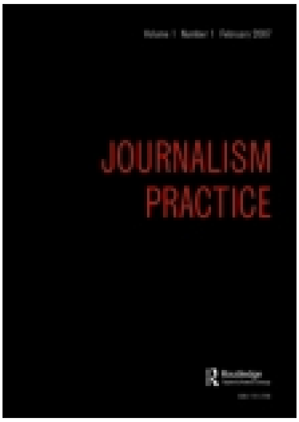

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ARE JOURNALISTS ALWAYS WRONG?

Christopher B. Daly

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ARE JOURNALISTS ALWAYS WRONG?
And are historians always right?

Christopher B. Daly

This piece focuses on a seminar which is currently taught at Boston University which draws on the insights of a conference held at the same university in autumn 2009. The conference brought together leading historians and journalists to explore the ground shared by the disciplines and, it is fair to say, sometimes divides them. The article argues that there is much need for an approach which draws on the strengths of both traditions while remaining aware of the shortcomings of each discipline. Drawing on debates within the historiography of both journalism history and mainstream history, it demonstrates the intellectual underpinning of the seminar which aims to point students to a wider array of the challenges, successes and reversals experienced by journalists and historians. It hopes to provide a method of investigating core questions about the journalism of the past in order to better inform the practice of journalism in the future. Furthermore, it extends this ambition to providing a collegial model for the exploration of other societies or periods of time which can be adapted at other universities.

KEYWORDS error; historiography; history; interdisciplinarity; journalism history

Introduction: Are Journalists Always Wrong?

That is a question that I raise, only half in jest, in a new seminar being offered at Boston University. The seminar represents the fruits of a conference held on our campus in the fall of 2009 in which we brought together panels of accomplished journalists and historians to explore common ground. Much of the discussion focused on shared concerns involving research and writing, since both fields involve the creation of non-fiction texts for an audience of some size.

Part of our discussion extended to teaching. I pursued that discussion with my colleague Bruce Schulman, who is a historian, an Americanist, and chair of the Boston University History Department. The two of us—one a former journalist and current professor of journalism, the other a prominent historian—began to zero in on the question of what happens when journalists "cover" an event or issue, then move on, leaving the field to later waves or generations of historians. We wanted to know what drove the process of historical revision. (We also wanted to know whether any students shared our interests, and we were not sure through the many months of planning.) Eventually, we decided to examine about a dozen major events in US history. First, we looked at each one through the lens of the journalists of the period, those reporters who wrote what has been called "the first rough draft of history" (Shafer, 2010). Next, we looked at those same events through the lenses of the historians who followed and wrote the subsequent drafts. We decided that this might make for a lively course.

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The Institutional Context

At Boston University, the president and provost have embarked on a campaign to encourage interdisciplinary efforts of all kinds. So, based on our joint interest in the issues and on our school's manifest support for inter-disciplinary work, we launched the course for the Fall semester of 2010. Hoping to encourage discussion, we organized it as a seminar, with a target enrollment of 20 students. We allocated 10 seats to the Journalism Department and 10 to the History Department, and we hoped to get a mix of graduate students and advanced undergraduates. In the end, we came very close to those targets.

In the readings we have used and in the discussions in class, we have found a familiar dynamic: journalists report some version of the facts, and then after a few years, historians take charge and set about working over the ground already covered by journalists. Often, after the passage of decades, the original version is hardly recognizable.

A Version of History in the Press

One case in point, among several, involved the war fought in 1898 between the United States and Spain. The first version of this historical episode, now largely discredited by scholars, was written by the newspapers themselves. The headliners in this tale were Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst, his arch-rival and publisher of the *New York Journal*. Their newspapers were initially credited—and blamed—for fomenting the war. By the late 1890s, the two publishers were locked in a furious circulation war, throwing all their ingenuity and resources into devising more and more dramatic, shocking, and scandalous headlines, culminating in a set of practices known as "Yellow Journalism" (Campbell, 2001; Hamilton, 2009).

The publishers' eagerness for war is best illustrated in the year or two preceding the official declaration of war by the United States. Hearst and Pulitzer both sent correspondents to Cuba, literally looking for trouble, which they readily found (Lubow, 1992). Correspondents described the brutal treatment of Cubans by their colonial occupiers, including the use of "concentration camps" to round up and subdue Cubans.

