

MAKING HISTORY TODAY (S2E12): Media and U.S. Politics - Matthew Delmont on Why Busing Failed

[Classroom Stories theme fades in]

[00min 08sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

Matthew Delmont is the Frank J. Guarini Associate Dean of International Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies, and the Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professor of History at Dartmouth College, an expert on African-American history and the history of civil rights. He is the author of [Half American: The Epic Story of African-Americans Fighting World War Two at Home and Abroad](#) from Viking Books in 2022, which received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

He is also the author of four previous books, [Black Quotidian: Everyday History and African-American Newspapers](#), [Making Roots: A Nation Captivated](#), and the book discussed in this episode: [Why Busing Failed: Race Media and the National Resistance to School Desegregation](#) from U.S. Press in 2016. He's also the author of [The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock and Roll and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia](#).

He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar Award to support this research. He regularly shares his research with media outlets, including the New York Times, NPR, TheAtlantic.com, Washington Post, and The Conversation. Welcome to Perseverantia, Matthew Delmont.

[01min 20sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

Thanks for having me.

[Classroom Stories theme fades out]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

So in your book, *Why Busing Failed*, could you talk a little bit about what from your perspective, busing exactly was? How does the federal government get involved in what we tend to understand is the very local issue of education? How does the federal government get involved in the 1960s? And how does what you write about extend our understanding, broadly speaking, of policies like, like redlining? How how did these things fit together and permeate national attention?

[01min 59sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

So let me start by saying school buses had long been used to transport students to schools. It's one of the things that made the modern American school district possible that you went from having these one room schoolhouses primarily in rural areas, to having larger, more modern, multi grade, junior high school and high schools. Busing, as we usually talk about it as scholars and within popular media, really comes out of the 1960s. It's at that time period that school

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districts start being forced to consider how to desegregate their schools.

This is happening in the south, but also in northern districts. And busing is one of the tactics that school officials or judges can use to compel schools to desegregate. It means that they're able to move students on school buses across zoning lines to make more racially diverse student body at different schools. It promotes intense controversy, particularly in northern cities like Boston, New York and Chicago.

[02min 59sec]

Because for a lot of white parents, it really upsets their understanding of what they consider to be, in their words, their schools. They're very happy with the status quo with regards to the racial demographics of the schools, the perspective that these neighborhood schools are theirs and have control over them. And so they're among the first to protest against the use of school buses to, to desegregate schools.

And that's where the, the term busing even comes from. It's not until you have these parents, primarily white mothers, out there protesting that they latch onto this term, busing. It's their way to resist these efforts of school desegregation. And so I think it's important to see that it's a political word. It's a political codeword that carries with it a lot of assumptions about who should and should not have access to schools and what the determining factor should be of how school attendance should be, should be determined.

This comes to a head in the 1960s because it really the first time the federal government starts to play a larger role in these cases. That comes in part, in large part through the 1964 Civil Rights Act, because it includes language that means that school districts have to comply with these nondiscrimination provisions in order to receive federal funding.

[04min 09sec]

And so that 1964 Civil Rights Act is really the first stick that the federal government has to finally force southern districts to comply with the Brown versus Board of Education rulings from ten years earlier. In the North, it's a little bit more complicated because that same Civil Rights Act includes loopholes that intentionally exclude school districts in the north.

These are added at the, at the request of northern politicians who see their white constituents out in the streets protesting some of the first attempts to use school buses to relieve overcrowding in schools. And so they include language that specifically says that the kind of segregation that happens in the South is covered by the Civil Rights Act. But the kind of segregation happened to the north, what they term racial imbalance, is not covered by the Civil Rights Act.

So that means that the same stick, this threat of withholding federal funds can't be used to force schools in Boston or in Chicago or in Los Angeles or New York to comply. But at a high level, it

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means that the federal government is playing a much larger role, a much more intricate role in the day to day functioning of schools than they were previously.

[05min 17sec]

It's not just a neighborhood or a local issue anymore. It's a federal issue. In terms of how this extends our understanding of issues like redlining, part of the importance of studying this period in school history is understanding that these school district boundaries were political creations. One of the things that people who resisted school desegregation kept saying was, you know, these are our neighborhood schools.

We, we don't want these neighborhood schools to be, to be changed. But the reality is that those boundaries that made them neighborhood schools, they were set by politicians in my school officials who typically drew the boundaries in ways that replicated the existing racial demographics of these different neighborhoods and cities. And so really real estate policies and school zoning policies often worked hand in hand to maintain racial segregation.

