The Role of the Literary Press in the Civil Rights Movement

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Sociology 310: The Civil Rights Movement

April 23, 2014

In the years following the First and Second World War, newspapers faced a challenging struggle of adapting to, reporting, and analyzing the American civil rights movement. The effort to end national segregation—particularly in the South—proved to be "a difficult story to tell" as mainstream newspapers often reflected Southern resistance to change. [1]The role of both the black and white presses during the Civil Rights Movement largely contributed to its final outcome, and the following pages are dedicated to the explanation of how differences in Northern and Southern journalism shaped the movement, and how the bravery of a few determined journalists shaped the role of the press forever.

The Black and White Presses in the North and South

Before the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that "transformed desegregation into a national imperative," the lives, experiences, and toils of black Americans were not expressed in the national press. With few exceptions, blacks were only mentioned in mainstream white-owned papers when they had committed a crime or were killed in a violent manner. "The only time a black man ever got in the paper was if he were in trouble, [if] he'd been arrested for something, if he'd been accused of something, if he'd been executed; there was never a positive story about a black—blacks winning honors, graduating from school, getting scholarships and so on, nothing of that sort appeared in newspapers", recalled Ira B. Harkey, Jr., editor of the *Pascagoula* (Miss.) *Chronicle*. A 1947 book titled "Your Newspaper", published by Harvard University Niemen Fellows, wrote: "North and South, most newspapers are consistently cruel to the colored man; as pictured in many newspapers, the Negro is either an

[1] David Davies. "Newspapers and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1957." In *The press and race Mississippi journalists confront the movement*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

entertaining fool [or] a dangerous animal."[2] On the infrequent occasion that "black news" were reported, it was commonly separated from "white news" and often published in a different section or on a special day of the week. [3]These "colored editions" were delivered solely to black neighborhoods and were a normal occurrence among the few Southern newspapers that published black news. In fact, the *Montgomery Advertiser* and the *Alabama Journal* each published 'black editions' for more than three decades."[4]

Perhaps even more discouraging than blacks being portrayed only as violent criminals—while failing to mention their successes—is the fact that most often, black stories were simply ignored in mainstream presses. In both Northern and Southern dailies, mentions of black obituaries, black business and church activities, and black social news before the *Brown* decision were nearly nonexistent. For instance, the New Orleans Times-Paicayune, where Harkey worked before editing the Chronicle, photographers were instructed not to take, distribute, or publish photos of minority groups, particularly blacks.[5]

The rise of newspaper coverage of black news can be attributed the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. A massive effort to expand school desegregation laws by consolidating lawsuits from four states, the *Brown* case struck down segregation and the 1896 establishment of 'separate-but-equal' public schools as unconstitutional. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and, in a 1955 decision, ordered integration efforts to proceed nationwide "with all deliberate speed." This landmark ruling was received with mostly negative

[2] Ibid., 2.
[3] Ibid., 1.
[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Ibid.

Southern reaction, and school desegregation soon became "the biggest regional story of the century."[6]

Rather than publicly voice opposition to the Court's ruling, newspapers in the Southern region opted to remain silent on the issue. By ignoring the civil rights movement, they rationalized, the civil rights activists would soon fail and abandon their mission. To counter Southern silence, a few large national newspapers began dedicating themselves to the coverage and analysis on the Civil Rights Movement and their efforts in protests, sit-ins, boycotts, and speeches. The "undisputed leader among newspapers", the *New York Times* responded positively to the Supreme Court decision, covering the entire scope of the two-and-a-half-year long litigation process and even devoting ten pages of analysis of the case on the day the ruling was made. The Times was remarkable due to its considerable effort to explain the background of the decision and its editorial and public support of desegregation. [7] In 1954, the Southern Education Reporting Service (SERS) founded the *Southern School News*, a monthly journal whose goal was "to tell the story, factually and objectively, of what happens in education as a result of the Supreme Court ruling." Working with correspondents from Southern and border states to provide unbiased coverage of integration developments, the *News quickly* reached 30,000 subscribed educators, journalists, public officials, and libraries.[8]

But while the *New York Times* and the *Southern School News* provided expansive information about black news, the great majority of daily newspapers trailed behind in both the "quality of their news coverage and the vitality of their editorial leadership." Both Southern and Northern newspaper reporters and editors reflected racist bias in their journals. "For many editors

