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Doctor of Philosophy

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Approved by the Committee, November 2011

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Between 1877 and 1978, black reporters, publishers, and readers engaged in a never-ending and ever-shifting protest against American racism. Journalists' militancy oscillated as successive generations of civil rights activists defined anew their relationship with racism and debated the relevance of black radicalism in the fight for racial justice. Journalists achieved their greatest influence when their political perspectives aligned with the views of their employers and readers. Frequent disputes, though, erupted over the scope and meaning of racial justice within the process of reporting the news, compelling some writers to start alternative publications that challenged the assimilationist politics promoted by profit-minded publishers and middle-class community leaders.

This national network of news by, about, and for African Americans emerged in the late nineteenth century as the editor-proprietors of small, but widely circulated, newspapers defended the freedoms and rights gained during Reconstruction. In the early twentieth century, editors and publishers rushed to establish new publications aimed at African Americans, leaving the southern countryside for urban industrial employment. Particularly in the North, many editors adopted militant editorial policies to win the loyalty of readers who might otherwise buy competing publications. During the interwar years reporters and readers infused black journalism with an unprecedented racial militancy and political progressiveness by endorsing the politics and sensibilities of Harlem's radical orator-editors, New Negro authors and artists, and Popular Front activists. This style of racial advocacy extended beyond the restoration of civil rights as writers condemned Western colonialism, criticized American capitalism, and explored black separatism. During World War II, journalists' progressive outlook propelled black newspapers to their peak popularity and national influence.

By the early 1950s, the ascendancy of anticomunism moved publishers to jettison writers associated with the politics of anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and black separatism. They were replaced by younger journalists who accepted the narrower mission of fighting for domestic civil rights. In the 1960s, African Americans infuriated by the slow pace of desegregation accused commercial publishers of being too ready to compromise their militancy. Radical writers and editors tapped into this frustration by creating an alternative press that defined and debated the merits of Black Power. In the 1970s, journalists began to broaden the reach of black journalism by fighting to integrate white newsrooms. They ultimately transformed, albeit fitfully, how mainstream media covered and portrayed African Americans and other minority groups.

This dissertation complicates and challenges the historiography of black journalism. It supplants scholarship that depicts press protest as unchanging and driven by publishers by arguing journalistic agitation was continually reconceived by journalists and readers. It broadens the definition of who was a journalist by foregoing a narrow focus on the "black press" for a more inclusive examination of "black print culture." It characterizes black radicals and their publications as integral, not marginal, in shaping commercial black journalism. It argues the tenets of black journalism, while diluted, gained greater salience as black journalists integrated white-owned media.
To Lisa, Emma, Melissa, Mom, and Dad
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii

Introduction: Crafting an Interdisciplinary Approach to Black Journalism 1

Chapter One: The Militancy of Modern Black Journalism 14

Chapter Two: The “New Crowd” Journalists 54

Chapter Three: From Ethiopia to Berlin: The “New Crowd” Triumphant 98

Chapter Four: “Persons of Questionable Leanings”: The “New Crowd” Driven Out 144

Chapter Five: Black Power Assaults the Black Newspaper 188

Chapter Six: The White Newsroom 226

Bibliography 242

Vita 263
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Introduction

Crafting an Interdisciplinary Approach to Black Journalism

A problematic disciplinary division devalues the historical significance of modern black journalism, which I define as the practice and profession of reporting and writing news and commentary on current events by African American journalists for a primarily black readership. The historiography of black journalism illuminates how journalism historians and cultural studies scholars pose contrasting narratives on overlapping subject matter but—with a few groundbreaking exceptions—seldom engage with one another’s fields. This bifurcation stems from methodological differences concerning who scholars study, which publications they examine, and how they define black journalism.

Journalism historians draw upon an older historiography that tends to equate the history of black journalism with the circumscribed professional perspective of newspaper publishers. The problematic nature of viewing black journalism through the eyes of newspaper publishers is illustrated by the commonplace conflation of black journalism with the “black press”—a troublesome term that fuzzily foregrounds owners’ control of mechanical production over writers’ intellectual creation. This scholarship is overly determined by personal and institutional biography dominated by publishers’ lives, careers, and politics. Another branch of study examines the federal government’s efforts to censor black newspapers in wartime, emphasizing publishers’ interactions with white officials. History written from publishers’ viewpoint becomes a narrative of declension—the influence of black journalism rises and then falls in tandem with newspapers’ circulation and profitability. ¹

¹ Patrick S. Washburn reviews influential histories about black newspapers in “‘A Dozen Best’: Top Books on Black Newspaper History,” American Journalism 23 (Summer 2006): 124-131. Personal and institutional biographies of leading publishers and their newspapers include Ann Field Alexander, Race
By overstating newspaper publishers' influence, journalism historians overlook central attributes of black journalism. They disguise how reportage conventions evolved over time as publishers, journalists, and readers negotiated the nature of news content. Instead, they depict owners as the top-down arbiters of news judgment. They also minimize the professional and political contributions of journalists who wrote for magazines and alternative (or radical) publications. Instead, they too readily link cultural influence to large circulations and long publication runs. By focusing on segregated black newspapers, historians undervalue the role played by black journalists working in the white media in enlarging the meaning and reach of black journalism. Tellingly, a useful textbook by Patrick S. Washburn offers the nearest approximation to a monograph's sustained analysis of the development of twentieth-century black journalism. 2

Cultural studies scholars tend to analyze magazine editors and writers who worked at the fulcrum of black literature and journalism, emphasizing their literary and scholarly...
contributions and neglecting their prosaic involvement with of-the-moment news. For these scholars, literary reputation supplants circulation as the measure of historical significance. Through biography and literary criticism, cultural studies scholars diminish black journalism by exaggerating the distance between so-called working journalists and celebrated writers—including the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Pauline E. Hopkins, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes. This distinction unintentionally inflates the parochialism of weekly newspapers, which balanced readers' demands for mundane coverage of local events with sophisticated analysis of racial issues and controversies.

But these scholars also attribute black journalism with an unexpected cultural vibrancy by linking it to broader political and social transformations. Recent scholarship provocatively extends the influence of publishers and journalists beyond the issues of white oppression and electoral politics to discuss how journalism reshaped black identity and broadened conceptions of racial justice. Examples are plentiful. Hanna Wallinger positions Pauline Hopkins, writer and editor for Colored American Magazine from 1900 to 1904, at "the center of crucial debates about the cultural politics of magazine editing, the cultural politics of radical activism, and the early feminist movement." Bill V. Mullen aligns publisher John Sengstacke and the Chicago Defender with the 1930s cultural politics of Popular Front progressives, imbuing a capitalistic publication with a communist-inspired editorial militancy. Adam Green looks beyond the sniping of jealous newspaper publishers and frustrated progressives to ask how Ebony, the nation's most successful black lifestyle magazine, transformed "notions of race within the collective imagination of blacks" in the mid-twentieth century. The extensive scholarship written since 1998 on Ida B. Wells best exemplifies how scholars have reclaimed supposedly lost voices and reasserted the centrality of black journalists to their contemporaries. Wells was a memoirist, pamphleteer, educator, and international orator who participated in debates concerning anti-
racism, gender politics, and Progressive-era social reforms. All of these roles, though, were rooted in the platform provided by her journalism career and her association with other black journalists.  

This dissertation traces the political and professional development of modern black journalism from 1877 to 1978 – from the end of Reconstruction through the early integration of white-owned media. I argue that successive generations of journalists, publishers, and readers negotiated the conventions and content of black news writing as they debated, defined, and critiqued their ever-shifting relationships with the forces of racism, modernity, and black radicalism. Publishers and journalists shaped these debates as they struggled to reconcile the assimilationist aims of a black middle class seeking to integrate into American society and the global agendas of black progressives who advocated for equality in its fullest sense. As these debates unfolded, segregated – but not ostracized – black journalists engaged white publishers and broadcasters in the slow, fitful process of integrating the news industry.

Like cultural historians, I identify black journalism as an integral but compromised component of an expansive and diverse black print culture. Robert Darnton, a pioneering scholar in the history of the book, describes the study of print culture as “the social and cultural history of communication by print ... its purpose is to understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thought and behavior of mankind during the last five hundred years.” Through black print culture, authors, poets,

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scholars, journalists, and activists used a wide range of printed formats to trumpet black achievement and intellectualism, denounce racist stereotypes deployed by white writers, and articulate a claim to racial justice and equality based on a modern conception of universal humanity. Print culture studies reveal black journalism as a social construction that derived meaning and value from all the participants in its creation—publishers, journalists, and readers, most significantly, but also advertisers, printers, newsboys, and newsstand dealers.  

Through black journalism, African Americans articulated competing visions of black modernity. Michael Hanchard defines Afro-modernity as “the selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions of the modern West within the cultural and political practices of African-derived peoples to create a form of relatively autonomous modernity distinct from its counterparts of Western Europe and North America.” Hanchard emphasizes that Afro-modernity is “no mere mimicry of Western modernity but an innovation upon its precepts, forces, and features.” Black journalists illustrated Hanchard’s analysis by engaging in advocacy journalism that challenged the legitimacy of (white) journalistic objectivity, a doctrine that claimed racial neutrality but reinforced white supremacists’ efforts to erase African Americans’ participation in the modern world.  

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Black journalists worked for two politically distinct but overlapping and cross-pollinating presses – the commercial press and alternative press. These presses were defined by their prevailing tendencies. The commercial press offered a profit-oriented presentation of current events designed to cater to the many interests of the largest possible readership. It came to be staffed, managed, and owned by professional journalists who aspired to lifelong careers in the industry. It consisted mostly of weekly newspapers, a couple of significant daily newspapers, and popular magazines. The alternative press advocated progressive and radical viewpoints that fell outside of mainstream political debate. It was run by professional journalists as well as activists – writers who today might be called citizen-journalists. Its publications were often fleeting and varied, ranging from magazines and newspapers to pamphlets, mimeographed newsletters, and organizational bulletins.

Publishers and journalists sought to establish the parameters of Afro-modernity when they debated the merits of black radicalism, an umbrella term encompassing the overlapping but distinct ideologies of black militancy, black separatism, and Pan-Africanism. Radicals questioned African Americans' faith in integration, and some advocated socialism and communism as empowering alternatives to capitalism's inherent impulse to create wealth by exploiting the disadvantaged. Radicals argued about their responsibilities to an exclusionary nation-state that demanded they spill blood upon its battlefields. They explored cultural and political connections with people of color elsewhere who were negotiating similar challenges and accommodations with Western imperialism. 6

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Publishers and journalists in the commercial press crafted these potentially incendiary debates within the consumer marketplace, an uneasy mediator of black sensibilities nevertheless identified by scholar Davarian L. Baldwin as “a crucial site of intellectual life.” The commercial press’ central attributes as an industrial entity were its capitalistic outlook and its racial autonomy. This orientation toward profit was distinctive of American media in general. Sociologist Paul Starr contends that the signature achievement and unresolved dilemma of modern American communications is the media’s tradition of fostering participation in democratic politics for the public good countered by the industry’s proclivity toward manipulation by selfish commercial and political interests. The marketplace opened space within the nation’s political economy for dialogue critical of American democracy, but it also established boundaries that forbid racial discourse that threatened to upend the status quo (and thus imperil the marketplace’s continued existence). Radicals’ core beliefs jeopardized publishers’ class and business interests and exposed their publications to white hostility.  

Even so, alternative journalists invigorated black journalism by persuading readers of radicalism’s legitimacy and by urging commercial publishers and journalists to infuse their news writing with an aggressive progressiveness. Commercial publishers reconsidered their political tendencies when they realized many African Americans supported radical aims — and bought the publications that advocated them. This dissertation complicates the history of modern black journalism by replacing an inert notion of the press’ mission of protest with an examination of how the oscillating militancy of publishers, journalists, and readers continually adjusted the combativeness of press agitation. Not by coincidence did press observers attribute a new militancy to commercial newspapers by the late 1920s — just a decade or so after the founding of radical publications like Hubert Harrison’s *The Voice*, Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World*, A. Philip  

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Randolph’s and Chandler Owen’s *Messenger*, and Cyril Briggs’ *Crusader*. Black journalism reached the height of its national influence between the late 1930s and late 1940s—a brief moment when the political and economic outlook of commercial publishers, alternative journalists, and a majority of black readers aligned. An inclusive discussion of black radicalism occurred only because the black news industry was owned, produced, and consumed primarily independent of white oversight. The central irony of the industry’s existence was that its core mission of integrating a racially segregated society threatened its very being.

This dissertation’s first chapter explores how the profession of black journalism solidified between 1877 and 1918 as its editor-proprietors mounted an increasingly militant defense of their rights and freedoms. In the 1880s, editors who matured amid Reconstruction’s expansive promises of equality established small but influential newspapers—including the *New York Age*, *Washington Bee*, *Richmond Planet*, and *Cleveland Gazette*. They stridently opposed white supremacists’ efforts to kill, disenfranchise, and segregate African Americans. This view of editors’ militancy refutes the implication of black helplessness within Rayford Logan’s description of the turn-of-the-century as the “nadir” of African American history. It also deflates Booker T. Washington’s supposed dominion over black journalism. Historians August Meier and Louis R. Harlan describe Washington’s secret subsidies to struggling publishers as evidence of, in Harlan’s words, “the totality of his power.” This dissertation takes an opposing view, casting those subsidies as a powerful figure’s frustrated attempts to buy loyalties that were never assured—even after payoffs were distributed. 8

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By 1900, African Americans’ rising literacy rates and migration to southern and northern cities combined to create sizable markets of news consumers. In the North, where publishers were safe from southern white terrorism, upstart publishers competed for readers’ business by writing more strident editorials and embracing modern journalism practices. By World War I, these publishers were powerful enough to warrant special scrutiny from federal agents and military investigators who feared black protest would disrupt war mobilization.

The second chapter describes the making of a new type of modern black journalist, a professional who infused black journalism during the interwar years with an unprecedented progressiveness and militancy. These journalists’ lives and careers were buffeted by world war, global depression, and unrepentant racism. Their writings were informed by the anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism politics of Harlem’s radical orator-journalists; literary modernism of Harlem Renaissance authors and artists; and Popular Front-style cultural protest. Their professional independence and influence was enhanced by the rise of weekly newspapers with regional and national circulations.

This characterization of black journalism counters Lee Finkle’s dismissal of leading publications of the alternative black press as “notable” exceptions to a conservative form of journalism built upon “assimilation and protest.” I agree with Mullen that Finkle’s “narrow critical framework” reflects a “persistent cold war anxiety” that overly diminishes the involvement of interracial leftists with black publishers and journalists. In an essay with broader applicability, Mullen argues that the Chicago Defender functioned as a cultural front by “gleefully exploiting every possible opening for black militancy while fueling black capitalist experiments that it viewed as corollary aims of a new cultural vanguardism.” More suggestive than authoritative, Mullen’s analysis informs this chapter’s broader claims of radicalism’s influence on black journalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Inspired by populist support for
radicalism, journalists adopted a modern style of reportage that embraced sensationalism, realism, and direct action (i.e., investigative reporting). Such reporting propelled a handful of newspapers to national prominence.  

The third chapter examines how newspaper publishers and journalists during World War II attempted to reconcile white officialdom's distrust of black journalism with readers' refusal to moderate their demands for equality. Publishers were in a precarious position. If journalists protested racial wrongs too weakly, readers dismissed their publications as irrelevant. If they challenged white authority too strongly, military officers and civilian bureaucrats threatened to harass reporters, censor news, and shut down pressrooms. Publishers attempted to appease both by depicting white support for wartime integration as an act of patriotism and encouraging African Americans to prove their loyalty by participating in the war effort. Drawing upon Mullen, this chapter illustrates how publishers and journalists evaded censors by avoiding obvious assertions of radicalism in favor of coded reportage that maintained the press’ racial militancy. For example, readers imbued the famed "Double V" campaign with a greater militancy than journalists could convey through text. Ultimately, the shift from war preparation to combat forced an uneasy interracial cooperation. By mid-1942, overall war coverage shifted from condemning military and civilian segregation to emphasizing the daily struggles of black soldiers abroad. Overseas war correspondents crafted a global critique of white supremacy that united black America with subjugated people of color around the world. After the war, publishers and journalists were rewarded for sacrificing elements of radical dissent with greater access to federal agencies and white newsrooms.

The fourth chapter explains how the anticommunism movement unraveled the short-lived ascendancy of black newspapers in the late 1940s and early 1950s, even as the emerging
Civil Rights Movement compelled journalists and their publishers to intensify their coverage of racial protest. As anticommunism strengthened, commercial publishers dumped radical journalists to protect their businesses. For advocating a communist-inspired global crusade for racial justice, these journalists endured criminal charges, public ridicule, and government harassment. They returned to the margins, writing primarily for alternative black publications and interracial leftist journals. After the U.S. Supreme Court struck down public school segregation in 1954, black reporters hop-scotched across the South to cover the boycotts, demonstrations, and court proceedings that defined the Civil Rights Movement. These younger journalists were untainted by cultural-front activism and accepted the narrower fight for domestic civil rights. Instead of applauding communism, they accused segregationists of aiding the Soviet Union by preventing the United States from living up to its ideals and making communism more attractive to people of color elsewhere. They were beaten and harassed for challenging white authority and reporting black claims of wrongdoing. New competitors emerged to seize control of the protest story. John “Johnny” Johnson of Ebony and Jet published the nation’s most popular black magazines. White print and broadcast reporters gradually expanded their coverage of racial conflict. Black newspapers, though, sustained a large readership by being the most widely available and reliable source of news treating African Americans as concerned citizens, not just subjects of controversy.

The fifth chapter studies how student protesters, Depression-era progressives, and radical militants reenergized an idiosyncratic alternative black press in the 1960s, exacerbating the financial troubles of commercial publishers who grew more restrained politically as their circulations plummeted. The work of alternative black journalists refuted white reporters’ contentions that the Black Power Movement was an unwanted deviation from the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. Alternative journalists supported direct protest and armed self-defense.
They doubted the merits of integration and appropriated communist rhetoric espousing worldwide revolution by the exploited and disadvantaged. Radical writers dismissed commercial publishers as middle-class compromisers whose editorial perspective aimed to please white advertisers. In turn, publishers worried that escalating militancy jeopardized landmark political and legislative achievements by alienating liberal white supporters and justifying the fears of white supremacists. As the decade progressed, publishers shifted from attempting to moderate student protests and redefine Black Power to condemning the militants who led the Black Power Movement. Radicals’ views, though, enjoyed wide currency among African Americans. In cities across the nation, Black Power activists launched community newspapers that challenged the editorial perspectives of established black newspapers and white-owned dailies. The Nation of Islam and Black Panther Party for Self Defense both claimed to publish newspapers with international circulations that exceeded the popularity of leading commercial papers.

The final chapter subverts the narrative of declension for modern black journalism by examining how black journalists working for the white media forced their employers to modify the framing of racial news. In 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, a presidential panel commonly identified as the Kerner Commission, rebuked white journalists for mischaracterizing the urban uprisings sweeping the nation and misunderstanding African Americans’ complaints of abuse and injustice. The panel also rebuked white publishers and editors for failing to integrate their newsrooms. The report compelled white news executives to hire more black journalists. Over the next ten years, these journalists fought for fairer news coverage by challenging story assignments, filing employment discrimination lawsuits, and forming professional organizations. They contested their editors’ claims to objectivity. They were aided by black consumers who threatened to boycott news organizations that ignored their demands for fairness in content and employment practices. Despite the obstacles of
institutionalized racism, these journalists broadened and redefined coverage of African Americans and other minorities by permanently – although imperfectly – moving black journalism's demands for racial justice into the mainstream of American news coverage.
In March 1892, an interracial fistfight among boys escalated into gunfire exchanged on the outskirts of Memphis between a black grocer’s defenders and white county deputies. A dozen black men were arrested. Three days later, a lynch mob yanked three men from their prison cells and gunned them down. Ida B. Wells, the 30-year-old editor of the weekly *Free Speech*, was godmother to one victim’s daughter. Afterward, she bought a pistol, tucked it in her purse, and investigated the lynching. Then she examined the causes of other lynchings. She printed her findings in her newspaper. ¹

Black editors had long deplored white southerners’ extralegal justice as a violation of black men’s constitutional rights, but Wells went further by challenging the validity of the criminal charges themselves. She not only condemned white behavior – she questioned white morality. In plain, forthright words, Wells revealed as false the notoriously widespread charge that most lynchings occurred because black men raped white women. “Nobody in this section,” she wrote, “believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women.” That commonplace justification, she said, was used to disguise what lynching really was – “An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down.’” She told her readers the only way they could protect themselves was to “save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor

give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.”

Wells’ critique of lynching inflamed Memphis’ white leaders, but their destructive retribution only expanded her influence as a writer and orator. The editor of the daily Memphis Commercial reprinted a Wells’ editorial that implied white women solicited interracial sexual relationships. The editor implored the city’s white men to violently defend the virginal sanctity of white southern womanhood. Soon afterward, the Free Speech’s type and office furnishings were destroyed. Wells received death threats as she traveled on the East Coast. So warned, she never returned to Memphis. Instead, Wells sold her subscription roll for a quarter-share stake in the New York Age, the nation’s most influential black newspaper, and continued to crusade for racial justice from the North. She went on lecture tours. She reprinted her antilynching articles in a popular pamphlet, Southern Horrors (1892). She traveled to England and collaborated with British reformers. Having transformed her antilynching campaign into an international crusade, she forced American policymakers to at least acknowledge lynching’s barbarity. Her work and words were examined by both black and white journalists. “Having lost my paper, had a price put on my life, and been made an exile from home for hinting at the truth,” she recalled, “I felt I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth now that I was where I could do so freely.”

Writing in a supposed “age of accommodation,” editors like Wells refuted white supremacists who moved to reassert a master’s control over black lives and even strengthened their protests as changing demographics expanded readership and solidified publishers’ finances. Editors and writers condemned lynching, denounced segregation, and defended

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3 Ibid., 69.
citizenship rights with an audacious militancy. Their words defined an intellectually robust and aggressive black print culture that asserted African Americans’ humanity and safeguarded an expansive conception of freedom claimed since Reconstruction. Militant editors wrote mostly from the North and Upper South – removed from the worst of southern terrorism – for a fledgling middle class. 

