Oral History
Interview with Herb Kaplow
By Sarah Buynovsky

Sarah Buynovsky: This is an interview with Herb Kaplow on Saturday, April 24, 2004. It is taking place at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University during the symposium: Civil Rights and the Press. I'm Sarah Buynovsky. Mr. Kaplow, what was your job when you first became aware of the civil rights story?

Herb Kaplow: Well, I don't quite remember. I remember covering a couple of things even before the Brown decision, but I think one was in Anacostia, Washington. I also went down to Montgomery, and I can't remember whether that was before or after Brown. But it was around, probably around 1954 or '53.

BUYNOVSKY: The first story that you can really recall as being during the civil rights period, how did you get assigned to it, did you volunteer, was it a smooth process?

Kaplow: Well, I went to work that morning. It was May 14th or 15th, 14th, 1954. And of course, we knew that something was pending because the cases had been litigated in the Supreme Court the previous year, so you were aware that it was underway, that something was due. And that morning, the bells rang on the Teleprinter, signifying a bulletin, maybe meaning a flash because a flash in those days was about the highest alert, a bulletin was maybe the next down, and I went to the Teleprinter and there came a bulletin, something to the effect that the separate but equal doctrine was knocked out after sixty years because it was declared by the Supreme Court as, uh, improper, as undemocratic. And then I was sent right away up to the court where people were gathering on the plaza outside the court, the crowd was mostly reporters and journalists, where there were some of the participants in the actual cases. I remember Thurgood Marshall was there, and he was the lead lawyer for the Legal Defense Fund, which was the legal branch of the NAACP in effect. And there were a lot of other people, and of course the crowd gathered and we ran around interviewing and filming everybody we could. It was the most dramatic – that was the really, the formal opening. I think I may have done a couple of things related to civil rights before that, but also I was just sort of becoming a reporter in 1953, so I was a very (inaudible) person, and this was 1954.

BUYNOVSKY: And what was the mood during that period? I'm sure when you get the flash, there's a bit of an adrenaline rush as a reporter, but when you got to the plaza and you were surrounded by fellow journalists, did the magnitude of the decision hit you right then? What was kind of the feeling there?

Kaplow: We knew it was a big story. And we had written up about it while it was going through the courts, and we knew it was probably historic. But looking back fifty years later, I really don't think we comprehended then how far-reaching and historic that decision would be. It went far beyond just education, it permeated almost every facet of

American life, and the more we saw of it the more we knew it would really have an enormous event in the life of this country. We didn't spot it right away, but you know, that's hard to do. But it clearly is, you know, reverberates even now.

BUYNOVSKY: You were assigned to cover this story as sort of a junior reporter. Had you not been assigned to cover it, would it be something you would want to do? Was every journalist sort of aching to get out there and cover this story at this point?

Kaplow: Once the decision was handed down, the next step was to implement it, which meant the courts and the legal people were going to go ahead and knock out whatever segregated practices existed and most of them, of course, were in the South. And the first targets were really those segregation laws, they were on the books, so they were sort of the most tangible targets you could go after. And so, pretty soon after the decision was handed down, I was sent off. I don't remember where, but it was one of those places and a lot of other reporters, for the next ten years or so, we were out there roaming around. And it was sort of like a traveling troop, who seemed to be most of the time regulars going together from one place to another. We knew we were on to a durable, long-term historic event.

BUYNOVSKY: Was there any sort of reaction from management, what kind of support did you get from them? What kind of support did you get from friends and family during this time?

Kaplow: Well, we were dispatched. I wasn't the only one, you know, we would go out for a few weeks and then go back for a rest and someone else would come in. People running the news shows also appreciated the fact that this was an historic moment, and so we were sent out, was no question about going after the stories, even if you were out for a long time and nothing much happened, because it was so obvious. And the more that went on, the more we knew that it was a big event in American history. Our families, well, let's see. My first son was born around there, my wife could have used my help. I was off somewhere, but we still knew we were on the verge of history, making voyages.

