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Introduction, Part II: Media culture and public memory

Paul M. Haridakis

Kent State University - Kent Campus, pharidak@kent.edu

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DEMOCRATIC

NARRATIVE, HISTORY, & MEMORY

Edited by Carole A. Barbato and Laura L. Davis
Contents

Preface
  CAROLE A. BARBATO AND LAURA L. DAVIS  vii

PART I: FROM HISTORY TO HUMANITY
Introduction
  CLAIRE A. CULLETON  3
Kent State and Historical Memory
  THOMAS M. GRACE  8
Kent State Comes to Canada: Internationalizing the Antiwar Movement
  CHRISTOPHER POWELL  30
Remembering Injustice and the Social Construction of Silence
  JAY WINTER  49

PART II: CORPORATE MEDIA CULTURE AND PUBLIC MEMORY
Introduction
  PAUL HARIDAKIS  67
Visualizing the Limits of Democracy in the Silence of the Cold War:
The Photography of Life Magazine and the Unraveling of the
American Century
  DEVAN BISSONETTE  73
Lost History/Lost Democracy: Media Culture and the 1960s
  EDWARD P. MORGAN  86
“Of Loss and Learning”: How Anniversary Coverage Affects
Understanding of May 4, 1970
  JANET LEACH AND MITCH MCKENNEY  103
Wars on Trial in Three Landmark Documentary Films: *Night and Fog*, *Hearts and Minds*, and *Taxi to the Dark Side*

DANIEL L. MILLER AND SUZANNE CLARK

PART III: MEMORY, HISTORY, AND JUSTICE

Introduction

KENNETH J. BINDAS

The Role of Forgetting in Remembering: The Desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas

CATHY J. COLLINS

Confronting the Legacies of Violence: Lessons from Kent State and Greensboro, North Carolina

RENEE ROMANO

Social Remembering and Kent State

JERRY M. LEWIS

Appendix: This We Know: Chronology of the Shootings at Kent State, May 1970

CAROLE A. BARBATO, LAURA L. DAVIS, AND MARK F. SEEMAN

Bibliography

228

Contributors

242

Index

245
On May 4, 1970, an international spotlight focused on Kent State University after a student protest against the Vietnam War and the presence of the Ohio National Guard on campus ended in tragedy. Twenty-eight guardsmen fired sixty-seven shots in thirteen seconds. They killed Kent State students Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder and wounded nine other students, permanently paralyzing Dean Kahler.

The demonstration at Kent State marked a climax of the student activism and protest of the 1960s, a historical period encompassing the shootings at Kent State. The student protest movement was rooted in the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. On college campuses, the generation gap—the divide between generations in lifestyle, culture, politics, and values—of the 1960s also was strongly felt. Those in positions of authority—parents, campus administrators, politicians, and law enforcement officials—squarely lined up on one side of the divide, with rising numbers of students on the other.

On May 4, the Ohio National Guard, called into town by Kent’s mayor, literally lined up on campus on one side of the grassy central area known as the Commons. Students gathered five hundred feet away at the campus Victory Bell. Most students were observers; many felt aligned with the general counterculture movement; some were campus activists. Many students were consciously exercising their First Amendment rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech as they gathered for the May 4 rally.

In a statement read by press secretary Ron Ziegler, President Richard Nixon responded to the shootings by commenting, “This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy,” an assertion of authoritarian values seen by many as lacking in sympathy. For a large proportion of Americans,
from members of Congress to the average citizen on both sides of the generation gap, the shootings constituted a watershed moment that changed their perspectives on the war in Vietnam. May 4, 1970, became the day the war came home in the American imagination, the day that American soldiers killed American children on U.S. soil. For college students, the shootings at Kent State spurred the largest national student strike in U.S. history. “More than half the colleges and universities in the country (1350) were ultimately touched by protest demonstrations, involving nearly 60 percent of the student population—some 4,350,000 people in every kind of institution and in every state of the union.”