In the summer of 1897, a story unfolded that met the publishers' needs exactly. A young woman named Evangelina Cisneros (invariably described as "raven-haired"), the daughter of a jailed Cuban rebel, was thrown into prison in Havana, on the grounds that she had dared to defend her honor against a rapacious Spanish colonel. Hearst's *Journal* editorially demanded her release—in headlines, news stories, line drawings, and editorials. Hearst personally led a campaign for her release, ordering his correspondents around the United States to call on prominent women to sign a petition to be sent to the Queen Regent of Spain.

From Hearst's point of view, the Cisneros story became more appealing when the Spanish refused to release the young woman. The editor dispatched a reporter named Karl Decker to Cuba, equipped with bribe money, and Decker managed to help the damsel escape to New York, where she could be feted and displayed. That allowed the *Journal* to crow, in decks of headlines arrayed as an inverted pyramid:

MISS EVANGELINA CISNEROS RESCUED BY THE JOURNAL.
An American Newspaper Accomplishes at a Single
Stroke What the Best Efforts of Diplomacy
Failed Utterly to Bring About in
Many Months.

Similarly, when a "visiting" US battleship, the USS *Maine*, blew up in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, both of the Yellow papers jumped to the conclusion that the deed was the fault of Spanish saboteurs. Even over the objections of the ship's captain, Pulitzer and Hearst presented the sinking of the *Maine* as a work of Spanish perfidy and called for the United States to retaliate. Just over two months later, the United States declared war on Spain.

According to the newspapers themselves, the cause of the war was their own coverage of Spanish abuses. In the first draft of this history, the Yellow papers rushed to take credit. A few days after the declaration of war, Hearst's paper even ran the following gloating headline:

HOW DO YOU LIKE THE JOURNAL'S WAR?
(*New York Journal*, May 1, 1989, p. 1)

For decades, that view prevailed. As late as 1947, it was at the heart of the analysis of the war presented by Stanford University historian Thomas A. Bailey in the chapter about 1898 in his book, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, long a standard work. But by the 1960s, that interpretation was coming under attack. One milestone was the publication of the work of the Cornell University historian Walter LaFeber, who argued for an economic interpretation of the motives of US policy-makers in his 1963 study, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898*. Yet another approach emerged in the 1990s from the "culture studies" movement when Kristin L. Hoganson published her study of the war of 1898 titled *Fighting for American Manhood: how gender politics provoked the Spanish–American and Philippine–American wars*. She attributed the war mainly to the perception among that generation of American men of a need to assert their masculinity by going to war. In the later tellings, the activities of the Yellow Press fade or disappear altogether. In this episode, as in many others, the pattern is clear: journalists present one version of events, only to see that draft corrected, revised, or reinterpreted by historians.

Thus, the question persists: Are journalists always wrong?

Are Journalists Always Wrong?

In one, perhaps trivial, sense, the answer is obviously, No. Collectively, journalists gather, check, and disseminate vast amounts of information, ranging from the week's menu in the local school cafeteria, to the closing price of a share of stock, to the outcome of a football game, and on to topics that are more complicated and even interpretive. If one measure of the "rightness" of journalists is factual accuracy, then it must be acknowledged that most of the material in most news stories is right, at least in the sense that it is "not wrong." Most stories, after all, are never corrected because the factual material contained in them was accurate to begin with. They stand *un*-corrected.

Moreover, there is another sense in which journalists are "not wrong." That is, an old newspaper or news broadcast (like almost any text) can be used by a skillful historian as a source of *inadvertent* testimony about all sorts of things. Most journalists do not set out to provide a window into the workings of their society for the benefit of historians who will come along hundreds of years later. Yet, their work can serve that very purpose. For example, any historian who reads newspapers from the eighteenth or nineteenth century quickly realizes that even if the newspapers are inaccurate about this or that detail, they are unerring in their power to reflect the zeitgeist of their era.