[6] Ibid., 4-5.
[7] Davies, 5.
[8] Ibid., 6.

and publishers the response was honest", noted Mississippi editor Hodding Carter II. "They shared the values of the land they inhabited and felt it was their duty to reflect them." Most newspapers answered directly to their readership and advertisers; as a whole, they were generally owned, sponsored, edited, and published by and for whites. A glaring example of the depth of segregation in newspaper industries is found in the racial makeup of its staff. Most daily publications consisted of all-white staff.[9] To exemplify this further, the nation's largest organization of journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, did not have an integrated staff until the late 1950s. Blacks were virtually invisible in the mainstream press; in 1955, for example, just twenty-one journalists were staffed by white-owned newspapers in the North—and none in the Deep South. The few pioneering black journalists worked in publications in the Northeastern and Midwestern states, where integration support was more widespread.[10]

Contrary to the supportive coverage of the civil rights movement by Northern daily journals, black weekly newspapers, and the *Atlanta World*—the nation's only black daily—newspapers in the South offered little support for the *Brown* ruling. While some border states had progressive views, "no single large newspaper [in the Deep South] emerged as enthusiastically integrationist." The trend here is evident. In border states, where the population favorably approved Brown, the major journals encouraged compliance with the law and favored efforts to integrate. In the South, most newspapers accepted the Court's authority but sought minimum compliance with the new law. The Deep South showed the largest and most hostile reaction to desegregation, and the newspapers who chose to voice opinions on segregation called for wide resistance to the Court decision.[11] The day after the Court's ruling on the *Brown* case was

[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Davies, 4.
[11] Ibid., 7.

dubbed a 'black day in the South.' On May 18, 1954, newspaper headlines in Southern cities wailed that blackness and darkness had descended upon them. The publications remarked that the darkness was caused by the end of legal segregation and urged on the South to preserve the holy institution of legal separation. White Southerners overwhelmingly supported its segregationist and racist history; legal segregation had been in place since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, and "most white Southerners were willing to fight to keep it that way." In newspapers, television, radio, and magazines, white politicians and local leaders championed for "massive resistance and defiance," further maintaining the status quo of the region. [12]

The Southern press strategy developed into two options: some newspapers remained silent on civil rights by refusing to cover movement efforts, and others loudly championed SDouthern ideology. These two types of newspapers worked together to increase segregationist beliefs and keep Southern blacks ignorant of movement successes. For example, one of Nashville's two mainstream white daily newspapers, *The Banner* boldly emerged as openly, proudly and defiantly segregationist." Its editors regarded Earl Warren—U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice at the time of the Brown decision—as part of a wide "conspiracy of social change. "Its publisher proudly boasted of having editorially endorsed and supported the candidacy of J. Strom Thurmond—a 'rabid segregationist'- for president in 1948.[13]

An example of efforts to keep Southern news hidden in the press occurred in a small town in Virginia in the middle of the century. From 1959 to 1964, the local board of education supervisors in Prince Edward Country, Virginia voted to close all county schools instead of allowing them to integrate. The local white press had refused to publish school board meeting

[12] Charlotte Grimes. "Civil rights and the press," 120.
[13] Ibid., 121.

agendas or reveal the times and places of such meetings to the public. The only individuals who attained information about the state of the schools and could vote on the future status of the schools were white board or PTA members; as such, the decision to close the schools directly reflected solely the wishes of the community's white leaders. Claiming that revealing meeting dates would "unleash controversy," the white newspapers used their power to restrict information that affected all of the town's black citizens and encouraged white resistance efforts to integration. [14]

The horrific and graphic riots in Oklahoma were another example of how the white Southern press affected public knowledge and wrongly influenced public opinion. In June 1921, Tulsa, Oklahoma was in flames after one of the worst race riots in American history. At the time, information surrounding details and causes of the event were not well published. By the most modern accurate accounts, the riots were traced to Dick Rowland, a black man who was accused of "assaulting" Sarah Page, a white elevator operator. Though Page described the event as a simple "arm-grabbing," rumors and exaggerations swirled quickly around the community and the *Tulsa Tribune* and the *Tulsa Daily World* published it the next day as a rape case. The following day, one local white newspaper published an editorial that Rowland was to be hanged for this crime; that night, both white and black mobs surrounded the courthouse, as whites gathered to execute the lynching and blacks joined to protect Rowland from violence. Predictably, a fight between the two masses emerged and one gunshot was fired, killing a white man. News accounts in the Southern newspapers both during the two-day period of events were "confusing, inconsistent, and unreliable." Their wrongful interpretation of the events and depiction of the