BUYNOVSKY: During that time during that civil rights era, what did you think your role was as a journalist? Looking back, do you think that maybe your role, or how you perceived it, has changed?

Kaplow: No, I think the role's been the same, hasn't changed. The role was to go out and report on what was happening. And with a basic, journalistic tenet involved, you know, I'm sure the basic purpose of journalism, role of journalism, is to seek out issues that affect the American people, that are sometimes, usually, sometimes very controversial, sometimes very confusing, and complex, and try to get as much good information, the best information you can get out of this, and then lay it out for the American people, so the American people can then, on the basis of this information to a larger extent, can make the best public policy. And that was the role that fifty years ago,

that is the role now, and it's a very important function. You can sort of feel right about it once in a while when you, when you are involved in reporting something that has some beneficial contribution to America.

BUYNOVSKY: How did the weight of that responsibility weigh on you at the time while you were covering these stories? Did you feel an even more of a drive to get the story out to the public and do your best to present it as fair and balanced and seek out those important issues?

Kaplow: Well, it wasn't – you got to learn a lot, you got to function better as time went on. I think all of us knew that there were certain disciplines that were important, disciplines in journalism, you know, basic one, when you go to a story, you just don't talk to the seeming leading light. You're supposed to go around and find, get as, get everybody involved, get different sides. So that was one of the things, you know we should get this guy who is a spokesperson or something of civil rights groups. Then you want to go find out the extreme, to the Ku Klux Klan, and find out what they're doing, find out what the city people are doing, finally get all the parties to it, and that's very much part of it, you tap everything, you touch every base you can. Sometimes you can't, but I noticed in some journalism generally, not only this, that people have not gone along with that, they take one person and it's a good soundbite or something, and sort of kiss off the idea that you now have an obligation to find out the person on the other side, that's the best way to inform the public.

BUYNOVSKY: What are your strongest memories of that time? You describe these different times out, can you take me back there, can you kind of lead me by the hand with one of these journeys that you particularly remember?

Kaplow: Well, I'll tell you this one, a story I remember saying this, one of the other guys doesn't get to it first. Let me see how it went. In the period of, after the Brown decision was handed down, there was a period of about five or six years where we were all watching and covering the implementation of it in the South, particularly because that's where the laws are. And quite a bit was done to move forward on the problem. The courts, the federal courts particularly, were very strong, very consistent, and they didn't take any nonsense from people. A lot of people tried these, what they called these, not casual, but they'd try to get their way across in sort of a flimsy way. Well the courts were really, there's a book out by a reporter from South Carolina about the court of appeals that sat in New Orleans, that there were Republicans and Democrats that sat on it and boy, they just didn't tolerate any nonsense. Anyway, and other things were going on. People were sort of adjusting in some cases, schools were sort of fiddling around, I mean, for the most part in the South, most of it was resistance, but various degrees of it.

Then came, so it was about five or six years, in 1962 I guess. Kennedy had become President, and it was, there were calls for new proposed legislation to go to Congress on civil rights. Kennedy proposed a package, which civil rights leaders complained was

too timid, too modest, not far-reaching enough, not strong enough in effect, and there became a debate, not so much in the public as in Congress and in Washington, should we push on hard or give a respite. Kennedy sort of felt, well, you know we've accomplished quite a bit in the last half dozen years now, let's have a rest. Well, his point probably was mostly due to the fact that he had to modify some important Congressional leaders who were Southerners: James Eastland of Mississippi, Richard Russell of Georgia. They were very powerful in Congress. He, besides wanting to get civil rights through, wanted to get other things through and felt he couldn't if these guys were to be resistant. And they would have blocked it, so he opted, that was at least part of the thinking. So he proposes weak, relatively weak or restrained or whatever you want to call it, package of new laws.

Coincidentally at that time, Martin Luther King went to Birmingham. Birmingham was the toughest, hardest nut to crack, I think, in the whole business. And I spent a lot of time there. And just coincidentally, Bull Connor, the segregationist police officer in Birmingham, he really, I mean, hard-nosed guy, turned the dogs and the hoses and the other stuff on the demonstrators.