What Nixon failed to see, his staff recognized: the shootings at Kent State became one of the major symbolic events of the Vietnam War as well as the 1960s era, marking the beginning of the end of Nixon’s presidency, as his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, noted. “By January 1973, when Nixon announced the effective end of U.S. involvement,” Vietnam War historian Mark Barringer writes, “he did so in response to a mandate unequaled in modern times.” During these years, the legal aftermath of the events of May 4, 1970, was well on its way to becoming, as Kent State legal scholar Thomas Hensley explains, “one of the longest, costliest, and most complex set of courtroom struggles in American history,” setting civil rights precedent in the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2000, on the thirtieth anniversary of the event, Kent State University established an annual Symposium on Democracy. The symposium was founded as a living memorial to honor the memories of the four students who lost their lives in the May 4 shootings, with an enduring dedication to scholarship that seeks to prevent violence and to promote democratic values and civil discourse. This volume presents a collection of essays based on and revised from presentations at the 2009 symposium. Through a range of disciplinary lenses, these essays explore the complex relationships among experienced events, memory, and portrayal of those events in order to probe the deepest questions of human experience. While connections among the essays cross over from multiple directions, they have been gathered in three groupings that offer one set of possibilities for making meaning. Essays in the first group move from the particular history of May 4, 1970, to eternal concerns of peace and violence, silence and giving voice. Those in the second group address the part played by corporate—and noncorporate, if you will—media in shaping public memory and raising public consciousness. The essays in the final grouping examine acts of remembrance and reconciliation within local communities and the long history of discrimination existing within the national American community. Like the first two groups of essays, this group directly and indirectly proposes ways in which we can move toward social justice.

On the occasion of the tenth annual symposium, historian Jay Winter addressed the Kent State community as “the silence-breakers, who recognize, with Joseph
Brodsky, that ‘the past won’t fit into memory without something left over. It must have a future.’” Winter noted of the Kent State community that it is our “achievement to shape that future through framing of active knowledge in this place and at this time about the injustices that occurred here.”

For more than forty years, the Kent State community has answered the claim that other human beings have on us, so that we preserve the stories of those who have been lost—both to honor the lost and to reveal universal meanings. We at Kent State are negotiating, in a literal sense, the space between memory and history, between social remembering and historical analysis—as Jerry M. Lewis, in his essay in this volume, applies the terminology of James Wertsch. For the 2009 symposium, scholars national and international were invited to join us in thinking through how to preserve Kent State’s history for future generations, so as to respectfully acknowledge the past and to serve the future. The scholarly examinations of the 2009 Symposium on Democracy informed the thinking, planning, and decision making for a May 4 Visitors Center. The two main features of this center are a guided walking tour of the seventeen-acre historic site and a permanent exhibit. The walking tour provides visitors the facts of the event, which had become draped in myth and misunderstanding. Acknowledging the many voices and multiple perspectives regarding the events of May 4, the exhibit invites visitors to explore those facts within the social and historical context of the times, in order to better understand the events of that day and to reflect on their impact and meaning for today.

For many at Kent State, and for many in other communities that have experienced violence, the historical event is a lived event. And so acts of scholarship are sometimes acts of remembrance and commemoration at the same time. This volume emanates from a commemorative act, and at the same time it seeks to find historical meaning. That historical meaning not only holds relevance for a particular community but also speaks indelibly to the human community.

History begins with the actual, but any analysis will be a process of—as captured in the title of the 2009 symposium—“Re-membering: Framing, Embracing, Revising History.” Many of the essays in this volume offer a treatment of the Kent State story. Others reflect on similar experiences in other communities, sometimes giving the measure of the scope of the Kent State event; on chronologies, short and long, within other communities; and on individual experience. As a collection (to make a turn on a phrase offered during the 2009 symposium), they make meaning of past history in order to serve the future.
Notes

