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Louis M. Lyons Papers

1918-1980 (*Bulk:* 1955-1974)

9 boxes (4.5 linear ft.)

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As a journalist with the *Boston Globe*, a news commentator on WGBH television, and Curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, Louis M. Lyons was an important public figure in the New England media for over fifty years. A 1918 graduate of Massachusetts Agricultural College and later trustee of UMass Amherst, Lyons was a vocal advocate for freedom of the press and a highly regarded commentator on the evolving role of media in American society.

The Lyons Papers contain a selection of correspondence, lectures, and transcripts of broadcasts relating primarily to Lyons'

career in television and radio. From the McCarthy era through the end of American involvement in Vietnam, Lyons addressed topics ranging from local news to international events, and the collection offers insight into transformations in American media following the onset of television and reaction both in the media and the public to events such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the war in Vietnam, and the social and political turmoil of the 1960s.

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Background on Louis Martin Lyons

A distinguished journalist, Curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and radio and television commentator, Louis Martin Lyons was a distinctive progressive voice in the media from the 1920s through the 1970s. Born on Sept. 1, 1897, and raised fatherless both in the suburbs of Boston and on a small farm in Plymouth County, Mass., Lyons graduated from Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1918. After military service during the First World War, he returned home intending to become a teacher, but with the assistance of a friend's connections, embarked instead on a career in journalism. Hired by the *Boston Globe* in 1919, and then working as editor for the MAC Extension Service and reporter for the *Springfield Republican*, Lyons quickly found his niche. Even at this early stage in his career, he had a nose for news and little fear of controversy. His reporting, for example, helped expose some alleged improprieties by Amherst College President Alexander Meiklejohn that led to his resignation.

In 1923, Lyons returned to the greener pastures of the *Globe* as a reporter, later becoming a columnist, special features writer, and, during the Second World War, war correspondent. From the mid-1930s, he was also an active member of the American Newspaper Guild, one of the first white collar unions in the country and a target for critics who thought it tinged with Communism. At the *Globe*, Lyons covered a broad terrain, from Lindberg's flight across the Atlantic to the Vermont floods of 1927. In perhaps the best known article of his career, in 1940, Lyons quoted then ambassador to Britain, Joseph P. Kennedy, as saying that "Democracy is finished in England. It may be here." Although Kennedy claimed he was misquoted and, then, taken out of context, the article deepened the split between Kennedy and Roosevelt and ultimately helped precipitate the ambassador's resignation.

In 1938, Lyons was accepted into the first class of fellows at the Nieman Foundation, which had been created to assist mid-career journalists, in the words of the donor, "to promote and elevate the standards of journalism in the United States and educate persons deemed specially qualified for journalism." When Archibald MacLeish left as Curator of the Foundation to become Librarian of Congress in the following year, Lyons was selected as his successor, leaving his responsibilities at the *Globe* entirely in 1946 to work full time at the Nieman. From the post-war period until 1964, he helped shape the Fellows program, diversifying its ranks to include women, non-whites, and non-Americans, and expanding its scope to include all major media.

If anything, Lyons' obligations at the Foundation seem to have spurred his productivity, while opening new avenues as a public spokesperson on journalism writing, and the role of the press. Lyons maintained an intensive schedule of lecturing and publishing, and he expanded into non-print media. When WGBH radio was founded in 1951, Lyons was tapped to do news and commentary, and when they branched out into television four years later, he became the station's first newscaster. For twenty years, his nightly radio broadcasts were also fixtures on the local scene. A forceful advocate for freedom of the press even at the height of the McCarthy era, he was recognized with the George Foster Peabody Award for reporting by a local station and the Richard Lauterbach Award for "substantial contributions in the field of civil liberties" in 1958, and was awarded the Freedom Foundation Medal in 1959 and the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award in 1963. Lyons received honorary degrees from the University of Massachusetts, Rhode Island State College of Education, Colby College, and Harvard. Since 1981 (also 1964-1966), the Nieman Foundation has awarded its Louis M. Lyons Award annually to "honor displays of conscience and integrity by individuals, groups or institutions in communications."



Louis Lyons, ca.1955.

Although Lyons retired from the Nieman Foundation in 1964, he remained actively engaged in journalism. He continued his television broadcasts on shows such as Prime Time and Evening Compass until curtailed by a stroke 1975, and he served on the Board of Trustees at the University of Massachusetts from 1964 until 1971. Remarkably, a year and a half after his stroke, he returned to regular radio commentary. Louis Lyons died on April 11, 1982, leaving three sons, a daughter, and a step-daughter.