[14] William G Thomas III. "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi", 7.

incident as rape were biased and have been blamed for inciting a riot that eventually left 10,000 homeless and degraded the town's economic vitality.[15]

The Orangeburg Massacre of 1968 is yet another example of Southern resistance to publication of black news. While protesting the segregation of the local bowling alley in Orangeburg, South Carolina, all-white state patrol troopers fired on the 150 black demonstrators, killing three and injuring twenty-seven more. This event was significant in the number of wounded and the fact that this was the first time that students had been shot and killed on an American college campus by state officers. Not surprisingly, however, the local city newspapers failed to report this massacre and thus this event "barely penetrated the nation's consciousness." [16] Mainly because the victims were black students," there was none of the public outcry that would follow the shooting of white students at Kent State," reports Jack Nelson, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist for the Los Angeles Times.[17] The deaths of the black demonstrators were glossed over in local newspapers by trivial stories of white family engagements and upcoming white events.

This tremendous lack of editorial leadership in newspapers led one *Time* magazine correspondent to conclude that, "with a few exceptions, Southern newspapers in particular were doing a patchy, pussyfooting job of covering the region's biggest running story since slavery."[18] Southern papers focused on criminality of blacks, while ignoring both the injustice of segregation and the growing influence of the Civil Rights Movement; northern papers, on the other hand, routinely publicized the civil rights struggle and exposed the rampant and violence

[15] Grimes. "Civil rights and the press," 125-126.
[16] Jack Bass. "Documenting the Orangeburg Massacre."
[17] Ibid., 118-119.
[18] Ibid., 7.

racism in the South.[19]The problem in Southern newspapers was two-fold: journals not only minimized coverage of desegregation efforts, but what few stories were published were generally "unbalanced and distorted," as depicted in the coverage of the Tulsa riots. Black news was often published without social or historical context and emphasized "conflict rather than progress." For example, even though many early integration movements had successfully been implemented with little or no violence, the white press highlighted the aggressive mobs that usually followed Southern desegregation efforts. [20]Sam Ragan, a reporter for the *Raleigh* (N.C.) *News and Observer* chastised the Associate Press for "overlooking something of a revolution" when three North Carolina schools successfully—and peacefully—integrated. "Disorder and bloodshed", he lamented, are always better stories than "peace and progress." [21]

Even when there was remarkable violence and bloodshed, the South still resisted! When Police Commissioner Eugene 'Bull' Connor unleashed dogs and hoses against Dr. Martin King's and Reverend Shuttlesworth's team of protestors in May 1963, the central city newspapers—the *Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham News*—both refused to post the story on the first page of the paper. The journals claimed that it would be "civically irresponsible" to publish news as "explosive" as the confrontation on the titular page. Thus, the cover page of the *Birmingham News* featured headlines like 'Carol Burnett to marry her producer' and 'Sophia Lauren in bed with a virus infection' and relegated a small article in the paper's interior to the event, casually titled 'Fire Hoses, Police Dogs Used to Hunt Down Negro Demonstrations.' In contrast, national daily newspapers featured much coverage of the violence. The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* of the same day featured three pictures of the aggression on its front-page story.

[19] "The Press and the Civil Rights Movement." Newseum Digital Classroom.
[20] Davies, 9.
[21] Ibid., 9-10.