Historians of the Press

As several leading historians have emphasized, newspapers reflect their societies even as they shape them. David Paul Nord (2001) has argued that early newspapers played a key role in building communities by giving readers common materials to reflect on. Michael Schudson has shown how newspapers embodied the competitive, commercial spirit of the nineteenth century, until a cultural shift sent many editors in search of a more professional mode in the twentieth century (Schudson, 1978). And James Carey, in defining the social role of newspapers in history, identified them as carriers of "consciousness *in* the past"—as opposed to contemporary historians, who one would expect to have a consciousness *of* the past (1974, emphasis added). "When we study changes in journalism over time, we are grasping a significant portion of the changes that have taken place in modern consciousness since the Enlightenment," Carey wrote in a landmark essay.

Indeed, in this sense, journalists *cannot be* wrong. Readers who skim just a few old stories can quickly see answers not only to the question of what happened on a given day but also to questions the journalist was *not* asking himself or herself:

- What does this society consider important enough to write about and pay for? In the early eighteenth-century newspapers, there is evidence that the topics people would pay to read about included piracy in the Atlantic trading world and legislative proclamations. A century later, news of the captures of runaway slaves swelled in frequency and in poignancy.
- How does the journalist conceive of the basic work product called a story? Early newspapers in America were often discursive, and even epistolary. Later, they became more partisan and eventually more dispassionate and "professional."
- What attitudes are prevalent about topics like race, class, gender? Some subjects, of course, remain so taboo that they never appear in the "public prints."
- What is the quality of the "public sphere" created by the uncoordinated actions of hundreds or thousands of journalists, each following his or her own lights?

These are subjects that every journalist "testifies" about through the work itself, even if the journalist never self-consciously tries to penetrate or analyze the surrounding society. This is one reason why many historians, especially social historians, are so intent on finding newspapers from the era they are studying and so happy when they find them. Wittingly or not, journalists always provide material that reflects *something* about their era.

More common, though, are those instances where journalists *are* wrong in a significant sense. One category of significant journalistic error involves information that has been suppressed. The history of the Cold War, for example, is rife with instances where one or more governments deliberately withheld information for years. The gradual release of

Soviet archives and the sporadic revelations of programs like the Venona Project (Haynes and Klehr, 2000) have given historians access to documents that while sometimes problematic, were not even available to journalists of the 1940s and 1950s. Journalists cannot be blamed for failing to report secrets, but their work in such an area is still incomplete and therefore misleading.

The Russian Revolution: Reassessment of Journalism's Role

Another category of journalistic error involves a more serious failure by journalists themselves—the sin of omission. A dramatic case that we examine in our course involves coverage of the Allied invasion of the new Soviet Union almost 100 years ago. In a little-known but far-reaching episode, US and British leaders decided to invade Russia—their recent ally in the Great War—in 1918 and stayed for almost two years (Knightley, 2004 [1975]). Few Americans ever heard of this mission, nor did they ever find much useful information about Russia in their newspapers during the war and for many years afterward. During the fateful convulsions of the Russian Revolution and its immediate aftermath, American journalists failed their readers—with few exceptions, miserably. Most simply failed to show up; most of the rest willfully misinterpreted the things they saw and heard.

Initially, czarist Russia had been a participant in the Great War, fighting against Germany from the start in 1914. As the war dragged on, however, Russian sentiment turned against the Czar, the entire Romanov family, and the war. In the spring of 1917, the Czar was overthrown, and that fall the Bolsheviks—led by Lenin and Trotsky—toppled the new government and began installing the Communist dictatorship. In the spring of 1918, the new Soviet government in Moscow negotiated a separate peace with Germany, based on the communist view that the war was a brawl among capitalist powers.

American publishers—successful capitalists themselves, for the most part—did not generally consider the Russian Revolution a big enough story to bother covering. As a result, their papers did little to inform Americans about the new society forming in the old Russia—neither the idealism of some of its followers nor the brutality of most of its leaders. The coverage only worsened in the following months. When the Soviets dropped out of the war on February 12, 1918, American newspapers denounced the move as a double-cross to the Allies (who would now have to bear the full brunt of the German military machine on the Western Front), and some went so far as to suspect that the Bolsheviki were really German agents. Aside from the young American John Reed, the correspondent for the socialist magazine *The Masses* and author of the classic book *Ten Days that Shook the World*, there were almost no American correspondents present in Russia to do any first-hand reporting (Reed, 1919). In their absence, American papers felt free to run stories predicting the Communists' imminent demise.