7. Thomas R. Hensley, “The May 4th Trials,” in Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective, 3rd ed., ed. Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 2010), 64. Parents and wounded students were blocked for years by the Eleventh Amendment, which prohibits citizens from bringing civil suit against governmental officials acting in their official capacities. The important concept of sovereign immunity was modified by the U.S. Supreme Court, which determined in a case brought by the parents of the slain students that it may be used as a legal defense, but not to block a trial (76–77).
10. In “Photographic Evidence of the Ukrainian Genocidal Famine, 1932–1933,” scholar Roman Serbyn defined collective memory as “what people as a collection make of their past history in order to serve the future” (address, 2009 Symposium on Democracy, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, May 1, 2009).
11. As an iconic event, the student protest and subsequent shooting of students at Kent State by members of the National Guard on May 4, 1970, is well known. However, the particulars of the four days in May that comprise the event are much less well known and are the subject of much disinformation. Because the events of May 4, 1970, are the
focus of, or relevant to, the discussion in many essays in this volume, the editors have provided a chronology of those events in an appendix, based on information from the key sources, most of which are no longer in print. The chronology is informed by the perspective of the forty years that have passed since that date, by the more than forty combined years of research and teaching on May 4 by the chronology’s authors, and by the positioning of May 4, 1970, within the literature on the 1960s.

Part II

Corporate Media Culture and
Public Memory
Columnist Walter Lippmann once claimed that the media are our windows to the world—particularly the world beyond our direct experience. In the years since, media scholars have devoted considerable attention to ascertaining the media’s influence on our opinions, perceptions, and behavior. They have disagreed, however, over the extent of the media’s power in that process. Some claim that the media set the public agenda. As Cohen put it, the press “may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful much of the time in telling its readers what to think about.” Others attribute even more power to the media, suggesting that not only do they tell audience members what to think about, but the way they frame stories also guides interpretation of the images and events portrayed. Still others assert that the media are not particularly influential, and that audience members’ individual differences mediate and generally limit the extent of media effects. Although scholars disagree over whether the media shape perceived reality or simply reinforce preexisting attitudes and opinion, they generally agree that the media do tell stories and shape how they are presented.

The following four chapters, making up part two of this book, all undertake such inquiry and reflection on the media’s presentation of significant U.S. cultural events. Although their authors don’t draw specific conclusions about how media portrayals shaped understanding of events portrayed, they do remind us of the importance of examining the potential short-term and long-term effects of the media’s portrayals of those events. Collectively, the authors ask us to consider how those portrayals may have shaped perceptions at the time, and how ongoing coverage of these past events may reshape or reinforce memories of them.

Together, the chapters focus on portrayals of war, protest, and other specific cultural events from the 1940s to the 1970s generally, and the May 4, 1970, tragedy at
Kent State University specifically. Their analyses of the media portrayals remind us that these were tumultuous times in the United States. It is important to reflect on the media images they review because dependence on the media is more intense during times of societal conflict. Further, the more we rely on the media to help us interpret events covered, the greater the potential that this coverage can shape our perceptions of reality. In different ways—sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly—all of the chapters in this section consider the role of the media in shaping our perceptions.

The chapters provide readers with a context for learning about or remembering the events portrayed and an opportunity to reflect on them and elaborate on them—and to consider the possibility that our views and experiences are inextricably intertwined with such media portrayals. For most of us, in other words, our memories are mediated memories. Both for readers who did and for those who did not directly experience the events covered, these authors suggest that one cannot discount the influence of media portrayals that have become part of our recollections of these events. Their essays, then, help us to consider that the amalgamation of media images we have in our memories have become a part of our perceived reality of the events they portray. In hindsight, we need to consider the times the events occurred, the media’s role in shaping our perceptions and memories of those times, the accuracy of the media portrayals, and the consequent accuracy of our memories.

Edward Morgan’s essay, “Lost History/Lost Democracy: Media Culture and the 1960s,” reviews what he refers to as the media culture of the 1960s. Rather than focusing on a particular media organization or medium, he suggests that in the headlights of the early twenty-first century, the 1960s are reflected in rather dichotomous media images today. At times, the 1960s are framed by corporate and political actors in terms of nostalgia. Often, however, the 1960s are framed by the media in a way that allows current corporate and political interests advancing a political shift to the right to blame the nation’s present ills on the cultural events of that earlier decade. He refers to this latter media frame as a backlash to the 1960s that “trivializes the kind of empowering democratic awakening” of the era.

Although Morgan seems particularly concerned with the latter, each of these very different frames marginalizes 1960s culture. Whether the media are cast as playing a central role in the 1960s or as agents of social control returning us to “the hegemony of consumer-driven capitalism,” Morgan emphasizes that the memory we have of the 1960s is itself a media product, produced strategically by powerful interests in the United States. His conclusions are supported by research suggesting not only that the media do play a role in setting the public agenda, but also that the media’s own agendas are set by powerful social forces, including political leaders and the newsworthiness of events they cover.

