

Historiography

in Mass Communication



Volume 2 (2016). Number 7

Historiography in Mass Communication

Editor

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Editorial Purpose

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

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Essays

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

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

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

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

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Kobre Award Interview: David Abrahamson



Abrahamson

David Abrahamson received the American Journalism Historians Association's Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2013. He is the Charles Deering Professor of Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical*, editor of *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*, and co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research*. He is the general editor of the Northwestern University Press "Visions of the American Press" series. Along with the Kobre Award, he has received the AEJMC Magazine Division's Educator of the Year Award (2011).

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

Abrahamson: I was raised in Annapolis, Maryland, by immigrant parents — my father, a Classics professor at St. John's College; my mother, a physician in general practice. It was clear to me, even as a young child, that the household ethos was largely defined by their *Mitteleuropa* (German/Swiss/Austrian/Czech) cultural roots. A key element of this was a profound respect for formal education, and the dinner-table discourse — often enlivened by my parents' colleagues or students — always reinforced the centrality of learning in a life well-lived. As newcomers in an adopted land, however, my parents also realized that they would have to embrace less formal forms of learning, specifically self-

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Abrahamson

education through the popular media. As a result, the daily newspaper ceremony (Annapolis's *Evening Capital*, which apocryphally claimed an 18th-Century founding) and the weekend perusal of stacks of popular magazines were treasured family rituals of exploration. With these inferred influences as a starting point, an undergraduate degree in history from Johns Hopkins University, then two years in the service and then a master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism led to my career as a magazine editor and writer.

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

Abrahamson: In the 1970s, I served as the managing editor of *American Boating*, editor of *AutoWeek* and managing editor of *Car and Driver*. Looking to Harold Hayes's *Esquire* for inspiration, *Car and Driver* tried to engage the automobile not as an object of devotion but as a social and cultural phenomenon worthy of serious journalism. After a number of years as an editor, however, the desire to write full-time asserted itself ("Create rather than process," the voice said). For almost two decades thereafter, I contributed articles to a variety of national publications (e.g. *The New York Times Magazine*, *New York Science*, *Oceans*, etc.). In addition, I had an active editorial consultancy, assisting publications with start-ups and editorial workshops. Clients included many of the major magazine publishing firms, and in some instances, I served as editorial director for substantial new projects.

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

Abrahamson: Though I have always conceived of the role of an editor as teacher, my formal involvement with the academy began in the early 1980s when I was invited to teach writing and editing workshops for an

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affiliate of the University of New Hampshire. Subsequent teaching positions included adjunct professorships in the New York University's Departments of Journalism, History and its Center for Publishing, as well as adjunct lectureships at New York's Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts. A growing engagement with teaching and research led to a series of career choices. At age 42, I enrolled in the doctoral program in American Civilization at New York University, passed my qualifying exams in Journalism, Culture and Communication and American History, completed my dissertation and was awarded my Ph.D. in 1992. I joined the full-time faculty of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism in August 1994. I have taught the following courses: Literary Journalism, Magazine Publishing, Magazine Writing, Magazine Editing, Magazine Editing in an International Context, and American History.

Q: Tell us about your background in history — When did you first get interested in historical research? How did your education prepare you to be a historian?

Abrahamson: This may sound terribly pedestrian, but as an adolescent I think it is safe to say that I read at least 50 of the “Landmark” books on American history. I did not, of course, realize how chauvinistic, ethnocentric and incomplete the narratives were; indeed, it is hard to imagine more tainted, bowdlerized versions of American history. But I suppose they were a perfect answer to the historical appetites of a 12-year-old. Becoming a history major as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University probably was an important turning point. I am not certain about the institutional background, but in retrospect it is clear that Hopkins in the mid-1960s embarked on a serious effort to establish a prominent history department. The country's best history programs were raided, and the university succeeded in attracting David Herbert

Abrahamson

Donald, Alfred Chandler, Stephen Ambrose, Frederick Lane, and Richard Slusser. Similar attention was paid to a History of Science Department that also featured prominent scholars. Now I have to confess that all of this scholarly quality was pretty much lost on me at the time. I took the courses, learned a lot and became curious about the possibility of one day becoming a historian, but I have to admit I could have studied harder and learned more. My undergraduate experience as a history major, however, proved to be a good foundation when in my early forties I enrolled in a doctoral program in American Civilization at New York University. As you know, an Am Civ (American Studies) degree is typically a combination of American history, literature and something else. For me the something else was Neil Postman's program in Culture and Communication, which he always infused with a historical perspective.

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

Abrahamson: Perhaps the major influence was Paul Baker, a Gilded Age biographical historian, author of the definitive historical biography of Stanford White (*Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White*) and my dissertation director. His outlook, like many involved in American Studies, was explicitly interdisciplinary. As a result, in my own historical work I have always regarded disciplinary boundaries as lightly guarded frontiers. In the same vein, I have always been moved by the work of Vernon Louis Parrington and his foundational American Studies scholarship. I probably ought to also mention Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, in my view one of the most insightful books on the challenge of historical objectivity. One last aspect of my historical outlook concerns the importance of economic factors in media history. Though definitive microeconomic data is usually rather hard to obtain,

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I think it often influences historical outcomes in ways that are often overlooked.

