

Extended Abstract

Scribes of the Scaffold: A Systematic Review of Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Press-Lynching Nexus, 1892–2025

Narratives legitimizing racial terror against Black Americans were produced through social processes before circulating rhetorically. News media institutions were uniquely positioned to construct socially meaningful representations of racial violence, given their cultural gatekeeping power and technical affordances for mass persuasion. But how did news media make sense of racial violence, and how have scholars studied this coverage? Scholarship from Wells-Barnett (1895) to Brundage (2005) and Lewis (2021) has treated journalism's symbiotic relationship with lynching since its inception. Yet, journalistic coverage of racial violence has been studied largely in isolation by scholars of journalism history, sociology, and African American studies. As such, theory and methods treating press coverage of racial violence lack an organizing review. This dissertation-article bridges this historiographical gap by conducting a systematic review to organize past scholarship and ground future work.

Using PRISMA criteria, this review identifies 37 articles across communication, history, and sociology that analyze news coverage of racial violence. Mapping this corpus diachronically, I identify five generations of coverage research: activist origins (1892–1940), academic vacancy (1940–1981), early press-specific studies (1982–2000), cultural framing turn (2000–2015), and the rise of computational analysis (2016–2025). Coding for methods and theory, I show 62% of existing research uses qualitative close reading, while fewer than half take explicit theoretical approaches. Additionally, few studies conduct large-scale computational research, a methodological turn predominantly comprising post-2019 publications. While prior scholarship

conceptually anchors lynching press coverage within Hallin's Sphere of Consensus (Mindich 1998; Perloff 2000), this paradigm remains computationally unmodeled at scale.

To address this gap, I present an integrated forensic framework for analyzing press coverage, originally developed in my Ph.D. dissertation and expanded from a coauthored large-scale analysis (Wells et al. 2025). Operating forensically, this framework identifies dominant narratives, excavates interpretive frames, and computationally maps narrative-frame configurations onto Hallin's Spheres of Consensus, Controversy, and Deviance across 60,000 historical newspaper articles (1805–1963).

References

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