



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Disinformation and the *Illustrierter Beobachter*, 1926–1945

Institution: University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Project Director: Daniel Howard Magilow

Grant Program: Fellowships

Significance and Contribution

In July 1926, the Nazi Party’s official photographically illustrated magazine, the *Illustrierter Beobachter* (*Illustrated Observer*), juxtaposed a doctored photo of a party rally with quotes from mainstream newspapers that had accurately reported the event as poorly attended. The image’s caption hatefully shouted: “Who lies? Photography or the Jewish newspapers?” Significantly, this extremist publication was invoking the authority of photographic truth precisely when technologies like single-lens reflex cameras, offset printing, and a signature style of unretouched, sharply focused, so-called “straight” photography were establishing familiar protocols for how to construct facts—but also falsehoods—visually. This recognizably modern photojournalism soon became an especially effective but often pernicious way to shape information around the world, particularly within the political chaos and cultural ferment of the Weimar Republic, Germany’s first but ultimately failed experiment with liberal democracy. In Weimar Germany, the photographically illustrated tabloids known as *Illustrierten* (singular: *Illustrierte*) were the most important venues for this new kind of visual news. I seek funding to complete a history of the *Illustrated Observer* that shows how, as it exploited the new terms of photographic truth, this *Illustrierte* grew from a fringe publication into one of Germany’s most influential purveyors of disinformation. And in so doing, it contributed to the Weimar Republic’s collapse and National Socialism’s rise. In spite of current concerns about media disinformation, and in light of the frequency and oversimplification with which popular discussions of the topic invokes Nazi Germany, there surprisingly exists no German- or English-language account of the *Illustrated Observer*. My project offers a much-needed corrective. This case study of the *Illustrated Observer* shows that while the similarities between media disinformation in interwar Germany and the United States and Russia in the 2020s are striking, so too are the differences and historical contingencies, which frustrate attempts to establish easy parallels.

This project contributes to the humanities and the NEH’s core missions because its purpose is to use the *Illustrated Observer* to understand how, on a granular level, this extremist news outlet used images, texts, and ideas that readers associated with a fashionable, cosmopolitan modernity to disinform and erode democracy. The project is thus very much in line with the NEH’s A More Perfect Union initiative, as I seek to broaden our understanding of the history of the mass media’s importance to democratic institutions and thus its central roles and responsibilities in establishing and sustaining a more just and inclusive society.

It is hard to overstate just how influential *Illustrierten* like the *Illustrated Observer* and its rivals were in Weimar Germany. They entertained, informed, and distracted readers then much as cable news and the internet do now and were just as popular. By design eclectic, *Illustrierten* whetted readers’ appetites for visual sensation with spectacular photographs and kept their interest with light features such as pulp fiction, jokes, puzzles, cartoons, and ads. As evidence of their pervasiveness, it merits note that the best-circulated title, the *BIZ* (*Berlin Illustrated Newspaper*), had by 1929 a weekly run of 1,844,130 copies—many read by multiple people in homes, hotels, bars, and cafés—in a country of 65 million. But as Germany embraced *Illustrierten*, extremist political parties co-opted them to visualize truth in service of their own agendas while concurrently attacking competitors as the *Lügenpresse* (lying press) and democratically elected officials as illegitimate.

This project examines how, during its run from July 1926 to April 1945, the *Illustrated Observer* created a platform for disinformation by interweaving diverse kinds of photographs and texts within a broader matrix of modernity. I argue that, by mixing spectacular images and banal features, the *Illustrated Observer* exemplified historian Jeffery Herf’s concept of reactionary modernism: it paradoxically mimicked the cosmopolitan and even elitist rhythms of a progressive, stylish, capitalist modernity to advance anti-modern, anti-Enlightenment ideals. This history of the *Illustrated Observer* also engages with the budding field of Critical Disinformation Studies, notably the recent work of scholars at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Center for Information and Swarthmore College’s Disinformation Studies Project. Moreover, I build on the work of photo historians Andrés Zervigón, Sabine Kriebel, Konrad Düssel, and others who have offered models for writing a critical history of the *Illustrated Observer* through their writings on the disinformation of another popular *Illustrierte* fundamentally opposed to the Weimar Republic: the German Communist Party’s *AIZ* (*Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper*), which advocated Soviet-style communism, not race-based nationalism. By analyzing the *Illustrated Observer* as an overlooked publication from the early history of modern news in which images took on roles once filled by the written word alone, this interdisciplinary study makes a timely contribution to Disinformation Studies, Media History, German Studies, and the History of Photography.