Now the press was there, the pencil people were there, newspapers, magazines, and of course there was radio and there was this new emerging medium of television. And these pictures, on that day that the dogs and the hoses were unleashed, captured these pictures and were distributed, I think around the world, certainly this country and many places abroad. And they were so gripping that they got the public. No longer did they come off as sort of a pedantic Washington political exercise, it now went into the public. And within a short period of time, the message, there was a, what's the word, a feeling, a general feeling, a consensus formed, press on, no respite. And that went back, I thought it went back, I thought it took about two weeks from the time those pictures were shown to when Kennedy got the message and I ran into a fellow who I knew worked with Bobby Kennedy in that, and I said two weeks and he said, no we got the message much quicker, withdrew that proposed legislation and resubmitted the stronger one, which, I think, public accommodation's a big feature of that. The earlier one, the weaker one, I think was mostly a voting -ights package, but he resubmitted it, he was killed. Johnson became President and the next year that package was approved by Congress. I think that was one of the big turning points in the whole drama.

BUYNOVSKY: How difficult was it for you to cover these stories? Talk to me about logistics, did you have personal reasons, safety issues? I know you were attacked once while covering the Freedom Rides, is that correct?

Kaplow: Yeah, my camera man, sound man and I were covering some Freedom Riders who went from Birmingham to Montgomery. I was not actually hit. I ran down the street with the other two fellows because we were all sort of hooked up together. After that, while we were out of there, they chased us down the street and they tore the camera off our camera man. He got a little banged up and then, while we were down there, the big riot started behind us. And I mean that there was a – you would get, you

had to be careful, and physically it was very taxing because there weren't enough people. It was, maybe if I was lucky, there might be another reporter around. And in those days getting on television, now they have producers and associate producers, but then it was just me and the camera man and sound man, and they'd run off and take pictures and I'd take film, and I'd have to fly from, I don't know, from Jackson, Mississippi, to Memphis to get it on the air. So logistically it was very difficult.

I was never appreciated when I yelled for help those days, it was very hard to get. I was in Cuba on a different story, and my, I'll never forget, I was doing it previous to the Cuban revolution and we finally got on the air. And the whole place, the studio was filled with about four hundred of Castro's supporters, just getting on the air was very difficult, and then the guy in New York who heard this, we would like you to be a little bit more selective in what you're doing. I went through the roof. But, it was taxing, it was hard, sometimes it was dangerous. There were bombings, and there were people getting pushed around. But you know, you sort of would learn how to be an operator in those conditions.

BUYNOVSKY: Talk to me about personal issues that you brought to this. All journalists, I know, should set aside their personal issues when covering a story, but everybody brings a little bit of baggage, and this was a very emotional issue. How did that affect you in your reporting?

Kaplow: Well, I was aware of it. I was aware of it in other stories too. It's not that you strip yourself of your beliefs, but there are some disciplines and you as a journalism student should know them by now, that there are certain things that you have to do to ensure that you're covering everything and that you're not hiding your own sentiments necessarily – that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have strong feelings, but your strongest feelings should be when you're a journalist is to get the story and get it right and complete and even what you perceive as the bad along with the good. I often interviewed people who knew I didn't, my sentiments weren't theirs, but I really think in some of those, like George Wallace, and a lot of other people, I remember asking, I was in Birmingham, and I saw the police chief and I went over and talked to him and he was a little restrained and a little grumpy but he was not bad. And after we got finished he said, "What are you going to do now, go out and interview King, Martin Luther King?" I said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact if I can find him, I'm going to go interview him." And he sort of grumbled but that was all.