In comparison to the *Birmingham News*, *New York Times'* headline stated 'Violence Explodes at Racial Protest in Alabama' and *Los Angeles Times'* huge-font headline read 'New Alabama Riot: Police Dogs and Fire Hoses Halt March.'[22]

At the same time that images of Bull Connor's violence toward marchers in Birmingham were spreading throughout the nation, the most violent episode in Virginia during the Civil Rights Movement took place. In June 1963, protestors of Danville—a community where one-third of the population was black—began demonstrating for equal employment opportunities and government representation. [23]The white press so fervently refused to publish any news of black events that, after six days of silence on the matter, the Associate Press threatened to stop its wire service if the white major journals would not provide coverage. Six hundred people had been arrested during the few weeks of the protest, and the prominent white newspapers did not publish a single mention of the event until one week later.[24]

Even when white daily newspapers were mandated to cover black news, they did so begrudgingly and often cynically. Through both subliminal and explicit rhetoric, the white press molded words and images to "disparage" the demonstrations as "deeply threatening to the nation's law and order" and as "a near riot without clear goals or coherent reasons." Reflecting Southern bias, white editors mainly focused on the white side of the story, praising the local police for its bravery and leadership in protecting the town during this "racial war." Neither Martin Luther King's jailing for violation of Birmingham's court injunction against the protest nor his noteworthy "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail" were featured in the *Richmond* (Va.) *News*. Instead, southern reporters glorified Eugene 'Bull' Connor's self-control in dealing with

[22] Audie Cornish, "How The Civil Rights Movement Was Covered In Birmingham," 2-4.
[23] "Danville Riots." Virginia Historical Society.
[24] Thomas III, "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi", 9.

the "unruly truants" and defended white behavior against blacks as being a "stoic prevention [against] impending racial violence." Rather than focusing on the arrests of 3,300 nonviolent black protestors, the white mainstream press highlighted the courage of the police and emphasized that ten officers had been injured in the violence. The white-owned *Danville Bee* (Va.) commended the police's force in "restraining and eventually dispersing" the black demonstrators. In a lead editorial boldly titled 'Sworn Duty Well Done,' the newspaper editors remarked that Southern white resistance was "a fight to contain a Communist front which has suddenly emerged within *our city limits."* The one journal who ran a short article on King's "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail" –the *Richmond-Times Dispatch*—used the editorial to criticize King as a "self-anointed judge of which laws he will obey" and scorned his role in "inciting mobs of Negros to turbulent street demonstrations." [25] It was through these incendiary writings that the white press was able to manipulate Southern community members to view segregation as fiercely dangerous to American interests, safety, and longevity.[26] White press rhetoric also contributed to biased coverage of the event, describing it as merely a "tense situation" and a caption under a photograph read "Negro women gets wet down by a fireman's hose as protest marches were broken up." This cynical language contributed to heavily skewed reports that shaped Southern opinion and entrenched the South more deeply into segregation. [27]

In direct contrast to white journalism, black press editors portrayed the actions of the Birmingham police as "savage and unrestrained" and defended the protestors as "freedom fighters." The words "bestiality" and "ruthless savagery" were used by the *Richmond Afro-American* to depict police behaviors, and its editors charged the police with "torturing

[25] Thomas III. "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi", 8.
[26] Ibid., 10.
[27] Ibid., 8.

defenseless citizens", imprisoning "tender-aged school children", and using dogs on "unarmed and helpless people." [28] Contrary to Virginia's white press, the black newspapers of the state featured the Birmingham violence and demonstrations on the first page for weeks after the incidents. African American journalists prided themselves on exposing and analyzing local and national Civil Rights Movement efforts, "from the beginning to well after their end." Their publications quoted a wide array of people, including "church leaders, U.S. Senators, political party leaders, Urban League staff, and especially leaders outside of Birmingham."[29]

The black press, indeed, was not always a cohesive unit. Black newspaper editors often disagreed about certain strategies in the Civil Rights Movement. For example, they differed in opinions toward the 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins and the use of young students in marches and demonstrations in 1963. While all of the black papers covered local and national events, they promoted opposing approaches to segregation and racism. For example, the *Richmond Afro-American* promoted bold campaigns against discrimination and injustice, while the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, on the other hand, suggested a more moderate approach by encouraging education and self-help.[30] Nevertheless, they did show unity in inspiring blacks to break the chains of segregation and fight for their human rights.

