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The Passion of Ken Williams: The Double Life of a Mayor, the Newspaper that Brought Him Down, and the Story of Journalism in America

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The Passion of Ken Williams: The Double Life of a Mayor, the Newspaper that Brought Him
Down, and the Story of Journalism in America

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Abstract

In November 2007, a team of reporters from the *Benton County Daily Record* published an expose revealing that Ken Williams, the mayor of Centerton, Arkansas, had been living a double life. In his former life as Don LaRose, he was a preacher in the Northeast, who one day vanished without a trace. His wild saga includes Satanists, truth serums, and a supposed murder. The *Benton County Daily Record* confronted the former reverend several times before he finally confessed to his double life. The next morning, he resigned as mayor, saying that the decisions he made were for the protection of his family in the 1970s, before eventually pleading guilty in 2009 to a felony charge of forgery. To this day, the reporters say that the only person who knows the truth is Williams, himself; yet, since his disappearance in the 1970s, he has maintained a single narrative, warts and all, of kidnapping and brainwashing. As a case study, the story of Ken Williams investigates the role of local journalists as watchdogs over official misconduct and the dilemma journalists face when a public official firmly and repeatedly presents an alternate reality at odds with verified facts. This case study explores questions about myth and self-presentation. This project crafts a book proposal to catalogue the riveting narrative of Ken Williams and the *Benton County Daily Record* within the context of American and Arkansan history in the early aughts.

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Ken Williams, Don LaRose, and the *Benton County Daily Record*

In 2007, Centerton, Arkansas mayor Ken Williams was at the top of his game—his town’s population had nearly tripled since he took the office in 2001, and he had just been re-elected in a landslide victory. Charismatic and beloved by many of his constituents, Ken Williams seemed to embody the ideal small-town American. Until the week of Thanksgiving 2007, nobody would have even guessed that Williams was a fraud. Reporters from the local newspaper, the *Benton County Daily Record*, called him to ask if Williams knew anything about Don LaRose, a preacher from the Northeast who went missing in the 1980s. The mayor denied it, and when the *Daily Record* called him again the next morning, he denied it a second time.

The truth was Ken Williams *did* know Don LaRose because he *was* Don LaRose—a preacher who had faked his disappearance, claimed to be hunted by Satanists, stolen the identity of a dead teenager, and living a second life in Northwest Arkansas as Ken Williams, eventually climbing his way up to be elected mayor. In a day, Williams would lose his job; in a year, he would be charged with felony-level forgery based on his second identity. And one newspaper—the *Benton County Daily Record*—broke the story of Williams’ dual identity, revelations that led to Williams’ spectacular downfall. This story of Williams, the *Benton County Daily Record*, and the city of Centerton embodies the role of journalism in holding institutions accountable, as well examining the dilemma journalists face when a public official firmly and repeatedly presents an alternate reality at odds with verified facts. As such, this case examines how journalists deal with “personal truths” and “alternative facts” presented by public figures. This project is a book proposal, addressing each of these questions while also offering the remarkable narrative of Williams and the *Daily Record* reporters.

The story of Williams and the *Daily Record* tackles numerous themes indicative of the American experience. Williams, himself, can be interpreted as a sort of real world, modern day Jay Gatsby: a man who abandoned his past mistakes, adopted a new name, and became the mayor in the name of the American Dream. At its core, it's also a small-scale political drama, as Williams feuded with other local leaders, his city council, and the Arkansas government, all for the sake of making Centerton a bigger, grander city. Tangentially, it's also a true crime story of a small town and its inhabitants. The duality of the two personalities—Williams and LaRose—delve into some of the basic notions of the human condition. Did Don LaRose really *become* Ken Williams, or was that merely the persona he chose to portray himself as? Today, presentation (specifically, the way we present ourselves on social media) is a fundamental notion of the human psyche and the very meaning of identity. Erving Goffman argued that each individual presents himself or herself in the best light in an effort to win others over, offering only a fraction of reality. Williams, years before Facebook and Instagram would hit their stride, began developing his narrative—all on donlarose.com. The website contained a self-proclaimed story “filled with excitement, tension, murder, intimidation, and much more.” Williams and his alternative identity clashed with the legal realities his office held and the field of journalism that is based on such a legal system. The journalists, basing their notion of the truth on the legal system, wrote an article that led to Williams’ downfall. Kovach and Rosenstiel say that journalism’s first obligation is to the truth but note the complexity of such a statement (2014). “By the beginning of the twentieth century, journalists began to realize that journalism and reality—or accuracy and truth—were not so easily equated,” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). For example, Williams still clings to his story, despite his conviction on fraud charges. But the reporters on the story, themselves, still say to this day that the only person who knows the