By the late 1880s, successful newspapers sold just several thousand copies each week, but circulated in all regions of the country and overseas. This skeletal national communications network of news by, about, and for African Americans solidified in the early twentieth century as black men and women left sharecroppers’ shacks for industrial employment in southern and then northern cities. As African Americans’ journeys acquainted them with modern urban living and greater daily freedoms, illiteracy plummeted and a mass consumer market emerged for race news. Upstart editors competed for readers’ pennies and nickels by adopting modern journalism practices and emboldening their demands for racial justice. During World War I, federal agents and military investigators attempted to subdue the surging influence of black editors and publishers by equating their criticism of American racial practices with treason. Editors moderated their criticisms when harassed and intimidated by state authorities but refused to abandon their mission of protest.

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In the Civil War’s smoldering aftermath, African Americans published weekly newspapers to defend their new freedoms, bolster community institutions, and protest white
oppression. Aspiring editors founded nearly two dozen newspapers nationwide between 1865 and 1869. Readers recognized the value of literacy and publishing in maintaining their freedom. A subscriber applauded the San Francisco Elevator for opening a reading room where visitors could browse newspapers and magazines from elsewhere. "If we desire to succeed in our efforts for elevation," he wrote, "we should sustain such enterprises, and uphold the press and everything connected with it." Intimately aware of their race's tenuous standing among congressional Republicans and southern planters, editors remarked upon national and local affairs as freedmen searched for relatives, formalized domestic relations, and negotiated labor contracts. Editors announced town meetings, reprinted sermons and stump speeches, and celebrated black accomplishments. In the South, editors presented their demands with humility. Their mere presence courted violence. Joseph T. Wilson, the first black editor to establish a newspaper in Virginia, fled Norfolk in 1866 while a mob destroyed his press. As during slavery, white southerners regarded African Americans who could read and write with suspicion and hostility. They knew literacy threatened their ability to control black labor and behavior.  

Editors participated in state and national politics and encouraged readers to vote—preferably for an editor's preferred candidate. In this era of partisan journalism, editors accepted subsidies from Republican candidates seeking favorable coverage, and leading politicians launched their own newspapers to promote their campaigns. The politician-publishers included Louisiana Governor P.B.S. Pinchback, Alabama Congressman James T. Rapier, and Mississippi Senators Hiram R. Revels and Blanche K. Bruce. Partisanship often turned petty as politicians and their editorial allies squabbled over patronage and political advantage, establishing a long-standing complaint that editors devoted too much effort and space to

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narrow partisan purposes. Most partisan newspapers folded soon after election campaigns ended. Although the number of newspapers nearly quadrupled in the 1870s, none published before 1880 existed three decades later.  

After Reconstruction ended in 1877 and federal troops decamped from the South, white supremacists intensified efforts to strip black men and women of their circumscribed political and economic independence. They moved to consolidate their control over southern society through violence, social ostracism, and denial of civic rights. Thousands of African Americans were lynched. State prisons overflowed with black men convicted of petty property crimes. The first railroad segregation laws were passed in the late 1880s. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation was legal in public places as long as equal facilities were provided for both races. Following Mississippi's lead, southern states drafted new constitutions that disenfranchised most African Americans by tying voting rights to property and literacy requirements. White voters swiftly replaced officeholders endorsed by black editors.  

Nationwide, white editors and publishers reinforced white southerners' racial agenda by degrading African Americans through abusive stereotypes that implicitly justified violence against them. White journalists categorized blacks through the same tropes used by literary authors, which Howard University professor Sterling A. Brown identified as the contented slave, wretched freeman, comic Negro, brute Negro, tragic mulatto, local color negro, and exotic primitive. These stereotypes defined African Americans by status signifiers assigned to them by white southerners during Reconstruction. Editors also marked blacks as outside of American citizenry by refusing to follow the standard practice of using courtesy titles when writing about black men and women. Instead of referring to black women as "Mrs. Smith" or "Miss Jones," a

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reporter might identify someone as "the Smith woman" or "the Jones woman," which was language typically reserved for outing prostitutes. The word "Negro" was seldom capitalized in the white press, despite a relentless campaign of protest by black editors. News that acknowledged an interracial commitment to building a community rarely appeared in white papers. Black marriages and births were not announced. Fraternal lodge meetings and sorority fund-raisers were ignored. Student achievements and religious events were not written up.  

White editors mostly traded in stories that highlighted the supposedly inherent nature of black criminality. They featured race prominently in crime stories, often flashing a black assailant's color in the headline and then mentioning the suspect's race again in a story's first or second paragraph. White assailants were seldom identified by race. But white victims allegedly attacked by black suspects were always identified by color. Editors frequently cast petty crimes involving black perpetrators as humorous reaffirmations of stereotypes. In particular, thefts involving watermelons or chickens were written with an exaggerated, knowing tone of condescension. Individual crimes were used to demean entire neighborhoods. A *New York Times* correspondent described in 1880 how white residents in Washington, D.C., blamed "horrible assaults upon young women" on "a large class of colored people here who live by burglary and begging, and who cannot be induced to go into the country and work, even for good wages." Such news coverage validated and intensified readers' prejudices.  

White editors aimed to titillate and enrage white readers when describing allegations of interracial rape and murder. They slanted their stories with fanciful language that contrasted the victim's supposed good character with the suspect's alleged cruelty. In a story with the subhead, "Another Negro Fiend Finds Death at the End of a Rope," the *Macon* (Georgia) *Telegraph and

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Messenger reported that “a burly negro” stopped two children on the way to school and “laid violent hands upon the little girl and dragged her to the woods.” Outraged editors often encouraged extralegal retribution. The Wheeling (West Virginia) Register did not wait for a judge and jury to decide the guilt of a 20-year-old black man arrested for rape. Describing the suspect as someone with “a mean sneaking look” who “would commit any devilish crime,” the newspaper headlined its story, “Work for Judge Lynch.” While black perfidy was unforgivable, white lawlessness was explained away by the victim’s pain. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch commended a lynch mob for remaining “orderly” as it hanged “a Negro brute.”

Crusading black editors established their own newspapers to denounce white journalists’ lies, distortions, and innuendos. While some editors retained childhood memories of slavery, most reached maturity amid heady expectations of full citizenship and political participation. Despite lowly or modest beginnings, they had the talent, connections, and political patronage to fuel their professional and political ambitions. Most were lawyers, printers, teachers, ministers, or political appointees. Most were men, but women also achieved significant success and widespread recognition. These editors published newspapers to advance the cause of racial justice, supplement their incomes, and build their leadership credentials. They condemned white oppression in scathing editorials that defined the era’s journalism, and praised black achievement in flowery platitudes. They seldom engaged in original reporting, but printed local social news and announcements unavailable elsewhere. These editor-proprietors styled themselves as “race men” and “race women” – middle-class entrepreneurs who believed acceptance of the Victorian values of thrift and sobriety would lead to their race’s material and intellectual betterment and, ultimately, assimilation into American society. They saw their

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publications as community trusts, platforms for uplift and self-improvement, not mere commercial ventures.  

Location and capitalization often determined an editor’s militancy. More than half of the estimated 130 black newspapers were published in the South, where caution muffled most editors’ assertiveness. By the mid-1880s, though, editor-proprietors published dozens of newspapers in northern and border-state cities with sizable black populations. Northern editors wrote with greater militancy and urgency, but small circulations and limited advertising imperiled their papers’ existence. To appease patrons and advertisers, even the most pugnacious editors moderated their opinions when necessary. While 90 percent of blacks lived in the South, northern editors enjoyed larger circulations than editors in southern states because of their editorial forthrightness and readers’ higher rates of literacy. Leading newspapers sold just a few thousand copies each week, but their editors’ words were read from coast-to-coast and beyond. Editors extended the reach of their columns by exchanging copies with one another, reprinting excerpts from other newspapers, and engaging in long-distance debates. Newspapers that enjoyed several decades of success were established in the 1880s, including the *New York Age*, *Washington Bee*, *Cleveland Gazette*, *Richmond Planet*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, and *Indianapolis Freeman*.  

These papers’ editors entered journalism from diverse backgrounds and for different reasons, freely mingling politics and journalism. T. Thomas Fortune, who founded the *New York Age*, was the leading editor of his generation. The son of a slave who later served in Florida’s statehouse, Fortune aspired to be a full-time activist. While editing newspapers, he was

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appointed a customs inspector, attended Howard University, worked in a newspaper's print shop, and took night law courses. He founded and led the National Afro-American League, a forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In the nation's capital, W. Calvin Chase worked as a lawyer and local political operative before founding the Washington Bee in 1882. The son of a blacksmith and dressmaker, Chase grew up in his own home, attended preparatory school at Howard University, and secured federal patronage appointments through Frederick Douglass and Senator Blanche Bruce. 13

In Cleveland, Ohio, Harry C. Smith took sole control of the Gazette in 1886 and used it as a springboard for a three-term stint in the Ohio legislature. In Richmond, Virginia, John Mitchell Jr., an honor student born to enslaved house servants, took over the Planet in 1884. With the paper as his base, Mitchell served on the city council, founded a bank, invested in real estate, and headed the Virginia Knights of Pythias. In Philadelphia, Christopher Perry worked for fifteen years as a sheriff's office clerk. He founded the Tribune in 1884 after the Sunday Mercury—a white-owned weekly where he headed the “colored department”—folded. And in Indiana, Edward E. Cooper launched his first newspaper soon after graduating from high school. Born a slave in Florida, Cooper supplemented his journalism career by working for the U.S. Railway Mail Service. He founded the Indianapolis Freeman in 1888, promoting the four-page weekly as “the first and only illustrated journal of the Afro-American race.” 14

Black editors subverted the language of white journalism to expose its fraudulence.

Delicate-looking but hot-tempered, Fortune argued that the best way to avenge racial atrocities was to emulate the oppressors. He urged African Americans to "look at the white papers of the

South and learn from them the necessary lesson, that the only way we can hope ever to win our
fight is to arm ourselves as our opponents do, support those newspapers alone that support us,
and support those men alone who support us.” Fortune reversed the conventions of white
reportage when he wrote or edited columns about lynchings. In 1891, Fortune edited a dispatch
on the “foul murder” of a “helpless prisoner” hung in Maryland’s Queen Anne County by its
“‘best citizens’” – a term placed in quote marks to signify its duplicitous usage. The article’s
bombastic language shifted the white sense of aggrievement to the black victim. The writer
claimed “the thumb screws and engine tortures of the Spanish Inquisition were deeds of
violence that pale into insignificance” compared to the victim’s “cruel, inhuman and unlawful
butchery and hanging.” The language of violence extended to the characterization of prejudiced
courtroom proceedings. A rape conviction in Maryland mandated death by hanging, but in this
incident, three judges doubted the lynching victim’s guilt. Instead, they sentenced him to
twenty-one years in prison. Arguing they should have released the man before he was lynched,
the correspondent pounced on the abuse of judicial power: “It was a double crime – a judicial
murder and an unlawful lynching.”

Editors challenged escalating violence against African Americans by reserving the right
to arm themselves. Nicknamed the “Fighting Negro Editor,” Mitchell matched Fortune’s swagger
– in the Confederacy’s onetime capital. In November 1883, four black men in Danville, Virginia,
were killed after they exchanged angry words with white men on a sidewalk. A riot ensued. The
politically-charged incident helped propel race-baiting Democrats into state and local offices. In
dispatches to the New York Globe, then edited by Fortune, Mitchell damned the uncharged
white assailants as “cowards” and “murderers of innocent blood.” He hinted at the possibility of
black self-defense. “If the colored men in Danville had been armed,” he wrote, “a massacre

15 Fortune quoted in Penn, Afro-American Press and Its Editors, 483; and “Foul Murder in
would not now have been chronicled.” Three years later, Mitchell received an anonymous death threat after denouncing a lynching in central Virginia. The writer warned, “If you poke that infernal head of yours in this county long enough for us to do it we will hang you higher than he was hung.” Mitchell holstered his Smith & Wesson revolvers, rode a train to Charlotte County, walked to the lynching site, and toured the surrounding area. Then he wrote about the threat and his investigation. Readers applauded the stunt. Mitchell was just twenty-two. 16

White supremacists often resorted to violence and property destruction when black editors refused to concede the legality of disenfranchisement and segregation. In 1898, North Carolina’s Democrats organized a campaign steeped in violence, fraud, and racist appeals to oust from state offices a coalition of black Republicans and white Populists. During the campaign, editor Alexander L. Manly of the *Wilmington Record* (reputedly the nation’s only black-owned daily newspaper), defended black manhood after a prominent woman orator in Georgia claimed that the number of rapes committed by black men against white women justified lynching. “Our experience among poor white people in the country,” Manly wrote in August, “teaches us that the women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than are the white men with colored women.” White Democratic editors reprinted the editorial, circulating it throughout the state to galvanize white voters. Two days after the November election, a white mob burned Manly’s press as it seized control of black-majority Wilmington. The light-skinned Manly escaped with the help of a white resident. In the riot’s aftermath, a group of prominent black ministers, politicians, and educators blamed Manly for instigating the riot and apologized for his editorial. 17

16 “The Old Dominion,” *New York Globe*, November 17, 1883, 1, and November 24, 1883, 1; and Alexander, *Race Man*, 41–42.

As leading editors participated in politics and demanded racial justice, they also exhorted readers to embrace white bourgeois mores and build their intellectual and material wealth through racial unity. The ideology of racial uplift served editors' personal interests just as it did for other members of a rising black middle class. Uplift validated editors' middle-class aspirations and sanctified their pursuit of prosperity. It fulfilled their duty to tout black achievement and also satisfied their predilection to moralizing. While editors solicited advertising and subscriptions from white clients, their financial success depended upon a literate black readership with disposable income and a sense of race loyalty. Editor-proprietors viewed African Americans' refusal to buy black newspapers as a betrayal that retarded racial progress. Mitchell castigated delinquent subscribers, as well as those who claimed not to read race publications. "You'll spend $1.50 in frolic," he wrote, "and yet be unwilling to give that amount to a struggling race defender in order that he may send you his paper for one year."

Few editorialized as ardently for uplift as the Bee's W. Calvin Chase, who believed African Americans would not overcome race hatred and achieve their full rights as citizens and humans until they had accumulated enough wealth and learning to prove they deserved equality. "If you have money and education," Chase wrote, "your color will not be a bar to your admission in the best society." 18

Elite African Americans praised black journalism's usefulness in fostering racial unity and shaping favorable public opinion about their race. An 1891 survey asked eighteen politicians, professionals, and scholars whether black editors and writers properly served the race. Respondents were broadly supportive. D. Augustus Straker, a prominent West Indian lawyer

living in Detroit, claimed “the Press has done more for the intellectual advancement of the negro than anything else; and in his moral advancement it has been the efficient handmaid of the church.” William S. Scarborough, a classics professor at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, credited newspapers with establishing “a closer bond of union among us, by which we have been enabled to present a solid front, make a stronger fight for our rights, and thereby demand fair play in the race of life.” 19

Elites criticized newspaper editors for symbolizing the underdevelopment of black intellectualism and refinement. “The great colored newspaper,” said the Reverend Theophilus G. Stewart, “must begin at the bottom and grow up with the advancing race.” Elites believed editors exacerbated their difficulties attracting readers and advertisers by failing to correct spelling and grammar errors and promoting gossip-mongering and partisanship. They urged editors to aspire to the production and editorial standards of well-financed daily newspapers and literary weeklies. Some elites suggested incompetent editors asked too much of racial uplift when they castigated readers for refusing to buy inferior publications. Author Charles Chesnutt dismissed most black newspapers as “mediums for hair straightening advertisements and the personal laudations of ‘self-made men.’” 20

Elites like Chesnutt preferred magazines to newspapers, favoring periodicals’ intellectual and literary aspirations to weeklies’ emphasis on the political and commercial. Black magazines and journals, though, struggled to stay solvent as their editors searched for enough subscribers willing to pay higher subscription prices. Not until the 1880s did religious denominations, fraternal orders, and educational institutes establish long-running periodicals. Sustained by dues and donations, these journals informed members and affiliates about organizational activities.

19 Penn, Afro-American Press and Its Editors, 431, 444.
Their editors appealed to a broader readership by printing extended essays, short stories, and poetry by well-known writers and scholars. Hampton Institute and Lincoln University both published alumni magazines. In 1884, the African Methodist Episcopal Church launched the quarterly *A.M.E. Church Review*. Its editor, the Reverend Benjamin Tucker Tanner, featured the period's leading scholars and writers, promising “to produce a periodical that would give to the world the best thoughts of the race, irrespective of religious persuasion or political opinion.” Tanner hoped to improve racial relations by illustrating the depth and breadth of black scholarship. But few whites acknowledged the Review’s existence.  

Black women writers most fully voiced their views and concerns in women’s magazines, which simultaneously catered to and challenged gender conventions. Male editors attempted to use the ideology of racial uplift to restrict black women’s involvement in journalism. They expected respectable women to fulfill the ideals of true womanhood, which emphasized domesticity, submissiveness, modesty, and piety. In newspapers, most women journalists were restricted to writing women’s columns. Women who challenged workplace gender roles, like Ida B. Wells, endured criticism that aimed to destroy their professional standing by undermining their claims to womanhood.  

Many women writers were intimately involved in the black women’s club movement, which sought to combat racism and improve the status of black women. Gertrude Mossell, a popular writer whose work appeared in many newspapers and magazines, wrote a women’s column that urged readers to protect their virtue, stressed the value of maintaining a well-kept

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home, and offered tips for raising children. Mossell also told women to seek opportunities outside the home and fight for their rights. She encouraged women to enter journalism, describing the work as a “shade better than schoolteaching.” She criticized accommodating black leaders who sought to moderate demands for racial justice by pleading for a nonexistent, interracial unity. “Always the cry of peace, peace, when there is no peace,” she wrote. “We live in the hope of developing a manhood and womanhood that will aim at a real and not a fictitious peace.”

Suffragist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin provided black women writers with their most progressive publishing outlet in 1890 when she founded Woman’s Era, a Boston-based newspaper that promoted the black women’s movement. “Our indignation should know no limit,” Ruffin wrote. “We as women have been too unobtrusive, too little known.” Ruffin rejected efforts to restrict women’s duties to domesticity, saying “Some of us have not the temperament for family life.” She also opposed segregation laws and encouraged her readers to violate them. “If laws are unjust,” Ruffin wrote, “they must be continually broken until they are killed or altered.” Written and edited by women, Woman’s Era featured work by such notable writers as Mossell, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Pauline E. Hopkins. Writing from Massachusetts, Ruffin and her correspondents spoke more freely than editors and writers who lived in the South.

Supporters of Booker T. Washington, the politically-connected and well-financed president of Tuskegee Institute, continually urged militant editors to moderate their views to protect interracial goodwill. Washington emerged as a national spokesman on race relations in 1895 after telling appreciative white southern businessmen in Atlanta that, “The wisest among

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my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.” In his public rhetoric, Washington conceived of racial uplift as the sacrifice of self-interested political participation for a mutual interracial progress that did not exist. He viewed dissenting editors as potential rivals who threatened to divert patronage from his allies and damage his reputation as a race leader. 25

Editors’ muted their criticism of Washington because they endorsed aspects of uplift ideology that overlapped with his views, and they feared political and financial retribution as he grew more popular with white politicians and philanthropists. As a group, editors applauded racial uplift’s mission of character development and racial solidarity. Individually, they debated Washington’s political and educational capitulation. Washington’s most consistent critic damned his Atlanta speech with faint praise. “It simply shows,” wrote Cleveland’s Harry C. Smith, “that he is a careful, thoughtful man of ability, who, to some extent, had the courage of his convictions.” Several months later, Smith accused Washington of harming racial progress to build his own reputation and win “the popular praise of the white people and their money.” By 1900, when Washington reached the apex of his national influence, many editors avoided criticizing him and his policies but continued to involve themselves in political activities and editorialize for political rights. Their inconsistence annoyed Washington. 26

Washington’s inability to control editors forced him to take extraordinary steps to manipulate them. His vaunted “Tuskegee Machine,” a ruthless political operation, waged a relentless public relations campaign to silence editors’ criticisms and win their endorsements. Washington’s aides flooded newspaper offices with laudatory press releases. They curried

26 Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 224-236; *Cleveland Gazette*, October 5, 1895, 2; and “Prof. Washington, A Trimmer,” *Gazette*, December 7, 1895, 2.
editors' favor by buying advertising and coordinating special press supplements. They fed tips to
friendly editors and derailed the careers of opponents. Washington secretly subsidized or
partially owned several newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Age, Colored
American Magazine*, and probably the *Washington Bee*. He cloaked these financial dealings in
secrecy to preserve his reputation for being apolitical. Even cash payments, though, could not
guarantee an editor's allegiance. T. Thomas Fortune's chronic mismanagement of the *Age*
forced him to request subsidies from Washington. While Fortune became one of Washington's
staunchest supporters, he irritated his patron by continuing to take political positions in his
editorials and sporadically disagreeing with Washington's policy of conciliation. Ultimately,
Washington's heavy-handed tactics exacerbated the ire of his most implacable press foes. 27

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By the twentieth century, American journalism bore little resemblance to what it had
looked like just three decades earlier. The development of industrial capitalism and the creation
of a national market economy remade cultural perceptions, a process that Alan Trachtenberg
calls the "the incorporation of America." Industrialization promoted the rapid growth of cities,
propelled a surging rise in immigration, and created a class of professional, middle-class
managers. Industrialists moved to solve a crisis of overproduction by searching for new markets
and creating new categories of consumer goods. They developed and refined marketing and
advertising techniques to entice new groups of people to buy their products. These changes
culminated with the development of a modern mass culture built upon consumption. Consumer

27 Concerning Washington's press relations, see August Meier, "Booker T. Washington and the
Negro Press: With Special Reference to the *Colored American Magazine*," *Journal of Negro History* 38
*Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, eds. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of
History* 37 (August 1971): 393-416.
culture altered people's perceptions and values, and the nation gradually transitioned from emphasizing agrarian independence and Victorian notions of character to concentrating on personality and appearance.  

A revolution in communications helped fashion mass consumer culture. Modern American journalism traced its origins to the penny press of the 1830s, but it was reshaped when publishers and advertisers responded to industrial capitalism's transformations by overhauling daily metropolitan newspapers and creating mass-circulation magazines. These changes occurred as a dramatic drop in the cost of newsprint spurred rapid expansion within the publishing industry. The number of daily newspapers in the nation quadrupled between 1870 and 1900. Average circulation leapt from 2,600 to more than 15,000. No modern national magazines existed in 1880, but about twenty circulated by 1900. Monthly magazine circulation tripled in fifteen years, leaping from 18 million to 64 million by 1905.

