The Press and Lynchings of African Americans
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In July 1930, newspaper men poked around Emelle, Alabama, trying to ferret out details of the lynching of a Black man as well as several other slayings. A few White residents who had been on hand when the men were killed refused to talk about the events to reporters from *The Tuscaloosa News*. “What the hell are you newspaper men doing here?” asked a White man who had been part of the vigilante group. “We’re just killing a few negroes that we’ve waited too damn long about leaving for the buzzards. That’s not news” (Raper, 1933, p. 67).

The White resident had that part right. During the 1930s, after thousands of African Americans had been put to death by mobs—particularly in the South but in other regions of the country as well—lynchings were no longer unusual or shocking events that deviated from the norm. They were, as Howard (1995) noted, “a routine, everyday sort of villainy that were primarily southern and almost always inflicted upon Black, rather than White, people” (p. 14). Approximately 4,742 individuals were lynched between 1882 and 1968; of the victims, 3,445 or 73% were Black (Zangrando, 1980). During the heyday of lynching, between 1889 and 1918, 3,224 individuals were lynched, of whom 2,522 or 78% were Black (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 1969). Typically, the victims were hung or burned to death by mobs of White vigilantes, frequently in front of thousands of spectators, many of whom would take pieces of the dead person’s body as souvenirs to help remember the spectacular event.

Historians have long known about lynchings, and numerous books have been written about the subject (e.g., Brundage, 1993;
Logan, 1965; Raper, 1933; Wells-Barnett, 1969; Wright, 1990). Yet, as historian Joel Williamson (1997) observed,

the writing of the history of lynching has been strangely disjointed and discontinuous. In contrast, a number of historians have made slavery the focus, virtually, of their scholarly lives. . . . Perhaps it was easier for us Americans—as historians and a people—to deal with slavery than to deal with lynching, and easier still to deal with disfranchisement and segregation than to deal with either slavery or lynching. (pp. 1232, 1252)

The record of journalism and mass communication scholars is more dismal. Although there have been many studies of racial biases in the modern media (e.g., Berry & Manning-Miller, 1996; Dates & Barlow, 1990; Gandy, 1996; Martindale, 1986) and a host of scholarly investigations of the African American press during the late 19th century (e.g., Daniel & Huber, 1990; Hutton, 1995; Suggs, 1983), there has been virtually no research examining the ways in which the mainstream American press covered the lynching epidemic that swept the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In view of the paucity of research, it is not surprising that journalism history textbooks devote virtually no space to press coverage of lynchings. As it presently stands, a student who reads Emery and Emery’s (1996) classic text would have absolutely no idea that many Southern papers provided vicious coverage of lynchings during the late 19th century. Also, the student would not have a clue that some American newspapers wrote editorials that defended the institution of lynching. The omission of any discussion of this prejudiced coverage coupled with the upbeat discussion of the growth of the press during the Gilded Age (Emery & Emery, 1996, chapter 8) provides a distorted romantic picture of American newspapers.

The time has come to set the record straight. The purpose of this article is to redress the imbalance in the literature by reviewing major streams of knowledge on press coverage of lynching. The news media are important in the history of lynching because they helped to uphold the social order and molded public opinion on
this issue (Sloan, 1994). Drawing on historical works, secondary sources, and hundreds of newspaper accounts, this article summarizes what one knows about how newspapers discussed lynching on their news and editorial pages during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This period was chosen for consideration because it was the heyday of lynching in the United States. The discussion of press reportage that follows is based on a search of dozens of books on lynching in the field of American history, examination of listings under lynching in the American History and Life Abstracts and Historical Abstracts, a systematic review of journal articles and books on 19th century press history, and hundreds of newspaper articles or excerpts from articles on the subject of lynching. Designed not as a quantitative study of newspaper coverage but rather as an historical review, this article is intended to provide a systematic analysis of the nature of newspaper coverage of lynching during the late 19th and early 20th centuries both to redress the imbalance in the field and to stimulate empirical investigations.

