Its reinterpretation has been most evident in a number of biographies of media owners. Progressive historians had portrayed owners as selfish, conservative profiteers. Neo-conservative historians argued that owners often had made lasting constructive contributions to the media, and that they symbolized some of the fundamental positive aspects of the American character. Whereas Progressive historians had viewed most owners with suspicion, Neo-conservative historians described them as individuals of high principle.

Although the appellation "Neo-conservative" may be applied appropriately to this approach, it also may be thought of in many respects as a "business history" school. Following the leadership of scholars in the prestigious Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration in the 1920s, business historians developed their own approaches to explain American industrial history. Those historians who studied the mass media argued that owners were not predatory profit seekers but farsighted, thoughtful entrepreneurs whose contributions to the American media system were considerable. Owners' goals were not simply to accumulate money but to bring new efficient methods of management to the media industries and in the process to serve better the information needs of the American public. Business historians also rejected the Progressive critique of media owners as enemies of democracy and freedom. They argued instead that owners, by providing efficiency and larger operations, gave America the best media system in the world and thereby actually contributed to greater democracy and freedom.

The most highly acclaimed work from these historians was Gerald Johnson's *An Honorable Titan*, published in 1946, a biography of Adolph Ochs, publisher of the *New York Times*. Ochs, Johnson said, was one of the financial giants of the late 1800s who had so much to do with making industrial America what it is. Unlike many of the industrialists who were materialists and rogues, however, Ochs was an honorable businessman committed to the ideal of the newspaper as a public institution: impersonal, reliable, responsible, and devoted primarily to serving the public with news. Daring and honest, he made the *Times* successful through faith in traditional values, hard work, common sense, and self-reliance. Believing journalism's first obligation was to inform the public, he refused to be influenced by advertisers and maintained a low editorial profile. His journalistic career exemplified principle, and the history of the *Times* under his direction provided a story of

advancing journalism. Ochs, Johnson wrote, broke with the personal journalism of the past, while shunning the sensational techniques of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. In emphasizing serious news, rather than sensationalism or opinion, he adapted the *Times* to conditions of his era and of the future and thus laid the foundation of modern quality journalism: As the *Times* quickly acquired a reputation for excellence, its owner gained a reputation for honor, character, and integrity.

### The Cultural School

The sixth major school of interpretation -- that of Cultural history -- gave little attention to any such ideology, neither conservative nor liberal, its fundamental premise being that the media operated in a close interrelationship with their environment. The major works in the Cultural school were written by university professors trained in communication history and often in communication and behavioral sciences. The impetus for the Cultural interpretation may be traced to a work on urban sociology by Robert E. Park, one of the members of the prestigious school of sociology at the University of Chicago. In "The Natural History of the Newspaper," published in 1925, Park argued that the evolution of American journalism resulted from its interaction with the surrounding culture. The press, he said, was "the outcome of a historic process in which many individuals participated without foreseeing what the ultimate product of their labors was to be. The newspaper, like the modern city, is not wholly a rational product. No one sought to make it just what it is. In spite of all the efforts of individual men and generations of men to control it and make it something after their own heart, it has continued to grow and change in its own incalculable ways."<sup>5</sup> The primary factors in determining the nature of the newspaper, Park stated, were the conditions of the society and the system in which the press operated.

While some historians in other schools had attempted to explain the media as institutions somewhat separate from society, Cultural historians considered the media as a part of society and therefore influenced by various factors outside the media themselves. Thus, such questions as what factors accounted for the founding of newspapers and radio stations and under what

---

<sup>5</sup>Robert Park, "The Natural History of the Newspaper," in Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Robert D. McKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 88.