In appearance and content, newspapers and magazines appealed to readers in new ways. Publishers attracted consumers' gaze with sophisticated layouts and designs and more illustrations and advertising. The nature of news writing also changed. Reporting was becoming an esteemed occupation. Sociologist Michael Schudson argues that journalists "saw themselves, in part, as scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly, and more 'realistically' than anyone had done before." Reporters' conception of their work borrowed from literary realism, which contended that facts could be seen and documented. It also drew upon progressivism's reformatory tendencies, which sought to hold power brokers accountable for their actions – but seldom questioned the ongoing structural

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change within American society. The over-the-top ostentatiousness of “yellow journalism,” as
seen in William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World,
reinvigorated debates about the role of press sensationalism. Hearst characterized such
reporting as “journalism of action.” Publisher Adolph Ochs purposely contrasted his New York
Times against its competitors by emphasizing news as information, not entertainment, and
refraining from sensationalism’s ceaseless self-promotion. 30

Metropolitan newspapers and national magazines helped create a mass-market
audience by defining who they were not appealing to. Scholar Richard Ohmann describes how
magazines defined an emerging, modern “professional-managerial class” (PMC) by providing
“their readers with a range of information and interests that linked them conversationally to
other readers in the same circle of acquaintance, and culturally to like-minded readers across
the nation.” Among white middle-class readers, African Americans were seen as “increasingly
irrelevant to the social project of industrial capitalism and to the PMC vision of modernity, in
particular.” Fittingly, then, editors avoided stories about racial repression, which would have
undermined their magazines’ aspirational tone by challenging white readers’ claims to privilege.
Instead, advertisers reinforced conceptions of African Americans – as well as other ethnic and
racial groups – as pre-modern through the stereotyped images of the happy servant and
irascible pickaninny. Such depictions protected the interests of white entitlement – just like
southern editors’ lurid lynching stories, which transformed white lawlessness into a sacred duty
to protect white womanhood. Sociologist Paul Starr observes that the exclusion of African
Americans from the emerging mass media reflected a larger effort to mitigate the social changes

30 Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New
York: Basic Books, 1978), 71. Also see W. Joseph Campbell, The Year that Defined American Journalism:
1897 and the Clash of Paradigms (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-16; and David R. Spencer, Yellow
Journalism: The Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power (Evanston, IL: Northwestern
University Press, 2007), 77-94.
rocking the United States by containing and silencing perceived outsiders. Denied a voice in mainstream journalism, racial, ethnic, and political minorities created vibrant alternative presses.  

African Americans significantly expanded the circulation base for black publications in the 1890s and 1900s as they left the southern countryside for better work and freer lives in southern cities and northern industrial centers. Black men and women moved out of the South in numbers that approached those of the famed “Great Migration,” which occurred around World War I. While nearly 90 percent of African Americans still lived in the South, muckraking journalist Ray Stannard Baker observed in 1908 that population increases in northern cities were “not short of extraordinary.” Simultaneously, black illiteracy rates dropped from 70 percent in the 1880s to 45 percent by 1900. Migration combined with literacy and educational attainment to establish sizable local markets of urban news consumers.

Black editors participated in the sweeping changes that recast American journalism, even though racial barriers deprived them of the capital needed to fully modernize their newspapers and magazines. The creation of an expanded, competitive consumer marketplace compelled new publishers to outdo their rivals by embracing greater editorial militancy and adopting modern journalism techniques. Modernization occurred gradually. Novelist James Weldon Johnson characterized the newspapers of the period as “a feeble and struggling medium.” The typical newspaper still employed only a handful of people – the proprietor, perhaps an assistant editor, an office girl who handled bookkeeping and read copy, and two or three part-time agents who claimed a percentage of the papers they sold. Most editors still had

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31 Ohmann, Selling Culture, 220, 258, 264-265; and Starr, Creation of the Media, 233-266.  
full-time careers in other professions. Editors typically contracted with white printers, who could afford to buy printing presses, to do their mechanical work.  

Editors and publishers expanded black journalism at an unprecedented rate in the early 1900s. They saw their new careers as a way to participate in political discourse, even as disenfranchisement and segregation curtailed their direct involvement in electoral politics. In the two decades between 1890 and 1910, at least 1,320 black newspapers were founded. That figure exceeded the total number of papers established in every other decade combined from 1860 to 1940. The cheapness of ink and paper attracted aspiring publishers. Most newspapers were started in the South and folded soon after they were founded. In Mississippi, newspapers survived just one or two years. Northern editors, though, experienced more lasting success. They established the black press' first long-running secular periodical and four newspapers that would circulate nationally by World War II. "It is a difficult matter to find a Negro who can read, who does not read one or more of these race papers," said L.M. Hershaw, an editor and educator. "He may not always be a subscriber, but failing this he has an unfailing faculty for borrowing his neighbors' papers."

The editors of short-lived but sophisticated monthly magazines illustrated the coalescence of a racial outlook shaped by militancy, modernity, and the marketplace. These editors were forward-looking, not despairing; despite writing in what historian Rayford Logan famously labeled the "nadir" of African American history. Magazine editors aimed their

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33 James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Americans, What Now?* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 26, and George W. Gore Jr., *Negro Journalism: An Essay on the History and Present Conditions of the Negro Press* (Greencastle, IN: Journalism Press, 1922), 14-15. Historians have generally isolated the black press from the broader trends within American journalism. This exclusion rests largely upon the vocational conceits of journalism. Black newspapers were purveyors of advocacy journalism, not objective reporting. They were weeklies, not dailies. They served a niche readership, not a general audience. Racial restrictions impeded editors' abilities to modernize their publications and denied professional training and employment opportunities to black journalists.

editorials and articles at a readership that included elite blacks and sympathetic whites. They championed their publications as an erudite and cosmopolitan expansion of black print culture. A writer in *Alexander’s Magazine* described periodicals as “the outcome of calm, deliberate, and critical thought,” which contrasted sharply with the slapdash production and consumption of weekly newspapers. Magazine editors reinforced their own significance when they complimented their readers for their high standards in reading material. “It means that culture is taking a deep hold upon our people,” wrote J. Max Barber, managing editor of the *Voice of the Negro*. “It is an indication that our people are becoming an educated, a reading, people, and this is a thing of which to be proud.”

The leading magazines of the early 1900s reflected the individual perspectives of their editors but also reinforced a broader intellectual commitment to an encompassing, international conception of modern racial activism. Working from Atlanta, editors Barber and J.W.E. Bowen intended to evade southern parochialism in the *Voice of the Negro* (1904-1907) by commenting upon “Current History, Educational Improvements, Art, Science, Race Issues, Sociological Movements, and Religion.” The editors commissioned articles on the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Philippines. They boasted that their magazine was read on every continent except Antarctica. Based in the heart of the New South, Barber and Bowen took care in early issues to praise Tuskegee’s leader and expound upon the goodwill of civil-minded white southerners. And yet, Barber still condemned the southern practices of disenfranchisement, segregation,peonage, and lynching.

Under the editorship of Pauline E. Hopkins, Boston’s *Colored American Magazine* (1900-1909) developed into a first-rate literary journal that critiqued American racism and its

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consequences through fiction and poetry. Magazines proved to be a particularly valuable space for black women writers, their militant words perhaps more readily accepted by readers who associated their commentary with gentile erudition rather than with newspapers' more blatant partisan editorializing. Hopkins wrote a series of biographical sketches that countered white editors' stereotypes by depicting black men – and especially black women – as heroic defenders of a universal humanity that defined the modern age. "The dawn of the Twentieth century finds the Black race fighting for existence in every quarter of the globe," Hopkins wrote in 1903. "But the Negro still lives, and while life remains, Hope lifts a smiling face." 37

The Niagara Movement embodied the emergence of this new racial militancy and the corresponding new direction for black journalism. The movement's founders met in July 1905 to rebuke Washington's rhetoric of accommodation and demand a more forceful advocacy of black political rights and integration into American life. Atlanta University professor W.E.B. Du Bois, the convention's guiding force, argued for immediate universal voting rights and the abolition of segregation. Organizers also denounced Washington's ruthless manipulation of black editors by adopting a constitution that called for "freedom of speech and criticism" and "an unfettered and unsubsidized press." Du Bois' journalistic allies attended the conference, including Barber, William Monroe Trotter of the Boston Guardian, Chase of the Washington Bee, Smith of the Cleveland Gazette, columnist John E. Bruce (known as Bruce Grit), and Wendell P. Dabney of the Cincinnati Union. Although the all-black Niagara Movement faltered, its supporters inaugurated an era of enhanced militancy. 38


White supremacists responded with time-tested practices. In September 1906, three nights of rioting erupted in Atlanta. Competing daily newspapers had printed sensationalistic reports of black men assaulting white woman during a hard-fought gubernatorial campaign that had callously inflamed white fears of black rule. Du Bois rushed home from Alabama to guard his family with a shotgun. John Temple Graves, white editor of the Atlanta Georgian, wrote a letter for the New York World, blaming the riot on “a carnival of rapes.” Appalled by this slander on black manhood, Barber sent a heated response, accusing white men of committing the alleged rapes. He offered a more judicious explanation for why the riot occurred. “The cause of this riot: Sensational newspapers and unscrupulous politicians,” Barber wrote. “The remedy: An impartial enforcement of the laws of the land.” Soon afterward, a prominent white business leader warned Barber to leave Atlanta. If Barber refused, he knew he would be arrested and possibly lynched. Barber moved to Chicago and renamed his magazine, The Voice. He never recouped his financial losses, and the magazine folded the following year. Washington, who disapproved of Barber’s involvement with the Niagara Movement, impeded his search for journalism employment. Barber eventually became a dentist. 39

Like Barber, Du Bois struggled to establish a national magazine from which he could denounce American racism and urge African Americans to greater achievements. Several months after founding the Niagara Movement, Du Bois and two associates launched Moon’s Illustrated Weekly in December 1905. The magazine’s backers hoped to attract thousands of subscribers, but its circulation probably never exceeded several hundred. It folded after just thirty-four issues. One co-founder complained that the publication might have survived if Du

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Bois had toned down his editorials. Afterward, Du Bois wrote regularly for *The Horizon*, the publication of the Niagara Movement. But that magazine’s three-year run ended in 1910. By then, Du Bois and others had founded the New York-based NAACP, a militant and disputatious coalition of white liberals and black activists. 40

As the NAACP’s director of publicity and research, Du Bois lobbied the group’s board of directors to finance a journal of “opinion and literature” that would “record important happenings and movements in the world which bear on the great problem of interracial relations and especially those which affect the Negro-American.” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* appeared in November 1910, despite the board’s concerns about its costs. The magazine sold for ten cents a copy or one dollar for a yearly subscription. Du Bois wrote nearly the entire first issue and became its defining voice. The inaugural press run of one thousand copies sold out. More success followed. By early 1914, the *Crisis* claimed 33,000 monthly subscribers and operated nearly independent of the NAACP. Circulation topped 45,000 in April 1916. Tens of thousands more heard or read re-circulated copies. Buttressed by reliable funding and white defenders, Du Bois’ journal was an unqualified success. 41

Written from a black perspective for an interracial audience, the *Crisis* contradicted stereotyped depictions of African Americans by showcasing black men and women as participants in modern life and as citizens active in shaping the destiny of the United States. Du Bois argued that whites misjudged blacks because they ignored “the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass.” Du Bois was particularly aware of the impact of images in countering stereotypes. In its early years, the *Crisis* ran only a few pictures of poor sharecroppers – a purposeful avoidance of photographs that a white reader could quickly reduce to well-honed caricatures of wretchedness, ignorance, and servility. Instead, Du

41 Ibid., 409-413, 474; and “The Crisis,” *Crisis* 1 (November 1910): 10.
Bois featured the educated black elite, whom he labeled the “talented tenth.” The journal’s covers frequently displayed a photograph or engraving of a carefully composed clubwoman—her expression, whether smiling or sober, reflected her Victorian bearing, and her hairstyle and clothing spoke to her prosperity. A “Men of the Month” feature celebrated the civic, educational, and business accomplishments of black professionals, regardless of gender, through short biographical sketches. Accompanying photographs reiterated the subjects’ claims to respectability.

Special editions linked elite African Americans to the Victorian emphasis on learning and domesticity. In July 1913, an issue devoted to education ran a formal portrait of thirteen students attending the University of Indiana on its cover. Inside, six pages of copy listed the achievements of outstanding students in high schools and colleges alongside fifty photographs of students and teachers. Similarly in October 1914, Du Bois ran eighty-nine photographs of infants and children—out of more than 350 submitted by hopeful parents. Du Bois argued that the images disproved racist assumptions linking skin color to hereditary deficiencies. “As social problems these children are of greatest interest,” he wrote. “They are beautiful, bright and wholesome. There is no reason in the world why in any civilized human society they should not easily, gracefully, and effectively take their place and do their work, receiving the respect due to decent human beings.” These children, Du Bois claimed, would be well educated, well fed, and well groomed but also “compelled to prove before a prejudiced jury that they have a right to be treated as normal American citizens.” The simple abundance of such images countered the perspective of white editors who treated black achievement and respectability as exceptional.

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Through such pictorials, Du Bois attempted to expose sympathetic white liberals to their racial prejudices by asserting the ordinariness of black achievement. 43

The Crisis also revealed how white editors transmitted stereotypes by dissecting articles and headlines to expose their manipulation of racial news coverage. Du Bois routinely excerpted columns, editorials, and articles from white newspapers and critiqued their racial biases. He argued that white journalists believed racial inferiority was an inherent, verifiable truth, and this assumption compelled them “to make the facts prove this thesis ... and when stubborn facts appear that simply will not support this thesis there is almost complete silence.” Du Bois unmasked journalistic bias in an occasional Crisis feature, “The Manufacture of Prejudice.” In May 1911, the feature illustrated how white reporters exaggerated and sensationalized racial conflict by comparing stories about three different incidents with testimony from other sources—a letter written by the NAACP chairman, firsthand reports from eyewitnesses, and a contradictory news story. In February 1913, sensational headlines from white newspapers—including “WOMAN CLUBBED AND LEFT TO DIE; POSSE SEEKS NEGRO,” and “RACE WAR IN A HIGH SCHOOL”—were paired with follow-up accounts printed by black newspapers. Regarding the clubbing, only a black newspaper reported that a white farm laborer confessed to the crime. The Chicago Tribune later admitted the school riot (initially reported as instigated by a black student) never occurred and printed a correction. But a local black newspaper observed that the retraction appeared “in an obscure corner of the paper.” 44

Writing bluntly about racism for an interracial readership, though, caused Du Bois to clash with white readers and benefactors who accused him of excessive negativity and racial chauvinism. A regular feature, “The Burden,” recounted incidents of white abuse and showed

how racism manifested itself through violence, economic sanction, political fraud, courtroom manipulation, and accepted custom. While such articles were common fare in black newspapers, they stunned uninformed white readers. Du Bois also wrote editorials with unsparing frankness. One satirical piece bemoaned the loss of white privilege and the right of white men to rape black women. Du Bois concluded this editorial by conceding he had been wrong to oppose lynching: "Hereafter we humbly pray that every man, black or white, who is anxious to defend women, will be willing to be lynched for his faith. Let black men especially kill lecherous white invaders of their homes and then take their lynching gladly like men." 45

Readers' response to such editorials revealed the limits of racial understanding among white liberals. One white reader said she was "truly shocked" at Du Bois' outlook and warned that his journal "only creates discontent among your people." White NAACP board members constantly pressured Du Bois to moderate his editorials. Board chairman Oswald Garrison Villard wanted Du Bois to balance his recounting of white atrocities by printing news about black crimes. The suggestion infuriated Du Bois, who already fumed at Villard's paternalistic demeanor. Board member Mary W. Ovington pinpointed the cause of tensions: "The magazine is the organ of two races, but its psychology is the psychology of the colored race." She too urged Du Bois to placate his critics. He refused. Du Bois defended himself against charges of racial bitterness by restating his belief that stereotypes hid the depths of racial injustice from white readers. "This is a newspaper," Du Bois wrote. "It tries to tell the Truth. It will not consciously exaggerate in any way, but its whole reason for being is the revelation of the facts of racial antagonism now in the world, and these facts are not humorous." 46

45 "Divine Right, Crisis 3 (March 1912): 197.
In the same year that Du Bois launched the *Crisis*, little-known publisher Robert S. Abbott moved to distinguish the *Chicago Defender* from its rivals by applying the modern journalism techniques of metropolitan dailies to a weekly black newspaper. In doing so, he established the template followed by the most successful black newspapers for much of the twentieth century. The son of former slaves, Abbott was born in 1868 in coastal Georgia. He studied printing at Hampton Institute and moved to Chicago in 1897 to attend law school. His legal career stalled when he was unable to attract clients because of his dark complexion. He founded the *Defender* in 1905. He was 37. The *Defender* began as a four-page sheet published out of a boardinghouse by Abbott and friends who occasionally volunteered their time. A poor speller prone to awkward phrasing, Abbott seemed unlikely to triumph over a crowded field of competitors that included the venerable *Conservator*, best-selling *Appeal*, and intemperate *Broad-Ax*. Little distinguished Abbott from his established rivals. That began to change in 1910 when Abbott hired J. Hockley Smiley, a caterer-turned-journalist and the *Defender’s* first full-time employee, to overhaul his newspaper.  

Abbott and Smiley led the way in transitioning black newspapers into commercial ventures of mass appeal by emulating the appearance and news conventions of the nation’s most popular daily papers. Other editors also experimented with new layouts, provocative headlines, and more images, but none did so as quickly or as successfully as Abbott. (The *Defender* so resembled the Hearst newspapers that unfounded but persistent rumors alleged Hearst was Abbott’s secret partner.) Abbott and Smiley deployed elements of sensationalism to imbue the *Defender* with a sense of urgent immediacy rarely conveyed by their competitors. Banner headlines, often printed in red ink, ran the full length of the front page, morphing

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standard stories of racial abuse and achievement into breathless, breaking news. Out of inclination and calculation, Abbott refrained from overt partisanship as he condemned racial abuses. Tellingly, he was one of the few editors to avoid siding with either Washington or Du Bois in their long-running feud. In September 1914, the Defender became the first black newspaper in Chicago to expand to eight columns across eight pages. The paper swelled with pride: “New and original matter coming from all parts of the world has necessitated this action. To make room for the growing business it hopes to do this fall and winter. The outlook is bright and the time is ripe.” Seven months later, Abbott divided the newspaper into sections, promising consistent coverage of sports, churches, clubs, society, books, art, music, drama, fashion, health, legal aid, and housekeeping. A cartoon appeared on the editorial page.

Reporters were hired. Each week, the Defender provided news coverage comparable in breadth to a small daily newspaper. Circulation grew to about 30,000. 48

To a degree unmatched by its rivals, the Defender was a racialized consumer product purposely designed to appeal to the largest possible readership. Abbott cultivated a working-class readership. He ran columns devoted to the doings of janitors, hotel workers, and railroad porters. He listed activities sponsored by minor churches and clubs, not just those attended by the city’s most prominent citizens. He printed regular dispatches from other states, which kept newcomers in touch with their hometowns. He ran promotions that offered prizes and brief celebrity to ordinary readers. Such material seemed to personalize the news even as the paper’s content grew more impersonal – a result of black Chicago’s population growth and the staff’s increased attention to a national circulation. Abbott touted the Defender as the reader’s

personal guide to understanding the impersonal city. A 1916 promotion, for example, boasted about the Defender’s role in telling a Chicago woman about the death of an aunt in Nashville and another woman about the whereabouts of her estranged stepson. In fact, learning of a relative’s death or location through the newspaper, revealed the disruptions, not the connections, of modern black life. 49

Abbott built the Defender’s circulation with a far-flung distribution network that ceaselessly wooed potential customers. Newsboys hawked newspapers on the streets. Railroad porters sold them on trains and delivered bundles to sales agents across the nation. Musicians and actors carried them from town to town. Roscoe Conkling Simmons, a popular Republican orator better known than the Defender, was hired to write a column and promote the paper on his speaking tours. Readers liked what they read. Circulation leapt to 50,000 in late 1916, then to 90,000 in 1917, and 125,000 in 1918. Roughly two-thirds of the Defender’s readers lived outside of Chicago. Ironically, circulation growth deepened readers’ sense of personal connection to the Defender as African Americans nationwide consumed the same news stories. 50

Billed as the “WORLD’S GREATEST WEEKLY,” the Defender functioned as a promoter of modernity and urban life. Abbott’s path-breaking success stemmed from his vision of marrying the militancy of racial protest to the spectacle of modern life. Articles about lynchings, riots, and other racial wrongs appeared alongside news about celebrities, crime, and commercialized leisure. The juxtaposition served to exclude the racist South from modern life and optimistically cast the accoutrements of city living – such as musical performances, theatrical acts, and professional sports – as symbols of racial advancement. Among regular readers, the Defender’s

militancy imbued Abbott with the credibility of a race leader. “I love and honor the Defender,” one reader wrote, “because it is the one concern that lives exactly up to its name, and further because it defends the virtue, honor, rights and dignity of a worthy people.” Abbott’s stature as a protector of black rights persuaded many southern readers who had never visited Chicago to trust editorials, columns, and articles that urged them to leave behind southern violence and discrimination for the promise of better work and more opportunities in the North. 51

The Defender was perfectly positioned to exploit the quickening of black migration out of the South after 1916. The paper ran classified advertising that listed industrial job openings across the Midwest. Reporters and editors wrote news articles about groups’ planned departures and southern white officials’ concerns about the loss of black labor. Southern authorities enhanced Abbott’s standing whenever they accused him of aggravating racial tensions and wherever they confiscated his newspapers. Among African Americans who remained in the South, the Defender fueled dreams of greater freedom and modern living incompatible with southern segregation. 52

While Abbott was the most successful modern publisher, others were gaining footholds in metropolitan markets by crusading against local discrimination, broadening news and feature coverage, and expanding business operations. The growing influence of these publishers alarmed white authorities who accused them of arousing racial resentment. These publishers condemned the same racist practices criticized by their nineteenth-century predecessors. But their editorials were more direct – written in the straightforward language of modern journalism rather than the flowery formalism of Victorian writing. They also paired editorial opinion with original reporting on local discrimination in schools, housing, employment, and government.

