

Huey Long's Race for the Senate:
An Analysis of the Impact of Media Bias on the 1930 Election

**Presented March 21, 2015, at the 2015 Joint Journalism And
Communication History Conference at the Arthur L.
Carter Journalism Institute, New York University**

By the time Huey P. Long entered the 1930 Senate race, he had already earned a reputation throughout the state of Louisiana as a highly controversial figure and radical politician. New Deal scholar Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., aptly summed up Long's appeal: "In his manners, values, and idiom, Huey Long remained a back-country hillbilly. But he was a hillbilly raised to the highest level, preternaturally swift and sharp in intelligence, ruthless in action, and grandiose in vision."¹

During the previous two years, Long had been busy running for and winning the governorship of Louisiana, being charged with and beating impeachment, and gaining national attention in a widely publicized encounter between a pajama-clad Long and a German consul. Despite all of this, Long's popularity grew and, with confidence and cockiness to back him up, he turned his sights to the U.S. Capitol.

Long undertook the Senate campaign while only two years into his post as governor, a move that fueled the ever-growing division of the state's populace into two factions: Longs and anti-Longs. From the start, Long's campaign for a U.S. Senate seat was an effort marred by episodes of name-calling, scandals (including charges of kidnapping against the Long regime) and overall mud-slinging – a circumstance well documented in the state's major journalistic organ, *The (New Orleans) Times-Picayune*.

The 1930 Senate race proved to be a culmination of sorts in the ongoing feud between Long and the state's mainstream media for it was in this campaign that Long,

with the majority of the Louisiana press system against him, relied on his own newspaper, the *Progress*, to disseminate his words. In the words of author Harnett T. Kane, the *Progress* “was the journalistic counterpart of the less-elevated aspects of Huey’s speeches – undependable, gutter low in its ethics, and howlingly popular.”²

The relationship between Huey P. Long and the Louisiana press can be characterized as unstable at the best of times, and explosive at the worst. It is primarily due to this volatile situation that Long was compelled to create his own media outlet, first in the form of circulars (it has been estimated that Long distributed approximately 26 million circulars³ during his political career) and later by starting his own newspaper. Long ally Gerald L.K. Smith commented on the then-governor’s talent as an author of circulars: “Huey Long is the greatest headline writer I have ever seen. His circulars attract, bite, sting and convince. It is difficult to imagine what would happen in America if every human being were to read one Huey Long circular on the same day.”⁴

Though there are many moments in the Long vs. established press war that warrant sharp attention, this research is focusing solely on the 1930 Senate race for the following reasons:

1. First, this move was Long’s attempt to catapult himself onto the national stage with the White House as his ultimate destination. This element alone helps to understand the urgency of the tones adopted by both the Long media machine and the Times-Picayune.
2. Second, in the years leading up to 1930, the newspaper industry in the United States was moving toward a more professionalized stance. The American Society of Newspaper Editors issued its “Code of Ethics” in 1923. This had

significance for many reasons, not the least of which is that it signaled “the growing size, impact and professionalism of journalism.”⁵

3. In correlation with the establishment of ethics’ codes, U.S. newspapers had been shifting since the end of the 19th century from being what author Richard Kaplan calls “mouthpieces of political parties” to a press that practiced “journalism as independent and objective.”⁶

However, Kaplan is quick to note that in the early part of the 20th century, “dailies did not so much expand their coverage of civil society’s diverse opinions as continue to publicize the policies and pronouncements of ‘important’ legitimate speakers from formal political institutions.”⁷

The questions driving this paper are: In an era of increasing attention to journalistic ethics, did *The Times-Picayune* disregard a traditional watchdog stance and instead mount a campaign within its pages to dissuade voters from choosing Huey P. Long for national office? And, if so, can this be linked to Kaplan’s assertion that dailies of this era continued to side with their city’s “important legitimate speakers” rather than offer a fair and balanced account of both political parties?

To this end, this research will examine how the leading Louisiana newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, reported on the 1930 Senate race between Long and incumbent Joseph E. Ransdell. As a basis of comparison, *The New York Times* also will be studied to gain insight into how the national press viewed the campaign. The analysis will cover three areas: the *Picayune*’s coverage of Long in its daily pages (judged on the basis of prominence of articles in the paper, tone of headlines and articles, and contrasting articles in the same edition on campaign rivals), the *Picayune*’s editorials on Long, and

comments and coverage by *The New York Times* on the Senate election. *The New York Times* will serve as the newspaper of record on this matter, providing a foundation for how one segment of the national media portrayed the campaign.

And if I haven't painted a clear picture of the varied responses this particular character, otherwise known as "The Kingfish," elicited in others, let me end with a few choice quotes about the man.

- "It's all very well for us to laugh over Huey, but actually we have to remember ... that he really is one of the two most dangerous men in the country." FDR, 1932 (the "other" being Douglas MacArthur)
- "A child prodigy, he grew up in a middle-class family in Winnfield. He married at nineteen and was a lawyer at twenty-one, a public official at twenty-five, governor at thirty-five. He was dead at forty-two. No one else packed so much drama into so brief a political career." – Glen Jeansonne, Louisiana historian

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Messiah of the Rednecks," *Huey P. Long – Southern Demagogue or American Democrat?*, ed. Henry C. Dethloff (Lafayette, La.: The University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1976) 80.

² Harnett T. Kane, *Huey Long's Louisiana Hayride – The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship, 1928-1940* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Company, 1990) 79.

³ Burton L. Hotaling, "Huey Pierce Long as Journalist and Propagandist," *Journalism Quarterly* 20 (1943): 22.

⁴ Gerald L.K. Smith, "How Come Huey Long?," *The New Republic* 82 (1935): 15.

⁵ Center for Journalism Ethics at the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison. http://journalismethics.info/research_ethics/codes.htm

⁶ Richard Kaplan, "The Origins of Objectivity in American Journalism," *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism Studies*, ed. Stuart Allan (... 2009) 32.

⁷ Kaplan, 35.