And part of what I hope the book, *Why Busing Failed*, does is give us a different lens to look at that history, to look at these real, really structural factors that, that structured racial inequality in a key part of the 20th century.

[06min 28sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

So thinking about busing as a political issue and something that politicians could latch onto and use in messaging about their campaigns and policies that they wanted to engender as leaders, how does it shape opportunities or perhaps limits for those politicians of the 1960s and maybe into the 1970s and thinking about people like John F Kennedy and Goldwater and maybe some of those who came later?

[06min 57sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

Busing became a really attractive issue for a lot of politicians, particularly politicians who were the more conservative end of the spectrum because it allowed them to signal very clearly to constituents, usually white constituents, that they were going to do everything they could to maintain the racial status quo with regards to school segregation. And it allowed them to do it without ever explicitly saying that they were supporting segregation.

So by and large, by the 1960s, it becomes not viable for politicians to use racial epithets anymore or to use explicitly racist language, or to say explicitly that they were going to stand up for white supremacy or for maintaining racial segregation. But busing allows them to do a lot of that same political work while using a, what seems like a very innocent sounding term.

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So these politicians say that they were opposed to busing, that they were in favor of neighborhood schools. These were the kind of common political words that were thrown around in the 1960s and 70s. But the upshot was that it meant that they were advocating for the maintenance of segregated communities. And so the dynamics of what those protests looked like, it looked different than the, the kind of protest outside of Little Rock Central High School in 1957, where people are yelling and are very visibly trying to maintain racial segregation by the 1960s and 70s that kind of protest sometimes results in active street protests. But now they're using this language that seems innocent, that seems colorblind, that seems racially neutral to try to maintain, or to try to promote a lot of the same, same policies.

[08min 30sec]

The folks who have a more complicated time with it are the Democratic politicians on the more liberal end of the spectrum who want to both claim to be advocating for civil rights, but also who recognize that they too have a lot of white voters who might be in favor of civil rights, broadly speaking, but are not in favor of any changes to their own school districts.

And that's where some of the language that I mentioned earlier in the Civil Rights Act came from. That these are politicians who see themselves at the forefront or the vanguard of being political supporters of civil rights. But when they're thinking of civil rights, they're thinking of what's happening in Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia. They're not thinking about what's happening in their own backyards in New York or in their districts in Chicago or in Minneapolis.

[09min 17sec]

And so it really forces them to to walk a tightrope, so to speak, that they want to be advocates, want to claim to be supporters for African-American and Afro-Latino civil rights, while at the same time they don't want to lose their base of support within white, particularly white working class and middle class communities. And so that's the kind of political terrain that these politicians are trying to navigate in the 1960s and 70s.

[09min 39sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

So I think maybe the students were a little surprised when they saw the book list and they were wondering how does a book about desegregation and policy relate to a class on media and politics? And how should we understand the narratives that have surrounded busing? In other words, how does, how does media fit into this story? And particularly how does media structure this idea that busing was a failure?

Were these narratives something that comes as a result of popular pressure from the bottom up? Were they the result of deliberate political spin by the media or by politicians? How do, how do we fit media into this, this story that I think they understood people might understand is very traditionally political, but maybe not as a media story?

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[10min 32sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

Well, I was really excited to get your email and to know that your, your class is reading this in a media history class, cause I approached this topic as a historian, a cultural historian who focuses a lot on media, particularly television media. So I would say media was important to the story because it really worked hand in hand with the grassroots political activists and with the elected political officials to shape the common sense terms that people were using to make their political arguments for the grassroots activists, the folks who were protesting against school desegregation.

They learned how to protest effectively by watching civil rights activists. Who used television successfully to make the case for, for enhanced legislation and enhanced national attention to the racial violence that was happening in the South. And so from that perspective, we know that TV played a really important role in helping to make the nation aware of civil rights issues that were going on in Alabama and Georgia, Mississippi.

[11min 34sec]

By the 1960s, now you have white mothers, other white citizens in northern cities who've watched how successful they have been. And they use those same techniques and tactics, but to make the opposite case, to say that we shouldn't have this kind of racial integration in Pontiac, Michigan, we shouldn't have this kind of racial integration in Chicago. It's important to understand it from a media perspective too, because television is really coming into the foreground in this time period as the main source of where Americans are getting their news from.

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

And so by the late 1960s, the, the three major networks have large nightly broadcasts that are reaching the vast majority of Americans. Most Americans have TVs for that time period. But what they don't have is the ability to do in-depth research on these really complex topics like school segregation. And so one of the things they did in the research was try to get a sense of how producers and reporters understood their job.