You see, part of it is, it's not good to be a sycophant, you stand up in a quiet, professional way, you'll do better than otherwise. There was a characteristic of this story that is unique. Most stories you cover are complicated, technical, economic stories and things, and you don't know everything, so you have to be very careful, and you don't have time to check with the experts. You don't know which is the right case and which is the wrong case because they're so complex. Here it was unique. We knew what the right side was. America was coming to grips with it, you know, there were things happening before Brown and the armed forces were desegregated, things were

happening. The American public was coming to see this for what it was, a terrible institution. So you still had to play along with it and not be, there are still lots of aspects of it that you didn't particularly care for, but this was unique because overall you knew that segregation was wrong. So that element, unlike many other stories, was there and it was a big factor. It still was a tough story to cover and everything, but you didn't have to go into the ethical or moral aspects of it because those were pretty well covered.

BUYNOVSKY: Were you given any rules by your bosses, your management in coverage? Was there certain language given to you as far as how you should be covering things, fairness doctrines, balance, any of that?

Kaplow: No, I don't remember ever getting any of that. I mean the people who were above me didn't know the story as well as I did anyway then. You know, I don't know whether we had, probably got some complaints and stuff like that, but I don't remember ever getting that. A lot of people, you'll probably find it if you haven't already, sometimes the people back who are ordering you around don't trust you for it. They know better, everybody knows what kinds of stories, everybody knows political stories, you go out as a political reporter and you come back with a story that's really a good story and it's new. It's very hard sometimes getting it past your editors because they know better because they read that morning's Times. You're ahead of the story, so, I didn't get much direction on how to proceed out there.

BUYNOVSKY: How would you rank the stories you covered during the civil rights era and related to the civil rights era, among the stories that you've covered?

Kaplow: Well, for me, civil rights was the biggest story I've ever covered. I didn't cover Vietnam. I was there for about three or four days well, twice, and we did some stuff back in Washington of course, but I wasn't that involved. Civil rights was the big story. What was the question, how do they rank? It was the number one story.

I had an interesting thing, a friend of mine who worked for the UPI and was out in Vietnam. He was from South Carolina, and he was in Vietnam for a couple years, mostly inside. But he went out with the troops, I guess, sometimes. He said to me he was more frightened in the South than he was in Vietnam. He worked down in Atlanta for a while, so I think most of the people at this conference would tell you civil rights was their biggest story, by biggest I mean most complete, most taxing, most, the one that you really, could sometimes feel good about.

BUYNOVSKY: I'm going to go back a little bit and talk about the fear issues, particularly what story, you were attacked obviously, and there were times there were bombings around you and such. When did you feel the most palpable fear, can you describe that feeling to me?

Kaplow: Well, it was sort of scary that day when they went after us down the street in Montgomery. There were some bombings at night. I happened to be, I was, spent a lot

of time in Birmingham, and then one time I know I came, I happened to be coming from somewhere else, going back to Washington. And I stopped over in Birmingham, and there was a bombing. And that night I got a call from the police, a police guy. I don't know how he found out I was in, well, I do know, I guess the guys down at the desk reported everybody to the police, and the police said something to the effect, because I had been there the previous bombing or bombings, and he said, "Mr. Kaplow, why is it that when you come to town there's a bombing?" "I don't know." We left it at that. And there, well, fear, there was fear because things would happen on the streets.

Oh, in the Montgomery thing, that riot, well, disorder, I don't know how bad it has to be to be classified as a riot. We followed – camera man, sound man and I rode behind the bus carrying the Freedom Riders from Birmingham to Montgomery. We got to the bus station in Montgomery before the bus. As we got out of our car, there were about eight or ten local townsmen around there, one of them, I remember, was cleaning his fingernails with a knife. And he asked me, "Are you one of them?" And I mumbled something, but I smelled trouble and sure enough, it came when the kids came in on the bus. And they, as I said, they hit the camera man.

