



K A P P A T A U A L P H A NEWSLETTER

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American University professor wins Mott award

It's easy to blame the internet for the decline of newspapers. But as Margot Susca discovered, the answer is much more complicated and largely due to the decades-long influence of private investment firms working behind the scenes.

Susca, an assistant professor at American University, will be honored with the Frank Luther Mott/Kappa Tau Alpha Research Award for her book *Hedged: How Private Investment Funds Helped Destroy American Newspapers and Undermine Democracy*.

The idea for Susca's book emerged when an NBC News producer asked Susca, a former newspaper reporter herself, how she knew that concentrated newspaper ownership was



SUSCA

is not Gannett, Lee Enterprises or McClatchy-Tribune," Susca said. "The story is really about

as harmful as she claimed. Susca decided then to go beyond anecdotes and started digging through corporate records.

"Once I started looking at the financial documents for six months or so, it was clear: Wait a minute, the story here

the private investment funds that control those newspaper chains."

In *Hedged*, Susca demonstrates how mergers and acquisitions of hundreds of newspapers gradually undermined the quality of print journalism.

"Her multifaceted analysis shows how private equity funds involved in the newspaper industry are maximizing profits while demanding cuts and layoffs, leading to important stories not being covered, governments not being held accountable, and entire communities being left neglected," said Raluca Cozma, a professor of journalism at Kansas State University.

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WVU professor named KTA adviser of the year

Professor Bob Britten has a simple but powerful philosophy: "If you can give, you should."

For his dedication to this belief and to the Kappa Tau Alpha national honor society, Britten, a teaching professor at West Virginia University, is the 41st recipient of the William H. Taft Outstanding Adviser Award.

Britten was inducted into KTA at the University of Missouri while a graduate student and has served as West Virginia University's KTA adviser since 2012.

"Dr. Bob Britten is most deserving of this recognition. In addition to his long service as KTA adviser at WVU, each year he educates attendees at our school's student and alumni award ceremony about the organization's history and importance," said Diana Martinelli, director at the WVU School of Media and Communications.

Martinelli said Britten fosters a culture of academic excellence and professional integrity among journalism and mass communication students.

"He is an excellent role model of KTA's values: knowledge, truth and accuracy. Students and colleagues alike hold Bob in high regard, and we are thrilled he is receiving this national-level award," Martinelli said.

As the KTA adviser, Britten ensures exceptional students can be recognized for their achievements.

He recalled one student who began as an English major, became editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper and then switched to a journalism major.



PHOTO BY BRIAN SMITH

West Virginia University's newest Kappa Tau Alpha initiates flank KTA adviser Bob Britten at their spring 2025 ceremony. Britten, a teaching professor of journalism, has served as the KTA adviser at WVU since 2012. Britten is the 41st recipient of the William H. Taft Outstanding Adviser Award.

"Seeing her develop and shine in multiple classes of mine — seeing her leave as a completely different person than when she came in — was really, really a

joy," Britten said.

In addition to recognizing students, he also

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115 years of history



PHOTO BY NATE BROWN

University of Missouri School of Journalism graduates show off their smiles and swag after being inducted into Kappa Tau Alpha. The national honor society was founded at the University of Missouri in 1910 and has inducted nearly 80,000 students nationwide since then. Outstanding graduate students and the top 10% of a journalism and mass communication program's juniors and seniors are eligible to be initiated.

Investigative skills pay off in Susca's 'essential book'

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Cozma, the national president of KTA, also praised Susca for the scope of her research, which included in-depth interviews with journalists trying to cope with unreasonable expectations as their employers cut staff and with citizens hungry for information about their local communities that they could no longer find.

KTA Vice President Patrick File said Susca's book provides a clear examination of the political economy underlying the crisis in America's newspaper industry.

"It's hard to think of a more essential book for anybody—student, scholar, general reader—who wants to understand today's news media landscape and consider a viable path forward," said File, associate professor at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Building on the insights from her first book, Susca is now exploring the ownership of different media platforms including television, social media, and radio.

"I think that there is a story to be told about the investors behind mainstream media, about the profit behind mainstream media," Susca said.

The second book, under contract with the

University of Massachusetts Press, is called *The Media Plutocracy: Billionaires, the News, and America's Authoritarian Slide*.

At American University, Susca says her favorite classes to teach are journalism ethics and "Democracy Along the Red Line," a general education elective she created for first-year students.