And one thing they kept saying is they didn't have an archive or a library or researchers who could go in and look at 20 years of zoning decisions in Chicago, or look at the history of these court cases that were starting to come, come up in New York or in Pontiac. As a result, television news stations really just sent camera crews to the places where they expected dynamic television footage to emerge.

[12min 58sec]

And so part of what I try to do in the book is show that television really helped to make these local stories into national phenomenon. And they helped to make busing a term and a political

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idea that becomes legible to Americans all over the country. I think the best example from the book is probably the Pontiac busing case.

There is a group of mothers who protested, led by a woman named Irene McCabe, who received a huge amount of media attention in 1971, 1972, because they staged a “mother’s march” from Pontiac, Michigan, to Washington, D.C., over 600 miles. When they eventually got to actually see, they only drew a thousand people to their rally in Washington, D.C. But they received coverage on all three major networks.

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

Both when they left Pontiac along the route and when they got to Washington, D.C. So this was a group of grassroots political actors who were tremendously successful in getting coverage and getting attention for their cause. It’s a, I think to understand this time period, we have to understand that judges, politicians, they weren’t approaching these topics, such as busing, just in a sort of an academic context or in a policy context that those policies were already being debated, bandied about nationally, largely through television before they ever reached the courts or before before data analysts ever had a chance to actually run the numbers to see to what extent busing was successful as a policy.

[14min 25sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

Yeah, I have so many thoughts on this because somebody who writes about a lot of media from a political angle, there’s there’s so much that I want to talk about. But, well, my students were wondering how questions of localism play into these debates about busing and desegregation, as they are such huge national media stories? And, you know, how do, how do questions of localism also play into media and media coverage?

How do we see the differences between what’s happening at the national media level and the local media level? How do, how does localism play into the story as well?

[15min 07sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

That’s a really good question. I think if you take a step back, it almost doesn’t make sense that you would have national news stations covering school decisions that are happening in Pontiac, Michigan, or in Louisville, Kentucky, or even a city as large as Boston. These even in larger cities, are still relatively local issues. And so you have to kind of scratch your head and think, why would that be national news?

Of all the things that are going on that would be relevant to a national audience, why would these questions about who attends which schools in which neighborhoods in Boston be something that receives national attention? I think part of the story was that these local issues become nationally relevant because there starts to become dots all over the country.

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That get linked by this common storyline of busing. And so that's part of the reason why all these, these small towns, larger cities, but all these school cases keep showing up on the national news is because it links to a recurring storyline that the media has identified as something that viewers will care about. So typically the media, television media shows things on, on the air because they think viewers want to see them.

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

And that means that advertisers will continue to buy advertisements to reach those viewers. They're often looking for storylines that they can hook these new, new events onto. And that's why busing resonates so powerfully, is that once you had a number of cases in the 1960s, then Pontiac shows up and Cleveland shows up, then Boston shows up.

[16min 37sec]

And when I got into the research at the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, I was amazed at how many of these examples show up on national news. I just kept thinking Why? Why is this nationally relevant? Why is it nationality relevant? I think the story is that it's relevant because it all linked in to this, what became a national story. It stitched together these local stations or these local school cases into something that became a national story.

But I think it also gives us a sense of why the national media was so ill prepared to cover this story. Well, because those local school issues were so complex and they were so localized. And I think this came out in the court cases that one of the reasons it was so hard for the NAACP and other civil rights organizations to bring these cases is that they had spent a tremendous amount of money to research on the decades of schools zoning decisions and school official board meeting notes that could provide evidence of intentional segregation, that this was something that really took months and months and months of research.

Television news just didn't have the capacity to be able to do that kind of research. And so they would essentially parachute into these different cities and try to make sense of what was a very detailed, nuanced, local story. And they would give it 2 minutes or they gave it 3 minutes. And most of the coverage, it was almost identical in most cases. That they would have coverage of white parents protesting outside of schools, carrying, carrying signs that said something about how they protested busing or how they were in favor of neighborhood schools. That's what was legible to the media, and that's what they broadcast to all these national audiences.

[18min 12sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

And so I think to link back to your students questions, the localism versus national I think was really important because the national coverage almost worked to the detriment of these different local school districts, because it puts so much intense pressure and, and attention on what, at the end of the day, was really a set of local policy decisions that that needed to get sorted out at

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the local level.

