

Interview with Kathleen Wickham, Chair of the Humanities and Social Sciences



This isn't your first visit to Rennes, could you tell me a bit about your last visit and what brought you back?

In 2016, I was here on a research trip. I went to St. Malo to do additional research on the Paul Guihard case, the Agence France Presse (AFP) reporter who was murdered in 1962 during the James Meredith integration crisis in Mississippi. I had done an academic article on it and I was expanding it into a book when I had the opportunity to go to St. Malo to meet Paul's brother, Alain Guihard, who now lives in Lyon. I was also able to give lectures at the Pantheon Sorbonne University and in Rennes on the topic during that time. It really helped to forge a connection between Brittany and the University of Mississippi.

After my visit in 2016, I was told about this position called Chair of the Humanities and Social Sciences, where they invite visiting professors to come for a month or two. I applied for that and received all the approvals here and at home, including a sabbatical.

This time around I have a set of lectures scheduled, and Rennes 2 and the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) have evoked the subject of coordinating a student and faculty mobility program in a more formal manner. We haven't worked out all the details yet, but Ole Miss is very interested in Rennes for our students. This visit is meant to hopefully kick off the beginnings of an exchange program.

Your 2017 book, *We Believed We Were Immortal*, is about the murdered journalist Paul Guihard and the other reporters who were present during the 1962 Mississippi integration riots. What led you to take on such an ambitious story?

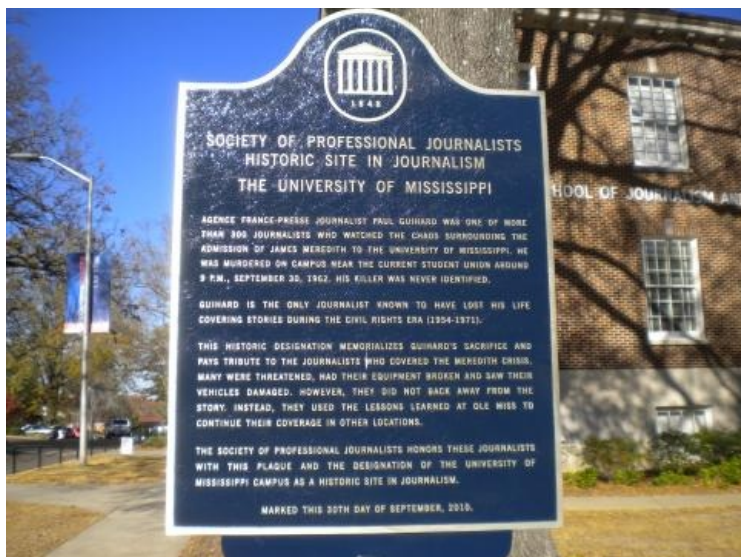
Some would say I became obsessed with Paul Guihard and the story. It was during the 40th anniversary commemoration that I learned about his murder. He was murdered on campus, shot in the back from about a foot away. In all of the in books I was reading at the time, the text surrounding his murder was maybe as long as a paragraph or a page. I felt highly offended that an unsolved civil rights murder of a journalist was given so little space, and it happened right on my campus. I started to go through all the material I could find. I obtained the FBI files and all the related documentation that led me to make my first connection with Alain Guihard, Paul's brother, through Google of all things.

Once the academic article came out, I consulted with my dean, and we decided that we really needed to talk about the more than 300 reporters who were on campus that day in 1962. I had a list of them provided by the FBI files. Of course, since the timing of all this happened almost 50 years ago, simply finding these people today was going to be a challenge. With the help of Google and my publisher, Larry Wells, we managed to turn the case inside out.

We then narrowed it down to twelve people who could speak for the 300, twelve different stories. We have included the story of Sidna Brower, a Memphis-reared editor of the student newspaper; also that of Dorothy Gilliam, who was the first African-American reporter for the Washington Post; and that of Claude Sitton of The New York Times among others. We have the experiences of other black reporters who were banned from covering the story, for their own safety according to authorities at the time.

That day in 1962, these journalists were threatened, they had their equipment destroyed and they were attacked. But they were there to cover the story of the first African-American to integrate any public school in the state of Mississippi after an 18-month battle in the courts. The US Army had to be called in to stop the riot in the end.

So this has been my focus, my obsession so to speak for a while. I was the faculty advisor for a student chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, and we received a grant to install a memorial bench in Paul's honor. The following year, the campus was dedicated a National Historic Site in Journalism, in honour of Paul and the 300 journalists who were on campus.



You said that you were in contact with Paul's brother, Alain are you still in contact with him?

