
In Shocking True Story: The Rise and Fall of Confidential, "America's Most Scandalous Scandal Magazine," Henry E. Scott crafted neither the most readable nor organized study. Hardly a scholarly history of Confidential, Scott’s book nevertheless offers extensive passages and images illustrative of the scandal magazine's different story formulae and provides sufficient narrative to link these examples for the few readers with at best a vague memory of Confidential and other 1950s exposé magazines.

Robert Harrison, who Scott argues learned his narrative technique as a reporter for Bernarr Macfadden’s New York Evening Graphic, launched Confidential in December 1952 with such tabloid features as an item on a homosexual wedding, photographs of women in underwear, a “science” story asserting athletes make lousy lovers, an exposé about chain-gang torture, and images and fiction published in his girlie magazines—Beauty, Parade, Whisper, Eyeful, Titter, Wink, and Flirt. According to Scott, the concept for Confidential came to Harrison after he noticed stories about celebrity lives attracted viewers during Estes Kefauver’s Senate investigations of mobsters. With his August 1953 issue featuring Marilyn Monroe, Harrison also learned that readers never tired of Hollywood gossip. The Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio issue sold 800,000 copies and alerted the Hollywood studios that Confidential would not be intimidated by studio flaks. For five years, until its trial in 1957, every Confidential issue used a “story-behind-the-story” formula to undermine the Hollywood mythology of stars as all-American heroes and beauties.


Faced with PR damage from *Confidential* and its imitators, studios pressed for legal action against Harrison, pressuring California Attorney General Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, who planned a gubernatorial run and expected support from Hollywood. Calling exposé publications harmful to the movie industry, Brown impaneled a grand jury where Harrison’s former editor Howard Rushmore revealed names of Harrison’s tipsters. On May 15, 1957, Brown obtained indictments against eleven people and five companies linked to *Confidential*. Subpoenaed actors and cops, prostitutes, and reporters identified as *Confidential* tipsters all worried what People of the State of California vs. Robert Harrison et al. would reveal about their activities. The trial for conspiracy to publish criminal libel, obscenity, and information about abortion and male rejuvenation took two months and concluded with a hung jury. With studio support, the state dropped all charges except conspiracy to publish obscenity, and Harrison agreed to a fine and an end to exposés of Hollywood’s private lives in *Confidential* and *Whisper*. Harrison sold *Confidential* three months later as its circulation fell to 200,000.
A media consultant and former reporter and editor for Knight-Ridder and Times Mirror newspapers, Henry Scott served as publisher of *Metro New York* and vice president for New Media and New Products at the New York Times Company; managed *The News in Review*, *The New York Times* Russian edition; and was publisher of *Out* magazine.