Scope of collection

The Lyons Papers contain a selection of lectures, transcripts of broadcasts, and correspondence relating primarily to the television and radio career of the journalist Louis Martin Lyons. From the McCarthy era through the end of American involvement in Vietnam, Lyons's broadcasts covered topics ranging from local politics, personalities, and places to the major current events on the national and international scene.

The distinction between broadcasts, lectures, and articles is not always clearly marked in the collection, however the broadcasts appear almost exclusively to be associated with WGBH, while the lectures were generally delivered to universities, press organizations, and at many of his awards ceremonies. The broadcasts, the true heart of the collection, address topics ranging from New Hampshire politics to Girl Scouts and the UN, politics in Boston, John F. Kennedy's run for president, nuclear war and Cold War, international politics, the abuse of the press, McCarthyism, civil rights, John Birchers, racism, Black education, Vietnam, and the Du Bois homesite dedication. Includes some correspondence relative to the broadcasts, the deaths of Lyndon Johnson and Earl Warren, anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, television commentary, and the role of the press. Of particular note are materials relating to his emotional broadcast following the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the latter including dozens of letters from the public reacting, pro and con, to Lyons' impassioned words. Most of Lyons' earlier (McCarthy-era) broadcasts were destroyed in a fire at WGBH. Lyons' lectures cover a similar range, but are more typically focused on journalism as craft and responsibility and issues surrounding the media.

The correspondence is relatively sparse, with much of it concerning such mundane matters as arrangements for lectures. While there is no sustained correspondence with any single person, Lyons did correspond with a number of well known individuals (e.g. Archibald MacLeish, Lux Feininger, Gluyas Williams, Arthur Schlesinger, Leonard Lewin, and Felix Frankfurter), and a few letters stand out. A letter from a former MAC student, Walton D. Sproul, for example, contains a vivid description of the final hours of World War I at the front, Senegalese troops, and the first signs of peace in Germany; an emotional letter from friends Charles and Phyllis Paskauskas discusses their mood and the mood of the nation in the wake of John F. Kennedy's death (in the Kennedy file); and a number of letters from the late 1960s and early 1970s discuss presidential politics and the raging political controversies of the day.

Inventory

Articles

1949-1970

2 folders

Box 1

Largely on journalism, journalist ethics

Awards

1963-1964

Box 1

Broadcasts

1954-1970

2 folders

Box 1

Broadcasts

1954-1959

Folder 1

Broadcasts

1960-1961

Folder 2

Broadcasts

1962

Folder 3

Broadcasts

1963-1964

Folder 4

Broadcasts

1965-1970

Folder 5
Broadcasts
1972-1974

Folder 6
Broadcasts
Undated

Folder 7
Broadcasts: Commentaries
1963-1974

3 folders
Box 2
WGBH broadcasts, mostly labeled "commentaries."

Broadcasts: Commentaries
1956-1963
Folder 1

Broadcasts: Commentaries
1964-1973
Folder 2

Broadcasts: Commentaries
1974, undated
Folder 3

Club -- Talks
1965-1976
Box 2

Ephemera relating to the Club of Odd Volumes meetings, speeches given by Lyons at the Club on the Supreme Court decisions and the political assault on the press, the inauguration of Jimmy Carter.

Coolidge, Calvin
ca.1925-1972
Box 2

Re: WGBH broadcast on Calvin Coolidge (July 4, 1971); Nieman Report article on Coolidge (1964); two real photo postcards of Calvin Coolidge.

Correspondence
1919-1976
9 folders
Box 1-2

Correspondence
1919-1959
Box 2: 1

Correspondence
1960-1962
Box 2: 2

Correspondence
1963-1964
Box 2: 2

Correspondence
1965
Box 2: 3

Correspondence
1966
Box 2: 3

Correspondence
1967
Box 2: 3

Correspondence
1968
Box 3: 4

Correspondence

1969

Box 3: 5

Correspondence

1970

Box 3: 6

Correspondence

1971

Box 3: 7

Correspondence

1972

Box 3: 8

Correspondence

1973-1980, undated

Box 3: 8

Dinner (Louis Lyons Testimonial)

1960

Box 2

Frost, Robert

1963

Box 2

Thoughts on the death of Robert Frost.

Honorary Degree

1964

Box 2

Kennedy, John F.

