



U.S. Civil Rights and the Power of the Press

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During the 1950s and 1960s, America underwent a major transition in racial attitude, tradition, and policy. The people, organizations, and events--collectively the civil rights movement--which initiated the transition were presented to America and the world by the press. During this time, some segments of the American press came to be thought of as allies of the movement and facilitators of movement objectives.

Civil rights leaders, journalists who covered the movement, social scientists, and historians generally agree that the press did not start the civil rights movement. However, they do contend that the movement

would have taken longer to achieve many of its goals or would not have succeeded at all if not for press interest and coverage.

Press interest in and coverage of the civil rights movement and the movement's need and use of the press led to a mutually beneficial relationship. That relationship provided the press with one of the most important stories of the century as well as the opportunity to stimulate a self-correcting capacity (discussed later) within American society. Similarly, the relationship facilitated the movement by providing the impetus for the popular and governmental support needed as a basis for social change--in this case civil rights for black Americans.

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