complete truth is Ken Williams, himself, who has perpetuated this perplexing personal narrative across decades.

Given the variety of themes, ideas, characters, and chapters in the story, I am crafting a book proposal for the potential to tell the story of Williams as a work of literary journalism. The proposal consists of a thorough layout of the themes, characters, and summary of the potential full-length book, plus the first two chapters of the book. Upon completion, I plan to submit this work to publishing houses for consideration.

Research Question

As the journalists at the *Benton County Daily Record* fought for an objective truth, the *Daily Record* makes its stance clear—Williams was a liar, and he fraudulently deceived the city of Centerton. Williams began crafting his own personal truth—for the whole world to read, on donlarose.com. But Williams, although admitting to the *Daily Record* that “some of the account is fictional or slightly inaccurate,” maintained the story throughout the journalists’ investigation and in the years since, albeit discussing the story less and less frequently. This case study provides further insight to the role of accountability journalism in examining official misconduct and the dilemma journalists face when a public official firmly and repeatedly presents an alternate reality at odds with verified facts. In the United States, the Trump administration plagued journalists with “alternative facts” and questions of alternate realities to objective truths. The juxtaposition between the journalists’ pursuit of an objective truth compared to Williams’ fabrication of a persona asks the question, how do journalists, particularly at the local level with limited resources, pursue the objective and absolute truth in the face of subjective, emotionally based testimonies and falsehoods?

Literature Review

Centerton and Arkansas in the Late Twentieth Century

Following World War II, Arkansas was known widely as an impoverished state of blue-collar workers (Whayne, et al., 2019). Between 1967 and 1980, manufacturing production grew by more than 300 percent in Arkansas, while it only increased by about fifty percent in the greater United States (Whayne, et al., 2019). Around then, in the northwest region of the state, Sam Walton established a grocery company he named Wal-Mart in 1962; seventeen years later, Walmart “was doing a billion dollars’ worth of business a year,” (Rosen, 2009), establishing Northwest Arkansas as a region of business. Business was booming in Northwest Arkansas, at a rate even faster than the nation as a whole: between 1970 and 2015, income per capita in Northwest Arkansas grew annually by about two percent, versus a rate of 1.4% for the U.S, meaning that “at these rates, Northwest Arkansas doubles its income every 35 years, while the U.S. needs 50 years to do the same,” (Gascon & Varley, 2015).

Centerton, platted in 1900, made its name known the same year as “the Apple Capital of the World,” when the Arkansas Black, a dark apple native to Centerton, received first prize in the Paris World’s Fair (Teske, 2018). Later, however, years of crop failure led Centerton’s agriculture industry to shrink. Historians Diane and Ray Hanley write that, “The familiar pattern of small-town Benton county was repeated in Centerton—the railroad pulled out, the apples failed, and the town never grew” (1998). It took decades for Centerton to hit its stride, but when the rest of Northwest Arkansas’ population grew around the 1970s, Centerton’s population grew dramatically with the rest of Northwest Arkansas. Ozark counties grew an average of 42% in the 1970s, particularly in its rural population. By the turn of the twentieth century, Centerton became

Arkansas' fastest-growing cities (Harris, P.), growing more than one thousand percent in population between 1990 and 2010.