51 “Editor’s Mail,” Defender, October 19, 1918, 16.  
52 Grossman’s Land of Hope remains the definitive account of the Defender’s role in promoting black migration in the late 1910s, particularly see pages 74-88.
Such reporting forced northern municipal officials to acknowledge a racial double standard and respond to complaints. In June 1916, Ray Stannard Baker warned in *World’s Work* that black editors “have shown an increasing impatience and boldness of tone.”

Struggling but enduring newspapers now dotted the country. In Baltimore, Civil War veteran John H. Murphy Sr. bought the bankrupt *Afro-American* in 1897. He was the paper’s printing foreman. He later merged with a competitor, reincorporated to raise capital, and gained readers by campaigning to defeat state disenfranchisement amendments. In 1919, two years after adopting a sensationalistic format, circulation topped 19,000.

In Pittsburgh, lawyer Robert L. Vann, a pragmatic entrepreneur and Republican operative, partnered with five others in 1910 to found the *Courier*. He soon became the paper’s editor and used its pages to promote his legal cases and build his clientele. Located above a funeral parlor, the *Courier* grew slowly because Vann rejected sensationalism. Even so, circulation climbed to 12,000 by 1919 thanks to Vann’s crusades for better housing and schooling, more job opportunities, improved medical care, and reduced crime.

The *New York Amsterdam News* was founded in 1909 in a cellar on Amsterdam Avenue by James H. Anderson, a onetime bill poster, bellhop, baker, sailor, and sexton. The paper teetered on bankruptcy and struggled to compete against the *New York Age*, which remained one of the nation’s most respected black papers, even though Fortune had sold his stake two years earlier. The *Amsterdam News*’ circulation rose after Anderson moved his offices to Harlem, added society news, and printed a popular minister’s sermons. Financial solvency,

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though, was not achieved until Edward A. Warren, an awning-maker, subsidized its production. Warren reputedly pawned a large diamond ring three times to keep the presses rolling.  

Elsewhere on the East Coast, P.B. Young moved to Norfolk in 1907 to work as plant foreman for the *Journal and Guide*, a fraternal paper published by the Supreme Lodge Knights of Gideons. Young’s father, a North Carolina slave-turned-editor, was a member. Young bought the paper in 1910 when state insurance regulations restricted the lodge’s business activities. Located in the former Confederacy and serving a conservative business community, Young championed Tuskegee-style accommodationism but also organized the local NAACP branch. By 1919, the *Journal and Guide’s* circulation had grown from 500 to 4,000.  

On the West Coast, Charlotta Bass bought California’s oldest black newspaper, where she worked as an editor, in 1912 after its founder died. She renamed it the *California Eagle*. She hired her future husband as a reporter. Bass gained national attention when she protested the filming of *Birth of a Nation*, a movie based on D.W. Griffiths’ novel *The Clansman* that depicted African Americans in offensive stereotypes.  

In the Midwest, Joseph E. Mitchell launched the *St. Louis Argus* in 1912 with the backing of a small insurance company he had organized. A veteran of the Spanish-American War, Mitchell was an Alabama native who moved to the Gateway City in 1904. He started the *Argus* after a Republican sheriff refused to appoint more black deputies, conceding that the loyalty of black voters was not enough to secure patronage jobs for them.  

On the opposite side of Missouri, editor Chester A. Franklin moved to Kansas City in 1913, hoping its sizable black population could support a profitable publishing venture. Since the

age of 17, Franklin had helped his parents edit and print the *Colorado Star* (formerly the *Statesman*) in Denver. He operated a print shop for six years before establishing the *Call* in 1919.  

In Oklahoma, Roscoe Dunjee was a wholesale vegetable farmer when he founded Oklahoma City’s *Black Dispatch* in 1915. Dunjee’s education had ended in the fourth grade, but he had once worked in a print shop, and his father, a Baptist minister, had published a newspaper three decades earlier in West Virginia. The *Black Dispatch* served as the official news organ of the local lodge of the Knights of Pythias. Like Young, Dunjee was an accommodationist who became a driving force in Oklahoma’s NAACP activities.

The rapid expansion of black journalism led to intensified scrutiny of black publishers in April 1917 after America declared war on Germany. The Great War provoked racial unrest across the United States as the draft and wartime industrial production relocated tens of thousands of African Americans at a moment of heightened national anxiety. Unfamiliarity, job competition, overcrowding, and harassment sparked violence. A vicious riot erupted in East St. Louis, Illinois, just three months after the United States entered the war. White workers attacked black workers hired by a factory holding federal contracts. Thousands fled their homes. About 40 blacks and eight whites were killed. A month later, black troops based in Houston retaliated against civilian harassment. Military tribunals found 110 soldiers guilty of mutiny and riot. Nineteen were hanged and sixty-three received life sentences.

Amid this turmoil, federal and military officials quit viewing editors’ criticism of the racial status quo as special pleading and instead treated it as a potential act of domestic insurrection. White authorities feared German agents were attempting to disrupt mobilization

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61 John Henry Lee Thompson, “The Little Caesar of Civil Rights Roscoe Dunjee in Oklahoma City, 1915-1955” (PhD diss, Purdue University, 1990), 35, 48-49, 52
efforts by exacerbating racial tensions. They read routine articles with exaggerated suspicion, particularly accounts of racial violence, criticisms of military segregation, and comparisons of southern racism to German atrocities. "The fomenting of race hatred among the negroes at this time," a postal lawyer wrote about the Defender, "is extremely unfortunate and flavors strongly of German propaganda." Black journalists and their publications, regardless of size or prominence, were monitored for disloyalty by the Post Office, State Department, Bureau of Investigation, and military intelligence divisions. Wartime legislation aided state surveillance. The Espionage Act of 1917 punished statements that could cause "insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty" among troops and recruits with a fine of up to $10,000 and twenty years in prison. The amending Sedition Act of 1918 went further, essentially making it illegal to criticize the United States in wartime if that criticism could be construed as harming the war effort. The acts authorized the Postmaster General to censor and impound offending publications and suspend second-class mailing permits. 62

While surveillance was extensive, prosecution was rare. Authorities relied upon threats of legal action and the loss of mailing privileges, both of which could disrupt publication and result in bankruptcy. Investigators routinely met with publishers to express their concerns and outline possible consequences. Major Walter H. Loving, a black Army investigator, visited Abbott's office in May 1918 and warned that "the eye of the government is centered upon his paper, and caution should be his guide." Abbott responded with a long letter touting proofs of his patriotism and distinguishing the difference between his paper's attacks on "the evils of the South" and its loyal support for "the great cause of Democracy." 63

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The most notorious exception was the conviction of G.W. Bouldin, editor of the San Antonio Inquirer, for attempting to cause mutiny among military forces. Bouldin was punished for printing a guest column that defended black soldiers who were court-martialed after they retaliated against white civilian harassers. The offending writer had written, “It is far better that you be shot for having tried to protect a Negro woman, than to have you die a natural death in the trenches of Europe, fighting to make the world safe for a democracy that you can’t enjoy.” Bouldin was sentenced to two years in a federal penitentiary. He was paroled after about one year. 64

Despite government intimidation, editors prodded President Woodrow Wilson to fulfill his pledge to fight for democracy by eradicating American segregation. Shortly after war was declared against Germany, an Afro-American editor wrote, “Let us have a real democracy for the United States, and then we can advise a house cleaning over on the other side of the water.” In Cleveland, Smith argued that wartime was the perfect time to demand the full rights of citizenship. “Rights are seldom granted except in a crisis,” he observed. In May 1918, Loving warned the Argus’ Mitchell to moderate his editorials or court suppression and loss of mailing privileges. Mitchell dared Loving to identify treasonous statements, asking him to “advise us whether it is considered disloyal for us to tell of the wrongs that are being daily directed against us.” 65

Despite African American opposition to the war, editors seldom condemned the war itself. Rather, as historian William G. Jordan observes, they sought to sway national discourse “not by challenging fundamental popular assumptions about democracy, the war, or nationalism but by putting their own spin on those ideas.” They cautiously – and repeatedly –

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64 Kornweibel, “Investigate Everything,” 171.
reaffirmed their patriotism. Although an outlet of protest, the black press also served as a reluctant forum for state propaganda. Abbott reminded Loving that “he gave unlimited space” in the *Defender* to promote the sale of Liberty Loans. Surveillance and intimidation led many editors to temper their tone— but failed to silence their criticisms. 66

Editorial capitulation was rare and fiercely criticized. Du Bois jeopardized his reputation in July 1918 when he wrote in the *Crisis*, “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.” Critics accused Du Bois of abandoning his principles in exchange for a promised captaincy in the Army’s military intelligence branch. NAACP Board Chairman Joel Spingarn, also an Army major, had informally offered the commission to Du Bois, pitching it as a way to help win the war and secure civil rights. After Du Bois agreed to accept the position, Spingarn assured the commander of military intelligence that Du Bois had promised to “change the tone” of the *Crisis*. By then, Du Bois likely had little choice but to temper his words: White NAACP board members were scandalized by being associated with a potentially treasonous publication. Federal investigators had already visited NAACP offices and written letters warning of possible prosecution. The Post Office bolstered the government’s case when it twice declared the *Crisis* not suitable for mailing. (The declarations came after the controversial issues were delivered.) Du Bois defended his call to suspend civil rights agitation until after the war and vowed that black military service would be rewarded in the future. “If this is OUR country,” he wrote in August, “then this is OUR war.” Amid the

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ensuing controversy, the military commission was never formally offered. 67

A June 1918 conference in Washington, D.C., better represented publishers’ sentiments concerning the war and also reflected the federal government’s dawning recognition of black journalism’s power. The conference was organized to give top administration officials an opportunity to encourage about thirty editors to vocally support the war effort. Publishers heard appeals to their patriotism from Secretary of War Newton Baker, Committee of Public Information Chairman George Creel, and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, among others. In turn, publishers explained how lynching, segregation, and discrimination dampened enthusiasm for the war among their readers. While “heated argument was not infrequent,” both sides considered the conference a success. Editors agreed to keep their discussions private and authorized Emmett Scott, a Tuskegee ally serving as Baker’s special assistant, to distribute “all public accounts” about the meeting. Col. Marlborough Churchill, head of military intelligence, told the Army’s top officer that “the leaders of the race are intensely loyal, but feel keenly their inability to carry the great mass of their race with them in active support of the war unless certain grievances receive immediate attention.” The editors reaffirmed their patriotism and promised to aid the war effort, carefully noting in a signed resolution that their publications circulated more than one million copies. “German propaganda among us is powerless,” their statement read, “but the apparent indifference of our own Government may be dangerous.” After listening to editors’ complaints, Baker pressed President Wilson to pursue action against lynching. The following month, Wilson condemned lynching – without specific reference to its racial connotations – for the first time. 68

68 Maj. J.E. Spingarn to the Col. M. Churchill, June 22, 1918, and Churchill to Chief of Staff, War Department, July 2, 1918, Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, reel 19, 732, 733-735; Jordan, Black
The federal government's intense monitoring of black publishers illustrated how an escalating racial militancy had expanded black journalism's scope and influence. The hallmarks of nineteenth-century journalism remained but were altered amid proliferating publications, soaring readerships, modern living, and unrequited demands for wartime sacrifices. Condemnations of racial violence remained journalists' stock-in-trade, but President Wilson's wartime rhetoric introduced a more determined effort to denounce colonialism and scrutinize capitalism. Victorian values persisted but were challenged by lifestyles, events, and products written about and advertised in metropolitan newspapers. Political partisanship continued to shape news coverage but less frequently defined it. Tuskegee-style accommodationism was less prevalent – especially outside of the South. When the twentieth century began, white authorities viewed black editors mostly as an annoyance and occasionally as a localized threat. During World War I, even the federal government could not effectively silence their criticisms. Individually, editors and reporters were susceptible to white retaliation. As a group, they claimed to rival ministers as race leaders. They strengthened that claim over the next two decades by modernizing their presses and broadening their claims of racial justice beyond the United States.

_Newspapers and America's War for Democracy_, 122-133; and “Editors Discuss War Problems with Scott,” _Baltimore Afro-American_, July 5, 1918, 1.
Chapter Two
The “New Crowd” Journalists

In November 1928, Wallace Thurman, a novelist, editor, and failed publisher, launched what he described as “an independent magazine of literature and thought.” He called it Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life. In his first (and next to last) editorial, Thurman criticized an older generation’s spent reportage as “nothing else but preaching and moaning.” For Thurman, modern black journalism was inextricably linked to the sensibilities of the New Negro – that idealized figure symbolizing the forward-looking African American who was forged from the dissonance of twentieth-century industrialism, urbanism, and mobility. Thurman urged journalists to emulate the convention-shattering authors and poets of the Harlem Renaissance by embracing “new points of views and new approaches to old problems.”

That same month, Eugene Gordon outlined similar parallels between the professionalization of black journalism and the trope of the New Negro. He praised journalists for developing a new sense of professional standing and converting to political radicalism. Gordon, a leftist press critic, literary benefactor, and editor for the white-owned Boston Post, credited young college graduates with redesigning sloppily edited and poorly composed weeklies. He contended that young journalists, inspired by Harlem’s radical orator-editors, “dared to state baldly on the printed page what had hitherto been only whispered in secret and dark places: a desire for complete social equality; an admiration for the Bolshevisitic experiment in Russia; and contempt for all Negroes who were less radical than the writers themselves were.” Realistic depictions of black life in fiction freed publishers and journalists to more forcefully scrutinize and chastise real-life race leaders. Like their celebrated literary colleagues,

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journalists used text and image to interrogate stereotypes as well as conventions concerning class, culture, and citizenship. "They all breathed that same fierce fire of independence and radicalism," Gordon claimed, "independence of thought on sacrosanct questions of the day; radicalism with relation to the social and economic condition of the workers." 2

The perspectives of Thurman and Gordon were characteristic of a young cohort of writers whose political radicalization and unsparing scrutiny of a racist nation-state during the interwar years established a new template for modern black journalism. In essence, journalists and publishers yoked the militancy of the New Negro to the business orientation of the commercial newspaper, an incongruous and tempestuous pairing of radicalism and capitalism that occurred because newspapers, unlike most other black institutions, operated autonomously of white oversight. Hardened by world war, race riots, and global depression, these journalists embraced the militancy of Harlem's radical writers, the modern sensibilities of influential authors, poets, and artists, and the racially progressive outlook of Popular Front-era communists and their supporters. Journalists' political radicalization coincided with readers' sweeping progressivism and the modernization of publishers' printing and distribution systems. This confluence of shared politics and enhanced mechanical capability inspired and enabled a staggering surge in circulation that transformed leading newspapers into publications of regional and national significance.

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World War I ended in victory for the Allies in November 1918, but African Americans' contributions to the war effort received no meaningful recognition from federal officials or

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national politicians. W.E.B. Du Bois' plea to "close ranks" with white citizens produced no amelioration of black grievances. Instead, distrust and violence persisted. Federal investigators continued to monitor black activists and their publications, with suspicions of German espionage morphing into fears of communist subversion inspired by the Russian Revolution. White officials routinely characterized black expressions of dissent as "race hatred." 3

With unemployment high and prices rising, a wave of racial violence seized the nation in the summer of 1919 amid exaggerated fears of anarchist terrorism. More than twenty riots occurred, with black victims suffering at the hands of white attackers in cities as diverse as Knoxville, Tennessee, Omaha, Nebraska, and Washington, D.C. The most violent attacks happened in Chicago after a black swimmer drowned after being pelted with rocks thrown by young white men. The swimmer had drifted into a beach area reserved for whites. Days of escalating violence followed. Several dozen blacks died, and hundreds were wounded. 4

Federal investigators and municipal officials accused journalists – white and black – of inflaming racial tensions with inaccurate, exaggerated, and prejudiced news coverage. In Chicago, a commission was formed to examine the causes of the city's riot. Commission members urged white journalists to cover African Americans in a more objective and positive manner. They similarly encouraged black publishers to abandon sensationalism and report with greater accuracy on interracial incidents. Commission members also revealed how white citizens perceived black journalism as a threat to the prevailing social order. Paternally, they asked black journalists to muffle their militancy by devoting "more attention to educating Negro readers as to the available means and opportunities of adjusting themselves and their fellows into more harmonious relations with their white neighbors and fellow-citizens.” The statement

4 For a sociological analysis of the causes and effects of the 1919 riots, see Jan Voogd, Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
amounted to an endorsement of racial uplift ideology by asking African Americans to conform to white expectations. *Chicago Defender* publisher Robert S. Abbott, a commission member, signed off on the recommendations. ⁵

Amid this turmoil, southern migrants arriving in Harlem were greeted by radical street orators, each of whom claimed his definition of black militancy represented the true spirit of the New Negro. Despite sharp political differences and frequent feuding, these orators shared similar racial and political outlooks. They condemned racism, demanded full equality, and advocated armed self-defense. They repudiated black leaders who asked African Americans to moderate their demands and pursue interracial cooperation. They attributed the origins of World War I to capitalism’s ceaseless drive for new markets and Western imperialism’s worldwide exploitation of people of color. As their crowds swelled, the orators turned to print to extend their influence. Their reputations were further burnished when their wartime predictions of unrelenting white hostility were validated in the immediate postwar years.

Radical editors exerted a political and cultural influence that far exceeded their mostly modest circulations and erratic publication runs. “The New Negro is Negro first, Negro last, and Negro always,” wrote Hubert Harrison, a West Indian orator. “He needs not the white man’s sympathy; all he is asking for is equal justice before the law and equal opportunity in the battle of life.” ⁶

Dubbed the “father of Harlem radicalism,” Harrison was among the most influential of New York’s black militants. He was a former socialist organizer whose dismissal from his comfortable career as a postal clerk was orchestrated by Booker T. Washington’s allies. The dark-skinned Harrison founded the Liberty League of Negro Americans in 1917 as a radical, all-black alternative to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).


The league’s political views were published in The Voice, a four-page newspaper that sold for a penny. Harrison described the paper “as the medium of expression for the new demands and aspirations of the new Negro,” a figure who represented “a breaking away of the Negro masses from the grip of old-time leaders.” The first issue sold out its press run of three thousand copies. In it, Harrison characterized the riot in East St. Louis as a “pogrom.” “How can America hold up its hands in hypocritical horror at foreign barbarism,” he asked, “while the red blood of the Negro is clinging to those hands?” Harrison claimed white editors concealed reports of black men fighting back against white attackers because they feared other African Americans might emulate the defenders. “If white men are to kill unoffending Negroes,” Harrison wrote, “Negroes must kill white men in defense of their lives and property.” Within a month, weekly circulation reached eleven thousand, a reflection of reader support and the paper’s cheap price. Most black newspapers cost a nickel. 7

Harrison distinguished his radicalism from activists who embraced socialism or communism through his conception of “Negro consciousness.” Propaganda billing World War I as a campaign for democracy, Harrison argued, exposed the degree to which the economic exploitation of Western capitalism was rooted in a foundational belief in white supremacy. “All the available facts go to prove that, whether in the United States or in Africa or China, the economic subjection is without exception keener and more brutal when the exploited are black, brown and yellow, than when they are white.” This realization intensified black demands for democracy and equality. These demands were expressed through the actions of the New Negro. Harrison contended that black radicals who followed socialism or communism did so, not so much because of class interests, but because “the dogma of Race-Consciousness” positioned

those ideologies as a means to defeat a capitalistic system that upheld white supremacy. But, Harrison argued, explicitly racial radicals – those who nurtured “racialism, race-consciousness, racial solidarity” – attracted more followers because they realized that “the roots of Race-consciousness must of necessity survive any and all changes in the economic order.”

Two southern transplants who touted socialism disagreed with Harrison. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen launched the monthly Messenger in November 1917, pitching it as “The Only Radical Negro Magazine in America.” They advocated “scientific radicalism,” which they defined as an unapologetic attack on American racism founded upon an interracial class consciousness that would “build a new society – a society of equals, without class, race, caste or religious distinctions.” They saw signs of their ultimate success in the rise of the Soviet Union, fall of the German empire, and unrest in the British colonies. Randolph and Owen were unregistered conscientious objectors who rejected Du Bois’ plea to halt racial protest until after the war. “Since when has the subject race,” Owen asked, “come out of a war with its rights and privileges accorded for such participation?” Unlike establishmentarian leaders, the Messenger’s editors advocated mass protest, endorsed the Russian Revolution, demanded integrated unions, and supported women’s suffrage. They were arrested for treason in August 1918 while speaking in Cleveland. The charges were dismissed when, according to Randolph, a white judge portrayed them as unsophisticated young dupes misled by savvy white socialists. Regardless, the Post Office suspended the Messenger’s second-class mailing privileges.

Randolph and Owen contrasted their class-oriented militancy against the “Old Crowd Negro,” a dismissive label for established leaders who failed to recognize African Americans as...