Remarkably, the black press shared significant similarities with its white counterparts. Both black and white journalists carefully selected stories and purposely published those that reflected their reader's experiences, opinions, and histories. Both presses wrote their publications with their readers and advertisers in mind, and circulated those articles which they believed would advance their own political and social agendas. However, though the white and black

[28] Ibid., 9.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 5-6.

press occasionally covered the same events in the same time frame, their publications showed disparate emphasis, meaning, rhetoric, and ideology and called on its readers to reach in opposing ways. While the white press used Civil Rights Movement efforts to encourage segregationist beliefs, the black newspapers utilized current events to inspire black community members to protest the system of segregation and champion for equal citizenship rights. [31]

The History of the Black Press in the United States

> "Black newspapers provided a forum for debate among African Americans and gave voice to a people who were voiceless. With a pen as their weapon, they were Soldiers Without Swords." – Joe Morton [32]

The history of the black press can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. In the winter of 1827, the first newspaper in the United States to be published by blacks—aptly named *Freedom's Journal*—was founded. The main goal of the *Journal*, notes Jane Rhodes, was to be an "autonomous voice for blacks. Rhodes, a professor of African American Studies at Macalester College, believes that the press was a tremendous force for change and a strong outlet through which blacks could advocate for social reform. Though the Freedom's Journal closed two years after its establishment due to disputes between the editors, it managed to pave the way for future black newspapers.

In the nineteenth century, the black press served to "inform people, elevate moral, [and] build a sense of racial consciousness." Three thousand blacks were murdered by lynch mobs between 1882 and 1919 and the black press was a voice for the lost lives that the mainstream press ignored. The black newspapers "guided readers through a rigidly segregated world," notes narrator Joe Morton; they informed them of "which employers did not discriminate", "lauded

[31] Ibid., 2.
[32] *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*. Directed by Stanley Nelson. S.l.: Half Nelson Productions, 1998.

athletes and professionals who the mainstream press ignored", and reflected "the full spectrum of life in black communities."[33] Because of their work, black journalists were revered and widely adulated by the black community.

Predictably, black newspapers lacked large advertisers for its publications. Though many faced financial troubles, this lack proved a major advantage for the black press. Because they did not depend on the approval of large corporate sponsors and instead largely relied on circulation revenues, black newspapers had the freedom to "report things as we saw it," notes black journalist George Barbour.[34] The black papers were the only voices in the print media of the African American perspective on current national events, and that was partly attributed to its lack of dependency on large business sponsors.

During the Second World War, the black press used the war effort to reflect and analyze on the "bitter reality of segregation." In a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a Kansas cafeteria worker named James Thompson suggested that blacks **"**use the war overseas to press for change in [our] own back yard." He suggested the Double V campaign: **"**the first V for victory over our enemies from without [and] the second V for victory over our enemies from within." [35] Thompson's words spread quickly throughout black publications, which began calling for a victory against Nazism and a victory against racism. At the end of the war, black newspapers were circulating a record number of two million journals every week. Though American troops had now won in Europe, the battle at home still needed a significant victory.

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

African American newspapers routinely connected local and national civil rights movement efforts to the larger context of global events, particularly in wars. For example, during the Korean War the black press featured articles about the successes of the black troops. They pointed to the hypocrisy of the war effort; American efforts were joined against totalitarianism but its troops abroad remained desegregated. The press noted that, despite the racial segregation, black soldiers and servicemen were still as patriotic and dedicated to the cause as whites; how then, the black editors asked, can blacks fight for freedom abroad yet still be negated equal citizenship at home?[36] The global context of the Cold War also helped shaped discourse on school segregation. Ironically, white Southerners and segregationists also used war rhetoric to further drive their interests in the region; any individual that opposed racism and the separation of the races was dubbed a "communist" and "a rebel," states Edward Abie Robison, former reporter for the California Eagle.[37] In this reference, both black and white newspaper journalists informed their readers of the scope of the *Brown* case and how it would affect each city and community by tying it to larger context of the anti-communism war effort.