On the whole, the reporting in America about the Russian Revolution and the Allied expedition was so deplorable that it prompted a remarkable study by two young journalists the following year. They epitomized the drive to professionalize American journalism that was then gaining ground in the United States in the new university-level journalism programs at Missouri and Columbia, in the fledgling professional organizations like Sigma Delta Chi (which became the Society of Professional Journalists), and in the emerging trade press. The leaders of this movement, usually well-educated and ambitious young journalists, were dissatisfied with the field's raffish and blue-collar milieu; they wanted to set standards and measure performance. Among them were two of the most ambitious of the new professional journalists, both working at a remarkable young magazine of progressive outlook called *The New Republic*. One of the authors was Charles Merz, a Yale University graduate who later worked as a reporter at the *New York World*, then became the influential editor of the *New York Times* editorial page during World War II and the Cold War. The other author was Walter Lippmann, a Harvard University graduate who went on to become the most prominent and respected US journalist of the middle twentieth century, the country's unofficial foreign minister, a prolific author, and a syndicated whirlwind (Daly, forthcoming, chap 8). In August 1920, they teamed up on an impressive pioneering work of journalism criticism, which appeared as a supplement to *The New Republic* headlined "A Test of the News" (*The New Republic*, August 4, 1920).[1]

Lippmann and Merz conducted a comprehensive analysis of the coverage of Russia from the news pages of the *New York Times*, looking at more than 3000 news stories from March 1917 to March 1920. By design, they ignored the newspaper's editorials and focused exclusively on what should have been factual news accounts. They asked a very simple question: in light of the already known facts, how reliable had the reporting been just a few years earlier? From a reader's point of view, how factual and useful was it? In their judgment, the coverage was almost ludicrously bad.

To illustrate their point, the authors cited case after case where the *Times* correspondents were fanciful at best or deluded at worst. "News reports in 1917, 1918, 1919, and early 1920 that the Soviets are about to collapse, or have collapsed, or will collapse within a few weeks is false news," they pointed out, at a time when the regime was consolidating the power that would endure for most of the century. In the 24 months between November 1917 and November 1919, Lippmann and Merz documented 91 occasions when the *Times* news pages "stated that the Soviets were nearing their rope's end, or had actually reached it" (*The New Republic*, August 4, 1920, p. 10).

Four times Lenin and Trotzky were planning flight. Three times they had already fled. Five times the Soviets were "tottering." Three times their fall was "imminent." Once, desertions in the Red army had reached proportions alarming to the government. Twice Lenin planned retirement; once he had been killed; and three times he was thrown in prison (*The New Republic*, August 4, 1920, pp. 10–11).

Such coverage, which borders on farce, would have been hilariously bad but for one fact: the treatment of Russia by the Wilson administration during this period and the coverage of Russia by American newspapers affected relations between both peoples and their governments for the next 75 years or so. Again and again, the coverage in the *Times* featured wild speculation, blatant wishful thinking, and unsourced diplo-military mumbo-jumbo. In the end, Lippman and Merz concluded the typical US correspondent in Russia was about as useful as "an astrologer or an alchemist" (*The New Republic*, August 4, 1920, p. 42).

At root, Lippmann and Merz found that US reporters were too credulous, too tied to official sources, and too willing to write what they hoped rather than what they saw. "From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster. On the essential questions, the net effect was almost always misleading," they wrote (*The New Republic*, August 4, 1920, p. 3). In the period in 1917 between the overthrow of the Czar in March and the success of the Bolsheviks in November, Lippmann and Merz found a cheerleading quality in the coverage: the new Russian government would stand firm with the Allies against Germany and never seek a separate peace. Even after Lenin and Trotsky came to power in the fall, the optimism kept up—not just in isolated mistakes but in dozens of front-page stories:

> WE CAN DEPEND ON RUSSIA . . .
> (*New York Times*, August 9, 1917, p. 1)

> RUSSIA WILL FIGHT ON . . .
> (*New York Times*, August 15, 1917, p. 1)

In the months following the Bolshevik victory, the collapse of the new regime was likewise predicted—regularly and confidently. Thus, it came as a substantial surprise to American readers when the Bolshevik regime survived and signed a peace treaty with Germany in February 1918.