I was in Birmingham again, Birmingham was a really tough place, really, I mean it was strong segregationist movement everywhere and it was dangerous, could be violent. One night we went out to an automobile raceway, and there was going to be a rally by the segregationist group, a guy named Arthur Haynes, who was, wanted to become mayor, and we went out. And I sent the camera crew out before I went, because I had to do some things and they could get set up. Well as I got to the, later on, to the oval, to the place, I could smell it. I looked around and said this is a place you've got to be careful of because you heard things, you sort of developed a sense, and the platform where the speakers spoke from was in the center of the oval, and the people covering it, the cameras, were also in the center, and their cars were all in that center, and I looked at them and I told my camera man, I said, "Look, we'll get some of this filmed and then we're going to get out of here before it ends because if we get stuck in here, it could be trouble." I mean, we couldn't get out, we were all locked in. So we did, we got as much as we needed for the story, and we got the story and we got out. And the next morning, I think it was the guys from CBS, said, "Where'd you guys go last night?" And I said, "Well we decided to get out," I said, "Why?" He said, "Well after it was all over some, of the fellows came out of the stands looking for the guys from NBC, the nigger broadcasting company, and they were ready to do some work on you." Well that kind of thing is scary, but we didn't get nailed that time. NBC, the nigger broadcasting company, genteel Appalachian fun.

BUYNOVSKY: Is there a particular reason there was that sort of stigma, it was just that they were upset you were covering these events?

Kaplow: Well, a lot of them, even the guys who wouldn't hit you with a bat, felt they were getting a raw deal from the national press particularly. And you constantly heard, if you guys weren't here, we wouldn't have problems. Yeah, what they don't say is, you

guys were here we wouldn't have problems and you wouldn't have black people getting civil rights, you know. That's why we went there. And even the most sophisticated people would say, you're just stirring it up, stirring it up, with a camera. You know, you can't hide a camera. But, I know a lot of, even the people who weren't guided by the segregationists felt that nationally they were not really getting their story, their difficult story told well enough, you know, fairly enough, and they may have had a point sometimes. I sometimes thought the stories that I saw sometimes were not complete, they didn't say, well, I'll tell you a story.

The mayor of Birmingham was, am I giving what you want? The mayor of Birmingham was a fellow named Albert. He had beaten Bull Connor in the previous election for mayor, Albert Boutwell. He seemed like a nice enough guy to the extent I saw him around, but he was mayor in the tough, very difficult, tough situation. He had never been in anything like this, and of course he had a lot of people helping, working with him, but he was, it really was very difficult. Well, I'd decided one of the people I should see, remember I said you try to see everybody you can whatever side they're on, and I went up to his office, and they were very nice to me but I didn't get to see Mayor Boutwell. I went up another time, by this time I was getting to know his clerks and secretaries, and no, I couldn't see Mayor Boutwell. It was either the third or fourth time I went up and they again told me I can't, he's not available. They weren't nasty about it – they were genuinely nice, but as I was leaving I heard someone saying Mr. Kaplow? And I looked around and the door had opened and there was a woman standing there and she said, "Do you have a few moments?" And I said, "Yes."
And the next thing I know I'm in with Albert Boutwell. He wanted to talk. And I didn't, see now, I knew it was, he was thinking off the record, and you know when you try to, in journalism you try to avoid getting off the record stuff because most of the time it's a matter of a person who wants to say something but not have to account for it, who's really trying to knife somebody along the way, so you stay away from that off the record in so far as you can. In this case, I knew he was really in agony, it was a terrible spot he was in and I don't know whether he was helping it or hurting it. I wanted to just get some sense of how he felt, somehow it might be something that you should get, even if I had to tell him, alright I'll go along with you on this, and I did, and I don't remember now, years later, what he said, but I think I got some sense of the agony he was going through. I think it probably helped somewhat, because it looked genuine, you know, if you talk long enough, you saw the genuine side, and I think that probably helped me understand him a little better.

BUYNOVSKY: Talk to me about the legacy the civil rights era had on the press. We talked about how it affected America in general, the public, but press coverage and issues dealing with the media.