"My democracy seminar is an exploration of the news media and how well it serves citizens," Susca said. "We use the Metro's Red Line as the spine of our field work, engaging with media professionals and communities in Washington, D.C., exploring journalism and democracy at a crucial crossroads."

Susca worked as a newspaper reporter in Connecticut and Florida before earning her Ph.D. in mass communication from Florida State University. At American University, she also helps with the Investigative Reporting Workshop.

"I get to mentor new investigative journalists on FOIA, financial records, sourcing, and storytelling techniques," she said. "It's a wonderful opportunity to help train the next generation of investigative reporters."

She used those skills for *Hedged*. She will receive the Mott award, which includes a \$1,000 prize, at the Association for Education in Journalism and

Mass Communication annual conference in San Francisco.

Named in honor of Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Frank Luther Mott, an educator and longtime leader of the Kappa Tau Alpha national honor society, the Mott award honors the best research-based book about journalism or mass communication published during the year.

Other finalists for 2024 work were Ira Chinoy for *Predicting the Winner: the Untold Story of Election Night 1952 and the Dawn of Computer Forecasting* (Potomac Books); Larry Heinzerling and Randy Herschaft with Ann Cooper for *Newshawks in Berlin: The Associated Press and Nazi Germany* (Columbia University Press); W. Wat Hopkins for *Hate Speech is Not Free: The Case Against First Amendment Protection* (Rowman & Littlefield); and William E. Porter and Thomas A. Mascaro for *Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years* (University of Michigan Press).

Kappa Tau Alpha, the national college honor society founded in 1910 for scholarship in journalism and mass communication, has recognized research contributions to the field since the inauguration of the Mott award in 1944. KTA has about 100 chapters at universities throughout the United States.

Service comes naturally to WVU professor



PHOTO BY BRIAN SMITH

West Virginia University Professor Bob Britten leads Kappa Tau Alpha initiates in the honor society's traditional pledge to adhere to the principles of truth, knowledge and accuracy. Sometimes, the students and advisers find the words from the early 1900s to be a mouthful.

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helps the national honor society by helping screen books and scholarship applications for annual competitions.

Britten attributes this spirit of service to his upbringing.

"If we think of service as a way to produce the world we hope to live in, it makes it a lot easier to contribute what you can."

Beyond his service to KTA and WVU, Britten also is active in Scouting America. The Eagle Scout reengaged with scouting when his daughter joined in 2022.

"I'm now her troop's Scoutmaster, and we do all kinds of camping and events over a typical year," Britten said.

Britten brings his professional expertise in the visual arts to scouting by designing patches for events ranging from the troop level all the way up to the National Jamboree.

"Visual communication is my professional and academic background, not something I expected to be contributing when my daughter got involved with scouting, but it turns out a lot of things need to be designed," Britten said.

Examples include promotional materials, shirts and signs for the local council's main camp, Camp Mountaineer.

"These days, I try to get our youth more involved with visual planning — concepts, sketches and designs — and work with them to bring their ideas to life so that the images of our council come from them rather than me," he said.

At WVU, Britten primarily teaches courses in visual communication and design. He has been working in journalism and news design since his junior year at Allegheny College, when he was "promoted" from movie reviewer to managing editor of his campus newspaper.

Beyond his work with KTA, Britten's academic background includes research on collective memory and visual journalism. His dissertation explored 9/11 memorialization through a content analysis of



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB BRITTEN

Bob Britten designed this patch set for the Mountaineer Area Council for Jamboree 2023. The patches feature cryptids native to West Virginia and state landmarks.

newspaper coverage of the visual artifacts at the Flight 93 crash site in Pennsylvania

While much of his early research focused on photo archiving, Britten now invests most of his energy into creative projects and mentoring students.

"I try to get students to submit to a good, high-profile conferences like AEJMC, so that their work gets out there and they can see the payoff for the work that they've put in," Britten said.

The Taft Award is named for William H. Taft, a University of Missouri journalism professor who served as KTA's executive director from 1962 to 1991. The award has been awarded annually since 1945 and comes with a \$500 check.

IN BRIEF

VCU student wins KTA scholarship

Sophomore Kayla Munecas hopes to follow in her sister's footsteps as a journalist and credits sibling rivalry for her drive to succeed.

Munecas, who is majoring in mass communication at Virginia Commonwealth University, is the second recipient of Kappa Tau

Alpha's now annual \$1,000 scholarship.