Yes, we'll be recording a podcast on the Paul Guihard story with the AFP on April 4. Since Paul was an AFP reporter, they want to celebrate his heroism and his sacrifice. Alain was hoping to join us for this occasion but, unfortunately, he won't be able to make it this time around.

It is part of a new effort by AFP to do historical podcasts of events that made them famous. We supplied them with photos and videos that we had, and Alan has given them some information to contact him for anything that they might want to add to the story. It's really a great initiative in the sense that it can help to preserve the memory of events like this that might otherwise be lost over time.

This story is the topic of one of the many lectures that you've given since you've been here. Could you tell us more about the lectures you've held for Rennes 2 students and what upcoming ones are planned?

Well, I've had the opportunity to speak on a range of topics related to the American media. I gave a lecture on the state of American news media last week and I've also done several presentations on fake news. In another lecture, I presented an overview of the civil rights movement and the media. Of course, I've done one on the Paul Guihard case. I'm doing another one on, 'Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965', a 14-part documentary about the Civil Rights Movement. It's really interesting because no one has ever done an academic paper on that documentary, except for people who study it as a documentary. I stumbled across tapes of the pre-production sessions, which gave me access to people like Julian Bond through audiotape. I'm also working on that for an academic article.

Larry Wells and I are also doing a joint presentation on William Faulkner and Michael Dorman, a Newsday reporter who came looking for Faulkner in 1962. Unfortunately Faulkner had died three months prior, but he interviewed some of the other members of the Faulkner family.

During your lecture on the state of American news media you said that, "If we lose journalism, we lose democracy." What are some of the ways in which journalism students can help to keep a standard in the industry against things like fake news or misinformation?

I actually told the students this morning that critical review of the material you're getting is of the utmost importance. Know who the source of the material is. I would say that if you really wanted factual information go to legacy media organizations, The New York Times, the three major networks, etc., because they have a history of endeavoring to be as impartial as possible in their news coverage. As to other news sites, always look at them very critically. For example, I signed up to receive daily examples of fake news from the AFP to be better identify these types of articles. Question everything, including the source. Go to two different sources, go to legacy sites and go to other sources and ask yourself, where's the truth? Make an effort to be informed. Don't just accept it.

You also spoke about corporate buyouts and the impact they have in decreasing local media sources. What advice would you give to journalism students in light of these recent changes to the industry?

The corporate issue has to do with the fact that hedge funds and other companies saw that journalism can pay big dividends. But they forgot that we're in the journalism business not just in the advertising business, and we let them. The corporate entities, as a rule, have traditionally been more likely to control the editorials for national political offices and left everything else up to the local people and that has worked.

I would say to students today: verify, verify, verify, and be transparent. Always be a truth-searcher and recognize that your first obligation is to your public and not your employer. That's our trust and credibility. It's like a slow dance, and if one person stumbles on a slow dance, you can both go down. But I also remind my students about their reputation. If you wreck your reputation, you're gone. So you owe your allegiance to the public to get the stories.

French President Emmanuel Macron is seeking to establish a European agency to control and regulate real vs. fake news. Could you see something like that happening in the US?

I just heard about that as well, but I don't see that happening in the U.S. I don't think that many people would support governmental control of the news. We don't have licensing rules for journalists for the same reason. We don't do it because who is going to do it, the government? The same entity that you, as a journalist, is charged with covering? Personally, I'll take my First Amendment chances. And yet, I know that there's always been a big push for what is called a shield law, to pass a federal shield law. I can't ask someone to pass a law just for me.

What is a shield law?

A shield law is designed to protect reporters' privileges. It would be similar to if someone confesses to a priest that they committed a crime, the priest doesn't have to reveal it. There are certain classes of people who want to give journalists the same kind of protection. But it's a slippery slope.

For me, it comes from the government so I think I'm in the minority on that issue. You give a little bit and then what happens. You give a little bit and then what happens, you may end up giving more and more, and the next thing you know... Those who don't like us, would like us to be licensed. They say well, lawyers are

licensed by the Bar Association..., but they're charged with the law. Doctors are licensed..., but they are charged with your health.

Any other new projects on the horizon?

I'm working on a documentary with Larry Wells. His late wife was Dean Faulkner Wells (niece of William Faulkner). Larry knows many family stories that don't make it into the academic articles. We have finished filming and the editor is working on the final cuts of the documentary, with Larry narrating the stories of living in the Falkner house and Rowan Oak, William's home. We're wrapping that up now. We have half of the documentary done that we are showing while here, and we'll have the rest ready soon. I am the producer of it, and it's sponsored by the Ole Miss School of Journalism and New Media.



Larry Wells and Kathleen Wickham

01 April 2019