

PRESS & MEDIA

Hoover's Hidden Wordsmiths

THE SOURCE: "Friends of the Bureau: Personal Correspondence and the Cultivation of Journalist-Adjuncts by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI" by Matthew Cecil, in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Summer 2011.

AS THE FIRST DIRECTOR OF THE Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover faced a public-relations problem. Amid the centralization of government under FDR's New Deal, some Americans worried that a federal law enforce-

ment agency would develop into a secret police force. To head off such fears, the FBI under Hoover began what became a decades-long effort to court allies in the press.

One of the more unusual aspects of this campaign was the creation of a five-agent ghostwriting division that cultivated journalists with ostensibly personal letters from Hoover. The correspondence unit, housed in the FBI's crime records division, churned out thousands of

these missives during Hoover's 48-year tenure at the helm of the FBI and its predecessor, the Bureau of Investigation, writes Matthew Cecil, a journalism and communications scholar at South Dakota State University.

The correspondence unit took the lead in recruiting new "journalist-adjuncts" to the FBI's side by engaging potentially friendly reporters in a wide-ranging correspondence. As letters were exchanged, Hoover might offer condolences at the loss of a family member or inquire about his correspondent's wife—on occasion even maintain a separate correspondence with her—all through the pen of a ghost. Hoover met in person with some of his supposed pen pals, but more often



J. Edgar Hoover was a polarizing figure, but thanks in part to the fawning coverage of the FBI's "journalist-adjuncts," he had plenty of admirers.

than not letters and information leaks sufficed to give the quarry the impression that he was a member of Hoover's inner circle. Grateful reporters offered up tips and glowing press mentions of the FBI. "Thank God that a man like J. Edgar Hoover is the head of the FBI," read one ringing endorsement in *The American Magazine* in 1955. "He is the greatest bulwark against the insidious Communist menace that is casting a shadow over this great land of ours."

The unit sometimes suggested particular articles for "special correspondents" to write. In 1950, after the publication of a book criticizing the FBI's spying and other activities, Hoover's letter writers convinced Morris Ernst, the general counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union, to publish a defense of the bureau in *Readers' Digest*. "The article's publication provided Hoover with cover from the Left that the bureau cited for decades thereafter as evidence of its restraint in civil liberties matters," Cecil notes. Some journalists writing about the FBI even submitted their work to Hoover for his review prior to publication.

Those who believed themselves to be part of Hoover's inner circle took their relationship with one of Washington's most powerful men seriously. Writer Courtney Ryley Cooper collaborated with Hoover on articles, books, and film scripts over seven years, and was the frequent recipient of letters ghostwritten by the correspondence unit. But when an article he wrote under Hoover's name about the surfeit of criminal activ-

ity in car-friendly campgrounds was loudly criticized by defenders of the tourism industry, the unit cut Cooper off. He committed suicide within a year, and his wife alleged that he did so because of the depression he experienced after Hoover snubbed him.

Hoover has gone down in history as a master manipulator, but the story of this unit went largely untold. The group, said one disgruntled former FBI administrator, was the "greatest letter-writing bureau in the history of the United States."

PRESS & MEDIA

How the Fire Starts

THE SOURCE: "All the News You Want to Hear: The Impact of Partisan News Exposure on Political Participation" by Susanna Dilliplane, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer 2011.

THE CHARGED RHETORIC OF conservative Bill O'Reilly and liberal Rachel Maddow have won their television news shows sizable audiences. Do their fighting words actually inspire fans to put down their remotes and become politically active? According to Susanna Dilliplane, a PhD candidate in communications at the University of Pennsylvania, the answer is yes. The wrinkle is that it matters a great deal what else the viewers watch.

Dilliplane studied the television news viewing habits of more than 10,000 Americans who identified as Republican or Democratic during the 2008 presiden-

tial election campaign. They all watched shows that reflected their views with about the same frequency. But when they switched to other offerings, Republicans were more likely to view programs headlined by partisans of the opposing stripe, while Democrats were more likely to tune in to neutral shows, such as PBS's *News-Hour With Jim Lehrer*.

Partisans of both parties who frequently watched like-minded shows became politically active earlier in the campaign cycle than others, Dilliplane found. But partisans who watched any conflicting news sources—taking in both conservative firebrand Glenn Beck and liberal flame-thrower Keith Olbermann, for instance—were much slower to volunteer to hand out campaign buttons, post signs on their front lawns, or donate money to candidates. Even those who viewed neutral programs on top of their partisan fare were quicker to jump into the political fray.

Differing tastes in partisan news shows didn't have much to do with who showed up at the polls, however. Survey respondents voted at about the same rate, regardless of political orientation. The biggest impact of partisan news, Dilliplane concludes, may be that it sparks the people who are least likely to be familiar with the other side's case to get involved in political campaigns early. That may be good news for candidates eager for zealous volunteers, she says, but it's hardly ideal for citizens looking for a more nuanced political culture.