NEWS AND LYNCHINGS IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Everyone is familiar with the term lynching, but what does it mean and where did it come from? Murphey (1995) differentiated lynching from other violent acts such as homicides, legal executions, and riots by noting that lynching is

an execution that is done outside the processes of established law by several or even many people in response to a perceived outrage, is motivated by a desire to vindicate the moral sense of the community, enjoys general public approval in the local community, and has as its target a specific person or persons. (p. 8)

No one knows exactly where the word lynching or the related term lynch law came from, although theories abound. Cutler (1905) suggested that the term arose during the Revolutionary War when a Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia administered punishments to Tory horse thieves. Legend has it that if the thief, after having
received 39 lashes, refused to shout “Liberty forever!” he would be hung by his thumbs until he relented.

During the 1880s and 1890s, lynching of African Americans reached epidemic proportions, the majority of lynchings occurring in the South. A voluminous historical literature has explored the roots of the Southern violence that occurred during the Reconstruction period and in the latter quarter of the 19th century (e.g., Ayers, 1984; Brundage, 1993; Williamson, 1984).

A late-20th-century observer schooled in hegemony or other theories that emphasize ways in which media enforce the status quo through subtle social control mechanisms (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) might assume that the late-19th-century press refrained from covering lynchings in much the same way that the 20th-century media shied away from covering other phenomena that fell into the sphere of deviance (Hallin, 1986) such as the Holocaust or AIDS. However, this view assumes that lynchings fell outside the mainstream sphere of consensus, which, of course, they did not; public opinion and elites, particularly in Southern communities, frequently viewed lynchings as necessary mechanisms to enforce racial norms (Clark, 1964; Shapiro, 1988; Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Thus, to report on lynchings was akin to reporting on unpleasant acts of nature such as earthquakes or floods; the events were unfortunate but necessary aspects of the order of things and therefore grist for the newspaper’s mill, particularly during an era in which news was developing ever more quickly into a commodity and sensational journalism was becoming a major force on the journalistic landscape (Baldasty, 1992; Dicken-Garcia, 1989). So it turns out that far from suppressing news about lynchings, newspapers embraced them, providing abundant, even graphic coverage of vigilante violence. As Clark (1964) observed in a book on the Southern country editor, “Many editors did not spare their readers’ sensibilities. Whatever their motives, they [editors] wrote full, detailed accounts. Turning through many volumes for the period from 1875 to 1920 is somewhat like walking through a chamber of horrors” (p. 228).

A review of the many books and articles on lynching provides ample evidence that the horror chamber metaphor is correct. For
example, consider this account from *The Springfield [Massachusetts] Weekly Republican* of April 28, 1899:

Sam Holt, the murderer of Alfred Cranford and the ravisher of the latter’s wife, was burned at the stake, near Newman, Ga., this afternoon, in the presence of 2000 people. Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the negro was deprived of his ears, fingers and genital parts of his body. He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on, but stood the ordeal of fire with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits, and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as “souvenirs.” The negro’s heart was cut into several pieces, as was also his liver. Those unable to obtain the ghastly relics paid their more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them. Small pieces of bones went for 25 cents, and a bit of the liver crisply cooked sold for 10 cents. As soon as the negro was seen to be dead there was a tremendous struggle among the crowd, which had witnessed his tragic end, to secure the souvenirs. (Ginzburg, 1962, p. 12)

Newspapers in every region of the country provided graphic coverage of lynchings, especially those that occurred in their area. “When discussing a lynching in their particular area,” noted Wright (1990) in a study of racial violence in Kentucky, “local newspapers gave all of the grisly details and, significantly, would often point out that the lynching was not the first one that had happened in their area” (p. 5). Major newspapers or metropolitan dailies sometimes described lynchings that occurred outside their geographical area. For example, the February 2, 1893, issue of *The New York Times*, under the headline “ANOTHER NEGRO BURNED,” described the grisly details of the lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas. Readers learned that Smith was placed on a 10-foot-high scaffold and was tortured for 50 minutes by red-hot irons thrust against his body, after which he was set on fire and transformed from a human being to charred human remains.