While Morgan raises the possibility that the 2008 election of Barack Obama may telegraph a shift in the political pendulum back to the left, his analysis simultaneo
ously asks readers to consider that even this counter-backlash manipulates 1960s images and raises critical concerns about the honesty and integrity of the media’s historical picture of that era and those developing that picture.

Devan Bissonette takes a different approach in his analysis of media images in his essay, “Visualizing the Limits of Democracy in the Silence of the Cold War: The Photography of Life Magazine and the Unraveling of the American Century.” Rather than dealing with media culture generally, Bissonette focuses on a single media organization, Life magazine. Focusing on Life’s photographic images from the 1950s into the 1970s, he considers how editorial decisions were reflected in Life’s portrayal of critical historical events of the era. Bissonette highlights a trajectory of the magazine over those three decades from seeing itself as a purveyor of the “American Century” to viewing itself as a questioner of such an idealized vision of America. Bissonette suggests Life used its pages to raise those questions and present “alternative ideologies.”

Given the shock of events during the period being examined—events such as the violence and conflict surrounding the civil rights movement, demonstrations over the Vietnam War, and other social protests—Life’s staff, according to Bissonette, came to question “the nation’s morality and intellectual prowess.” He suggests that Life magazine’s critical photographic portraits of government actors emerged only when the editors felt those actions fell outside societal norms (e.g., the use of intimidation and the denial of citizens’ lawful rights). At the same time, he suggests that the magazine was equally critical of those challenging authority when their actions likewise fell outside acceptable societal norms (such as their use of violence), arguing that the magazine’s social justice frame led it to cast a negative eye on those questioning American authority in a violent rather than a nonviolent manner.

The message with which Bissonette leaves the reader is that Life’s progression through the decades, like that of many of its readers, was a journey of social conscience that led it to become a supporter of social justice. He concludes by asserting that “Life, through its photographs, came to capture the failures of American democracy. . . . If the price of consensus was silence and violence, Life was ready to encourage a new style of unity that was explicitly open to those who respectfully questioned democracy’s shortcomings and sought solutions to reinvigorate the national promise.”

Like Bissonette, Janet Leach and Mitch McKenney focus their attention on a single media organization, the Akron Beacon Journal. In their essay, “‘Of Loss and Learning’: How Anniversary Coverage Affects Understanding of May 4, 1970,” they focus specifically on a single issue of that newspaper, the thirtieth commemoration of the May 4, 1970, shootings at Kent State University. Like Morgan, they offer an analysis of a contemporary media portrayal of a historical event. Unlike both Morgan and Bissonette, however, Leach and McKenney do not suggest a subjective media agenda or a predetermined media orientation or reinterpretation of history.
According to their analysis, the newspaper’s editorial and journalistic decisions were directed toward objectivity and reflected a conscious decision not to take a position on what happened at Kent State in May 1970. The editors instead wanted to educate readers and put the Kent State events into context. They explain the editorial process and decision making that went into a conscious attempt at objectivity, as in the assignment of journalists who were either born after 1970 or were too young to have firsthand knowledge of the events portrayed. But they also assert that the reporters “knew it would be a risk if their work contradicted the existing paradigm surrounding the shootings.”

Whereas Bissonette discusses the editorial decisions and philosophy of a media organization over decades, Leach and McKenney focus on the editorial processes pertaining to a single issue. This is not to suggest that the latter study is less important than the former. As they assert, a single issue’s “anniversary coverage serves as a lens through which to examine the past” and helps readers “reevaluate their impressions and understanding of important historic events.” Interestingly, like Bissonnette’s assertion that the staff of Life magazine was influenced by its coverage of historic events, Leach and McKenney note that the anniversary coverage of Kent State also changed the Beacon Journal’s reporters “personally and professionally.”