Allied leaders suddenly sensed a new threat, and the coverage nimbly changed direction. Following the separate peace signed by the Bolshviks, the dominant theme in the US coverage turned to the German Peril. Germany no longer faced an army in the East, so the path was clear for German expansion as far as India or even Japan; besides, without having to fight the Russians any more in the East, Germany could now throw its full might against the British, French and US troops on the Western Front. Logic dictated that the Allies open an Eastern Front themselves, by invading Russia. They did so, in several places. Then came the armistice, and with it any further rationale for positioning foreign troops on Russian soil expired. Just at that moment, however, the coverage revealed a new menace: the Red Peril. Three days after the armistice, the *Times* offered these headlines:

> BOLSHEVISM IS SPREADING IN EUROPE;
> ALL NEUTRAL COUNTRIES NOW
> FEEL THE INFECTION
> (*New York Times*, November 14, 1919)

What had been described not much earlier as a bankrupt system on the verge of collapse was suddenly rampant. With the new threat came a new rationale for the Allied invasion. From three directions, British, American and other troops, linking up with leaders of various White Russian military units, attempted in 1919 and 1920 to march to Moscow and depose Lenin. In each case, the *Times* correspondents foresaw ultimate victory—right up until the moment of defeat.

Part of the reason that the *Times*' correspondents may have been able to sustain such high morale is due to the fact that they were not slogging through Siberia with the counter-revolutionary armies. Far from being "embedded" with the expeditionary forces, most of the correspondents were hundreds, or thousands of miles away. Judging by the datelines on their dispatches, they were quite toasty and safe in Moscow, Paris, and London. For example, Lippmann and Merz cite this story from the spring 1919 offensive, touting the progress of Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak (who, although a Navy man, was not leading the White forces in a land campaign):

> **KOLCHAK PURSUES BROKEN RED ARMY**
> London, March 26 (via Montreal)—The troops of the Kolchak government who pierced the Bolshevist front on a thirty-mile sector on March 11, continue their progress and the position of the Bolsheviki is precarious . . .

Within months, the admiral had fallen back a distance of some 2000 miles. (In fact, there was also a fourth invasion of the Soviet Union—heading south from Archangel—but

Lippmann and Merz simply threw up their hands on that one. The news blackout was so effective about the US Russian Expedition that there simply were not enough stories to analyze.)

Part of the problem, the authors wrote, involved the reporters' methods. Time and again, the sources of the dispatches from Russia were not only unidentified, they were so vague as to be barely worth mentioning: "allied diplomatic circles," "well-informed diplomats" or simply "It is understood . . ." or, perhaps the ultimate, "It is asserted . . ." How could anybody ever check these reports? How could these sources (if they even existed) or the reporters themselves ever be held accountable? Another shortcoming that Lippmann and Merz could have stressed more was the failure of those reporters to get out of the diplomatic swirl and go see things for themselves. A week or two of eye-witness reporting could have cured most of the worst stories. Ultimately, Lippmann and Merz concluded that "the professional standards of journalism are not high enough" and were not being enforced strictly enough.

If only the US correspondents had been as definite about a remedy as they were about the diagnosis. Among the results of such reporting were the chronic misleading of the American people. In the ensuing confusion, the government vacillated between a *laissez-faire* attitude toward Moscow and a secretive invasion. Another result was the poisoning of US–Soviet relations: the Soviet leaders could see for themselves that the capitalist powers had tried to overthrow them, and they could read for themselves that the capitalist newspapers had gone right along with the program.

From this episode it is clear to see that journalists can indeed be wrong at least some of the time. Moreover, when they are wrong in ways that are not trivial, those errors or omissions can in fact be quite consequential. Such errors can distort contemporary perceptions of politics and society in significant ways, and they can put the first few squads of historians on the wrong track. These are the cases that compel the process of revisionism.