It is next to impossible to locate a newspaper article that does not identify the victim as a Negro or that refrains from suggesting that the accused was guilty of the crime and therefore deserving of punishment. The earlier excerpt from *The Springfield Weekly Republi-
can referred to Sam Holt as “a wretch” and called members of the mob who could obtain souvenirs of Holt’s body “fortunate possessors” of his relics. The New Orleans Picayune described an African American who was lynched in Hammond, Louisiana, for robbery as a “big, burly negro” and a “Black wretch” (Logan, 1965, p. 298).

Newspapers’ predilection for identifying the race of the victim and assuming guilt can be powerfully glimpsed by reading over the headlines. For example: “A NEGRO DESPERADO LYNCHED,” Boston Evening Transcript, July 21, 1886; and “NEGRO MURDERS A CITIZEN. POSSES ARE LOOKING FOR HIM AND HE WILL BE LYNCHED,” The New York Times, June 9, 1900 (Logan, 1965, p. 225).

Rayford Logan, who wrote the classic The Betrayal of the Negro (1965), concluded that most of the Southern papers he examined “assumed the guilt of a Negro who had been lynched or almost lynched” (p. 288). By contrast, Logan noted that newspapers were unlikely to make the same assumption about Whites who got into altercations with Black people. Tolnay and Beck (1995), in one of the few social scientific investigations of lynching, noted that Southern editors “often used sympathetic language in describing lynch mobs while reserving callous damnation for lynch victims. The southern press was extremely creative when it came to providing moral, if not legal, justification for the action of lynch mobs” (p. 261).

Some of the most rabidly vicious stories concerned lynchings that were inflicted to punish Black men for allegedly raping White women. As Ayers (1992) noted,

> Although most lynchings were inflicted in response to alleged murder, most of the rhetoric and justification focused intently on the so-called “one crime,” or “usual crime”: the sexual assault of White women by Blacks. That assault sometimes involved rape, while at other times a mere look or word was enough to justify death. (p. 158)

Newspapers reflected and played up these irrational fears. The Memphis Commercial Appeal was among the most vicious of Southern newspapers when it came to lynching and rape. On October 6, 1895, a front-page story described the lynching of a
Black man accused of raping a White woman. Similar to many papers of the era, it avoided the inflammatory term *rapist* and used the term *ravisher* instead. On page 1, *The Commercial Appeal* asked:

WHAT BECAME OF HIM?
HORROR REIGNS IN FAYETTE
A NEGRO RAVISHER RECEIVES THE USUAL PUNISHMENT
BESTIALITY OF THE CRIME
ALMOST WITHOUT A PARALLEL
WHITE VICTIM OUTRAGED IN THE PRESENCE OF HER SISTERS (Logan, 1965, p. 301)

EXPLAINING LYNCHING NEWS IN
THE PRESS OF THE LATE 1800s

How can one explain this virulently racist coverage? Unquestionably, some editors harbored strong racial prejudice, and the coverage reflected their racial beliefs. However, as Clark (1964) noted, “The majority, probably large, disapproved of lynching and believed that the practice threatened the whole structure of their law and civilization” (p. 232). Thus, some variations in coverage were due to the personality and values of the editor, particularly in the South where colorful editors put their stamp on the news and editorial pages (Osthause, 1994). Even so, there were such obvious similarities in newspaper coverage of lynchings—for example, the vividness and racist assumptions—that it would seem that factors external to editors’ values have to be considered. Economic factors undoubtedly influenced editorial decisions. Editors recognized that graphic coverage of lynchings could sell papers. It must be remembered that by the late 1800s, newspapers were increasingly governed by business principles; news had become less a political instrument to advance the aims of a party than a product to be shaped and molded with an eye toward increased revenue (Baldasty, 1992; Dicken-Garcia, 1989). Crime news, particularly stories of sensational lynchings of Blacks, seemed likely to attract a large audience of readers.
Public opinion also seemed to favor lynchings. Clark (1964) noted that “nearly every prisoner accused of a major crime stood convicted in the court of public opinion before he reached the prisoner’s docks in the criminal courts” (p. 236). Tolnay and Beck (1995) noted that

had opinion polling been as common during the lynching era as it is now, there can be little doubt about what it would have revealed about the southern public’s perception of Black lynchings. Most likely, average White southerners would have described lynching as an exercise in popular justice. (p. 86)