DanielMiller and Suzanne Clark’s chapter, “Wars on Trial in Three Landmark Documentary Films: Night and Fog, Hearts and Minds, and Taxi to the Dark Side,” returns us from an analysis of objective reporting to assessment of conscious media attempts at taking a position. They assess three documentary films that cover three different wars: Night and Fog (1955), covering World War II; Hearts and Minds (1975), covering the Vietnam War; and Taxi to the Dark Side (2007), covering the war in Afghanistan. Assessing the images presented in those films, they explain how three different filmmakers cast a critical eye on wartime events—specifically human rights abuses—that occurred during those wars. The films reviewed documented war atrocities, but also are a stark reminder that such abuses still occur. The social commentary in the films analyzed by Miller and Clark didn’t challenge the government’s authority to wage war or the potential necessity of war. Rather, it specifically challenged wartime actions that exceeded the bounds of moral acceptability, such as the circumvention of human rights by means of abuse, torture, and more extreme crimes against humanity.

While Bissonette suggests Life magazine came to critically evaluate government injustice during the tumult of the 1950s through the 1970s, Miller and Clark discuss how filmmakers questioned not just authority but also the inaction of ordinary citizens, who were perhaps complacent during the perpetration of abuses by those in authority. Miller and Clark show us how the media can be more than mere purveyors of social justice, as referenced by Bissonette, by reflecting social conscience. That is, the media can lead us to question not merely our nation’s actions but also our own action (or inaction) as members of a nation.
In this context, it is interesting for the reader to look at these essays in cross-section, examining their analyses of media treatments at the point of intersection when the media either take a position or do not take a position in their portrayals of groups engaged in societal conflict—specifically powerful societal interests and those who challenge them. That point of intersection is most pronounced during contentious times—and the times examined in these essays were tumultuous.

Although the authors of the chapters in part two leave their readers to ponder the extent of the long-term impact of the media portrayals discussed, they do remind them that, as Morgan says, “the wider public typically encounters both protest and the target of protest through the visual and interpretive filters of the media.” Our memories of events are largely mediated ones. This is particularly true for events for which we have no direct personal experience—and that accounts for most of history.

In recollecting past events, the authors of these essays leave us with a more implicit, but no less important consideration: although we see events as framed by the media, we also interpret them through our own social and psychological filters. Therefore, although media portrayals can be lauded or criticized, the long-term effects of the events they portray may be attributable as much to the audience as to the media.

Perhaps we give the media too much credit for change or stability. Our failure to engage in civic life may be attributable to our own malaise rather than to the media’s encouragement of such passivity. If we think of the 1960s with nostalgia rather than remembering the social upheaval, perhaps it is because that is the recollection we choose rather than the recollection forced on us by the media. If we acquiesce to such developments as free speech zones, a lack of universal health care for all citizens or of social support for those who are less fortunate, military control of media coverage, electronic surveillance, USA PATRIOT Act searches of library patron reading materials, and the reemergence of corporate monopolization and of the deregulation that encourages it, perhaps it is because we choose not to see the blemishes of our society that Bissonette references. Perhaps we refuse to accept any blame for those blemishes, as the films reviewed by Miller and Clark emphasize. Perhaps we simply want to blame past decades for them, as Morgan stresses.

If we do not accept blame for societal flaws or call for beneficial social change, it may be because we neither are nor wish to be any more socially conscious than we were when fear drove us to acquiesce to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s, and the failure of our justice system to push for convictions of those responsible for the murder of innocent students at Kent State University in 1970.

In short, the essays in this section suggest that while we may have lived through tumultuous times, they did not create tumultuous change. That possibility does not diminish the scholarly debate that these essays spur, however. We always need to be aware of the influence media have on us, especially on our views of important political
and cultural events. We can learn from revisiting media images such as those examined in these essays. As we learn, reflect, and remember, perhaps we will find ways to use the media to help remedy the social ills that exist today, rather than blaming the media for them. Then we may not come to marginalize the fight for civil liberties as the same old 1960s complaints, or regard protests against war as anti-American, or demean ideals such as peace and love as naïve and silly notions of youth angst.

If we are to continue to learn from past mistakes, we need to recognize that improving society requires assessing what we did right and what we did wrong. It requires us to correct misinterpretations—whether media induced or otherwise. Learning, reflecting, remembering, and, at times, revising history are an important exercise in the attempt to make ourselves and our society better. That is the goal of these chapters. Indeed, it is the goal of this book and of the symposium that spawned it.

Notes