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8 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms,” in Harrison Reader, 102-105.
“the most exploited of the American workers.” The editors derided the Old Crowd as “false
leaders” who threatened to stall social change because they emphasized racial difference rather
than class solidarity. Randolph and Owen labeled Old Crowd leaders as conservative, regardless
of whether those leaders were accommodationists or militants. The Old Crowd included
journalists like the Crisis’ Du Bois, veteran editor T. Thomas Fortune, NAACP organizer and
orator William Pickens, Howard University educator and columnist Kelly Miller, and New York
Age publisher Fred Moore. In their stinging criticism of the Old Crowd, Randolph and Owen
inverted black journalism’s practice of lauding race leaders. In a regular “Who’s Who” feature,
they ridiculed prominent race men for their blindness to the economic roots of racial prejudice.
In one issue, they skewered Roscoe Conklin Simmons, a prominent Republican orator and
Chicago Defender columnist, as representative of others who were “bankrupt in information,
poverty stricken in ideas, intellectual Lilliputians, and mental midgets.” 10

Another radical, West Indian activist Cyril Briggs, evolved into a communist with Pan-
Africanist beliefs. Briggs immigrated to the United States in 1905 when he was 18. Unlike other
radicals, he stuttered and avoided public speaking. Briggs joined the New York Amsterdam News
in 1912. He later became managing editor but resigned when told to moderate editorials
discouraging black involvement in the war. As peace was being negotiated, he seized upon
President Woodrow Wilson’s support for “impartial adjustment of all colonial claims.” Backed by
a West Indian merchant, Briggs began publishing the monthly Crusader in September 1918 to
promote “Africa for the Africans.” He advocated “government of the Negro by the Negro and for
the Negro” through the creation of an independent African nation. Briggs briefly aligned himself
with the Hamitic League of the World, a black nationalist organization co-founded by three

“Roscoe Conklin Simmons,” Messenger, October 1919, 26; and “The Negro Radicals,” Messenger,
October 1919, 17.
employees of an Omaha newspaper. An open admirer of the Russian Revolution, Briggs increasingly viewed an alliance with communists as a way to fulfill his editorial mission. He most likely joined the Communist Party sometime in mid-1921. The Crusader folded the following year. 11

Briggs also promoted his politics through the secretive African Blood Brotherhood and the Crusader News Service. Briggs formed the African Blood Brotherhood for “the liberation of Africa and the redemption of the Negro race.” He encouraged its members to convert others to their political views by organizing literary clubs that discussed black history and racial problems. He told them to “build up a strong public opinion against the serviles of the race, against ignorance, against immorality and race debasement.” The Crusader News Service was a mimeographed weekly service that served more than two hundred black newspapers in the United States, West Indies, and Africa. Since the service was free, small newspapers were especially eager to print Briggs’ editorials and dispatches. 12

Marcus Garvey proved more influential than Briggs in stoking the back-to-Africa movement. Born in Jamaica in 1887, Garvey worked as a printer in Kingston, a timekeeper on a banana plantation in Costa Rica, and a messenger for the London-based African Times and Orient Review, an early advocate of Pan-Africanism. Inspired by his study with anti-colonialists in England, Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1914 and organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) “with the program of uniting all the negro peoples of the world into one great body to establish a country and Government absolutely their own.” Garvey sailed to New

York City in 1916 to raise money for a Jamaican trade school. He decided to stay in the United States after recruiting about one thousand new members in Harlem. "Industrially, financially, educationally and socially," Garvey said, "the Negroes of both hemispheres have to defer to the American brother, the fellow who has revolutionized history in race development." The UNIA grew into a mass international organization of working-class men and women that historian Steven Hahn says "left its mark on every major black social and political movement of the twentieth century." 13

Garvey communicated with his followers in the United States, West Indies, and Africa through the weekly *Negro World* — with the printed product of their shared militancy fostering a sense of transnational communal connection. Editors reprinted Garvey’s speeches, devoted the front page to his extended essays, covered national conventions, and reported on local chapters. While unswervingly focused on reaffirming Garvey’s leadership, the *Negro World* also reinforced readers’ militancy and infused them with a sense of their own significance. A Garvey biographer observes that “pledges, promises and proclamations were laid before the reader much as they’d previously been laid before the King.” Editors solicited reader-written poems that expressed spiritual connections to Africa, ridiculed the Ku Klux Klan, and celebrated the UNIA. Letters to the editor linked isolated readers — perhaps in a Cuban village, South African city, or Alabamian whistle-stop — to a worldwide movement. “Kindly allow me a small spot in your big world,” began a reader in Bermuda. Bold banner headlines — “AFRICA THE LAND OF HOPE AND PROMISE FOR NEGRO PEOPLES OF THE WORLD” and “THE NEGRO DESIRES COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL PROSPERITY, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL PROGRESS AND

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POLITICAL LIBERTY – nurtured racial pride in ancestral heritage and future prospects. Garvey claimed a peak unaudited circulation of more than two hundred thousand. British and French colonial authorities banned the paper. They feared Garvey would provoke unrest with his demands for self-governance and his support for a return to Africa where black-majority rule could prevail. 

Commercial newspaper publishers aided in circulating radical editors’ viewpoints by excerpting editorials, covering lecture tours, and reporting on scandals. They feuded frequently with radical writers. Publishers castigated the radicals in editorials and occasionally informed on them when questioned by federal investigators. In moments of controversy, Abbott’s Defender and Du Bois’ Crisis seemed to rival the Negro World in their coverage of Garvey and the UNIA. Fred R. Moore, editor of the New York Age since he bought it in 1907 with money borrowed from Booker T. Washington, proved a frequent foil for the radicals, his views and actions seeming to personify the Old Crowd Negro.

Radical editors influenced black journalism more directly through friendships and professional dealings with journalists in the commercial press. Radicals achieved a measure of mainstream respectability when esteemed journalists joined their ranks. Most notably, the Negro World ran columns by John Edward Bruce, a popular writer known as “Bruce Grit,” and hired T. Thomas Fortune, once the nation’s most influential black journalist, as an editor in 1923. Bruce was the more important recruit. (Fortune was a shell of his former self, crippled by alcoholism and apparent bouts of mental instability.) Born in 1856 to Maryland slaves, Bruce began his writing career in 1875 as a special Washington, D.C., correspondent for a New York newspaper. Over the ensuing decades, he started and wrote for numerous papers, becoming

one of the best known columnists in black journalism. While immersed in the Republican Party infighting that subsidized black newspapers, Bruce developed an international network of contacts among people who promoted Pan-Africanism and celebrated a black history rooted in the African diaspora.  

Bruce initially dismissed Garvey as a "glib phrase maker and a dreamer" but later became a trusted advisor. When an Army investigator questioned Bruce about Garvey, Bruce described the UNIA’s plans for redeeming Africa as “impracticable, utopian, and jackassical.” Ten months later, though, Bruce reconsidered his opposition as Garvey spoke atop a stepladder at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street in Harlem. Garvey again outlined his mission, which Bruce summarized as an effort “to draw all Negroes throughout the World together, to make one big brotherhood of the Black Race for its common good, for mutual protection, for commercial and industrial development, and for fostering of business enterprises.” Ill-served by the Republican Party and unconvinced by socialism, Bruce realized he had no reason to oppose Garvey, particularly since no one else had offered a better plan for fighting racism. His column began to appear in the Negro World in May 1920. Bruce believed critics mischaracterized the true intent of Garvey’s “back to Africa” movement. He told Garvey, “I think I see with tolerably clear vision that your purpose is to lay the foundation broad and deep, so that the Negroes of the coming day will know better than we ... how to possess and hold and develop the heritage which the Almighty has given to the black race.”  

More frequently, journalists with radical affiliations worked for commercial newspapers and magazines. The most conspicuous example was Joel Augustus “J.A.” Rogers, a self-taught Jamaican born sometime in the early 1880s. After serving in the British Army, Rogers migrated in

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16 Seraile, Bruce Grit, 164, 166; and Crowder, John Edward Bruce, 156-158.
1906 to the United States. While working as a railroad porter, Rogers suffered the insults of American racism for the first time. Those humiliations motivated him to pursue a career as an independent researcher studying the history of race and racism. In 1917, Rogers published his first book, *From Superman to Man*, which refuted the supposed scientific origins of white supremacy. It sold more than ten thousand copies and appeared serially in many newspapers. Rogers called Harrison a friend, served as Garvey’s confidante, and contributed to Randolph’s *Messenger*. He also published widely in commercial newspapers – writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier, New York Amsterdam News*, and *Baltimore Afro-American*, among others. His articles financed his research at leading libraries and museums across North America, Europe, and Africa. Rogers became a regular weekly columnist for the *Courier*. 17

Rogers played a central role in popularizing the concept of the African diaspora. In 1934, the *Courier* began running his popular “Your History” feature, which paired facts about black history with sketches drawn by an illustrator. The cartoon-like feature fostered a militant racial pride and a Pan-Africanist perspective by tracing the lineage of African Americans to ancient empires in Egypt and Ethiopia. “Your history dates back beyond the cotton fields of the South,” read the feature’s introduction, “back thousands of years before Christ.” Rogers explicitly refuted stereotypes by championing example after example of black manliness, bravery, dedication, intellectualism, and physical prowess. (Rogers was also known to counter white erasure of black historical involvement by exaggerating the significance of black milestones or unearthing dubious evidence of a historical figure’s blackness.) One early feature paired sketches of muscular black men building the Great Pyramid with the exploits of a champion boxer and record-breaking cyclist. Another touted the intellectual achievements of agricultural

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chemist George Washington Carver and the popularity of a Mexican poet born to Congolese parents. That feature also listed the nine black boxers who had held championship belts, their names accompanied by a drawing of a triumphant black pugilist standing above a concussed white opponent. A third feature noted that two black soldiers were the first Americans awarded a French military decoration for heroism in combat. Their achievement was acknowledged with an illustration of a black soldier bayoneting a German soldier. 18

Readers praised “Your History.” A New Orleans fan encouraged others to cut out the feature and paste it in scrapbooks for children and pin it to bulletin boards at lodges, libraries, schools, and civic clubs. Another reader thanked Rogers’ editor for running his work. “As an editor,” she wrote, “you must be a wide-awe racial man to pick up such a value, for believe it or not, the only way of saving the Afro-American, who is fast sinking, is by awakening his racial pride through facts of his past achievements.” The Courier inculcated generations of readers with an appreciation for Pan-Africanism by running “Your History” regularly into the mid-1970s, nearly a decade after Rogers’ death. 19

Other commercial journalists had similar radical ties and affinities. Brothers Robert and Ulysses Poston established the Hopkinsville (Kentucky) Contender in 1919 with their father. Another brother, the teenager Ted, worked as a copy boy. The older brothers’ militancy was already well known. The Army had demoted them after they protested discrimination by a white southern sergeant. After they were discharged, the brothers angered Hopkinsville’s white leaders by writing an editorial that criticized them for relegating black soldiers to the end of a parade celebrating the return of local troops. The ensuing uproar forced the brothers to relocate

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to Nashville. In September 1920, they moved to Detroit in hopes of finally earning a profit. After covering several speeches by Garvey, the brothers again folded their newspaper, moved to Harlem, and joined the UNIA. Both worked for the *Negro World* and became high-ranking UNIA officials. In May 1922, Ulysses Poston was named managing editor of a short-lived UNIA publication, the *Daily Negro Times*.  

Back in Hopkinsville, Ted Poston read the newspapers his older brothers mailed home. Family history and UNIA agitation encouraged him to pursue journalism as a career. He attended Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial College in Nashville, working as a railroad porter to pay his tuition. Ted applauded editorials in the *Messenger* that promoted the unionization of porters. On work layovers, Ted stayed at Ulysses’ Harlem apartment. After a falling out with Garvey, Ulysses rejoined the commercial press, contributing to the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Inter-State Tattler* and publishing the *New York Contender*. (Robert Poston died of pneumonia in 1924). After graduating, Ted moved to Harlem in 1928 and helped put out the *Contender* from a bedroom office. Three years later, Ted joined the *Amsterdam News*, where his pro-union stance eventually clashed with the publisher’s anti-labor views.  

Another disgruntled veteran found intellectual stimulation and inspiration among socialists. At age 17, George Schuyler quit high school in Syracuse, New York, and joined the Army. He deserted in 1918 after encountering discrimination and spent nine months in a military prison. Schuyler joined the Socialist Party of America in November 1921. For Schuyler, the experience “was exhilarating and just the type of stimulation I had been hungering for.” In the early 1920s, Randolph encouraged the vagabond Schuyler to help around the *Messenger*’s offices when co-editor Owen was on a business trip. Soon, Schuyler was correcting copy,  

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31 Ibid.
sweeping and mopping floors, opening and answering mail, distributing magazines to newsstands, and writing a caustic column. He eventually became managing editor and hobnobbed with the nation's leading black journalists, radicals, and literary writers. Schuyler began writing for the Pittsburgh Courier in 1925. He worked for the Courier over five different decades, serving as a columnist, reporter, editor, book reviewer, and serial fiction writer. Although Schuyler later distanced himself from his youthful radicalism and became a zealous anti-communist, the militancy of his early reporting and the stinging sarcasm of his columns reflected an embrace of the New Negro as broadly defined by World War I-era black radicals. 22

Other aspects of black print culture – not just its political radicalism – recast black journalism in the 1920s. As Thurman and Gordon observed, journalists were transformed by the formulation of a new literary aesthetic, which was eventually labeled the Harlem Renaissance. Literary promoter Alain Locke claimed authors and artists symbolized the potent cultural and psychological changes that had occurred “in the internal world of the Negro mind and spirit.” Although informed and impelled by political radicalism, writers and artists – including Thurman, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and many others – strove for a more personal understanding of the New Negro. They drew inspiration from a vibrant working-class culture and staked a claim to national citizenship by asserting the centrality of black culture to the American experience. These young artists represented African Americans in an array of media – novels, poems, essays, reviews, music, drama, and journalism. Scholar Anne Elizabeth Carroll describes their works as “an on-going, ever-changing exploration” of how texts could most effectively undermine racism. “Race for them,” Locke optimistically

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wrote, “is but an idiom of experience, a sort of added enriching adventure and discipline, giving subtler overtones to life, making it more beautiful and interesting, even if more poignantly so.

So experienced, it affords a deepening rather than a narrowing of social vision.” 23

White publishers proved crucial in developing and promoting the Harlem Renaissance, but segregation, discrimination, and indifference restricted the opportunities they offered. Poet Arna Bontemps described the excitement as “almost unbearable” when front-line book publishers began to actively recruit black writers and nurture long-lasting relationships with them. “The walls of Jericho were toppling,” he recalled. Workplace segregation, though, prevented qualified black applicants from landing full-time editing and writing positions. Poet and author Langston Hughes defined the renaissance with his blues poems and his defense of black artists’ right to depict black culture without embarrassment. Despite his obvious qualifications, Hughes struggled to find employment, while less talented friends were hired for good jobs writing books, radio scripts, and Hollywood screenplays. “But they were white,” Hughes wrote, “I was colored.” White publishers’ bottom lines also worked against black writers. Disappointing book sales convinced white publishers that white readers would never buy enough black-oriented books to make them profitable. Hughes refused to abandon racial themes. Like other black authors and poets, he subsidized his literary work with paychecks earned in black journalism. 24

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More crucially, the Harlem Renaissance was buoyed by its close ties to black magazine editors, particularly Du Bois and sociologist Charles S. Johnson. Both men edited monthly journals backed by white philanthropists who could fund literary prizes and solicit the attention of white publishers. In the NAACP’s *Crisis*, Du Bois and literary editor Jessie Fauset commended art and literature that depicted black middle-class values as normative and downplayed racial differences to avoid inflaming negative stereotypes. Du Bois touted art for its value in dismantling racial injustice and advancing integration. “I stand in utter shamelessness,” he wrote in 1926, “and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”

Johnson evaluated art and literature differently in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* than Du Bois reviewed it in the *Crisis*. *Opportunity* was a monthly magazine founded in 1923 by the National Urban League, an interracial organization dedicated to improving race relations and removing barriers to black employment. Trained at the University of Chicago, Johnson’s dispassionate approach to sociology compelled him to dismiss attempts to use art as propaganda. To do otherwise, he argued, distorted the “authenticity” of self expression. Instead, Johnson described the New Negro literature “as an integral part of a single tradition and as a unique collective experience. Only as these different expressions of the racial life are viewed as parts of a whole is it possible to arrive at any true estimate of the Negro’s cultural achievement or his traits.”

The literature and art of the New Negro further eroded the pervasive influence of racial uplift ideology, with black newspapers and magazines serving as a primary arena for the

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26 Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 152-153, with Johnson quoted on 176.
contestation between Victorian values and modern sensibilities. While Crisis and Opportunity reflected the outlook of their editors, newspapers fostered a wider-ranging debate about the renaissance’s merits, as illustrated by coverage of Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928). The Jamaican-born McKay was a celebrated poet, onetime Garveyite, and a former associate editor of the Liberator, a socialist monthly founded in 1919. He was best known for his militant sonnet, “If We Must Die,” which was widely reprinted in radical publications. He later converted to communism and toured the Soviet Union. His controversial first novel aired the tawdriness of Harlem street life.

Critics in several leading newspapers panned Home to Harlem for denigrating the neighborhood’s citizens. The reviewers undoubtedly knew the book had received coverage in New York’s leading dailies. They had been similarly scandalized just two years earlier by Carl Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven, a white author’s foray into Harlem’s underbelly. Saying “Harlem is not as bad as painted,” the Courier’s critic accused McKay of being “solely after the shekels, shekels and still more shekels.” In the Defender, Dewey R. Jones claimed the novel violated common decency. He found “few redeeming features” in it. “Pimps, whores, chippies, parade themselves along in a fashion never before encountered in fiction,” Jones wrote. “There is even the undercurrent of contempt, expressed and implied, for everything that savors of respectability.” The Baltimore Afro-American ran a nonjudgmental summary review, but columnist Ralph Matthews dismissed the novel four months later as “merely obscenely dirty.” Matthews accused McKay of actualizing stereotypes that could slow racial progress.27

Such criticisms were common enough that provocative literary writers expected newspapers to publish negative reviews. McKay said black writers understood their work would

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be perceived by an average reader in general terms and by a black reader in racial terms. A writer could pretend to ignore racial opinion, McKay wrote, but “very likely he has his social contacts with the class of Negroes who create and express this opinion in their conversation and through the hundreds of weekly Negro newspapers and the monthly magazines.” McKay considered reviewers’ emphasis on race as “a kind of censorship” and claimed his critics seemed “afraid of the revelation of bitterness in Negro life.” 28

Fellow author Wallace Thurman agreed. For Thurman, black middle-class disgust for realistic literature was comparable to “those American whites who protest against the literary upheavals of a Dreiser, an Anderson, or a Sandburg.” Thurman challenged this perspective by founding two short-lived but critically-acclaimed journals – Fire!! and Harlem – that refuted Du Bois’ proscription that artistic creation should function as racial propaganda. (Thurman also worked as the managing editor of the Messenger in the mid-1920s after its editors had abandoned socialist politics and the magazine resembled what Hughes described as “a kind of Negro society magazine and a plugger for Negro business, with photographs of prominent colored ladies and their nice homes.”) After a lifetime combating stereotypes, most African Americans, Thurman argued, could not distinguish between “sincere art and insincere art.” “The mass of American Negroes,” he wrote, “can no more be expected to emancipate themselves from petty prejudices and myopic fears than can the mass of American whites. They all revere Service, Prosperity and Progress.” Tellingly, McKay’s and Thurman’s commentary appeared in white publications – the New York Herald-Tribune Books and New Republic, respectively. 29


And yet, newspaper coverage as a whole amplified and normalized the literary writers’ modernist outlook. Not all reviewers, for example, condemned Home to Harlem. The Amsterdam News’ Aubrey Bowser, a writer and educator married T. Thomas Fortune’s daughter, referred to McKay’s novel as “dirt for art’s sake” and called it “the best novel of Harlem ever written.” Poet Donald Jeffrey Hayes wrote a column for the Defender, praising the work of writers like McKay. Then McKay won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, one of eight awards established in 1926 to recognize black achievement. The honor prompted newspapers to run a spate of complimentary notices. As Thurman observed, “Negro newspapers reprinted every item published anywhere concerning a Negro whose work had found favor with the critics, editors, or publishers.” Controversy and public recognition led editors to demand more copy. A personal remembrance by James W. Ivy appeared in the Courier and Afro-American. J.A. Rogers interviewed McKay while traveling in Paris. Newspaper reporters helped transform a radical poet into a mainstream celebrity, ensuring that his work and political reviews received wide coverage in the future.30

More broadly, scenes in Home to Harlem were no more shocking, exploitative, or commercially oriented than the crime-and-scandal stories splashed across the front pages of black newspapers nationwide. A decade’s worth of sensationalistic journalism likely inoculated many readers to McKay’s alleged carnality. As the Afro-American’s Matthews observed, “Mr. McKay is guilty of the same crime that most Negro writers commit, newspaper men being the greatest violators, that of giving the whites a look into our garbage cans and toilets, but never allowing them to see us when we are cleaned up and sitting on the front porch.” From this perspective, modern newspapers and literature complemented one another. 31

31 Matthews, Afro-American, July 7, 1928.
As the Jazz Age closed, the New Negro's radicalized militancy and modern sensibilities had undermined the popularity and profitability of more conservative newspaper publishers. The declining relevance of the *Washington Bee* allowed the *Baltimore Afro-American* to open a bureau and build its readership in Washington, D.C. (The *Bee* folded several months after founder W. Calvin Chase died in 1921.) The *Richmond Planet* maintained its circulation, but publisher John Mitchell Jr.'s reputation as the "fighting editor" was a distant memory. He had shifted his attention from politics to business, prompting the *Messenger* to dismiss him as a "hat-in-hand Negro." "John Mitchell's day is done," Randolph and Owen wrote. "Negroes need shed no tears over it. When one loses his courage and devotes most of his time urging the victims of oppression to be polite to the prosecutors, it is time for him to go." In New York, the *Amsterdam News* claimed a circulation nearly one-third larger than Moore's venerable *New York Age*, which critics lampooned as a "Negro weakly." Floyd J. Calvin, the *Messenger*'s assistant editor, claimed Moore's influence was "rapidly waning, in proportion as the New Crowd demonstrates to the Negro public the difference between brain-work and guess-work." In Los Angeles, the *California Eagle* emerged as the most influential black newspaper on the West Coast. *Eagle* publisher Charlotta Bass belonged to the NAACP and organized the local chapter of Garvey's UNIA.  

Competition among Chicago's newspapers illustrated the ascendance of militancy and modernism among black urban readers – but also the persistence of uplift and respectability. By the mid-1920s, the *Defender's* strongest rival was the *Chicago Whip*, a newspaper launched in 1919 by two college-educated southerners. The editors, Joseph D. Bibb and William C. Linton,

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supported Marcus Garvey and relished deflating the pretensions of black leaders. Frank Marshall Davis, a journalist and aspiring poet who briefly worked at the Whip, described the sensationalistic paper as “the South Side’s most militant journal.” One scholar claims the Whip “quite possibly” matched the Defender’s local readership. But Chicago readers also supported the Chicago Bee, which placed a distant third in circulation. Cosmetics tycoon Anthony Overton established the paper in 1925 to boost his merchandise sales. The Bee purposely aimed for a middle-class readership alienated by its competitors’ stridency and sensationalism. Among its pledges to readers, the Bee promised to pursue “good, wholesome and authentic news” and “cordial relations between races.” “This Bee had no stinger,” Davis recalled. “Overton wanted nothing controversial in its columns. There were enough sacred cows to stock a Texas ranch.” The business prospects of publishers like Overton, though, worsened in the 1930s when economic collapse compelled many working-class African Americans to embrace aspects of communism, moving political radicalism more directly into the mainstream of commercial black journalism.  