More generally, the racism of the era, partly steeped in psychoanalytic fears (Williamson, 1984) as well as complex cultural forces (Brundage, 1993; Waldrep, 1998), pushed editors in the direction of the status quo. And so, in a general sense, lynchings were newsworthy. They were news not because they were unexpected man bites dog events but because even the most mundane mob action could be guaranteed to contain information that would arouse prurient interest, engage racist citizens, and uphold a social order that was dependent on the systematic oppression of Blacks by Whites.

As if this were not enough, in small Southern towns, the editor “ran the risk of bodily harm if he was too critical, especially if a sex crime against a female member of a good family had been punished” (Clark, 1964, p. 226). Big city newspaper editors also could reasonably expect to face violence from mobs and vigilante groups if they opposed lynching too vitriolically (Nerone, 1994). Thus, editors (that is, those who personally opposed lynching) were limited in what they could do. As human beings, they worried about what would happen to themselves and to their families; as social animals, they feared social ostracism if they took too strong a stand.

Yet, for all the negative portraits that appeared in the late-19th-century press, there were hopeful signs. Some newspapers and magazines (Logan, 1965) denounced the practice of lynching Black Americans. However, as will be shown, even these critical voices were tainted by their equivocal and inconsistent stands.
ANTILYNCHING VOICES: A MIXED MESSAGE

The *Chicago Tribune* was a pioneer in the antilynching effort. Beginning in 1882, the *Tribune* published a list of lynchings showing the number of people killed by lynch mobs in a given year and the reasons for the deaths. The *Tribune* was one of the first papers to use the word *alleged* in a headline about lynching (Logan, 1965). Yet, it too followed the custom of identifying the race of the “criminal” when he was Black, as in “Texans Lynch Wrong Negro” (Ginzburg, 1962, p. 9).

*The New York Times* was without question the harshest critic of lynching and provided some of the earliest denunciations. The *Times* was long “an outspoken foe of lynchings,” Wright (1990) observed. The newspaper referred to the lynching of Richard Coleman in 1899 as “an outrage so terrible and so shameful that it can only be explained as an outbreak of popular delirium” (Wright, 1990, p. 95). Yet, it had numerous blind spots. Stories frequently assumed the Black man was guilty. Four stories published on July 6, 1892, made this assumption, as in, “Edgar Jones, the young negro who murdered Michael Tierney . . . was hanged by a mob” (Mindenich, 1996). News articles and editorials stereotyped Blacks. On September 30, 1893, an editorial in *The New York Times* remarked that “it is true that the crime for which lynch law is even more frequently invoked than for murder is one to which the Southern negroes are peculiarly prone” (“Editorial,” 1893, p. 4). The editorial not only assumed Blacks were more likely to rape than Whites, but it made the questionable assumption that lynch law was more likely to be invoked for rape than murder. Thus, although *The New York Times* was clearly ahead of the curve when it came to criticizing lynching and took stands that other papers were unwilling to take, it too reflected the values of the era in several subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Not surprisingly, the White media lagged far behind the many African American newspapers in denouncing lynching. Ida B. Wells courageously used her newspaper, the Memphis *Free Speech* to document and condemn lynchings. After Wells wrote on May 21, 1892, that no one believes “the old thread-bare lie” that Black men
assault White women and went on to criticize Southern men on this issue, *The Memphis Daily Commercial Appeal* called her a “Black scoundrel,” White businessmen threatened to lynch the owners of her newspaper, and creditors commandeered the newspaper’s offices and sold the equipment (Nerone, 1994; Shapiro, 1988; Suggs, 1983). The mobs closed down the *Free Speech* but failed to silence Wells, who continued to rail against mob violence in other publications. John L. Mitchell, Jr., editor of *The Richmond Planet* during the 1890s, also waged a powerful campaign against lynching through his prose and political activism, helping Black people “compile their own history of White repression” (Brundage, 1991, p. 328).