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

Abrahamson: I have long been most curious about what might be called *sociocultural* history. It might be useful to first declare what this is not: It isn't *social* history, which typically focuses on various aspects of class, nor is it *cultural* history, which often is centered on intellectual history or on the arts. Rather, I like to think of the sociocultural as the historical intersection of both institutions and individuals, in both their working life and avocational pursuits. This is admittedly a fairly broad tent, but it allows for a degree of interdisciplinarity that I think is essential. As for my study subject and period, I have always been drawn to the study of the history of the postwar media. An aside: My reference to *postwar* — that is, World War II — must clearly identify me as an aging Baby Boomer.

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

Abrahamson: Here's a list of books: editor, *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects* (1995); *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (1996); with Marcia Prior-Miller, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form* (2015). I've also done six book chapters and journal articles.

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

Abrahamson

Abrahamson: My most recent book, which I co-edited with Marcia Prior-Miller of Iowa State University, was titled the *Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research* and was published in 2015. It is a scholarly anthology of the last two or three decades of scholarly research on magazines, and much of the scholarship was historical in nature. It was quite rewarding to help pull all this material together into a single — and I believe much-needed — single volume. However, if I consider “most satisfaction,” it would have to be my *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Post-War Periodical*. It documents the change in the magazine ecosystem in the middle of the 20th Century when the industry moved from general-interest to special-interest publications. Using the work of Roland Marchand (rather than Frank Luther Mott) as a template, I tried to replace chronicle with a more interpretive approach. I can only hope that others have judged my attempt successful.

Q: We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the most accomplished people are often the most modest — but if you had to summarize your most important contributions to the field of JMC history, what would they be?

Abrahamson: In 2003 my institution decided to make a major commitment to its university press, and part of that effort included approaching two of the component schools — the Kellogg School of Management and the Medill School of Journalism — to see if they could come up with series for the press to publish. I had the good fortune to be charged by my dean with the project, and with the help of my late colleague Richard Schwarzlose, we came up with a series titled “Visions of the American Press.” It called for 40 to 45 historical volumes, starting with *Aeropagitica* and ending with the rise of the World Wide Web. I believe we are fewer than ten volumes from completing the series, and as its

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general editor I've had the great good fortune to be in a position to help empower others; specifically, my fellow media historians. One can never be sure, but I believe the Medill series has made a significant contribution to the history of journalism and mass communication. Further, I must admit that it has been both a labor of love and incredibly satisfying. I do hope that at least some of the series authors would concur.

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

Abrahamson: One of the larger challenges of being a faculty member in the academy is time management. I suspect that I've done at least a passable job of this over the course of my career, but there is this nagging feeling that I could have been more intellectually productive. I doubt this is a unique feeling, but I do wish that, with a bit more rigorous focus, I had been able to write more.

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

Abrahamson: I have often relied on three inter-related avenues of enquiry in my historical work. The first is to always ask what *really* happened. And *why*. Implied in this is a belief that there is a curtain that always must be drawn aside to reveal the wizard. Second, a focus on the history of media *institutions* can reveal much about the nature of the media product. And lastly, I have a certain philosophical comfort in exploring journalism history using an *ethnographic* approach. It can be argued that journalists are hugely tribal, and their rituals and belief systems say much about their values and purposes.

Abrahamson

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

Abrahamson: I am really impressed by the quality of the current scholarship. I have perhaps a skewed perspective as a result of chairing the AJHA Blanchard Prize Committee for the last two decades. Since the vitality of any organism (or institution) can be measured by its reproductive success, seeing the high quality of all these newly minted Ph.D.s should reassure everyone that media history scholarship is enjoying a Golden Age.

Q: What do you think we in JMC history need to be doing to improve the status of JMC history in (1) JMC education and (2) the wider field of history in general?

Abrahamson: I hate to say this, but I often suspect that we may be on the verge of a genuinely *ahistorical* period. One doesn't need to be dystopian to see evidence of this all around us. We seem to be in an era where the journalism academy — or at least its administrators — are hopelessly enamored with technology and suspicious of any subject not directly related to our students' vocational success. While, for sure, there is an on-going call for historians to mount the barricades, I wonder if we aren't mostly preaching to the choir. I suppose the answer lies in the coming generations of media history scholars. Which means that we seniors must do everything we can to encourage them to find it.

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

Abrahamson: I suspect that much of the course of any academic discipline is determined by the direction provided by its learned society. In

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the case of media history, AJHA is a major actor. The future, therefore, will be determined by the clarity with which professional associations such as AJHA see their role. In a larger frame, the challenges may largely center on the place of the Humanities in the academy. Much of journalism scholarship rushed headlong into what it thought was a safe harbor in social studies. I'm happy to report that media historians have largely avoided the lure of the quantitative paradigms, but if our correct home is the humanities or some version thereof, it would be useful if serious thought were given to the role of humanities, not only in the academy but in society as a whole.

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