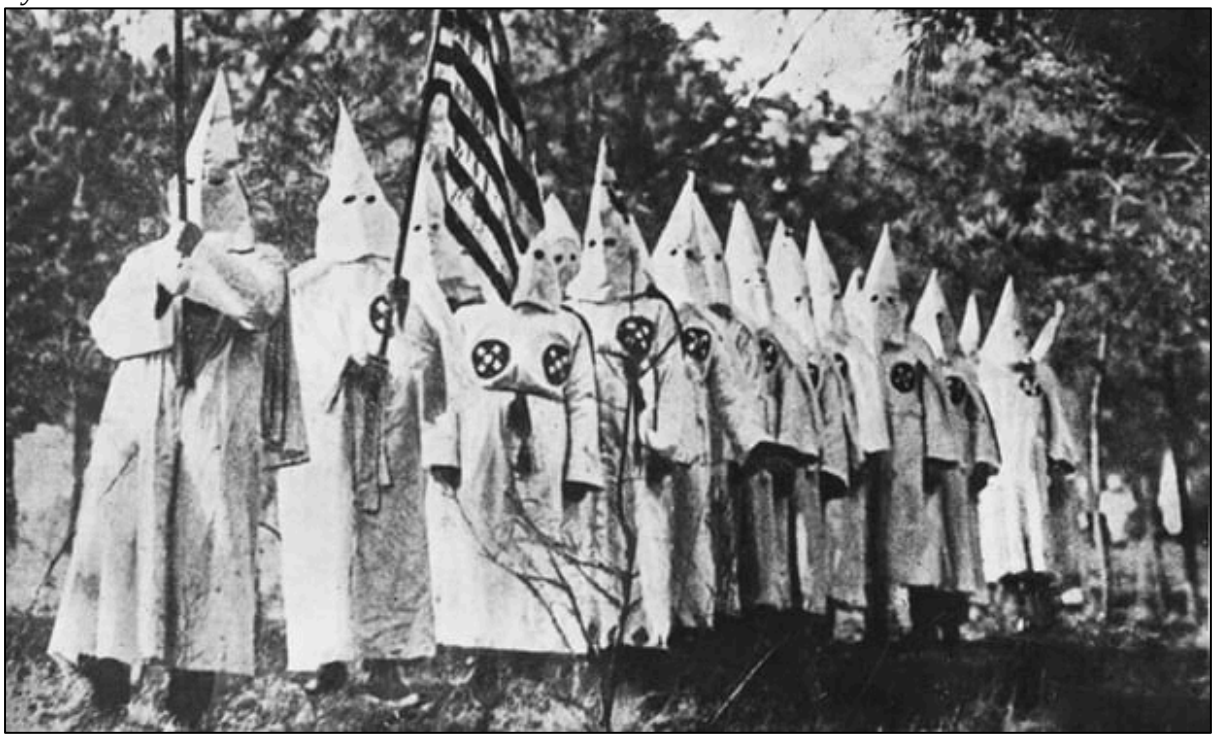
theguardian

The media and the Ku Klux Klan: a debate that began in the 1920s

Dr Felix Harcourt, author of Ku Klux Kulture, breaks down the 'mutually beneficial' relationship between the Klan and the media

Tue 6 Mar 2018
By Lois Beckett



A 1930 photo of members of the Ku Klux Klan. Photograph: Henry Guttmann/Getty Images

In the 1920s, the membership of the Ku Klux Klan exploded nationwide, thanks in part to its coverage in the news media. One newspaper exposé is estimated to have helped the Klan gain hundreds of thousands of members.

Dr Felix Harcourt, a professor of history at Austin College and the author of Ku Klux Kulture, breaks down what he calls the "mutually beneficial" relationship between the Klan and the press – and explains how much the debate that raged over coverage of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s mirrors today's arguments.

We're looking at the debate that is happening in the media right now over how to deal with white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements. You looked at the same debate that was happening almost 100 years ago. Can you set the scene for us?

In 1921, the New York World ran a three-week front page exposé of the Klan: daily denunciations of its ideology, of its activities, of its hooded secrecy, and its propensity

to violence. They managed to get virtually every major New York representative on record in opposition to the Klan. They ultimately spark a congressional hearing into the Klan's growing power. By some estimates it boosts the World's circulation by over 100,000 readers. It is syndicated to 17 other newspapers and sparks similar exposés around the country. But some have estimated that while the World picks up 100,000 readers, the Klan's gain is in the hundreds of thousands of new members – reportedly even cutting out membership applications from the New York World stories to join this organization they were just now hearing about.

So they're saying, "Here is the Klan's secret membership application form. Isn't it terrible that this is what hate looks like in the United States?" and people cut that out of their newspapers and say, "I'm going to join."

Indeed, yes.

Why didn't something similar play out during an earlier period of Klan activity?

To some extent, it's changing newspaper styles. By the time the 20s come along, there's been a tremendous move towards tabloid and ballyhoo journalism. And, effectively, the coverage of the Klan fit perfectly into that trend. It made for striking images on the front pages of papers. It drew lots of eyeballs. And the Klan was entirely aware of this. They were very careful to stage-manage events so as to draw maximum attention, and they made a concerted effort to invite journalists but then took care not to let journalists get too close – so as to "protect the secrets" ostensibly, to protect the mythos. But this is all a tactic of theirs –they need the press attention, but have to maintain their mystique.