American Journalism, The *Benton County Daily Record*, and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

Though journalism has its roots throughout modern world history, the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries have seen radical changes in the role of media, particularly in innovations like telegraphs, radio, television news, and social media (Starr, 2004). "By the late 1920s, the media in America and other advanced societies formed a new constellation of power," (Starr, 2004). Starr notes that, particularly in the United States and other countries like it, the ability of the press to establish itself as separate from the government, while also embracing innovation of new outlets, has permitted the role of journalism to sustain itself, independently (2004).

Originating as the *Bentonville Democrat* in 1886, the *Benton County Daily Record* was one of the leading newspapers in Northwest Arkansas, before being absorbed to the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, a division of the greater *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Abrams, 2011). The *Benton County Daily Record* changed ownership numerous times throughout its 125-plus-year history (Abrams, 2011). The *Democrat-Gazette* was once two separate newspapers: the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*, which went through decades of competition with one another (Stephens, 2015). Eventually, in 1991, the *Gazette* was sold to Gannett, which former *Gazette* writer Donna Lampkin Stephens called "the death of the newspaper," (2015). One writer called it "the paper of record. It was a chronicle. And that was drummed into your skull from the minute you got there, that this is history," (Reed, 2009). In 2015, the *Benton County Daily Record* was sold to WEHCO Media, the parent company of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Abrams, 2011). Eventually, WEHCO and Stephens Media combined to form

Northwest Arkansas Newspapers, a conglomeration of Northwest Arkansas papers including the *Daily Record*, *Rogers Morning News*, *Springdale Morning News*, and the *Northwest Arkansas Times* (Abrams, 2011), which many Arkansans felt was an irresponsible move; Stephens wrote, “Corporate journalism killed the *Arkansas Gazette*” as the news conglomerate put its profits ahead of journalism, absorbing any paper it could, including the *Benton County Daily Record* (2015). “Traditionally, journalists in the twentieth century often talked about there being a firewall between the news and the business side of news companies,” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

The American Dream

Since its inception, the United States has been associated with opportunity, but the phrase “American Dream” dates to the 1930s (Samuel, 2012). To many Americans, the idea of the American Dream boils down to several facets of economic stability and social mobility: the United States was the land of opportunity, and anybody could pull themselves up by their bootstraps to become financially successful. Lawrence R. Samuel argues that these definitions “do not come close to capturing the undeniable power of the American Dream, making it seem more like a wish list than what I believe to be is the guiding mythology of the most powerful civilization in history” (2012). George Gallup called the “traditional” American Dream the idea that “every man can become a millionaire,” but by the 1940s, he said it had changed to the idea of opportunity and success (Samuel, 2012). Jared Phillips described the Ozarks as having “an air of possibility” for the back-to-the-landers movement (2019), a movement which offered similar values of escapism and revitalization for its followers as Williams pursued by moving to the Ozarks in the same period; in terms of its agricultural success, Roy C. Rom called Arkansas “the land of opportunity (1991). The advent and accessibility of popular culture on television

promoted the American Dream and the idea of American opportunity to Americans in the 1970s (Samuel, 2012). But the American Dream's empty promises have long been a part of American vernacular, perhaps most emblematically in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). By the 1990s, as opulence became a facet of pop culture, the notion "that the American Dream was a dream, an illusion that Americans had created for themselves, was becoming increasingly clearer," (Samuel, 2012), as upward mobility became increasingly difficult to achieve.