The Role of Outspoken Brave Journalists in the Civil Rights Movement

> "The men and women who risked their lives, and their families' lives, to report on the civil rights movement are unsung heroes. Those journalists, black and white, chose to become the new Negroes of the Old South, targets of harassment, or worse, because they knew how important it was to witness and write about the struggles of people who fought and died for equality and justice and a more democratic America."– Melvin Coffee, assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky[38]

Fortunately, there were a few outspoken journalists and editors in the South who bravely opposed the common sentiment and supported the *Brown* case. Criticized in the South but

[36] Ibid.
[37] Thomas III. "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi", 6.
[38] Grimes, 125.

revered by supportive reporters, these brave individuals risked their lives and careers to advocate for integration. They were often "the only voices of reason" during massive resistance to desegregation. Their work was so influential in the literary community that six reporters were awarded Pulitzer Prizes for their courageous and inspirational rhetoric. [39] The role played by these few white Southern newspaper editors was deeply influential and important to the success of the movement. These dissenting reporters were "exceptions to the norm—a tiny band of revisionists who counseled that the South's long-range future lay in obedience to the law, and perhaps a gradual acceptance of a new way of life." [40]

Reporters in the South faced very real dangers to their lives and the lives of those surrounding them. Hodding Carter III, whose family ran the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville Mississippi, remembers facing "death threats, burning crosses, and circulation boycotts. He noted that his father, Hodding Carter Jr., was "doing things which were considered revolutionary in most of the South" and "anathema" in Mississippi. For example, his father's decision to use courtesy titles of "Mrs." in front of the name of black women was seen as a "direct assault on our way of life." Traditional Southern papers referred to black women through first names, and occasionally described them as "a Jackson woman", but "Mrs." was never used. In 1952, the *Columbus* (Ga.*) Ledger* found that only half of thirty-four surveyed Deep South daily newspapers used courtesy titles for black individuals or consistently ran columns or pages with black news.[41] Hodding Carter Jr.'s attack on white supremacy earned him continuous threats

[39] Davies, 7-8.
[40] Grimes, 120.
[41] Davies, 2.

from white community men; "I never knew a day in any home we live in Mississippi", Carter III reminisces, "in which there was not a gun in every public room." [42]

Often called the "Second American Revolution" by historians and sociologists alike, the Civil Rights Movement was a result of hundreds of thousands of bold and spirited community members, leaders, reporters, newsmen, and particularly journalists. The writings of Earl Caldwell, Paul Delaney, Jack Nelson, Gene Roberts, Gene Patterson, John Seigenthaler, and many other reporters and editors made an "invaluable contribution to an understanding of this significant period in American life." Without their contributions, [the public] would be left with a "potentially flawed and limited understanding of race relations today."[43]

The increase of desegregation effort in the latter part of the 1950s encouraged greater newspaper coverage of Southern activities and drove an influx of Northern reporters into these states. The 1956 University of Alabama riots were covered by sixty reporters, while seventy-five journalists traveled to Sumner, Mississippi to witness the 1955 trial of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy killed by white half-brothers for allegedly whistling and seducing a white woman at a convenience store.[44] The Emmett Till trial represented such a significant turning point for press coverage in the South that some historians have called it "the first great media event of the civil rights movement." The tiny Mississippi town was overflowing with journalists, photographers, television newsmen, radio announcers, and press columnists who were anxious to expose Southern racism to the rest of the nation. "Never in our region", noted the *Mississippi Sun* during the Till trial, "has so much out-of-state interest been taken in a case involving white and

[42] Grimes, 117-118.
[43] Ibid., 124-125.
[44] Davies, 10.

negro."[45] The ruling that the white defendants were not guilty for his murder sent shockwaves of anger and hostility throughout the nation and inspired consecutive Northern journalist trips to the South to unearth more injustices.

While the 1955 Till trial was considered the first great media event of the black movement, the 1957 integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas was certainly the largest. In retaliation for the court-approved admission of nine black students to the school, the state governor Orval Faubus called on the National Guard to prevent the students from entering the building. President Dwight D. Eisenhower proceeded to nationalize the National Guard in order to enforce compliance with integration and demand Faubus' conformity. The role of the media in this event is immense; when Faubus called on the Guard, only five out-of-town journalists were in Little Rock, but this number escalated to 225 less than a month later. Little Rock was "transformed into a kind of giant press room", noted NBC reporter John Chancellor.[46]

As the Civil Rights Movement was progressing into the 1960s, the entire American population was closely following "climactic events" in the Southern regions, particularly in cities like Birmingham, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi. [47] Not surprisingly, Southern whites grew particularly resentful and bitter toward the influx of Northern journalists and this conflict inspired some brave journalists to speak up loudly and widely.[48] Covering the crisis at Central High was dangerous for any individuals working for the press. Reporters faced threats, anger, scorn, and violence from both Governor Faubus and from the inflamed white mobs surrounding the school. Mob members tormented journalists, calling them degrading names like "nigger