What the national media usually wanted to see were things that were explosive in nature. They wanted to see things there were, where you had people yelling at each other or throwing rocks at each other, or bricks, that made for good, good visuals, but didn't necessarily move the school districts any closer to the kind of racial integration that we theoretically should have been the goal.

[18min 57sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

So it's probably unsurprising that in reading all of the work by the historians this, this term, my students saw a lot of contemporary resonance. And, you know, they they were really struck with how familiar much of what they're reading about really resonated with what they were seeing currently going on.

And they really wanted to apply these historical moments to provide some kind of lens of critical analysis, either of current media or to activist groups trying to create change in our, in our current moment and to see how media has changed and maybe could not be used the way that it was in the past, or how previous activist groups or politicians used media, and that we could we could learn strategies from them or better understand the media landscape.

So in addressing racial inequality in our current moment, what categories of analysis from your work would you advise looking to as we evaluate what's happening now?

[20min 08sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

That's a really good question. I mean, obviously, a lot is different today in terms of the media landscape than it was in the 1960s and 70, the time period I was writing about. I think the first thing I would say is try to understand what the commitments of different forms of media are. What I mean by that is, in addition, we get the mainstream television news and this book project.

I also looked at a lot of black newspapers and putting those two in conversation gives you a really different sense of what the commitments of those forms of media were. For black newspapers like The Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier, New York Amsterdam News, they always understood themselves as being a fighting press, and so they were always adamant about the importance of talking honestly and critically about the history of racism and racial discrimination, but also talking about the importance of advocating for substantive structural changes and working on, on behalf of and alongside civil rights activists to push for those, push for those cases.

[21min 08sec]

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I think when you look at the coverage of how while these protests happened in the black press, you see a lot of early coverage of civil rights activity in Boston, New York, that didn't show up in the mainstream media. It's what allowed a lot of white Americans to believe that there wasn't a civil rights movement in the north.

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

The black press gives us a much clearer sense of that. The decades of activism that preceded something like the Boston busing crisis in the 1970s. I think in contrast to that, the commitments of a lot of mainstream media organizations was to, kind of false sense of journalistic objectivity. Where if you just reported on both sides of an issue, somehow you completed doing your job. Even if you didn't actually push to understand which of those two sides was actually drawing on evidence, or which of those two sides was advocating for a vision of society that was going to work to the detriment of people of color.

[22min 02sec]

And I think we still see that a lot in today's media landscape, where too often mainstream media just has a sort of both sides equivalence that doesn't really tell readers or viewers much more about what's actually at stake in any given story. I think the other thing that came to be clear to me is media, particularly mainstream media often gets bored of topics.

And so one of the stories we tell as historians usually is how the media played a really proactive and progressive role with regards to the civil rights movement. And that's largely true as long as you only focus on 1955 to 1964, and really focus only on the South. But the reality is, after 1964, mainstream media largely got bored of covering the black civil rights movement.

[22min 50sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

And they essentially said as much. They said, we've covered that story. Now we want to focus on the silent majority of white voters who are, who feel upset, or who are staging a backlash of civil rights policies. I think similar dynamics are at play today. We had a period after the summer of 2020 where there was a nearly unprecedented amount of coverage for issues of racial violence and, and the Black Lives Matter movement and other protests that were against the kind of racism and structural racism in American society.

By late 2020 or certainly by 2021, a lot of mainstream media got bored of that kind of coverage and swung back in the other direction to focus on white communities who felt like they were left out of those protests, who felt attacked, resistant to these protests. And then in the last couple of years, we've seen an inordinate amount of media coverage for critiques and attacks on critical race theory or on other efforts to to teach about the history of race and racism in American society.

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[23min 49sec]

Dr. Matthew Delmont:

And so I think getting a sense of what different media forms value and the time frame that they're willing to dedicate to different topics gives us just a clearer sense of how ephemeral or how maybe incurious media can be in terms of its attention span, that it will kind of just go from one thing to the next –

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– without ever delving long enough in one topic to really understand and the nuances of what's going on there.

[24min 18sec]

Prof. Katherine Jewell:

Well, thank you so much to Matthew Delmont for talking with us. It's been a fascinating conversation. And I can't wait to see what you do next.

Dr. Matthew Delmont: Thanks so much Kate. I really appreciate you having me.

[Classroom Stories theme fades out]

[24min 40sec]

[Perseverantia theme fades in]

Prof. Jeff Warmouth (Communications Media):

This is Jeff Warmouth, Professor and Chair of Communications Media. And you are listening to the Perseverantia Podcasting Network.

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