Organization, Concepts, and Methods

The *Illustrated Observer* poses unique methodological challenges, beginning with its size. Although the first issue in July 1926 was only four pages, it grew in tandem with the Nazi Party's fortunes. By the early 1930s, twenty-four-page editions appeared weekly, and by 1939, 835,000 copies circulated annually. It only ceased publication on April 19, 1945 amid widespread paper shortages, just three weeks before Germany's unconditional surrender. Any history of this magazine must therefore contend with two decades of issues and thousands of pages and photographs. A second issue is backshadowing, literary theorist Michael André Bernstein's term for reading with the benefit of hindsight. One must interpret what today seems ideologically contradictory, incoherent, or taboo in ways that acknowledge that readers could not see into the future, but neither were they naive. A third methodological challenge is to find a balance between form and content. As disturbing as the *Illustrated Observer*'s disinformation is today, it was in its time a banal publication, just one of many *Illustrierten* in a tense political climate. Even so, attention to form and genre cannot come at the cost of downplaying the *Illustrated Observer*'s toxic messaging, which had catastrophic costs. Striking this balance is delicate but crucial. A final issue, a lack of sources, only compounds these challenges. The war destroyed archives, correspondence, and flammable newsprint such that complete runs of issues are rare. Surviving issues on acidic newsprint have crumbled with age, forcing researchers to rely on microfilm with poor quality images.

While these are not insignificant challenges, I have already located crucial archives and sources that will allow me to complete this project. To write this history of the *Illustrated Observer*, I will draw on the expertise I have developed through previous work on *Illustrierten*, German photography, Holocaust Studies, and Disinformation Studies as well as an interpretive framework that approaches this magazine from two perspectives. For one, I read the *Illustrated Observer* as one example of the kinds of publications known as *Illustrierten*. Reading in this way exposes significant continuities between the *Illustrated Observer* and its market rivals, in spite of their political differences. This comparative approach helps clarify how the *Illustrated Observer* simulated normalcy, even as it propagated misinformation and disinformation. Yet the *Illustrated Observer* must also be interpreted over time with specific attention to its nationalism, racism, and antisemitism and how its disinformation strategies changed in response to the specific challenges Germany faced. My complementary interpretive approaches allow for an integrated history that reads ephemeral features at a granular level while not losing sight of the bigger political picture. As described below, my manuscript synthesizes these approaches in four chronologically organized chapters, each named after an *Illustrated Observer* headline that reflected a major concern of the Nazi regime at a key historical juncture. The chapters offer textual and visual analysis of the issues where those headlines appeared and how they disinformed readers. Those chapters are:

Introduction – The Spectacular and the Banal – In the introduction, I argue that the *Illustrated Observer* both embodied and visualized German modernity's paradoxes. I also reflect on the methodological challenges it poses. Interpreters must account for its size and the lack of sources. They must also strike a balance between form and content and compensate for biases born of hindsight. I then lay out the integrated interpretive approach for historicizing disinformation and for contextualizing the rise of *Illustrierten* in 1920s Germany. To this end, I revisit critiques by thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Rudolf Arnheim, who attacked *Illustrierten* as both a cause and symptom of a diletantish, distracted, and consumerist modernity.

1. “Who lies? Photography or the Jewish newspapers?” (1926–1930) – In this chapter, I examine the *Illustrated Observer*'s origins and shows how its founders overtly copied popular, politically mainstream *Illustrierten* whose visual styles relied on avant-garde inspired photography arranged in eye-catching layouts. The *Illustrated Observer*'s editors mimicked these magazines both precisely because of and in spite of the fact that they were coded as modern, Americanized, and “un-German.” I then chart the *Illustrated Observer*'s growth from its first issue in July 1926 until the National Socialist German Workers' Party's (NSDAP) electoral breakthrough in September 1930 elections. My analysis of the first issue, which celebrated a July 1926 rally to relaunch the party after a multi-year ban, shows how the inaugural edition already established the terms by which the *Illustrated Observer* would use familiar media protocols to certify its disinformation.

2. “After our election victory, the struggle continues!” (1930–1933) – After the Nazis established themselves as a major political force, their *Illustrated Observer* grew in size and scope. This chapter covers the *Illustrated*

Observer's history starting in 1930, when the Nazi parliamentary bloc grew from twelve seats to 107. I then continue tracing Germany's descent into authoritarianism that culminated on January 30, 1933 with Hitler's rise to the chancellorship. I argue that as the *Illustrated Observer*'s war in text and image mirrored the political unrest on the streets of late-Weimar Germany, it normalized violence, nationalism, and antisemitism by using images as much as texts to construct crisis narratives. Yet it still enmeshed this bellicose disinformation within the modernity, cosmopolitanism, and playfulness typical of *Illustrierten*. For the case study, I analyze the September 20, 1930 issue and its paradoxical features such as ads from Jewish businesses and the juxtaposition of hostile political features with entertaining ones. Intentionally or not, the *Illustrated Observer* gave visual form to the complexity and rhythms of German modernity through this reactionary modernist dissonance.