In the long run, the Black journalists’ frame on lynching would carry the day. White newspapers would come to adopt Black editors’ views on mob violence. However, the change would not come quickly or without a fight.

**PRESS AND PUBLIC IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

The dawn of the 20th century did not usher in miraculous changes in press coverage. Many newspapers continued to cover lynchings in racist ways. For example, after the NAACP investigated a lynching in rural Georgia in 1919, *The Dublin [Georgia] Courier Herald* remarked that “the best thing . . . [the NAACP] can do for the betterment of negroes of the country is to shut its filthy mouthpiece and organs of racial equality and die in a grave filled with hogs slops” (Brundage, 1993, p. 361).

Nonetheless, the times were changing, albeit slowly. Investigative reporter Ray Stannard Baker, the only muckraker who directed his journalistic energies to expose lynching (Beasley, 1982), described lynchings in detail in *McClure’s* in 1905 and in a book, *Following the Color Line*, published in 1908. Although Baker made statements that are glaringly offensive by today’s standards (e.g., a reference to the “animal-like ferocity” of Black criminals), his work helped call Americans’ attention to racial problems and was praised by W.E.B. DuBois (Beasley, 1982). At the same time,
newspapers gradually began to frame lynching less as a regrettable but necessary mechanism of social control and more as a "terrible form of extralegal punishment" (Clark, 1964, p. 243).

If change did not happen overnight, it did manifest itself by the second decade of the 20th century. The change was particularly evident in the South where newspapers had frequently supported lynchings. In 1916, The Atlanta Constitution—which 17 years earlier had offered a $500 reward for the capture of Sam Holt—sent letters to all candidates for governor asking their opinions on lynching and the policies they would implement to curb mob violence (Brundage, 1993). In 1918, several of Georgia’s urban dailies supported a state antilynching law.

Brundage (1993) observed that "as self-conscious defenders of the reputations of their communities, urban editors were all too aware of the national scorn that lynching brought upon the region" (p. 224). In Georgia in particular, “concern for . . . reputation and the desire to mollify regional and national critics stirred urban editors to proselytize for organized efforts to suppress lawlessness” (p. 224). Southern newspaper coverage of lynchings in the early 20th century flowed in part from the new spirit of Progressivism that swept the South during this period. Drawing on values of social harmony, orderliness, and economic growth, a new White "commercial-civic elite" worked hard to develop civic pride and to foster a sense of urban boosterism (Brundage, 1993). Mob violence was antithetical to this spirit; also important, it tarnished the image of the New South that business elites—including editors—were working hard to cultivate.

In the North, newspaper editors were influenced by the Progressive Reform Movement that preached values antithetical to lynching. In addition, the newly formed NAACP pressed for federal antilynching legislation, which generated news stories. This is not to say that Northern papers stopped making racist assumptions about Black people during the 1910s and 1920s. However, there were noticeable improvements in coverage. With journalism becoming ever-more professional, newspapers such as The Boston Guardian, The Baltimore Herald, The Philadelphia Enquirer, The New York Sun, and The New York Times began using words such
as accused and alleged when describing Black victims of mob violence (see Ginzburg, 1962).

There was an upsurge in lynchings of African Americans in the 1930s, perhaps because of frustrations unleashed by the Depression (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Newspapers were increasingly apt to criticize lynching in editorials; yet, many papers persisted in running sensational stories about lynching parties that whipped up racial hatred (Dowd Hall, 1979). Tragically, despite NAACP lobbying for antilynching legislation and support by Eleanor Roosevelt during the 1930s, Congress refused to pass an antilynching law. It was not until 1968—including the lynching of Emmet Till in 1955 (Hudson-Weems, 1994), the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964, and the nation’s horrified observation via television of police brutality in civil rights protests—that Congress acted. In that year, Congress established jail terms and fines for any person who injured or killed anyone attempting to exercise his or her government-protected civil rights (Zangrando, 1980). It was the closest the nation would get to a federal antilynching law.