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Racism exacerbated the hardships of the Great Depression and provoked African Americans to reconsider their political alliances. In the North, about half of black laborers could not find work in major cities. In the South, poor sharecroppers fell deeper into debt, and most urban families survived on public aid. President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded to the economic catastrophe by more than doubling federal spending by World War II, creating an array of programs to reduce joblessness and establish a minimum standard of subsistence.

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Roosevelt promised equity in divvying aid and met regularly with black advisors. While New Deal policies and politics affirmed black citizenship, they proved inadequate in alleviating black needs. Administrators typically adhered to the nation’s color line, and African Americans routinely received far less than their fair share of relief.  

Even so, Roosevelt’s gestures toward racial awareness reflected the new political implications of black migration and agitation. By 1940, about one-third of twelve million African Americans lived outside of the South. Freed from southern disenfranchisement laws, they represented a powerful voting bloc disenchanted with the Republican Party’s failure to initiate racial reforms and its reluctance to intervene in the economic crisis. Robert L. Vann, the Pittsburgh Courier’s opportunistic publisher and a Republican stalwart turned Democrat, famously predicted in 1932 that the descendents of slaves would no longer vote for the party of the great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. “I see millions of Negroes,” Vann said, “turning the picture of Lincoln to the wall.” While largely ignored by the daily newspapers, Vann’s speech was widely reprinted in black weeklies. Four years later, black voters overwhelmingly cast ballots for Roosevelt.  

Like federal officials, white editors realized changing demographics and mounting protest merited serious examination, but they still failed to understand how extensively news coverage was shaped by stereotypes and racism. Increased press attention was not a gesture of interracial goodwill, but a tacit acknowledgement that black men and women had become a hard-to-ignore segment of society. Northern editors had once treated articles about race as

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regional news from Dixie. Now they assigned their own reporters to explain how local black residents intensified housing shortages, demanded government services, and filled factory jobs. Such coverage tended to depict African Americans as a problem that threatened the well being of the United States, which was implicitly construed as a white nation. This framing exemplified the liberal view of race in the era of managed race relations, a euphuism for what passed as interracial dialogue in the segregated mid-twentieth century. The goal of race relations was to grant just enough concessions to black activists to prevent flash eruptions of violence while blocking any systematic change to white dominion of the status quo.  

Reportage framed by the concept of race relations usually portrayed African Americans as objects of fascination or consternation. Such reporting could treat blacks with sympathy, curiosity, humor, and fear – but seldom with fairness and equality. Few newspapers deployed the crudest stereotypes of previous decades. But Time still joshed that, "Everybody knows that pickaninnies can be smart as paint," when it reported academically gifted black children might not be an anomaly. This same perspective permeated Stanley High's factual, yet menacing and paternalistic, two-part series "Black Omens," which appeared in the Saturday Evening Post. High told readers in spring 1938 that black men and women were overcoming economic and social divisions to agitate in unison for racial justice. This assertiveness challenged white expectations of black complacency. Such defiance merited a warning from High that the "the Negro himself – in both his temper and his objectives – is a very different person from the docile servant of the pre-migration, pre-depression period." High concluded this unity posed an ominous but vague

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36 My understanding of race relations is influenced by the critique of Gunnar Myrdal's American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944) in Singh, Black Is a Country, 142-159.
threat to (white) America. "The Negro is out for a new place in the sun," he wrote. "He does not expect to get it, like Emancipation, on a silver platter. He plans to make or take it for himself." 37

Black journalists had few opportunities to counter such news coverage in mass-circulation newspapers and magazines. White editors seldom hired them. Black journalists occasionally ghosted reports for major dailies, allowing a white reporter’s byline to appear over their words, or placed freelance articles in a magazine. A few prominent exceptions landed full-time jobs. Lester Walton, a former New York Age editor who helped convince the Associated Press in 1913 to capitalize the word “Negro,” had covered general assignment news for the New York World in the 1920s. Eugene Gordon worked at the Boston Post from 1919 to 1935, leaving to write for the English-language Moscow Daily News. But when the liberal New York Post hired Ted Poston in 1937, he was the only black reporter working full-time for a major metropolitan newspaper. 38

Specialized publications were somewhat more accepting. Literary and academic writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance contributed to small but influential literary journals and progressive political magazines, such as the Nation, New Republic, and American Mercury. In the 1930s, the Communist Party recruited black writers to celebrate the black working class and link racism to the sins of capitalism in national publications such as the Daily Worker and New Masses, and many lesser newspapers and journals.

The dawning racial awareness exhibited by federal officials and white journalists certified the growing influence of black scholars, activists, artists, union leaders, and journalists. Historian Nikhal Pal Singh contends that the combination of racial exclusion and dramatic demographic change forced African Americans to develop "institutional and information

37 "Education: Smart Pickaninnies," Time, April 1, 1940, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,885865,00.html; and Stanley High, "Black Omens," Saturday Evening Post, May 21, 1938, 6, 64.
38 "Newshawks Do Most Stories on White Assignments," Ebony, April 1948, 59.
networks that linked black intellectuals and activists with geographically dispersed but densely concentrated black populations that could be mobilized – with unpredictable consequences for the nation as a whole.” Shaped by the early twentieth century’s “new forms of black social existence, racial protest, and disruptive conflict,” these institutions and networks reached the cusp of maturity in the 1930s. When confronted by economic crisis, these institutions participated in what Singh calls “a sharp leftward turn” as black leaders attempted “to establish new lines of correspondence with those they understood to be black working masses.” The black press was enmeshed in this institutional expansion and political recalculation. 39

The Great Depression fully exposed how the commercial black press had evolved into a two-tier industry, with profitable, professional publishers in large cities distinguishing themselves from small-town, part-time editor-proprietors. “The fact is that the Negro press has become of necessity a business proposition first, and an uplift agency, second,” wrote Roy Wilkins, managing editor of the Kansas City Call. Many small newspapers folded after the 1929 stock market crash. Large newspapers floundered for several years but had the mechanical and personnel assets to survive lean years. Publishers slashed salaries, trimmed news pages, and created new sources of revenue. The Courier’s Vann, for example, completed a $104,000 printing plant in late 1929, filling it with used, but modern, equipment. Despite the paper’s indebtedness, the plant helped the Courier endure tough economic times by allowing Vann to contract for outside print jobs, reduce production costs, and expand the paper when circulation grew. In contrast, several local rivals folded. 40

The NAACP acknowledged the growing influence of black newspapers in the early 1930s when it altered its publicity practices. In prior decades, NAACP executives and board members

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issued statements and news releases in hopes of landing stories in white-owned newspapers. The group fitted itself to the daily press’ editorial demands and production schedules. Wilkins, who left the Call in 1931 to work for the NAACP, said the policy initially made sense because the organization’s major task was “the changing of a hostile or indifferent white public opinion.” But after Wilkins arrived, executives “made conscious efforts to cooperate as closely as possible with the Negro press.” Black newspapers had become too influential to ignore. 41

By the mid-1930s, leading publishers resumed expanding their operations as potential new rivals appeared. Mechanical modernization occurred so rapidly that one industry insider hesitated to estimate the value of new publishing equipment. Instead, he characterized the plants of the Defender, Courier, and Afro-American as being in the “big money’ class.” These newspapers invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in mechanical equipment, which included high-speed rotary presses and photo-engraving plants. P.B. Young Sr., the Norfolk Journal and Guide’s publisher, claimed in 1939 that the largest black newspapers were “better equipped than was the average large city daily of twenty-five years ago.” To make the most of expansion, leading newspapers joined the Audit Bureau of Circulation, an industry organization founded in 1914 to verify the accuracy of circulation figures for advertisers. Nine newspapers became members between 1930 and 1935, including the Afro-American, Amsterdam News, and Courier. Membership gave these newspapers an advantage when they solicited advertisers. 42

As major publishers saturated local markets, they looked for readers elsewhere. They opened bureaus, bought out smaller weeklies, or simply sold additional newspapers in other

42 G. James Fleming, “Emancipation of the Negro Press,” Crisis 45 (July 1938): 216; P.B. Young, “The Negro Press – Today and Tomorrow,” Opportunity 17 (July 1939): 204; and Horace David Murdock, “Some Business Aspects of Leading Negro Newspapers” (MBA, University of Kansas, 1935), 75. Murdock also noted that daily newspapers had an average ratio of 40 percent news and 60 percent advertising in a typical edition. His survey of eleven black newspapers found the average amount of space devoted to advertising was about 30 percent.
cities. Carl Murphy, the second-generation publisher of the *Afro-American*, started papers in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Newark, New Jersey. He also bought the struggling *Richmond Planet*. John Sengstacke, Abbott’s nephew and the *Defender’s* publisher-in-waiting, helped establish the *Louisville (Kentucky) Defender* in 1933 and the *Michigan Chronicle* in Detroit three years later. 43

Elsewhere, veteran journalists either launched or overhauled newspapers in cities where they believed stale competitors lacked the business savvy and racial militancy needed to maintain their circulations. In Cleveland, William O. Walker became managing editor in 1932 of the nearly defunct *Call and Post*. He swiftly challenged the city’s reigning black newspapers—including the uncompromising but intemperate Harry Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette*. Within six years, the *Call and Post* sold more papers than all its local rivals combined. In Los Angeles, Leon Washington Jr. founded the *Sentinel* in 1933, claiming the *California Eagle* spoke with a “chirp” when a tiger’s growl was needed. The next year, Cecil E. Newman founded the *Minneapolis Spokesman* and the *St. Paul Recorder*. He soon emerged as Minnesota’s most activist publisher. 44

In the South, flagship papers in Houston and Atlanta anchored two new publishing chains. Lawyer Carter W. Wesley, who had bought into the *Houston Informer* four years earlier, took over Texas’ largest black newspaper in 1931 after its founder quit and started a competing paper. Soon afterward, Wesley merged with his chief rival and began printing localized editions in key cities across the state. In 1932, publisher William A. Scott II transformed his Atlanta weekly into the only sustainable daily newspaper in black publishing. Scott bolstered the *Daily

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World’s profits by incorporating a multi-state newspaper chain, eventually named the Scott Newspaper Syndicate. By 1934, Scott had founded or partnered with more than fifty newspapers. Radiating from Atlanta, the chain of small circulation newspapers ranged as far west as Phoenix and as far north as Des Moines but was centered in the South.  

As newspaper publishers competed for circulation, the collapse of American capitalism and a federal response hobbled by racism compelled many African Americans – including journalists – to listen sympathetically to political radicals, especially communists. Unlike the New Deal, communism promised to remedy economic inequality and racial injustice. Its sense of a worldwide battle against capitalism and the exploitation of workers tapped into black sentiments concerning Pan-Africanism and the global nature of racism. “It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me,” recalled Richard Wright, Harlem editor of the communist Daily Worker, “my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole.”  

Communists had begun to win black converts and sympathizers in the mid-1920s when their racial progressiveness was touted by a small but disproportionately influential cadre of black writers and intellectuals. This black leftist vanguard helped shape the Harlem Renaissance and was well acquainted with the city’s radical editors. Its members – including McKay, Hughes, Walrond, Jean Toomer, and Walter White, among others – edited and wrote for various leftist publications and joined radical writing groups. Their political beliefs encompassed a hodge-podge of progressive ideologies critical of American democracy and capitalism. While frequently

at odds with the official dictates of the Communist Party, these writers taught newspaper and magazine readers to appropriate for their own purposes the racial righteousness of communism specifically and political radicalism generally. 47

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) gradually broadened its appeal among African Americans. The Sixth World Congress of the Comintern brushed aside decades of racial indifference in 1928 when it recognized blacks in the American South as an oppressed people entitled to the right of self-determination. The recognition funneled party finances and expertise into racial protest. Soon, Alabama sharecroppers, Harlem maids, and West Coast lawyers agitated for rights through grassroots organizations with loose ties to the Communist Party. The CPUSA grew more popular in the early 1930s when its lawyers challenged the prejudiced trials of nine black men accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. Communists gained more positive publicity when party member Angelo Herndon was arrested in Atlanta and convicted of fostering insurrection after attempting to organize industrial workers. The communists' brash advocacy contrasted sharply with the cautious activism of the interracial NAACP, which blunted its criticisms to avoid angering wealthy white philanthropists. "The Communists appear to be the only party going our way," said the Afro-American's Carl Murphy. "They are as radical as the NAACP were [sic] twenty years ago." 48

Communist tactics inspired new modes of journalistic agitation. Scholar Bill V. Mullen contends that the Chicago Defender functioned as a cultural front during the Great Depression


and World War II. The formation of cultural fronts allowed people blocked from full participation in the political system to fight for social and political change by applying outside pressure in public arenas where they had access, talent, and influence. Workers picketed. Consumers boycotted. Artists painted. Writers wrote. The Defender's progressiveness ripened after John Sengstacke took control of the paper while his uncle battled chronic illness. (Abbott died in 1940 from kidney disease.) Inspired by various leftist publications, Sengstacke "undertook a revolution in personnel, editorial strategy, and marketing." Mullen argues that the Defender blurred distinctions between journalism and advertising, fiction and poetry to recast each genre with a political purpose that "assaulted commercial and journalistic convention in order to undermine representations of white hegemony." Mullen identifies the Defender "as the most militant voice for black racial reform" and claims the paper "was 'redder' and more profitable than any other newspaper in the country outside of the Communist press." The Defender was hardly alone. 49

The commercial black press as an industry — regardless of individual publishers' halfhearted denials or outright opposition to communism — fit within the coalition of progressive institutions that operated as cultural fronts. The press' mission of racial justice coincided and overlapped with the general aims of socialists, anti-fascists, labor unionists, and, most notably, communists — all of whom advocated economic, political, and social reform to better the lives of minority groups and the working class. Communism's influence was everywhere. In Baltimore, Murphy said in January 1935 that he was "Red," although not as "Red" as he had been in previous years. His managing editor, William N. Jones, championed the Communist Party's presidential ticket in 1932 and visited the Soviet Union three years later. The Associated Negro

Press, the leading subscription news service for black newspapers, counterbalanced the Tuskegee-style conservatism of owner Claude Barnett with the leftist sympathies of editor Frank Marshall Davis. In Los Angeles, Leon Washington started the Sentinel with assistance from his cousin Loren Miller, a lawyer who supported communist policies and attended the local John Reed Club, a leftist writing group. At the Amsterdam News, the radicalized editorial staff included several leftist sympathizers who gained the backing of the communist-influenced American Newspaper Guild and struck in 1935 for better working conditions. Their victory was described as the first-ever successful strike by black workers against a black employer.  

Black newspapers operated as active and passive agents of progressive reform. Editors functioned as active brokers when they shaped news and commentary through the selection of columnists, slanting of editorials, and assigning of stories. For example, the Afro-American provided extensive coverage of the Communist Party in the mid-1930s in its news pages, while the Defender’s columnist roster in the 1940s endorsed progressive views. Both employed fellow travelers. Publishers and journalists also appropriated front techniques of agitation, sponsoring parades and rallies for racial equality—which also happened to attract publicity and boost sales. They similarly promoted “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts. The Chicago Whip’s campaign in 1929-1930 was the first to garner national headlines, but the Los Angeles Sentinel and Minneapolis Spokesman, among others, later imitated it. Newspapers were passive change agents when they responded to the news by covering events and speeches by progressive groups, including the Congress of Industrial Organizations, Federal Writers’ Project, National Negro Congress, Council on African Affairs, Socialist Party, Communist Party, and others.

Black publishers grappled fitfully with an ideology that touted social equality but also advocated the overthrow of institutions they hoped to join—and believed would survive

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50 Farrar, Baltimore Afro-American, 150; and Ottley, 'New World A-Coming,' 281.
political turmoil. The *Crisis* surveyed fourteen editors and publishers in spring 1932 for their views on communism. As a group, they struck an ambivalent tone: They understood why the egalitarianism of communism appealed to African Americans, but they were uncomfortable associating with a political ideology contradictory to American ideals. Most of the publishers believed black support for communism arose more from the United States’ failings than the Communist Party’s promises. “Is it not paradoxical that Negroes must seek protection under some flag other than the Stars and Stripes,” asked E. Washington Rhodes, publisher of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, “the flag for which they have fought to keep flying in the cause of justice and human liberty?” The *Journal and Guide*’s Young, the most conservative of the major publishers, said his policy was “not to view Communism as a thoroughgoing, death-dealing evil but to regard it as just one of the factors in a growing world-wide ideal to improve the conditions of the under-privileged.” Even so, Young criticized communists for failing to appreciate the full scope of black economic dependence upon white capital. Revolutionary rhetoric, he said, made “it difficult for the best of both races to get together and study and correct problems in an orderly way. Besides, because the Negro is marked racially, he becomes a ready target for anti-Communist venom whenever that develops.” 51

While many publishers and editors identified with the radical left, they undercut their own progressivism by refusing to abandon either the two-party political system or capitalist economy. The *Afro-American* never endorsed a communist candidate for president. Similarly, an ex-communist editor at the *Defender* complained of the “obnoxious, unwanted presence” of a particular communist in the newsroom, even as William Patterson, a black communist congressional candidate, criticized Sengstacke for writing that “communists have prayed upon the Negro people.” More broadly, publishers rejected efforts by the American Newspaper Guild

51 “Negro Editors on Communism,” *Crisis*, 117, 118.
to unionize their newsrooms. Owners often denounced union organizers as communists and urged their employees to recognize the need for racial, rather than class, solidarity. After forcing the *Amsterdam News* into bankruptcy, newsroom strikers secured a two-year contract from a new ownership group that rehired full-time workers, raised wages by ten percent, and instituted a five-day, forty-hour work week. However, the new publishers fired twelve of the fifteen strikers, including city editor Ted Poston, within one year of negotiating the labor contract. 52

Two decades of surging radicalism conditioned by a modernist outlook fundamentally altered how race news was reported. During the interwar years, black publishers and journalists gradually fitted a militant racial advocacy to commercial appeal by adopting a reporting philosophy that embraced sensationalism, realism, and direct action. Sensationalism made sense of seemingly random, abstract outrages by humanizing the news, which imbued it with a concrete practicality. As historian Henry Lewis Suggs observes, sensationalism showed “the community was strong enough to withstand the debilitating effects of licentious behavior, racism, and self-hatred.” 53

Realism shattered stereotypes by contradicting white caricatures of blackness through specific example. Realism also strove to denigrate racial uplift’s positivist self-deception by promoting critical scrutiny of black institutions, public figures, and everyday concerns. Richard Wright crafted a Marxist-inspired literary theory that demanded truthful depictions of working-class black life, of the “Negro way of life in America.” This required writers and journalists to grapple with the nationalistic character of black culture, which was often expressed through an international perspective sympathetic to the oppressions of all people of color. For Wright, such

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portrayals served the political purpose of unmasking the revolutionary nature of the struggle for freedom. 54

Direct action required editors to not just complain—Thurman’s “preaching and moaning”—but to assign reporters to investigate and expose wrongdoing. Initially, investigative reporting meant dispatching undercover reporters into the South, where the NAACP’s Walter White passed as white in the 1920s to learn the truth behind lynchings and Ted Poston disguised himself in old overalls and a greasy cap in the early 1930s to cover a retrial of the Scottsboro case. As war approached, direct action meant snooping around military bases to ferret out discrimination. 55

The press’ tradition of special pleading, though, frequently undermined modern race reportage. Realism was a constantly compromised ideal. While racial uplift encouraged writers to inflate black acceptance of white bourgeois values and aspirations, militancy prompted them to exaggerate black accomplishments to more readily dispose of racial stereotypes. Ironically then, the forces of black radicalism that shaped modern race reportage often countermanded it. The Pittsburgh Courier staked its claim to modern race reportage in 1935-1936 when it climbed to the pinnacle of black journalism while covering the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s plight captivated the cultural imagination and political aspirations of African Americans who had long revered the nation for its place in black religious traditions of exodus and its hard-won independence on a continent almost entirely colonized by European powers. Nineteenth-century editors had reflected this attachment through their “universally positive”

coverage of Ethiopia in 1896 when it defeated Italian troops at the Battle of Adowa. That press coverage, though, was limited to editorials, almanac-style factoids, and short dispatches. The second war aroused African Americans – now more familiarized to the tenets of black radicalism and pan-Africanism – far more than the first. As fascist dictator Benito Mussolini amassed an army on Ethiopia’s borders, African Americans volunteered to serve in Ethiopia’s military, marched in protest in cities across the United States, and donated to aid organizations. “Here, at long last,” recalled Roi Ottley, an *Amsterdam News* columnist, “was some sort of tangible idealism – certainly a legitimate issue – around which the black nationalists could rally, and indeed rally a great section of the black population.”  

The *Courier’s* coverage humbled its rivals, even though newspapers nationwide stimulated readers’ interest by saturating their front pages with war news. Propelled by its war coverage and boxer Joe Louis’ bouts, the *Courier* more than doubled its circulation and surpassed the *Defender* as the nation’s largest black newspaper. The *Courier* printed about 150,000 copies each week and put out seven zoned editions. A one-week snapshot of sales showed that slightly more than twelve thousand copies were sold in Pennsylvania, with the others distributed in every state except Idaho and North Dakota. The *Courier* had become a national newspaper.