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 11.
[47] Cornish, 1.
[48] Davies, 12.

lover" and physically confronted them. "Bigots and psychopaths don't like outsiders watching them", noted Chancellor, remarking that racist and angered crowds were armed, dangerous and vicious. In the four weeks of reporting in Little Rock, six white journalists and four black reporters were beaten by the mobs.[49]

Claude Sitton, a white reporter for the *New York Times*, was threatened at gunpoint. On occasion, members of the press wore disguises to protect themselves for suspicious whites; one white journalist famously dressed in overalls while reporting, so as to be glanced over for a farmer. "It was a dangerous time," says Sitton, "but nothing was as dangerous for us as the people who were struggling for their lives. "[50] Karl Fleming, a white journalist for *Newsweek*, was verbally threatened by a white mob; "they backed us against the wall", he reminisces, and said "If you god dam communist, Jew-loving, nigger-loving reporters don't get the hell out of this town, you're going to get killed."[51]

Despite the threats, journalists found a variety of reasons to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Gene Patterson, one of the most respected white journalists of the time, explains he was compelled by a "responsibility 'to expose the racist demagogues who exploited white voters [and] to champion the few courageous politicians who spoke the truth." These aforementioned politicians—such as Charles Weltner, a one-term Democratic congressman who "committed political suicide" by supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964—were championed by progressive journalists for their courage toward risking their careers and physical safety to stand up for black rights. Patterson also published editorials championing the nonviolent demonstrators who participated in marchers and sit-ins, as they often were attacked by white mobs and arrested

[49] Ibid., 11.
[50] Grimes, 126.
[51] Ibid.

for their actions. “It also took courage for reporters”, Patterson states, “to cover the movement day after day, despite the risk of violence to themselves.” [52]Though often scared for his life, Patterson continued to dedicate himself to researching and covering the injustices that blacks faced and fought in the movement. In an editorial, Phyl Garland discusses why she chose to become involved the movement. When [civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer] finally registered to vote, she wrote, she had to flee for her life. “Eventually”, Garland, long-time journalist with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, stated, “she was taken, captured, imprisoned, and beaten until her body was hard, until her body was beyond numb. “ After interviewing Hamer, Garland noted that her story was inspirational; “her story made me feel ‘You have to do something; you have to do something to let people know how these people were suffering.”[53]

The role of journalists during the civil rights struggle was to “fulfill their basic public services of watchdog and witness.” Their publications and photographs of events surrounding the black efforts helped awaken the nation’s consciousness and drove the need for social reform. The reports of individuals of the black press, both black and white, kept the struggle alive when it was not being given a voice in most of the mainstream press, and provided hope for the millions of disfranchised blacks that sought a better way of life.[54] Reporters’ “basic obligations”, stated Herb Kaplow, NBC news reporter, is “to tackle tough issues that involve the American people, to investigate them, to study them, to go into them, and then report all that material back to the American people.” Kaplow, who was attacked and beaten while covering the Freedom Riders in

[52] Ibid., 122.
[53] Grimes, 119.
[54] Ibid., 117.

Birmingham, Alabama, believes that reform only comes from an informed public that will then decide "the best possible public policy."[55]

However, the national press—of which Kaplow was an integral contributor—may not have had as far-reaching of an effect if two previous stages had not occurred. First, the black press had publicly denounced and resisted racism for many decades before the start of the Civil Rights Movement, and helped garner support for the upcoming mass effort. Secondly, the actions of the few Southern white journalists who faced "scorn and reader boycotts" were deeply influential to the movement; these white men and women often "became victims themselves of the same bias and mob violence they were covering" and created a public voice for integration supporters.[56] Gene Robert agreed with this, too, noting that if these few journalists and editors had not stood up to Southern ideology, "the gulf between the South and North might have grown wider. An editor for the *New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Roberts praises these reporters for "placing the national interest above regionalism" and becoming "voices of sanity in a period of southern abdication for national responsibility."' [57]