On the other hand, it must be noted that there are cases where an original work of journalism resists revision for good reason. One example we consider in our class is that of John Hersey's classic work *Hiroshima* (1946). Is there anything "wrong" with it that must be corrected? Is it missing something important that has subsequently come to light? Has something else happened that makes us put Hiroshima (the event) in a different light? Is it no longer a singular episode of world-historical significance? The answer to all these questions appears to be no. Hersey appears to have been especially well prepared for the assignment. He had spent years working as a journalist for *Time* magazine and for the *New Yorker*, practicing the skills of interviewing and reporting. He was also an accomplished novelist, having won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his wartime novel, *A Bell for Adano*. In *Hiroshima*, he combined meticulous, first-hand reporting with the novelist's techniques of scene-setting and character development to create a masterpiece of non-fiction narrative. The book has been in print continuously for more than 60 years. In 1999, *Hiroshima* was judged the greatest single work of journalism in America in the twentieth century (Barringer, 1999).

Hersey did something quite innovative by the standards of American news-writing. He told the story of the Hiroshima survivors entirely from their point of view. As readers, we experience the day much as if we were standing right behind the survivors, passing through each scene in sequence. Almost never does Hersey break from that narrative perspective to pull back to the typical journalistic perspective of the distant, neutral observer. Instead, he presents a tight-focus, ultimately human answer to the question: what is it like to live through the worst violence the planet has ever known?

It was his use of such literary techniques that prompted some later critics to hail Hersey as the true inventor of the "New Journalism" that burst onto the American scene in the early 1960s (Weingarten, 2005). Hersey showed other journalists that it was possible to use literary techniques while sticking to matters of fact.

Historians have, of course, pursued the general topic of the atomic bombing at the end of World War II. Books have been written examining and debating the process that yielded the decision to drop the bombs and on many aspects of the world-changing event. But no significant effort has been put into revising Hersey's coverage of the question of what the experience of being bombed felt like and meant to those who survived it.

In a few cases, we have been forced to address a variation on this theme: are there times when historical revision is counterproductive? Sometimes the answer seems to be yes. There are instances when revision distorts the journalistic record or introduces error. Consider the curious case of America's third president.

A New Species of American Journalist: Callender

In the late 1790s, Thomas Jefferson was in the thick of the maneuvers that produced the "party system" of politics and governing in the United States. But at the beginning of the new nation, there were no political parties to speak of. Indeed, the founders, in writing the Constitution in 1787, had not even mentioned the word "party" in the document, reflecting the prevailing hope that permanent divisions—or "factions"—would not exist.

Into that vacuum stepped newspaper editors (Pasley, 2001). As Jeffrey Pasley has shown, editors played an indispensable role in building the parties, at a time when they had no legal existence, no rolls of registered voters, no slates of candidates, no nominating conventions, no money—none of the trappings of the full-grown political party. In the absence of the machinery of partisan electioneering, newspapers were the means for letting readers know which candidates held which views. By endorsing a candidate, or simply by informing readers whether a candidate was a Federalist or an Anti-Federalist, newspaper editors began to give voting an ideological coherence that it would otherwise lack. In turn, the nascent parties enlisted newspaper editors to help spread their views and tout their candidates. In the first few decades of the United States, partisan papers even printed ballots that voters could fill out and take with them to the polling places.

Like many of the other Founders, Jefferson was working hard to promote himself and his views, sometimes using a political ally as his agent and often enlisting a newspaper editor as his cat's paw. In one case, though, a cat's paw turned on Jefferson and mauled him. That was Jefferson's experience with one of the most vicious and dangerous of all the partisan writers and editors: the hard-drinking Scottish immigrant James Thomson Callender, perhaps the ultimate example of the partisan polemicist and scandal-monger, a mutant offshoot of the new species of American journalist then emerging at the dawn of the era of the Party Press.

Callender had a nose for trouble. Born in Scotland in 1758, he worked for a while as a clerk, got fired, and took up the cause of Scottish nationalism, quickly becoming a militant. In 1792, he was charged with sedition. Hunted by the Edinburgh deputy sheriff, Callender bade farewell to his wife and four children, and fled to America. He arrived in Philadelphia in May 1793—alone and nearly penniless. Within months, he was offered a job reporting on the debates in the Congress for the *Philadelphia Gazette*, which gave him a toe-hold. Soon, Callender's family had crossed the Atlantic and joined him. Struggling to make ends meet, he moved his family onto Philadelphia's docks and began drinking heavily.