The editors’ masterstroke was hiring J.A. Rogers to cover the war from Ethiopia and promoting him to readers as a modern foreign correspondent. The *Courier* was the only black newspaper to send a full-time reporter to the warfront. Shamelessly plugging Rogers’ stories as

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57 Percival L. Prattis to Barnett, February 13, 1936, and “Publisher’s Statement Ending December 31, 1935, for the *Pittsburgh Courier,*” box 138, folder 9, *Barnett Papers.*
exclusives, publisher Vann and his editors aggressively capitalized on their correspondent's reputation as a singular authority on the role of race in world affairs: Only Rogers spoke French, the language of Ethiopia's rulers. Only Rogers was personally acquainted with Emperor Haile Selassie and his advisors. Only Rogers had been promised Ethiopia's cooperation. "Mr. J.A. Rogers is the only person, black or white," the Courier claimed, "who meets all of the requirements of the situation." After establishing Rogers' credentials, his editors demolished the legitimacy of other journalists. The Courier dismissed dispatches from other newspapers as suspect because their correspondents were free-lancers, not full-time professional journalists. "The others are amateurs, frauds or worse." Vann was right in at least one instance. The Defender's "Operative 22" — a reputed foreign correspondent supposedly granted anonymity to evade censors — was actually editorial writer Metz T.P. Lochard, who culled information from daily newspapers and wrote his stories from Chicago. 58

The Courier's editors contended that reports from white newspapers were equally dubious due to racism, distance, and censorship. Ethiopia banned white reporters from its front lines, claiming they might be Italian spies or victims of mistaken attacks. White reporters relied mostly on Italian press statements for their stories. Those statements were often impossible to verify, and reports written from them were scrubbed by Italian censors. "Whom should Courier readers believe?" asked Percival L. Prattis, Rogers' editor. "The lone typewriter of Rogers pounds out one story — the ETHIOPIAN SIDE. From hundreds of others comes a united chorus — the ITALIAN SIDE." Noting Rogers' exclusive visit to Ethiopia's front and his interview with Selassie, Prattis positioned Rogers' pro-Ethiopian coverage as an objective correction to the

preponderance of Italian propaganda. "Our readers deserve and must have the truth! — Regardless of Cost!" the Courier declared. 59

Despite the ballyhoo, Rogers' expertise was in the particularity of his racial outlook, not the professionalism of his journalistic work. He was a writer more familiar with his own idiosyncratic historical research than the demands of news reporting. He quickly frustrated his editor. "His cables bring us very little," Prattis complained, "just the shred of an idea. I have to take that and build it up." Like white reporters, the tall, light-skinned Rogers also waited far from the front lines for military couriers to deliver him the latest news. "I am fairer than most Ethiopians," he wrote, "and, for that reason, am apt to be mistaken for a European." When Rogers did visit the front, his dispatches were initially checked by censors just like any other correspondents' reports. He encountered few hassles. "They soon got to learn that I was entirely in sympathy with Ethiopia," Rogers said, "and sometimes my messages were approved without even being read." 60

Rogers' enthusiasm for Ethiopia's cause overwhelmed his accuracy. Eager to strengthen black America's sense of connection to Africa, he ignored and downplayed facts that deviated from his self-chosen narrative of African redemption. Much of what Rogers — and Prattis — wrote resembled the standard fare of black journalism. Rogers praised the fighting skills of Ethiopia's soldiers and frequently alluded to the nation's stunning victory over Italy in 1896. He outlined Italian atrocities and desertions, countered exaggerated claims of Ethiopian death tolls, and speculated on how Ethiopia could win. But Rogers also treated Ethiopian bravado as fact. He expressed no criticism of Ethiopia's wartime leadership. He predicted the eight-month war

59 Prattis, "Rogers Alone Giving Real Facts on War, Belief," Courier, March 14, 1936, 5; and J.A. Rogers, "J.A. Rogers Off to War Zone," Courier, 26 October 1935, 1.
would last for years. And long after others had conceded Ethiopia's defeat as inevitable, Rogers described how climate and terrain, diplomatic maneuvering, and Italy's struggling economy could snatch victory from defeat. Five months before Ethiopia lost, Rogers claimed, "Italy's 'war of conquest' is a colossal flop!" Despite the Courier's efforts to portray Rogers as a modern journalist, he was openly racialist in a way that future World War II correspondents would deem unsophisticated and overly acquiescent.  

In contrast to Rogers' war dispatches, Langston Hughes illustrated the power of modern race reportage in recasting an international event into a compelling – and realistic – depiction of how racism structured the world. In 1937, Murphy asked Hughes to cover the Spanish Civil War for the Afro-American. By then, Hughes was a celebrity with well established leftist credentials. He accepted the assignment, relishing the opportunity to travel abroad at "a good rate of pay" and witness firsthand the showdown between the Republic's Popular Front forces and General Francisco Franco's fascist-backed army. (Hughes bolstered his finances by arranging to also write for the Cleveland Call and Post and Globe magazine.) Spain's war was not the cultural touchstone that the Ethiopian conflict had been, but radicalized African Americans again volunteered for military service, donated financially, and organized support groups. In an editorial explaining why Hughes was covering a European civil war, Murphy wrote that Spain was "a battle ground and a country in which all races are fusing under the heat of conflict ... and colored men from America and other sections of the world, are being hurled into the vortex."

For Murphy, the Spanish Civil War seemed a prelude to a global conflict.  

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62 Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 315, 400; and "Our Stake in Spain," Afro-American, October 30, 1937, 12. Regarding African American support for Spain's Popular Front government, see Robin D.G. Kelley, "'This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do': African Americans and the Spanish Civil War," in Race Rebels, 123-160.
Part travel piece, adventure tale, and proletarian propaganda, Hughes' fourteen stories from war-torn Spain situated the Afro-American's readers within a cosmopolitan world where racism was less overt, opportunity was more plentiful, and black travelers hobnobbed with writers and performers, doctors and ministers, social workers and soldiers. This world's freedom was threatened by Franco, the fascist rebel general attempting to overthrow the republic's elected leftists. Hughes conveyed fascism's perils by describing it in terms familiar to his readers.

"Give Franco a hood," Hughes wrote, "and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a kleagle." Highlighting Mussolini's support of Franco, Hughes noted that "colored people from many different countries have sent men, money, and sympathy to Spain in her fight against the forces that have raped Ethiopia, and that clearly hold no good for any poor and defenseless people anywhere." Interviews with American volunteers fighting for the loyalist cause emphasized the importance of African American involvement in world affairs. Hughes, who was grazed by a bullet on the front lines, said his war experiences reaffirmed his decision to pursue the writing life and also transformed his outlook on human affairs. "My interests had broadened from Harlem and the American Negro to include an interest in all colored peoples of the world -- in fact, in all the people of the world, as I related to them and they to me." English professor Michael Thurston contends editors at other newspapers also "drew together matters both black and red, issues related at once to race in the United States and to socialism internationally." 63

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Readers clamored for modern race reporting and propelled black newspapers to unprecedented levels of success. From the mid-1930s to just after World War II, black newspapers at least doubled the total number of copies sold each week from less than one million to about two million, with some industry observers touting three million as a credible figure. As newspapers passed from hand to hand, weekly readership hovered between 3.5 and 6 million people at a time when the African American population totaled slightly less than 13 million. This spike in circulation transformed a handful of newspapers into a competitive confederation of national publications. Before 1930, only the *Chicago Defender* was truly national. Afterward, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Baltimore Afro-American* arose as powerful rivals, with the *New York Amsterdam News* and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* also selling nationally. The combined weekly circulation of just these five publishing companies — there were 169 black newspapers in thirty-six states in 1948 — neared nine hundred thousand by the late 1940s.

Elsewhere, certain metropolitan newspapers separated themselves from less militant competitors and emerged as dominant regional news sources. Such newspapers included the *Cleveland Call and Post*, *Houston Informer*, *Kansas City Call*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Louisville Defender*, *Michigan Chronicle*, *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*, and *St. Louis Argus*. Syndicates and wire services, most notably the Associated Negro Press, ensured that news from these regional outlets reached a circuitous national readership. Although in the making for a century, it seemed the infrastructure of a national communications network for sharing race news among African Americans had suddenly snapped into place.  

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Industry growth spurred professionalization. As an older generation of publishers retired or died, a new generation of business-minded executives took over increasingly sophisticated publishing operations. These new leaders—college educated and coming-of-age during a period of unparalleled expansion—functioned as chief executive officers rather than partisan propagandists. They increasingly confined overt political views to editorials and ceded many editorial duties to journalists. They focused more intently on business decisions concerning advertising and administration, circulation and distribution. Modern publishers were businessmen who believed they best served the quest for racial justice by informing readers, rather than leading readers. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed, "Instead of being prime movers in arousing excitement and directing attention, they publicized excitement and feeling already aroused."

The net effect was the amelioration of each newspaper's idiosyncrasies, which imbued the leading papers with a more standardized appearance.65

Professionalization bred conflict. Journalists saw themselves as integral partners in the production of race news. The rise of regional and national newspapers opened new opportunities for career diversification, specialization, and promotion. Young journalists were better educated and more cosmopolitan than their predecessors. College graduates were once a rarity in black journalism. By 1935, the Afro-American identified more than half of its editorial employees as college graduates, and the Defender claimed more than a third. Courier columnist

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George Schuyler believed competition was so intense by the mid-1930s that poorly written newspapers could not survive. The best edited newspapers were also the best-selling. "And this prosperity," Schuyler concluded, "is due as much to the skill, versatility, and loyalty of the editorial workers as it is to the publisher's good management and the efforts of the advertising department. It takes all three to make a successful newspaper." 66

When employers failed to acknowledge the value of journalistic labor, editorial employees attempted to organize unions. The Amsterdam News strike in 1935 inaugurated a wave of labor unrest that culminated with six newspapers being unionized by 1947, including four of the five national publishers. Schuyler believed publishers could eliminate labor unrest by treating their employees as valuable assets rather than replaceable parts. Publishers could earn loyalty, efficiency, and cooperation from workers if they offered living wages, civilized working conditions, and job security. The bargain also required a change in attitude. "In place of what is too often an irksome paternalism," Schuyler said, "there must be manhood co-operation." 67

Political radicalism, rising circulation, and intense competition birthed the modern black newspaper - a segregated business venture of sustained profitability that operated mostly independent of white financing. This business model empowered black journalists by allowing them to report and write without white interference. It provided publishers with tangible political power derived from sizable readerships. But this model carried the seeds of its own destruction. Financial security depended upon discerning the ever-changing interests of a mass


readership and maintaining a common understanding of the meaning of racial militancy. It depended upon white ambivalence to race news. It depended upon the continuation of segregation, which journalists sought to dismantle in each issue. Over the decades, industrywide efforts to overcome these inherent dilemmas were undercut by self-interested battles for expanded readership and profitability. During World War II, black publishers and journalists wielded their influence to redefine power relations with the military, federal government, and white press. In turn, the leaders of those institutions attempted to exploit black journalists’ weaknesses to diminish a leading promoter of racial justice.
Chapter Three

From Ethiopia to Berlin: The "New Crowd" Triumphant

In the months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, 29-year-old publisher John Sengstacke moved to protect the Chicago Defender against accusations of wartime disloyalty. He met in private with top federal administrators and attempted to forge a "cooperative relationship" with them. Sengstacke knew these men could cripple the Defender by censoring stories, suspending mailing privileges, withholding paper rations, forcing employees into the draft, and charging him with treason. He intended to forestall such penalties. He repeatedly promised the Defender wanted "to be of every possible cooperation to the government in doing whatever it can to improve and help maintain American morale." ¹

To demonstrate the Defender's loyalty, Sengstacke published a massive "Victory Edition" in September 1942. The ninety-four page paper, which included two magazine supplements, aimed to bolster black support for the war effort, emphasize the need for national unity, and detail black contributions to American society and war mobilization. It was intended for an interracial audience. Leading white liberals and government officials contributed essays and President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Generals Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote commendatory letters. Sengstacke expected the special edition to show "the Negro's problem is 'a part of' rather than 'apart from' the problem facing America as a democracy." He wanted to convince government officials that black protest "merely reflects a humiliating feeling of frustration," not a rebuke of the American way. ²

² Ibid.
The "Victory Edition" exaggerated the potency of interracial goodwill and denied the depth of black opposition to the war effort. It ignored African Americans who evaded the draft or registered as conscientious objectors to protest segregation. It never mentioned how black soldiers and sailors griped about journalists' attempts to undo military segregation and force them into combat for a cause they questioned. A few Defender employees — who "believed in passive support to the war" — refused to work on the edition because of its propagandistic orientation. They were eventually dismissed for inefficiency and insubordination.  

And yet, Sengstacke never repeated W.E.B. Du Bois' mistaken call to "close ranks" and put off racial justice until after the war. Instead, Sengstacke and his editors appropriated the language and symbolism of the Popular Front to characterize the African American struggle as part of a worldwide interracial movement against the forces of fascism. This characterization emphasized the shared concerns of the working class. By broadening the basis of black claims to equality along class lines, Sengstacke deflected accusations that black newspapers inflamed racial tensions.  

The issue's lead editorial, for example, opened without reference to race when it claimed "the masses are more enlightened" and "the common man" was no longer content with half-kept promises. When the editorial turned to the fight for racial equality, it reinforced its universality by asserting that the African American "is now ready to join hands with the rest of suffering humanity as a necessary expedient for winning his freedom." Only then did the editorial make its central point about the black man: "He is willing to fight, he is ready to die for

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3 Charles P. Browning to George J. Bott, March 31, 1943, box 58, folder 2, Abbott-Sengstacke Papers.

a free world, but a free world that will include him long after the roar of cannons and bursting shells shall have subsided.”

Similarly, Popular Front imagery allowed the Defender to appeal to readers’ militancy without acknowledging it in text. A full-page drawing on the edition’s cover was captioned “All for One – One for All.” Readers, though, could decide for themselves what meaning to attach to the glowering, muscular black man poised to defend himself with a bayonet while flanked on his right by white allies and on his left by armed fighters from Asia and the Middle East.

The Defender’s “Victory Edition” illustrated how commercial newspaper publishers attempted to reconcile black protest and white scrutiny during World War II by forsaking explicit textual radicalism for a more coded militancy. Reconciliation required compromise. Publishers and journalists appealed to black readers by continuing to denounce segregation in all its forms, earning rebukes from military commanders and Cabinet members. In turn, publishers and journalists neutralized government investigators and press critics by encouraging African Americans to fight for their country even though the nation had repeatedly rejected racial reforms after previous wars. They evaded discussing opposition to war participation, avoided direct criticism of American capitalism, and diminished open advocacy of communism. If successful, publishers knew this perplexing negotiation could force the federal government, military, and white media to recognize the potency of black journalism and open access to channels of power. Publishers also knew it could bolster circulation – the basis for their exaggerated claims that they spoke for black America.

Dispatches from overseas war correspondents exemplified how publishers and journalists moderated but maintained their militancy. War correspondents effusively praised the work of black troops in achieving victory, despite the hardships and persistence of American

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6 Defender, September 26, 1942, 1.
racism. However, they also scrutinized the global nature of white supremacy when they examined and denounced the Western colonial powers’ subjugation of people of color. Their criticisms challenged the Allies’ claims of promoting democracy and freedom by linking colonialists’ exploitation of conquered populations to fascists’ violent repression of dissidents. When war correspondents criticized Western colonialism, they reinforced and broadened an appreciation for black internationalism, a touchstone of black radicalism. They continued a radical critique of the United States’ racial practices in wartime by examining them from outside the nation’s borders. But when they celebrated the American war effort, correspondents marginalized other aspects of radicalism by positing American democracy as a flawed but adequate venue for remedying racial wrongs.

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In the years before the United States entered World War II, African Americans had little reason to believe the military valued black service and every reason to question the motives of anyone who urged them to enlist. Despite longstanding complaints, the Army and Navy remained staunchly segregated. The Marine Corps and Army Air Corps (which became the independent Air Force in 1947) excluded all African Americans. Black soldiers and sailors were denied promotions and confined to labor battalions and other support positions. One year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, fewer than nine thousand black servicemen were on active duty. African Americans accounted for no more than 2 percent of personnel in any branch of the Armed Forces. Top military officers promised racial reform only to quiet public controversy. They seldom followed through on their pledges. Most officers claimed tampering with segregation would lower troop morale, diminish efficiency, and reduce combat readiness. Fraudulent racist beliefs had hardened into institutional knowledge. Black recruits were
suspected of ignorance, cowardice, and laziness. If undertrained and poorly equipped black enlistees performed poorly, white officers blamed the soldiers' abilities rather than the quality of instruction.  

Black publishers and journalists mounted an uncoordinated but aggressive campaign for extensive reform within the Armed Forces, anticipating how the looming war could bolster African Americans' claims to citizenship rights. In February 1938, publisher Robert Vann of the *Pittsburgh Courier* penned an open letter to President Roosevelt, asking for increased enlistments, expanded service opportunities in all branches, and creation of a division of black combat troops supervised by black officers. "Even Negro combat troops have been made to feel that they are the domestic servants of the army in peace time," Vann complained. "This tends to stifle patriotism." Vann was ignored. Two years later, Vann renewed the *Courier's* campaign and formed a committee—later reorganized and called the Committee on Participation of Negroes in the National Defense Program—to lobby the Senate Appropriations Committee for inclusion of black troops in all branches. (The NAACP opposed the campaign since the creation of an all-black combat unit implied acceptance of segregation.) "The morale of Negro citizens regarding national defense is probably at the lowest ebb in the history of this country," lawyer Charles H. Houston, a committee member, warned senators. "Negroes have absolutely no faith in the leadership of the Army or the Navy."  

Military commanders resisted political pressure and stuck to their traditions, sparking frequent controversy. In October 1940, the *Courier* published a letter signed by nine sailors aboard the USS Philadelphia. The sailors wrote "to discourage any other colored boys who might

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have planned to join the Navy and make the same mistake we did. All they would become is sea-going bell hops, chambermaids and dishwashers." The sailors complained they could only serve as mess attendants — shining shoes, making beds, and cooking meals. They endured ceaseless provocation and mistreatment and were punished when they retaliated. Nine of the ship’s eighteen black sailors were being held in solitary confinement. Rather than forbid racial harassment, Navy officers imprisoned those who signed the letter and discharged them as unfit for service. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox told Walter White, NAACP executive secretary, that the sailors had violated regulations by publically stating their criticisms, which demonstrated "by their own actions that they must be classed as malcontents." 

Such racial hostility convinced Du Bois to tell his readers that they had no stake in the outcome of World War II. Du Bois had resigned as editor of the fading Crisis in July 1934, his thinking on race no longer matching the NAACP’s integrationist outlook. He was becoming a Marxist who favored segregation established according to black demands and believed the idea of Africa was central to African American identity. After quitting the Crisis, Du Bois broadened his readership by writing weekly columns successively for the Courier, New York Amsterdam News, and Defender. Just seven months before the United States joined the war, Du Bois told Amsterdam News readers that, "No outcome of the present war is going to help the American Negro or the Negroes of the world. Their problems after this war will be more difficult than ever." 

Onetime radical editor A. Philip Randolph was similarly frustrated when he announced in January 1941 that he was organizing a mass march on Washington, D.C., to demand the end

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9 "Mess Attendants Write: ‘Don’t the Navy,’" Courier, October 5, 1940, 1; and Frank Knox to Walter White, December 18, 1940, Papers of the NAACP, (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), microfilm, part 9, series B, reel 27, 1017-1018.

of discrimination in the military and industry. With the *Messenger* folded and his journalism
days behind him, Randolph spoke as a powerful union leader, the head of the Brotherhood of
Sleeping Car Porters. He claimed black citizens "must diplomatically and undiplomatically;
ceremoniously and unceremoniously cry out in no uncertain terms our demand for work and
our rightful places in every department of the army, navy, and air corps." The March on
Washington Movement was a national campaign designed to recruit supporters through press
coverage. Randolph held briefings for reporters, issued news releases, and wrote numerous
guest columns. In turn, as readers embraced the movement, they demanded coverage of
Randolph's speeches and other public appearances. Stirred by the threat of one hundred
thousand or more African Americans marching to the White House, Roosevelt promised to
establish the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was to enforce nondiscrimination in
defense employment. Randolph postponed the march but dangled it as a future possibility if the
committee proved ineffectual. 11

Newspaper editors amplified demands for military reform by assigning reporters to
investigate the treatment, living conditions, and work details of black troops. In summer 1941,
for example, the *Baltimore Afro-American* sent Ollie Stewart, a Louisiana minister's son struck
with wanderlust, on a nationwide inspection of twenty Army training camps. Stewart wrote to
familiarize readers with the day-to-day lives of loved ones serving in the military and to expose
discrimination and correct racial wrongs. At Camp Livingston in Louisiana, Stewart reported that
he had "heard no serious complaints," but he also noted that soldiers from the North opposed
the base's strict adherence to the rules of southern segregation. While soldiers preferred to
have black officers, they figured complaining would achieve nothing. Stewart complimented the

Also see Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph, A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace
camp's efforts to educate and entertain soldiers. "I have seen white and colored meet and salute each other," he wrote. "At other times I have seen them pass without a word or a nod."

His coverage was factual and measured. Elsewhere, Stewart wrote about white officers mistreating black soldiers and the Army’s refusal to promote African Americans. He described rundown barracks and inadequate training and recreational buildings and equipment. Calling Alexandria, Louisiana, "a powder keg," he claimed civilian harassment could spark a riot. Such an incident occurred six months later. After investigating reports of racial violence at Fort Bragg, Stewart concluded "the only way a change will come to this part of North Carolina will be for the soldiers first to be sure they are in the right – and then fight for rights." 12

Army officers tended to view any criticism of their racial practices as unduly hostile and harmful to national security. Under constant scrutiny by black journalists, the War Department scheduled a conference with twenty publishers and editors from twelve news organizations to explain how it operated and to improve its relations with them. Coincidently, the conference was held the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Scrambling to answer Japan's attack, General George C. Marshall met briefly with the journalists. He told them the Army was developing black units in every branch. He also announced the possible formation of a black division, as well as three cadet programs at black colleges. He admitted progress was slow, remarking, "And I am not personally satisfied with it either." Marshall spoke the soothing but vague words of the gradualist who claimed to understand demands for change but insisted on waiting for the right time, which most definitely was not during a war. Then Marshall turned the meeting over to subordinate officers and left. Col. Eugene R. Householder was less circumspect in his words. "The Army is not a sociological laboratory," he said. "Experiments, to meet the wishes and

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demands of the champions of every race and creed for the solution of their problems are a danger to efficiency, discipline, and morale and would result in ultimate defeat.” Householder derided “frequently” inaccurate stories. Adding insult to injury, Brig. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Sr. — whose career as the nation’s highest-ranking black officer had benefitted from strong press support — accused publishers of “sowing discontent in the minds of the soldiers.” The meeting accentuated what editors and publishers already knew — military commanders would resist change and respond only to pressure.  

