Threlkeld on Conway, ‘Contested Ground: The Tunnel and the Struggle over Television News in Cold War America’

Review published on Wednesday, December 28, 2022


Reviewed by Megan Threlkeld (Denison) Published on H-War (December, 2022) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)


For four months in the summer of 1962, a group of West German students dug a 140-yard tunnel under the Berlin Wall. More than twenty diggers worked around the clock to hollow out a three-foot-high by three-foot-wide passage, remove tons of dirt, reinforce it with wooden beams, and run water pumps to keep it dry. Over the course of two days that September, twenty-nine men, women, and children from East Berlin crawled for twelve minutes to freedom on the other side of the wall. After that, the tunnel was closed due to flooding.

Unbeknownst to most of the students, their endeavor was being filmed. American news crews had been on the lookout for opportunities to capture stories like this one on film. The project leaders approached NBC, looking for money for supplies in exchange for filming rights. Two German brothers working for the network eventually collected more than twenty hours of footage, which they turned over to Reuven Frank, a long-time journalist and NBC producer. Frank’s documentary on the project, *The Tunnel*, aired on December 10. More than 13.5 million people watched it, and it later won three Emmy Awards, making it both a popular and critical success.

In *Contested Ground*, journalism historian Mike Conway tells the story of *The Tunnel* against the backdrop of the Cold War; the rise of television news; and turf wars among print, radio, and television journalists about what constituted “news.” The central protagonist is Frank, who pioneered a new form of television news in the late 1950s with *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and maintained throughout his life that *The Tunnel* was his highest professional achievement. Conway traces Frank’s use of elements of the “new journalism,” or what came to be called narrative journalism, to craft an experience for the viewer that went beyond information-sharing and told an engaging story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. A year after the documentary aired, Frank published what Conway calls his “transmission of experience memo,” which outlined and advocated for the narrative approach in television news in order to draw viewers in and get them to care about the issues at stake. That memo profoundly influenced later journalists like Linda Ellerbee and Tom Brokaw. Based on recordings and published sources as well as oral histories and archival sources, *Contested Ground* explores what Conway calls a “critical juncture” in media history, when traditional approaches were in flux and new voices emerged to offer new directions.

The structure of the book is unconventional, particularly for historians. Conway likens it to a website.
Chapter 1 is the home page; it lays out the history of the Berlin Wall, myriad efforts—most of them unsuccessful—to tunnel under it, and the making and airing of *The Tunnel*. The other five chapters are the hyperlinks. Each one considers the documentary within a different historical context: the evolution of television news, the development of narrative journalism and Frank’s advocacy for using it on television, the history of the documentary and debates over whether *The Tunnel* was one, the gradual and contentious transition from print to broadcast journalism, and the Cold War.

Conway’s metaphor for the book’s structure is accurate, intriguing, and problematic. In some chapters his approach works well. Chapter 2, for example, tells a compelling story about the rise of television news through the lens of Reuven Frank’s career and what led him to produce *The Tunnel* in the way he did. Chapter 4, by contrast, spends so much time surveying the development of documentary films and documentary techniques in broad terms that the central story gets lost. Conway’s approach also, unsurprisingly, leads parts of the book to feel repetitive.

Chapter 6 will likely be of most interest to H-War readers. Here Conway explores the tension at the heart of the relationship between professional journalism and the US government during the Cold War. On the one hand, freedom of the press was touted as a cornerstone American virtue and one of the key distinctions between the United States and the Soviet Union. On the other, the government needed journalists to sell the dangers of communism to the American public, and journalists in turn needed government sources in order to do their work. In the case of *The Tunnel*, this tension led to a weeks-long battle—weeks that included the Cuban Missile Crisis—over whether NBC could and should air the documentary at all. The State Department tried to convince Frank that publicizing the tunnels constituted a threat to national security. Ironically, however, *The Tunnel* served as an effective piece of anticommunist propaganda.

But the structure of the book signals a deeper problem. Websites about historical events are more often designed to present information in interactive and visually appealing ways than to craft and support a scholarly argument about that event (though this is not to suggest that such sites don’t exist at all). A central purpose of a monograph, by contrast, is to intervene in and advance the scholarly conversations in a given field. *Contested Ground* leaves no corner of the context, production, and reception of *The Tunnel* untouched, but I would have liked a clearer sense of his argument about why this story matters and how it changes what we know about the past. Despite that, however, historians and media scholars will not fail to appreciate Conway’s efforts to situate *The Tunnel* in its historical moment, survey the controversies surrounding it, and chart its myriad impacts.

**Citation:** Megan Threlkeld. Review of Conway, Mike, *Contested Ground: The Tunnel and the Struggle over Television News in Cold War America*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2022. **URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57544

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.