MUNECAS

She says the scholarship will allow her to contribute to her own education and help her family.

The daughter of immigrants, Munecas says she wants to tell the stories of those living in

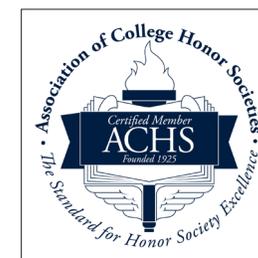
marginalized communities as well as hold those in power accountable.

Last year's recipient was Genevieve Machuca of University of Nevada, Reno. The Kappa Tau Alpha scholarship aims to support undergraduate students who have at least one year of academic coursework remaining at an institution with a KTA chapter and are majoring or planning to major in journalism or another mass communication field.

As part of the application process, students must submit an essay that introduces themselves and explains how their goals align with Kappa Tau Alpha's core principles: dedication to the highest ideals of journalism, commitment to freedom of expression, upholding honesty, practicing fairness, demonstrating skill and artistry in presentation, and prioritizing accuracy and truth.

National body certifies honor societies as credible student organizations

Kappa Tau Alpha is among nearly 70 national honor societies certified by the Association of



College Honor Societies, which has been certifying credible honor societies since 1925.

ACHS has established a timeline for reviewing societies, and

KTA is scheduled to be reviewed in the 2025-2026 academic year. Societies are expected to demonstrate they meet the following criteria:

- They require minimum scholastic criteria.
- They have transparent governance.
- They have collegiate chapters
- Their websites include basic information, such as the current officers, the initiation fee and admission requirements.
- They operate as nonprofits.

Beverly Horvit, KTA's executive director, said she expects the recertification process to go smoothly and is pleased ACHS takes its responsibilities seriously.

Celebrating excellence



PHOTO COURTESY OF ED CARTER

Professor Ed Carter celebrates with Brigham Young University's 2025 class of Kappa Tau Alpha initiates. Carter served as the national president of the honor society from 2020-2022 and as BYU's chapter adviser since 2007. The BYU chapter was founded in 1952.

TCU professor investigating impact of labeling AI-generated content

Lawmakers across the United States have proposed bills requiring labels to warn citizens when political images may have been generated by AI. But whether labels improve citizens' media literacy is unclear.

That's why Professor Chip Stewart, the KTA adviser at Texas Christian University, and Alexis Shore Ingber of the University of Michigan embarked on a project to examine the credibility of AI images and the effectiveness of warning labels.

Stewart received a \$1,000 research grant from Kappa Tau Alpha to help fund the research. He and Shore Ingber's research was accepted for presentation by the Law & Policy Division at this year's Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference.

The researchers used an experimental design to test the impact of different kinds of labels for differing types of content on how credible consumers perceived the content to be and how likely they were to share the material.

Although warning labels were effective in limiting the credibility of AI-generated images, labels presented as notes from the community also were effective. That suggests the government does not need to step in to regulate political content; communities can do that for themselves.

When it comes to commercial content, though, people showed a higher tendency to believe and share that content, suggesting that the commercial sphere should be more strictly regulated.



STEWART

Stewart used the KTA grant as seed money to help secure an additional \$13,346 grant from Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression to expand the project. The second phase will examine unlabeled AI images in political and sports contexts, and how they are proliferating on

platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Stewart has served as the KTA chapter adviser at Texas Christian University for 12 years, 2008-2015 and 2020 to the present.

Since 2003, Kappa Tau Alpha, the national honor society for journalism and mass communication, has awarded more than \$39,000 in grants to KTA chapter advisers to promote scholarship. Other recent grant winners, including Margaret Ng of the University of Illinois, Frank Waddell of the University of Florida, and Spencer Barnes of the University of North Carolina, have used their awards for studies that have led to AEJMC presentations and publications.

"We love that a relatively small award can help our advisers fulfill their need and passion to conduct meaningful research," said KTA national President Raluca Cozma, a professor at Kansas State University.

Kappa Tau Alpha was founded in 1910 at the University of Missouri and has chapters at nearly 100 universities.



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Kappa Tau Alpha, School of Journalism
University of Missouri,
Columbia, MO 65211-1200
email: umcjourkta@missouri.edu
www.KappaTauAlpha.org

Executive Director:
Beverly Horvit, Ph.D.,
573-882-7685