CONCLUSIONS

Before making concluding remarks on lynching and the press, it is important to offer a caveat. As noted earlier, this author did not pore over primary sources—namely, 19th-century newspapers. Thus, the validity of the conclusions rests on secondary source material. Whereas the breadth of the search of secondary sources and the fact that the same conclusions emerged from diverse sources gives the author confidence in the conclusions reached, the fact is that original newspapers were not statistically examined. As is subsequently suggested, an examination of such material is an important task for future research. With this in mind, the author moves to conclusions, interpretations, and future directions.

Some might argue that newspapers—particularly at the turn of the century, when vigilante-style justice was commonplace—treated all victims of mob violence, White and Black, with equal ferocity. However, articles on Black lynchings had a special vitri-
olic quality. Newspaper stories identified the race of the accused; assumed without question that the accused person was guilty; used a number of dehumanizing terms to label the Black victim—for example, *wretch, fiend, and desperado*; assumed the Black person’s race predisposed him to commit violent crimes, particularly rape; and sometimes self-righteously defended lynching of Black individuals. These descriptions would unquestionably fall under the category of racist discourse (e.g., Fredrickson, 1987).

There seems little doubt that press coverage of lynching had a variety of effects on news consumers. Contemporary research on media violence provides us with a few clues about newspaper impact, although one must view these as suggestive at best. Press coverage may have cultivated (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) distorted beliefs about the prevalence of Black crime, perhaps inducing agreement with the inaccurate notion that most lynchings were carried to avenge rape. Newspaper stories may also have persuaded readers that large majorities favored lynching, thereby providing a kind of social proof (Cialdini, 1993) that lynching was an appropriate mechanism for social control.

Truth being complicated, it is also likely that the press increased awareness of the horrific nature of lynchings, particularly during the 20th century when a number of newspapers framed lynchings as affronts to civilized society. For all their faults, newspapers did provide society with a detailed gruesome documentation of the lynching epidemic. They kept the issue before the public, probably helping to shape the public and elite agendas and convincing Whites that lynching was an important national problem. Surely, one reason why more than 70% of the nation favored antilynching legislation in 1937 (Zangrando, 1980) was that the press had helped make this an agenda item, in line with what agenda-setting theory would suggest (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

Could the mass media have done more? Such counterfactual thinking (Roese & Olson, 1995) is inevitable in such cases. Journalists are products of their times, and the news media function within and among a nexus of powerful social and economic forces. Reporters and editors are human beings who fear social oppro-
brium, internalize the assumptions of their culture, and worry about doing things that would bring harm to their families. Yet, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the press could have done more. There were no Schindlers in the newsrooms of the late-19th-century press. And in the 20th century, when opposition to lynching became more normative, it is noteworthy that none of the muckrakers saved one exposed mob violence for what it was, and the news media devoted their investigative resources to less controversial subjects.

It seems abundantly clear that while the mainstream media fiddled and equivocated, thousands of people, mostly Black, lost their lives.

Lynching is fundamentally part of the nation’s past. Yet, scholarly issues persist. In light of the absence of hard scientific studies of press coverage of lynchings, it would be helpful if researchers sampled newspapers across the country to obtain quantitative facts about press biases in lynching. It would also be useful to document changes in news portrayals over time and to examine differences by region and race of the victim as well as to explore relationships between press coverage and exogenous variables such as economic stress to better probe the impact of social system variables on news content. Research could also usefully examine such issues as why certain White newspapers were more willing to criticize lynching than others, influences of the Black press on mainstream press discussions of lynching, and ways that news and public opinion shaped public policy, either in a progressive or regressive direction. By documenting and explaining the role the press played in perpetuating lynching, scholars in a host of disciplines can shed needed light on a barbaric American phenomenon.

REFERENCES