3. “The world’s eyes turn to Germany!” (1933–1939) – In this chapter, I begin with the two key effects of the 1933 “aryanization” of the German press. First, it forced the (mostly Jewish) editors of the *Illustrated Observer*'s competitors into exile, where many helped develop iconic news magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Picture Post*. But second, it fully enshrined the *Illustrated Observer* as Germany's second most-circulated *Illustrierte* behind only the *Berlin Illustrated Newspaper*, which had been stolen from its Jewish owners and transformed into government propaganda. I then present a close reading of the February 20, 1936 issue of the *Illustrated Observer*, which highlighted Germany's hosting of the 1936 Olympics. It typified the magazine's ambitious disinformation campaigns in the 1930s that targeted German and international audiences alike.

4. “Comrades through and through” (1939–1945) – In this chapter, I recount the *Illustrated Observer*'s war-time history and show how *Illustrierten* shaped public perception of war by domesticating it. The *Illustrated Observer* stressed heroism and personal sacrifice while predictably downplaying—and often, totally ignoring—German losses. The April 19, 1945 edition, the final issue of the *Illustrated Observer*, is the text for close reading. Amid massive shortages and the collapse of civil society, it still trumpeted German resilience. Until the bitter end, the *Illustrated Observer* testified to the tremendous value the Nazi regime placed on images, especially photographs, in shaping public opinion and cultivating their disinformation.

Conclusion – The Afterlife of the *Illustrated Observer* – This short conclusion describes the end of the *Illustrated Observer* and how Allied occupation authorities prosecuted its editors at the Nuremberg Trials as major war criminals. I then take the story to today and use the history of the Nazis' *Illustrated Observer* to reflect on what it can—and cannot—tell us about disinformation today, its roles in war and conflict, the attention-grabbing visual rhetoric it uses to advance certain agendas, and the rhetorical power gained when disinformation is seamlessly interwoven into a visually attractive matrix of distraction and entertainment.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

My credentials to write this history of the *Illustrated Observer* are well-established. As a professor of German, I have the necessary language skills. I have spent over twenty years working on German photography and mass media and have authored or edited six books. I am the Co-Editor-and-Chief of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* and serve on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Academic Council and on the Academic Council of the Holocaust Education Foundation of Northwestern University.

An NEH grant will afford me the time necessary to delve deep into the archives and libraries scattered around Germany and elsewhere that house the relevant primary sources for this project. I will visit the most important archives during Autumn 2023 in Munich, Berlin, Dortmund, and Washington D.C. that house complete or almost complete runs of the nineteen years of the *Illustrated Observer*. They also own collections related to the Nazi Party's official publisher, the *Illustrated Observer*'s key editors and photographers, and the *Reichspressekammer* (German Press Chamber), the ministry that oversaw journalism in Nazi Germany.

Final Product and Dissemination

The deliverable of this project is a monograph to be published by a peer-reviewed academic press. Informal discussions with acquisitions editors suggest an interest on the part of multiple presses in acquiring this project, which will contribute meaningfully to debates about disinformation and the media's roles and responsibilities in a liberal democracy.

Work Plan

This project is already underway, having grown out of a book chapter on the *Illustrated Observer*'s early years that will appear in the peer-reviewed volume *Print Matters: Histories of Photography in Illustrated Magazines* (forthcoming 2023, Getty Publications). That essay provided the opportunity to conduct preliminary research and to develop my interpretive framework. I thus have a draft of the book's introduction. Aside from this introduction, the book has four body chapters and a conclusion. When working on projects that rely heavily on archival materials, I can research and write a chapter roughly every six to eight months. However, an NEH grant will allow me to buy out my teaching and service responsibilities and double this pace, approximately as follows:

<i>Before Period of Grant</i>	Summer 2022 – Fall 2022	Drafting of first body chapter
	Spring 2023 – Summer 2023	Drafting of second body chapter
Grant Period	September 2023 – November 2023	Archive and library visits in Germany and the United States: Berlin Document Center Staatsbibliothek (Berlin) Institute for Contemporary History (Munich) Institute for Newspaper Research (Dortmund) Hamburg Institute for Social Research International Newspaper Museum (Aachen) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
	December 2024 – February 2024	Revision of chapters one and two
	March 2024 – May 2024	Drafting of third body chapter
	June 2024	Follow-up archival visits in Germany
	July 2024 – September 2024	Drafting of fourth body chapter
<i>After Grant Period</i>	Fall Semester 2024	Revision of chapters three and four
	Spring Semester 2025	Write conclusion; revise Introduction; Draft and shop book proposal

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