Watchdog Journalism in Local Reporting

As newsrooms began shrinking in the years surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century, investigative journalists faced adversity in the world of local reporting (Daly, 2012). Small newspapers did not have the fiscal means of supporting a method of reporting as time consuming and expensive as investigative journalism. Several awards and recognition, though, highlight the prominence, success, and power of investigative reporting, namely the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism. Yet, even still, the award winners are heavily swayed in the favor of largescale newspapers' investigations: in the twenty-first century, more than half of the winning publications have had circulations above 500,000 subscribers (particularly *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*), with just four having circulations of less than 100,000. While not unprecedented to win such a prestigious award, many smaller-circulation newspapers rely on smaller-scale awards to earn recognition. The *Benton County Daily Record* reporters themselves received first place for investigative reporting in the Arkansas Press Association's Better News Contest in 2008. Even still, in 2020's Better News Contest, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* or its Northwest Arkansas edition received 16 first place awards of a possible 27 categories, including general excellence, emphasizing the resources corporatized journalism affords toward investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism, still, is an asset toward Arkansas news publications. Ginny Monk received the Arkansas Society of Professional Journalists' Diamond Award for their investigation into mental health and suicides of Arkansas youths (2020), as well as the Arkansas Press Association's award for investigative reporting the same year for her in-depth look at a Pulaski County landlord and several code violations. The staff at the *Leader* received the latter award in the weekly publication category for their investigation into a Freedom of Information Act violation from a city council member who held a secret meeting with police officers regarding their pay (2019). When Sarah Perry of the *Saline Courier* received the APA investigative award, as well as the I.F. Stone award, for her exposé of Bryant mayor Jill Dabbs' aggressive and problematic management, Perry said, "Journalists are tasked with being watchdogs for the community. This award shows that our team at *The Courier* takes that responsibility seriously" (2019). These smaller-scale awards allow independent reporting to be recognized for smaller-circulation publications. *Spring River Chronicle* of Spring River, Arkansas, received a top prize for its investigation into the mayor of Bryant, this from a publication which does not even have a website and, instead, posts its most significant stories on a Facebook page (2019). These investigations, in turn, allow even local politicians and officials to stay in check at the hands of the fourth estate.

Goffman's Self-Presentation

Journalists hold the responsibility to discern the truth from inflated realities, which can oftentimes become clouded in the world of personal truths. In his seminal 1956 work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman established his theory of self-presentation. Taking Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" monologue from *As You Like It* to the extreme, Goffman breaks down the significance of human-to-human interaction through an

extended metaphor of the world of theatre. “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be,” (Goffman, 1956). Researchers Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson note that humans are innately wired to have hidden motives behind their actions, “built to act in our self-interest while at the same time trying hard not to appear selfish” (2018).

The basic tenets of Goffman’s theatrical metaphor surround the idea of *performance* (Goffman, 1956). Yet, perhaps most important to the theory of self-presentation, Goffman defines the *front*— “those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social status,” (Goffman, 1956). Individuals, or actors, have the ability to modify or adjust these aforementioned facets to fit each social circumstance he or she finds him/herself in (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019), which Goffman called “impression management” (Goffman, 1956). Goffman posits that actors are constantly making impressions on their audience at some level of the aforementioned regions. Without differentiating these regions, the actor could become exhausted and face role confusion.

Goffman, of course, did not live to see the advent of social media. Yet, his theory still holds significant prominence in the digital age. “Cyberspace has become an alternative world where people create and administer their online identity, make friends and maintain relationships using text, visual and audiovisual elements,” (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). Online use has skyrocketed in recent years, particularly among younger users. “Self-presentation is an important concept in human interaction and a key factor driving users of online social networks to reveal

their personal information is the desire to maintain relationships,” (Holmberg, et al., 2018). Boyd developed a model of Goffman’s theory of self-presentation, in which, in terms of social media usage, “front stage” is defined as posting for a user’s followers or friends, e.g., an Instagram or blog post which anyone can view (2007). “In this way, one of the most important factors for establishing a reliable impression is to avoid embarrassment,” (Holmberg, et al., 2018), by fitting in with trends or inflating one’s achievements. Back stage, then, is defined as private messaging and other outlets of communication without public visibility (Boyd, 2007), or as “offline life... and these particular actors strongly invest in their *costume*—wishing to invoke the desired reaction from other... inhabitants,” (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2012).