Conclusion

> "I have to congratulate the black press, because it was the press that kept the movement, the courage, the hope in the hearts of black people when they were feeling so alone and so invisible to rest of America." – Dorothy Butler Gilliam, journalist for the *Tri-State Defender* in Memphis[58]

In the 1944 publication of "An American Dilemma", Gunner Myrdal predicted that the dehumanization and segregation toward blacks in the Southern region would not receive national

[55] Ibid., 119.
[56] Ibid., 128.
[57] Ibid., 131.
[58] Ibid., 127.

attention until the press would expose it. Myrdal predicted that the media's coverage of the degradation of blacks would "shock and shake" the nation and would lead to change.[59]

Well, Myrdal was right. Representative John Lewis (D) of Georgia declared, "Without the media, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings." Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963-66, led the Selma, Alabama march for voting rights and understood that role of the media in communicating and spreading the successes of the movement and exposing Southern racism and antagonism.[60] The press showed real –often violent and graphic—images of the struggle for black rights; it helped raise public support for the movement, and even encouraged three U.S. presidents –Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson—to get directly involved through legislation.[61] "[Reporters] made a difference, and that's what journalism ought to be about", stated Haynes Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his coverage of the Selma, Alabama marches.

The photographs and articles being sent from the Southern cities had a direct impact on national policy and attitude. Before the night was over, images of Bull Connor's violence flashed throughout the nation and around the world. "And the message was 'press on'," states Kaplow.[62] Journalists covering the civil rights movement faced constant racism, intimidation, threats, violence, the Ku Klux Klan, and hostile police and politicians.[63] "It felt like any reporter in a war zone because there really was that kind of constant level of fear," remarks Dorothy Butler Gilliam, the first black reporter of the *Washington Post*. Nevertheless, they endured. Journalists during the civil rights era were black and white, Southern and Northern, and they often worked

[59] Cornish, 5.
[60] Grimes, 118.
[61] "The Press and the Civil Rights Movement."
[62] Grimes, 128.
[63] "The Press and the Civil Rights Movement."

together to champion for black rights. “They know now that their reports helped change the social fabric of the country,” says Lynne Flocke of Syracuse University.[64] Journalists risked many things to complete their jobs, and they made a difference because “it was the right time to act and it was the right thing to do.”[65]

Martin Luther King was a significant leader in the movement for his respect for two things: first, he understood the importance of the law. Second, he respected the role of the media in shaping public opinion in order to change existing laws. He invited the press to attend the events of the movement, and encouraged them to spread news of Southern activities through all channels. Their combined efforts were successful; images of violence toward protestors sparked intense national outrage and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protected individuals from discrimination in public spaces.[66]

The choice of Selma, Alabama as the center for King’s voting rights campaign was not coincidental. King and other movement leaders organized the effort in this city for two main reasons: firstly, because of its intense segregationist history, and secondly, because of its ruthless and villainous leaders. King understood that officials like George Wallace, Bull Connor, and the city sheriff Jim Clark would make for volatile press articles that would inflame the sentiments of the American people and lead them to press for legal reform. Media outpour following the violence on the Edmund Pettus Bridge ’Bloody Sunday’ tragedy—violence that fractured John Lewis’ skull and left women and children trampled by horses—spread like wildfire. Public

[64] Grimes, 127.
[65] Ibid., 134.

[66] Jack Nelson. The Civil Rights Movement: A Press Perspective.

pressure became "so intense" that Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson, a law that guaranteed black's voting rights and increased the number of black elected officials nationwide.[67]

After a Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sit-in bus was firebombed in Anniston, Alabama, Rep. John Lewis exclaimed: "If you're going to beat us, let somebody else see it. Don't beat us in the dark of the night. Beat us while other people are watching so they can see it."[68] Lewis, like all of the other influential civil rights leaders, understood the role of the press in the overall success of the movement. The views of whites and the nation as a whole would not change until people were confronted with the bitter truths of segregation.

Reports of the police beatings of demonstrators in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965 once again moved a president to act. In front of thousands of people and on a national television screen, President Johnson declared:

> "What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement. Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."[69]

And so they did.

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[67] Ibid.
[68] "The Press and the Civil Rights Movement."
[69] "The Press and the Civil Rights Movement."

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