Nevertheless, he managed to make himself useful to the Republican cause, writing pamphlets in support of Jefferson and his allies. In July 1797, Callender tackled one of the stars of the Federalist camp, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. In a lengthy pamphlet, Callender revealed that Hamilton had transferred money to a convicted swindler named James Reynolds, insinuating that Hamilton and Reynolds were scheming to speculate in Treasury certificates, which were under Hamilton's supervision. The charge forced Hamilton to defend himself, but his reputation was ruined and his career, effectively, capped.

In the aftermath of his victory in the election of 1800—which featured the first peaceful transfer of power between political parties—Jefferson faced the novel issue of how many positions in the national government should be taken away from their Federalist occupants and turned over to Republicans. One of those who came calling after the election was none other than Callender, who had his eye on the plum position of postmaster in Richmond, Virginia, but Jefferson sent him away empty-handed.

Callender set out to get even. He promptly switched parties, and, in February 1802, he became a partner with a Federalist editor in running the *Richmond Recorder* newspaper. Callender assigned himself the job of bringing down Jefferson. Acting on the basis of rumors that he had picked up from anonymous sources, Callender let fly in print with the accusation that Jefferson had engaged in sexual relations with one of his slaves, later identified as Sally Hemings.

> It is well known that the man, *whom it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is SALLY. The name of her eldest son is TOM. His features are said to bear a striking though sable resemblance to those of the president himself . . .

The Federalist press had what it was looking for. The story was repeated in other newspapers, sometimes accompanied by lurid speculation about the "black Venus" at Monticello.

As for Callender, he was nearly finished. Having set the bar in the practice of scandal-mongering about the sex lives of the president, his own life quickly went downhill. In December, he was the victim of a public beating and again succumbed to his great thirst. The following summer, in July 1803, during another of his periods of heavy drinking, James Callender was found floating in Virginia's James River, dead at age 45.

Callendar was highly partisan and sloppy, yet he was almost certainly correct about Jefferson. In Callender's case, however, subsequent generations of historians revised his reporting into oblivion. He was denigrated as a scoundrel and relegated to the dustbin. It may be worth noting that he was not actually *refuted* (in what journalists would call a "knock-down") so much as he was denounced, pooh-poohed, or ignored. Captivated by their own admiration for the Founders, the eminent American historians—white men all—built Jefferson into a paragon, tailored for each subsequent period (Malone, 1948). Eventually and very gradually, the process of revisionism began to take hold. In 1974, historian Fawn Brodie published a best-selling "psycho-biography" of Jefferson that was the first book to take the Jefferson–Hemings liaison seriously (Brodie, 1974). Brodie, the first female scholar to tackle the controversy, made a much bigger impact on the public than she did on the historical profession. Most scholars continued to defend their conception of Jefferson's honor by minimizing or rejecting the Hemings tale (Ellis, 1997).

In 1997, the scholar Annette Gordon-Reed took up the case. She brought a unique set of credentials: she was not only a historian but also a lawyer; she was not only female but also African-American. In her *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (1999 [1997]), she presents an argument, almost like a pleading in a lawsuit, asking readers to treat the evidence in the matter more fairly than most historians had done to that point. Gordon-Reed argued, *inter alia*, that historians should stop granting all white witnesses more credibility than all black witnesses. Looking at all the evidence in this new light, she made a persuasive case.

Still, skeptics wanted convincing evidence. That came in the following year, when white descendants of Jefferson and black descendants of Hemings underwent DNA testing that indicated an overwhelming likelihood that Jefferson had been the father of at least two of the Hemings descendants. The new, scientific finding not only vindicated Brodie, it also vindicated Callender—the drunken, "irresponsible," partisan journalist of nearly 200 years earlier. In the end, it turned out that the initial reporting was on the right track and that racial and ideological assumptions sent historians off on a lengthy detour. The truth was there all along, but historians willfully did not see it.

Are Historians Always Right?