Of note, Goffman’s original theory was defined in terms of in-person communication. While numerous researchers have delved into the relationship between Goffman’s theory and social media use, one notion that needs further research is the sort of virtual anonymity social media permits. Given that online usage is not person-to-person, per se, but rather person-to-computer, there is a level of anonymity for communication. As such, users may “act out” comparatively speaking to their typical attitudes (Shim & Oh, 2018). Previous studies have shown that social media users have an innate need to fit in with others for fear of embarrassment (Shim & Oh, 2018). Given that the Internet and social media allow users to be in a constant state of “front stage” performance (Boyd, 2007; Holmberg, et al., 2018), online actors are more likely to consistently inflate reality, in an effort to impress their audience of followers (Goffman, 1956; Holmberg, et al., 2018; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019).

Objectivity in News and Online

Eric Auchard evaluated the role of social media, specifically Twitter, arguing that the pursuit of objectivity in journalism “meant complete ignorance of technical matters and an

overreliance on these sources to translate what was happening,” (Auchard, 2013). His argument can translate to the Internet, as a whole: a sort of marketplace of ideas, where Internet users can decide for themselves what they believe to be true. Even something as simple as the wording of text online can inhibit subjectivity (Li, et al., 2017). A 2021 survey shows half of all U.S. adults say receive their news from social media (Pew). Given the relationship between social presence and subjectivity, as well as the journalistic embrace of online presence, an online presence perpetuates a culture of subjectivity, even among journalists, who are traditionally called upon to display objectivity. Ken Williams presented his dual narratives and personalities online, with one website as Williams and another as Don LaRose, leaving the reporters at the *Benton County Daily Record* to piece together the truth from these subjective, digital stories.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel qualify certain criteria for journalists in their 2014 *The Elements of Journalism*. “Journalism’s first loyalty is to citizens,” they wrote (2014). Lewis Raven Wallace argues that objectivity as a goal of journalism is irredeemable: “I don’t believe that there is only one truth, but I still believe that truth is worth pursuing, and its pursuit still requires the rigorous practice of reporting” (2019). Noting that journalism is inherently about offering voices and platforms to the voiceless, Wallace argues that journalism should embrace its imperfect nature: “Maybe the news alone can’t teach imagination, curiosity, and social change, and maybe journalism alone can’t end exploitation or enact justice, but it can acknowledge these values, bend toward them” (Wallace, 2019). Kovach and Rosenstiel say that “truth is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but if it is seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it” (2014).

Methodology

To establish a thorough and broad timeline surrounding this narrative, I read several newspaper articles and accounts, interviewed first-hand witnesses in the story, and read several books on the themes addressed in this proposal. As a content review, I analyzed every *Benton County Daily Record* article published that mentioned “Ken Williams” in any fashion (a total of 462 articles), and every *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* article which mentioned Williams (16 articles), as well as reviewing various miscellaneous news organizations that mention Williams (e.g., an oft-referenced *Christianity Today* feature about Don LaRose’s disappearance in the 1970s). I obtained relevant Centerton city council minutes as well as other important public records and legal documents pertaining to Williams’ resignation. I also obtained several primary documents from and interviewed Tracy Neal and Eleanor Evans, reporters on the original story, to help establish their own methodology. I scoured data searches online for relevant information on the subject, particularly on Newspaper.com, where I found several contemporary news accounts of Don LaRose’s disappearance in New York. All of these media together create a thorough timeline with much of the essential information I plan to cover for this project. Ken Williams denied an interview in the project, but he, instead, offered his own autobiography *A Tale of Two Names*, with his own first-hand accounts of many events in the narrative. Besides the Neal and Evans interviews, I also interviewed Tiffany King, a television news reporter at the time who was also contacted anonymously with the story.

This methodology is essential to such a work of narrative nonfiction. Such thorough investigation as this affords the ability to craft a detailed timeline, placing the saga of Ken Williams as a case study within the boundaries of contemporary history, as well as its own chapter of Arkansas history. Not only does it provide a clearer picture for the reader, but it

allows the writer to develop the story from a number of angles and ensure all loose ends or questions are answered and addressed.

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