1963

Box 2

Broadcast notes and writing on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

King, Martin Luther

1968

Box 2

Public responses, pro and con, to Lyons' broadcast on the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Lectures and Talks

1948-1980

3 folders

Box 4-5

Topics: Freedom of the press; the press and television; Lovejoy Fellowship; Massachusetts Agricultural College; discrimination; role of the press

Lectures and talks

1948-1955

Box 4: 1

Lectures and talks

1956-1959

Box 4: 2

Lectures and talks

1960-1962

Box 4: 3

Lectures and talks

1963

Box 4: 4

Lectures and talks

1964-1965

Box 5: 5

Lectures and talks

1966

Box 5: 6

Lectures and talks

1967-1970

Box 5: 7

Lectures and talks

1971-1980

Box 5: 8

Lectures and talks

Undated

Box 5: 9

Massachusetts Historical Society

1971

Box 5

Lecture on Press and politics before television.

Merger of programs

1973

Box 5

Re: WGBH realignment of broadcasts, ending broadcast of The Reporters and Louis Lyons News and Comment and replacement with new show including Lyons.

Newspaper clippings

1957-1967

Box 6

Nieman Fellowship

1938-1960

Box 6

Letters of support for Lyons' application for a Nieman fellowship and related letters from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Archibald MacLeish, James B. Conant, Felix Frankfurter.

Nieman Report

3 folders

Box 6

Paste-ups of articles appearing in Nieman Reports.

Nieman Report (printed)

1951-1980

Box 6-7

Nieman Report (printed)

1951-1966

Box 6: 1

Nieman Report (printed)

1967-1970

Box 6: 2

Nieman Report (printed)

1972-1980

Box 7: 1

Obituaries

1957-1975

Box 7

Obituaries, mostly written for the Nieman Reporter or broadcast in WGBH, of Arthur Compton, Walt Disney, Merle Fainsod, Elizabeth Hall, Robert F. Kennedy, Edwin A. Lahey, Walter Lippmann, Charles Morton, John C. Page, Arthur Schlesinger, Edmund Wilson, Laurence L. Winship, et al.

Materials on Robert Frost, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King are filed separately under those names.

One Hundred Years of the Boston Globe

1971-1972

Box 7

Personal: Early days

1918-1946

Box 7

Includes materials relating to service in First World War.

Personal: Ephemera

1929-1975

Box 7

Includes invitation to inauguration of Herbert Hoover, 1929; American Newspaper Guild membership card; press pass to senate and to inauguration of FDR, 1937; air raid pass from World War II; invitation to birthday dinner for John F. Kennedy, 1961; invitation to memorial service for Robert Frost.

Personal: Miscellaneous

1929-1976

Box 7

Biographical piece on Lyons, election to organizations, and other miscellaneous items.

Portraits of George and Martha Washington

1981

Box 7

Press and the People (transcripts of television show)

Undated

Box 8

Prime Time

1971-1980

Box 8

Retirement

1963-1964

Box 8

Letters on Lyons' retirement.

Reviews

1951-1967

2 folders

Box 8

Special Projects

1959-1974

Box 9

White House Conference on Aging (1971); Press and the Race Issue (1963); Press and the Public (1964), etc.

Stroke

1975

Box 9

Get well letters.

WGBH

1954-1964

Box 9

Talks and lectures, ephemera, some letters.

WGBH Fire (burned fragments)

Box 9

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Louis M. Lyons, Jr., 1983.

Related Material

The papers of editor Charles Whipple include much additional information on the American Newspaper Guild at the Boston Globe during the period of Lyons' employment.

Processing Information

Reprocessed July 2007.

Bibliography

Lyons, Louis M. *Newspaper Story: One Hundred Years of the Boston Globe*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971). Call no.: PN4899.B65 B65 1971.

Nieman Reports. Call no.: PN4700.N57 Per (Du Bois Library).

Language:

English

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Search terms

Subjects

Boston Globe

Civil rights.

Freedom of the press.

Frost, Robert, 1874-1963

Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973.

Journalistic ethics.

Journalists--Massachusetts.

Kennedy, John Fitzgerald, 1917-1963.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968.

Television.

University of Massachusetts. Trustees.

Vietnam War, 1961-1975.

WGBH (Television station : Boston, Mass.).

World War, 1914-1918.

Contributors

Lyons, Louis Martin, 1897- . **[main entry]**

Genres and formats

Letters (Correspondence).

Speeches.

Link to similar SCUA collections

Antiracism

Civil rights

Journalism

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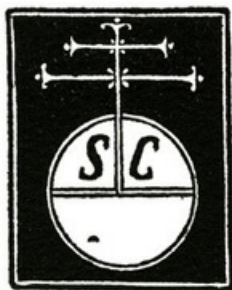
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