The Jefferson–Hemings case prompted us to turn the debate around and ask another question: Are historians always right? In one sense, of course, the answer is obviously not. Some historians make errors some of the time. There is another sense in which historians are not always right. That is evident from the fact that some historians revise others. Indeed, in this sense, one might conclude that historians are *never* right.

Both fields have some common properties: they have a methodology for approximating truth. In journalism, the methods for approaching the truth are manifold: they begin with the process of editing and the discipline of competition with other news sources. They involve devices to insure independence and to avoid conflicts of interest. They include transparency (ideally) about methods and sources. They ultimately involve legal and even criminal sanctions. If a journalist makes a factual assertion that is both false and damaging to an individual's reputation (and causes some measurable harm), then the journalist can be sued in civil court for libel. In rare cases, if a journalist divulges certain kinds of military or state secrets, the journalist can be tried in US criminal courts for espionage or perhaps even treason.

In the historical profession, the mechanisms for approaching the truth are somewhat different. They typically begin with a lengthy, formal apprenticeship that culminates in a doctorate degree. They extend to academic tenure, a system that is intended to guarantee the scholar's independence. At the heart of the discipline's practices are those associated with publication: peer review, inclusion of scholarly devices such as endnotes, and the system of reviewing new books. In the United States, historians appear in court so rarely (as defendants) that it is not really relevant to consider legal sanctions. In both cases, though, it may be that both journalists and historians face the same ultimate bench of justice: the evolving judgment about their work as expressed by their readers. In the end, readers far outnumber editors, and due to their collective wisdom, it is difficult (though not impossible) to mislead them for very long.

Common Ground or Friction?

Yet, for all that historians and journalists have in common, there is also a fair amount of skepticism and even mistrust between the two fields. Historians, in my experience, read a lot of journalism in the natural course of things. They also rejoice when they can find any kind of periodical in the era they are studying. Yet, historians often look down on journalists as a grubby, ignorant lot—hustlers who exaggerate, prevaricate, or simply scavenge randomly from what Thoreau called each day's "froth and scum" (Thoreau, 1991 [April 24, 1852]).

Journalists, for their part, commonly read a lot of history—sometimes as recreation, sometimes as "background" for their work. Yet, many journalists feel a sense of unease about history, especially about the variety of history now practiced in universities. They feel disappointed by many academic historians, blaming them for taking perfectly good "material" and robbing it of its inherent color, drama, and energy in order to advance ceaseless argument or "discourse."

Part of the friction between journalists and historians arises from the fact that the two kinds of non-fiction inquiries are asking different questions. Almost always, the foremost question on the journalist's mind is: what happened? At the moment when that question is first asked, no one knows the answer, so any answer—even one that is fragmentary, tendentious, or clichéd—can be quite compelling. Immediately after that question has been answered, however, the answer begins to lose salience. The characteristic response of the professional journalist is to move on to the next event or surprise, leaving others to mull over matters of interpretation and analysis.

Most of the time, historians are not particularly interested in the question of what happened, because it is pretty well settled by the time they begin their work. They are more interested in asking how or why something happened, or what it means for later generations. Questions of interpretation and causation are paramount. Regrettably, these concerns are often emphasized over the story-telling skills of scene-setting, character development, and textual pleasure.

Conclusion

Thus, we might hazard a reply to the question, Are journalists always wrong? That answer seems to be: yes, no, and it depends. At the same time, we might venture to ask, Are historians always right? In that case, the answer also seems to be yes, no, and it depends.

In our course at Boston University, we believe we have begun to explore these questions in a way that can be easily adopted to fit other universities and to study other societies or time periods. In our experience to date, the effort to examine journalism and history at the same time is both fruitful and suggestive. By putting both fields into a critical tension with each other, we can point our students toward a wider array of challenges, successes, and reversals experienced by journalists and historians. We have tried to put these two fields—each proud of itself and wary of the other—into a more productive relationship. Such a cross-disciplinary approach holds out the promise of illuminating something essential about both journalism and history.

NOTE

1. At this vantage point, of course, it seems a fair question to ask: how well were Russian readers served during the same period by their own news media? Such a study remains to be done, to the best of my knowledge.

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Christopher B. Daly, Journalism Department, Boston University, 640 Comm Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, USA. E-mail: chrisdaly44@gmail.com