Kaplow: Well, I think, as I said, I think almost all of us were involved in it as reporters and camera men and photographers, writers. All probably thought it was the biggest story and most important story we'd covered, you'll probably hear that today. And what did it leave us with? I think it had a, left us with a belief that we had really not only come

up close observing history, but even affecting it in some way. I don't, you know it's very easy to say, oh, it's heroic and all that stuff, but it's not that. It's really, you feel my goodness, I have a story we're doing the way it should be done, we're being professional and we're doing it. It's not heroic. It's doing your work. And you don't have too many stories where you, and then you can see the results of it, you know, laws are passed, actions are taken, courts clear up, and you had a little piece of that. And that's a good feeling because most, you know, so much of journalism is really fast and dirty and you go from one story to the other. But if you get a big story that comes out, and again, I emphasizing it's – we tend to glamorize a lot of things – and it's not heroic. I mean, but some people do good work, good professional work and it came at a time and at a challenge and at the place in history, of major concern.

BUYNOVSKY: What was the role of the black press during this time?

Kaplow: The black press, I just want to make sure I'm not supposed to be on the next panel, ok. The best way I can answer that is to tell you a story about the black press was around, but not many because there just weren't many, but they're around and we got to know them of course, and they had a tougher time than we did. The white segregationists didn't like us, but they hit a black guy, a black reporter over the head before they did us, we'd be a close second.

I'll tell you a story. Clemson, the desegregation of Clemson, I won't give you the whole build up, I'm going to tell it out there I think. Clemson was a masterful example of how desegregation should have been accomplished in the school. Part of it was that the school wanted it without any disorder, and we got together and talked about how to cover it at Clemson. And then at the end of this discussion, the public relations guy for Clemson, who also, he was in above his head, he had never been in the middle of anything like this, but he came up and said to a couple of us, you know we have a couple of black reporters here, I guess maybe from the Amsterdam News or Ebony magazine, one was magazine, one was, and he said we want to make sure that they get the story, we don't want to have anybody saying later that we're holding back, now how can we assure that? So we kicked it around for a while and I said and I think somebody else said, well, you know, we're, what we did with there was just to keep us from running all over the campus, everything chasing, this was Harvey Gant, who later ran with mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, was a student, and I said why don't we have pools set up at different places and, you know what a pool is, you, magazine person in pool, reports everything from that position to all the magazines and so on, and so you're covered because you can. So I said, why don't you go ahead and put the black guy who is a newspaper man in the newspaper pool with everybody else from the newspaper and the other guy from magazine, put him in the magazine pool, and you know. So anyway he said, "Well I'll try." He was frightened, as I said it was big. A few days later, and so on, I said, "So how'd you make out?" He said, "Well I told the guys what we're doing and for a minute they thought about it and then they said, 'yeah, you know that makes a lot of sense.'" And they were in those pools and they got the story. And you know what was sort of interesting about it, that's, Clemson was an example in

good desegregation of a college because the power elite decided there was not going to be another Ole Miss. But this was the second story about democracy, this little side bar, about, black guy said yeah, it makes sense. We ourselves, the practitioners of journalism could have been violating some of the basic elements of democracy. Does that answer your question in the very many words?

BUYNOVSKY: It does, and I don't want to keep you but I wonder if I can just give you a few terms – just give you two or three terms, and you give me a quick visceral response to them. The first one I'm going to say is Little Rock.

Kaplow: Oh, a lot of stories, Little Rock, I could go on for hours, that was, that had a lot of aspects to it, and I'll tell you what, I'll come back if you like because it's, Little Rock was dramatic as everything, and that was the first, that was really a story mostly at the beginning of defiance of the federal court order. The court order was to allow these children in Central High School. I was there – I could go on and on about that, but if you like I can come back when we have more time.

BUYNOVSKY: And the second one, Freedom Rides.

Kaplow: Freedom Rides, most of the Freedom Rides, I wasn't on because they were, they started I think at lunch counters in Tennessee and moved down. I was at this one from Birmingham to Montgomery, and I may have seen a couple of others, but, you know, they were mostly young people, they were genuine, they were concerned, they reformed well. They were good folks, and they weren't show-boating.

BUYNOVSKY: Mr. Kaplow, I thank you for your time.