So the Klan was aware of the media context it was operating in?

Very aware. They know that pictures of the Klan – clear, closeup pictures – are very desirable for a lot of newspapers. So they set up their own press photographer and then sell those photos to the local newspapers. They know that certain kinds of events are going to draw more press attention, which is why you see continually escalating events to have the largest fiery cross in the United States or the fleet of aeroplanes with electric crosses hanging from underneath. And there really is this emphasis on showmanship.

How did the debates over the media coverage play out initially and then change?

The tendency is to follow the New York World model of hyperbolic denunciation. Increasingly, though, there is an awareness that the Klan wields very effective methods of regulating the kinds of coverage it receives. Sometimes they would use physical threats. The editors of the Messenger [an African-American magazine] received a severed hand in the mail. But more often, because they grew in power and influence, they were able to wield the boycott as a very, very effective tool – and increasingly advertising, to promise advertising dollars to publications that followed at least a neutral line on the organization.

Did that focus on advertising dollars pay off?

Almost certainly. They hire big name agencies early on in the 20s. You see very widely circulated advertisements claiming, "This is the truth about the Klan. Don't listen to what the press is saying." A lot of particularly white mainstream dailies are increasingly aware that while denouncing the Klan can gain some readers, it can also lose them readers. The way to benefit is, it seems, to cover the Klan in a fairly neutral light. The problem with that of course is that by attempting to be impartial what you're really doing is presenting the Klan as normalized and sanitized –controversial, yes, but a popular and widely accepted organization.

So what groups and communities are contesting the way that the KKK is portrayed in the media?

Catholic, Jewish and black newspapers pushed back. Some in the black press think that the best thing to do is to deny the Klan any publicity whatsoever – what was referred to at the time as "dignified silence". Others, however, compare the Klan to a wildfire. Cutting the oxygen off will eventually kill it, but that doesn't mean it's not going to do tremendous damage in the meantime. And so other papers argue that there needs to be a far more active press campaign. So rather than presenting the story of a popular day at the Texas State Fair dedicated to the Klan, for example, a publication like the Pittsburgh Courier would instead focus on planned rallies that descended into violence and riots – to try to combat this idea that was being peddled implicitly in mainstream white newspapers that while the Klan was controversial, it was successful.

Was humor or mockery used by journalists?

You see a lot of political cartoons lampooning the Klan, but one of the most prominent theater critics of the time noted that the Klan could prosper in a cloud of custard pies. This mockery wasn't really having any effect on Klan membership. Quite often Klan members and Klan sympathizers saw those criticisms as evidence of having the right enemies, that they were on the right track. And so these critiques, ultimately, often end up being counterproductive.

You said that, eventually, the Klan moved beyond even favorable mainstream press coverage and made their own outlets.

The national Klan leadership create their own national newspaper syndicate called the Kourier, with a K, which, by the beginning of 1925, claimed a circulation of over one and a half million readers. The likelihood is that that is an inflated number, as with any numbers the Klan claimed. But even if we say that there was only half a million readers that would still make it one of the most widely read weekly publications in the United States to that point. It was a really valuable form of propaganda to effectively replace existing sources of news with this publication that used local news but also brought a national news and presented all of it through this Klannish ideological lens.

What kind of national stories would run in a Klan paper?

The relationship between the US and Mexico. Presidential politics. Balanced by the idea that this is meant to be a family publication, so you would have a lengthy denunciation of Catholic influence in America on one page and on the next page a recipe for pimento toast. A page for young readers with a joke. It had crosswords and puzzles ridiculously called the fiery crossword.

You've been describing an ascendant organization running its own newspaper and explosion in membership. What happened? Why didn't it last?

There is kind of a standard narrative that says that outside pressure and particularly scandal revolve around one of the major Klan leaders in Indiana who sexually assaults a woman who then kills herself. These scandals ultimately discredit the Klan and the public eye and lead to their collapse. Alternatively there are arguments that after the 1924 Immigration Act is passed the Klan has to some extent lost its reason for being and kind of dissolves back into the ether. These traditional narratives are problematic though because none of them really deal with the fact that while the Klan as an organization goes away the Klan as a movement remains entirely present because the people who had made up the Klan – the millions of members and the millions of sympathizers – don't suddenly change their minds about their beliefs. And so it's less accurate to say that the Klan collapses than it is to say that the Klan evolves into new forms.

What effect did the debate over the Klan and the coverage of the Klan in the 20s have on the media going forward? Did their approaches to this kind of story change?

It had remarkably very little impact. It's kind of a sad story. There was a crusade in newspapers through the 20s, who took bold stances against the Klan, even if those bold stances ultimately were not very effective in combating it. But the fact that these stances had been taken under a number of these papers which had been awarded Pulitzer prizes allowed the press by really the 1930s onward to look back and congratulate themselves on having defeated the Klan.

So newspapers looked back and they saw their Pulitzer prize-winning investigations and they ignored the fact that coverage had in fact grown the Klan's membership.

Yes. There is very little historical awareness of the reality of the relationship between the Klan and the press, which was really a relationship of mutual exploitation, more than anything.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.