Such high-level complaining failed to silence press criticism. After the Pearl Harbor attack, editorial writers rushed to strike at racial barriers in a moment when calls for patriotism and service were at a premium. They accused segregationists of betraying their country by hampering the war response. The Defender argued that anyone who insisted on maintaining military segregation “underestimates the gravity of the crisis or sympathizes with the enemy — therefore is a traitor to this country.” The Afro-American claimed the United States would remain unprepared for war as long as military recruiting stations were closed to black enlistees. “We cannot march against enemy planes and tanks and challenge warships armed only with a whiskbroom and a wide grin.” The New York Amsterdam Star-News (formerly the Amsterdam News) predicted unquestioned triumph if “superficial distinctions based upon skin color” were cast aside and “we throw our full resources into the battle.” In Pittsburgh, the Courier advised it was “close to treason to hamper total defense by quibbling over the minutiae of racial distinction; to jeopardize national unity by trying to maintain the color bar in the face of stern necessity.” The message was consistent — discrimination, not protest, undermined the war

effort. Even teenage newsboys understood. A few weeks later, a 14-year-old hawked his papers in Harlem by exclaiming, “Buy a paper! Buy a paper! Read all about it. You’re gonna be in uniform soon. You’re gonna have a chance to fight for the democracy you ain’t never had. Buy a paper!”

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Fear of spies, sabotage, and sneak attacks— the seething panic of the unknown enemy within—fanned suspicions that dissenters who questioned America’s war aims were, at best, unpatriotic and, at worst, seditious and treasonous. The war years witnessed a concerted effort by the federal government to silence, intimidate, and harass its sharpest critics and presumed adversaries. For the nation’s commander-in-chief, political and military expediency typically trumped free speech and civil rights concerns. As Attorney General Francis Biddle observed, Roosevelt believed, “Rights came after victory, not before.” Political orientation provided no protection. Prosecutors imprisoned fascist William Dudley Pelley, a conspiratorial isolationist nicknamed the “American Hitler.” They also pressured the Catholic Church to silence the radio broadcasts of Father Charles Coughlin, an anti-Semitic isolationist who recited Nazi propaganda. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the House Un-American Activities Committee (chaired by Democrat Martin Dies of Texas) intensified surveillance of the Communist Party and its suspected allies after the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact in 1939 with Germany. In the months after Pearl Harbor, Japanese immigrants were relocated as a military precaution.

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from their West Coast homes to desolate concentration camps across the Great Plains. None were ever accused of espionage or sedition.  

Within this climate of political repression, white Americans viewed anti-racism campaigns as a potentially traitorous manipulation of racial tensions at a moment of national vulnerability. War mobilization caused social and economic upheaval. More than sixteen million men and women served in the military, with nearly one family in five seeing one or more of their own in uniform. With so many white men in their prime fighting abroad, women and minorities were hired for jobs they would have been denied in peacetime. About 1.5 million African Americans migrated from the South in the 1940s to cities in the North and West. Violence followed as transplanted black families exacerbated housing shortages, moved into white neighborhoods, demanded better schools and public transportation, and took jobs once reserved for white workers. Riots erupted in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. Rumors heightened unease. In some places, whites falsely accused blacks of buying ice picks and switchblades to attack them during blackouts. In the South, white woman whispered about “Eleanor Clubs,” a supposedly clandestine organization of black domestics who vowed to end segregation by refusing to perform manual labor for white employers.

The start of combat operations intensified animosity between military commanders and black journalists. Four months after Pearl Harbor, a black civilian aide to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson warned the NAACP’s White that the War Department was “increasingly hostile” toward black newspapers and civil rights groups. Even sympathetic officers like Brig. Gen. F.H. Osborn, a liberal northerner, conflated black complaints about the military’s institutionalized

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racism with support for Nazi Germany. Osborn accused black newspapers — the *Courier* in particular — of manipulating stories “with adjectives and innuendo, so as to make them inflammatory.” Osborn cautioned that “very serious consequences would inevitably develop” if the *Courier* continued to print untrue articles. Percival L. Prattis, the *Courier’s* executive editor, admitted black newspapers tended toward “indiscriminate wording and slanting of stories.” But he was confident such articles came closer to the truth than the military’s rationalization of segregation.  

Army field officers and military intelligence agents frequently recommended censoring black newspapers and haphazardly but steadfastly barred them from bases, particularly in the South. Sergeant Robert Pitts, a black enlistee who was among the first soldiers trained at Tuskegee Air Field, prepared papers against soldiers considered hostile to the war effort. “In those days anybody reading the *Pittsburgh Courier* was considered suspect,” Pitts recalled. “We started a processing dossier on such individuals, and they were transferred elsewhere.” Acting corporal Earl Kennedy, stationed in Stockton, California, saw soldiers berated by sergeants if a black newspaper was found in their footlockers. “The question was asked, ‘What are you doing with that inflammatory material in your locker?’” Soldiers complained to the NAACP and various publishers when papers were seized. “Forcibly preventing the sale of newspapers,” wrote *Defender* columnist S.I. Hayakawa, “is about the most direct abridgement of the freedom of the press that can be imagined, short of shooting the editors or dynamiting the printing plant.”

Just as they had done during World War I, various federal agencies attempted to intimidate publishers and journalists to soften their criticism of American racism. Government

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investigators and bureaucrats were conditioned to treat black newspapers as radical instigators because of their attacks on segregation, ambivalence toward communism, and sympathy for colored populations worldwide, including Japan. Many officials viewed black journalists as untrained amateurs. Lawrence W. Cramer, executive secretary of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), reportedly claimed black newspapers did not intend to print seditious stories, but did so because of "the ignorance of editors and a sort of hysterical competition." 19

The government's investigations were wide-ranging. During a Cabinet meeting in May 1942, Roosevelt asked Attorney General Biddle and Postmaster General Frank Walker to meet with black editors "to see what could be done about preventing their subversive language." The U.S. Post Office investigated whether it should suspend postal privileges for certain newspapers, including the Courier, Defender, Chicago Bee, and Amsterdam-Star News. The government agencies primarily responsible for managing war news and propaganda – the Office of Censorship, Office of War Information (OWI), and the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), OWI's predecessor – closely monitored the tone of war coverage in leading newspapers. Censors breezily condemned articles about racial protest as inflammatory and removed them from papers mailed overseas. They also struck references to such incidents from copy submitted by foreign correspondents writing in the United States. "The enemy not only does not understand it," said Byron Price, director of the Office of Censorship, "but finds it prime ammunition for promotion of his 'divide and conquer' propaganda." In one instance, a Defender agent in Cuba returned all copies of an issue from April 1942, saying they were unfit to sell. "The entire paper was cut until only the border remained," Sengstacke complained. "Not a page was readable." In June 1942, officials from the Navy, FEPC, and Justice Department indicated their support for...

19 Milton Starr to Barry Bingham, 30 June 1942, Records of the Office of War Information (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), microfilm, part 1, reel 8, 480.
OWI’s policy of giving “unofficial warnings to Negro editors.” Milton Starr, a frequently criticized OWI advisor, claimed the policy “had the desired effect of toning down the Negro press.”

Agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) visited journalists and subscribed to newspapers, fully intending to impress upon editors the government’s vigilance. In 1942 and 1943, the FBI conducted an extensive nationwide investigation of racial conditions. The resulting secret report spent considerable effort analyzing black newspapers and magazines. It summarized articles that questioned national priorities and identified journalists with alleged affiliations with communists and labor unions. The report’s conclusions were vague and familiar but sounded ominous when couched in the language of law enforcement. According to the report, “Sources of information have volunteered the opinion that all the Negro press is a strong provocator [sic] of discontent among Negroes.” Enoch Waters, a Philadelphia native who joined the Defender in 1934, believed the FBI held up his credentials as an overseas war correspondent for nearly a year to intimidate the newspaper. The delay was supposedly tied to a political donation that Waters had made in 1940 to a black communist running for vice president. “It was a warning to the paper,” Waters recalled, “that actions hinting of disloyalty during this crucial period could create serious problems for the publisher and for the Negro press generally.”

Journalists complained publicly about FBI intimidation. Rotund, cigar-chewing columnist Cliff Mackay met twice with agents in spring 1942 at the Atlanta Daily World. During the first visit, an agent asked whether the Communist Party or a news service suspected of circulating Japanese propaganda had attempted to influence the paper’s news coverage. Mackay said they had not. The second visit came after Mackay angered FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover by

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highlighting the agency's poor record of hiring black employees. Knowing the FBI wanted to silence him, Mackay wrote a column that rebutted the agency for investigating journalists instead of segregationists. "It is they, not Negroes, who now are sabotaging the war effort," he said. "They are blocking the war effort by seeking to create division and disunity at a time when closed ranks should be the order of the day." 22

White journalists expounded upon the complaints leveled by military and civilian authorities, leading black journalists to characterize press criticisms as an extension of government surveillance and harassment. In April 1942, conservative columnist Westbrook Pegler described the Courier and Defender as combining the worst excesses of Hearst-style sensationalism with the skewed, inflammatory perspective of the Communist Party's Daily Worker and Father Coughlin's right-wing Social Justice. Pegler knocked the newspapers for printing anonymously-sourced gossip columns, undistinguished writing, and scam advertisements. Essentially, he accused them of shoddy journalism. Two months later, Pegler charged black editors with the same shortcomings they typically lobbed at daily newspapers. He claimed white editors handled racial news "with the greatest delicacy," while black editors always sided with their race, "often with injustice to the white man and the truth and to the damage of interracial understanding." Pegler was a formidable opponent. He reached ten million readers through his syndicated column and had won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing racketeering in Hollywood labor unions. 23

The most damning criticism printed in a major white publication came from a black writer – Warren H. Brown, a race relations advisor for the Council for Democracy, a liberal

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organization formed to support defense mobilization. Brown’s article appeared in the Saturday Review of Literature and Reader’s Digest, the nation’s most read magazine. Brown positioned himself as a thoughtful black man who, along with a majority of African Americans, rejected “sensation-mongering Negro leaders.” Brown argued publishers and journalists slowed racial progress and emphasized misfortune to incite unrest rather than promote justice. “For giving a dishonest, discreditable picture of American Negro life,” Brown wrote, “they are worse than the worst white newspaper. The average Negro newspaper portrays Negro life in burlesque.”

There was more. Liberal southerner Virginius Dabney, editor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, castigated black newspapers and the NAACP for attempting “to force immediate revolutionary revision in customs and practices which have grown up over decades and centuries of usage.” Dabney initially complained in his newspaper but repeated his charges in the prestigious Atlantic Monthly. He characterized activists as war profiteers and accused journalists of “stirring up interracial hate.” He claimed “the radical element of the Negro press” so indulged in vilifying white America that riots would break out if whites read those newspapers.

White journalists’ attacks marked an effort to maintain a definition of professionalism that excluded black editors and reporters. White editors accused black journalists of lacking objectivity, an industry doctrine rivaled only by truthfulness as the prime characteristic of the consummate reporter. A belief in objectivity held that professional journalists could and would separate known facts from personal opinion to present readers with an impartial view (often

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assumed to be the correct view) on a particular subject. Objectivity gradually gained dominance in journalism after the sensationalistic excesses of turn-of-the-century yellow journalism and the intensive propaganda campaigns of World War I. The ideal of objectivity imbued journalism with a sense of professionalism and rationalism. It promised to give unbiased and verified information to readers. Less noticeably, though, objectivity tended to reinforce the status quo. It achieved impartiality by promoting conventional wisdom and prevailing research. Faith in objectivity encouraged white journalists to judge race news on its structure – the one-sidedness of race-angled stories, excessive sensationalism, and a proclivity to exaggerate black achievements and white discrimination – rather than the merits of its underlying belief that African Americans deserved full equality. Within this framework, white journalists could dismiss black reporters as activists unable to impartially judge racial abuse because of their skin color. 26

Black journalists countered these criticisms by challenging white reporters’ faith in objectivity. They questioned whether a racist society could distinguish facts from values. The Defender’s Waters identified objectivity’s central flaw when he observed that Chicago’s daily newspapers never moved in advance of public opinion on racial justice. Waters believed white publishers routinely sacrificed objectivity to maintain circulation. “Faced with an uncomfortable dilemma,” he said, “most newspapers chose to express no view contrary to that held by the majority of their advertisers and readers, thus surrendering their editorial independence.” 27 Pratts of the Courier dismissed objectivity as an “academic curio.” He claimed objectivity functioned as “a guilty conscience complex, heeded more often as a space saver than as a


27 Waters, American Diary, 87, 221.
builder of character in the newspaper.” Prattis harkened back to the journalistic standards of the early 1900s when he claimed all good newspapers took sides and put their resources and intellect behind particular investigations. Forceful newspapers demanded aggressive journalists. Prattis described the black reporter as “a fighting partisan” who battled for full citizenship and equal opportunity on behalf of readers who demanded such journalism. “They don’t like him tame,” Prattis said. “They want him to have an arsenal well-stocked with atomic adjectives and nouns. They expect him to invent similes and metaphors that lay open the foe’s weaknesses and to employ cutting irony, sarcasm, and ridicule to confound and embarrass our opponents.”

Partisanship and cause, though, did not excuse lying or fabrication. In 1945, P.B. Young Jr., who succeeded his father as editor of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, wrote a “Credo for the Negro Press.” It was a widely endorsed declaration of the press’ aims. The pledge asserted journalists’ commitment to “crusade for all things that are right and just” and to “expose and condemn all things that are unjust.” The crusader, though, never abandoned “the cardinals of journalism, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity.”

Publishers’ responded to white intimidation and criticism from a significantly stronger position than they had during World War I. Leading publishers had organized an industry group, the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), in March 1940 to press their common interests. Although the NNPA never realized its full potential, it allowed publishers to appeal to federal officials with the full force of their readership behind them, a tactic guaranteed to gain entry (if not results) in Roosevelt’s political world. Publishers also established competitive national news bureaus in Washington, D.C. The NNPA and Associated Negro Press (ANP) sent syndicated stories to subscribers. The *Defender* and *Courier* staffed their own bureaus. The *Afro-American* covered national politics from the same offices it gathered local news for its

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Washington edition. The mere physical presence of black reporters attested to their expanded influence. The Roosevelt administration acknowledged black journalism’s political clout in 1943 when it pressured the all-white White House Correspondents Association to accredit the NNPA’s Harry S. McAlpin for presidential press conferences.  

Publishers approached the federal government with a mixture of aggression and conciliation. Defender publisher Sengstacke, for example, heard rumors in mid-June 1942 that the government might attempt to shut down one or more newspapers. He arranged a meeting with Attorney General Biddle, whom historian Patrick S. Washburn credits with ensuring no sedition charges were brought against black journalists. As the men talked, Biddle pointed to some newspapers on a conference table and promised to halt their publication if their tone was not moderated. Sengstacke recalled his reply decades later: “You have the power to close us down, so if you want to close us, go ahead and attempt it.” Sengstacke tempered his bravado with a compromise. He told Biddle that journalists would write more balanced articles if administration officials responded to interview requests. Biddle offered to call officials and make some appointments.  

Sengstacke also attempted to cooperate with Archibald MacLeish, director of the Office of Facts and Figures, the government’s propaganda agency. While soliciting federal support for his “Victory Edition,” Sengstacke offered to have a black publishers’ group serve as an advisory committee to MacLeish’s agency. “The crisis of the hour,” he wrote, “makes it imperative that the relationship between Negro editors and your office be maintained on a high level of cordiality and understanding.” MacLeish accepted the aid. But MacLeish’s agency then merged

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with OWI. Resentment mounted when Sengstacke’s offer encountered delays and indifference from the new department. His committee was finally approved seventeen months later. 32

A cadre of black advisors brokered disputes between bureaucrats and journalists. Many advisors had personal relationships with journalists and their supervisors, including former *Amsterdam News* reporter Ted Poston, former ANP columnist William Pickens, and former *Messenger* editor Chandler Owen. Advisors attempted to maintain an imperiled integrity as they advocated for their race among federal bureaucrats and championed discriminatory policy among black journalists. If they leaned too much toward advocacy, their tenuous connection to policymaking was further marginalized. If they shilled too strongly for segregationist plans, they were painted as traitors to their race. Owen and Pickens were criticized for underselling discrimination. Other advisors quit to protest policies they could not alter. Former federal judge William Hastie resigned as a civilian aide to the Secretary of War in 1943 when realized he could not change the military from the inside. Cincinnati lawyer Theodore Berry resigned from OFF because of its reluctance “to frontally attack white racial prejudice through propaganda instead of seeking to mesmerize Negroes with innocuous material.” 33

Another advisor worked surreptitiously for racial change. Alfred E. Smith, advisor to the Federal Works Progress Administration, griped to reporters that he could not even write a letter without permission from his supervisors. “His hands are tied and his office is purely one of window dressing,” ANP reporter Alvin White observed. And yet, Smith also wrote a popular, anonymously sourced gossip column in the *Defender* under the pseudonym Charley Cherokee. The column traded on scoops Smith picked up as a government insider. 34

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32 Sengstacke and Archibald MacLeish, June 8, 1942, and June 12, 1942, *Office of War Information*, part 1, reel 1, 910-911.
33 Theodore Berry to Walter White, September 17, 1942, Records of the Office of War Information, part 1, reel 8, 538-559.
34 White to Barnett, undated 1941, box 140, folder 6, *Barnett Papers*. 
Despite the FBI’s objections, the New York Post’s Ted Poston was the most prominent black journalist serving the government. He worked for the War Production Board and War Manpower Commission before moving in October 1942 to OWI to head the newly formed Negro News Desk. Poston’s office became a hub of activity, a place where advisers and journalists traded gossip and shared tips, with the loud and garrulous Poston serving as ringmaster. The desk summarized race news from twenty-five black newspapers, prepared press releases for black journalists, and sent information about racial issues to other federal agencies.  

Poston both hounded and assisted reporters. He called his friend Ellen Tarry, an Amsterdam News reporter, after fielding complaints about articles that accused white naval officers of discriminating against black sailors. Poston told Tarry she was harming the war effort and asked her to tone down her stories. She refused. “You can’t muzzle me!” she said. “You wanna bet?” Poston replied. He called her managing editor. The editor persuaded Tarry to make changes. She never felt betrayed, saying Poston “was just doing his job.”  

Another time, Poston wielded the threat of negative news coverage to prod the Navy into reforming its discriminatory policies. Poston claimed in October 1943 that he had been “reliably informed” that editors from several newspapers were planning to campaign for a congressional investigation of the Navy’s mistreatment of black sailors. Poston criticized the Navy’s public relations efforts for showing only the training of black units, not their participation in combat. Such inattention, he argued, reinforced the belief that black seamen were confined to shore-based labor duties. Also, Poston noted that officers had promised several times to enlist black women and make certain commissions available to black recruits. But no action had followed. Poston urged the Navy to immediately announce the fulfillment of its promises and to

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36 Ibid., 102.
publicize the achievements of black seamen. "I know this is going to be tough," he wrote, "but it will be worse if we let the Negro press take the initiative away from us." Poston's limited influence was short-lived. His news desk was eliminated after one year. 37

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Publishers' ceaseless negotiations to maintain their right to publish protest journalism led them to amplify their claims of national allegiance and blunt their writers' most radical criticisms. Wartime reportage was unabashedly patriotic, despite widespread cynicism toward mobilization. The Courier's famed "Double V" campaign illustrated how editors conflated protest with patriotism to fend off state sanction. Editors explained that "Double V" stood for "victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad." The expression was coined by James G. Thompson, a 26-year-old cafeteria worker at an aircraft manufacturing plant in Wichita, Kansas, who unburdened his uncertainty about looming military service in a letter the Courier published in January 1942. "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?" Thompson asked. "Is the kind of America I know worth defending?" Despite personal confliction, Thompson concluded he was "willing to die for the America I know will someday become a reality." 38

The Courier's publicity-minded editors sniffed a new crusade, but they were unsure whether readers would rally to support the war. They launched the campaign without fanfare, as they noted, "to test the response and the popularity of such a slogan." Readers sent thousands of telegrams and letters expressing their support. As the campaign evolved, the

37 Poston to George Lyon, October 23, 1943, Records of the Office of War Information, part 1, reel 8, 179-182.
Courier substituted Thompson’s conflicted patriotism for a spirit of triumphalism. One month into the campaign, reporter Frank E. Bolden knocked critics who accused African Americans of using the war to press for personal freedoms. “We are not trying to take advantage of Uncle Sam while his back is turned,” Bolden wrote. “WE ARE FIGHTING TO GET INTO THIS WAR EFFORT.” The campaign’s propaganda value was attested to by the many white politicians who praised it, even as southern segregationists and military officers accused the Courier of inflaming unrest. 39

Implicit in readers’ support — but largely excised from the Courier’s news coverage — was an understanding that many African Americans were reluctant warriors. While victory abroad represented a concrete military aim, victory at home was an ambiguous bundle of long-standing demands unlikely to be addressed in wartime. “The morale of our colored people is alarmingly low and from my point of view, justifiably so,” a New York reader wrote. Another reader from Nebraska said, “A few months ago I was ready to fight and die for the U.S.A., but my morale has dropped on reading the way they are treating our boys down South.” 40

Readers imbued the “Double V” campaign with greater militancy than the Courier’s editors associated it with in print, explaining the popularity of a slogan that encouraged discriminatory war participation. Scholar Kimberley Phillips argues that newspaper readers countered the government’s official depiction of war participation, which avoided showing black troops training for combat or black nurses tending to wounded white soldiers, by submitting personal photographs and snapshots of loved ones performing military duties. The “Double V” campaign (broadly defined) was visual as much as it was textual. The pairing of V’s became a way to symbolize one’s commitment to racial justice. Readers pinned “Double V” buttons to

39 Frank E. Bolden, “‘We Want Full Participating Rights in War to Save Democracy,’” Courier, March 7, 1942, 12.
40 “Victory at Home, Victory Abroad Sweeps the Nation,” Courier, March 21, 1942, 12; and “Nationwide Support Grows for ‘Double V’,” Courier, March 14, 1942, 12.
shirts and blouses. They hung “Double V” posters on car windows and store doors. They eyed “Double V” girls, flashed “Double V” hand signs, attended “Double V” dances, and even fashioned a “Double V” hairdo. The Courier deployed this symbolism to satisfy two audiences—black readers and white censors. African Americans, though, used the slogan to express themselves, not appease white America. Readers challenged the Courier’s editors when they believed the paper failed to fulfill their militant ideals. A Cleveland woman chastised the editors in April 1943 after reading an editorial opposing Randolph’s March on Washington Movement. “You can’t preach ‘Double V,’” she wrote, “and expect ‘Status Quo.’”  

As mobilization shifted from training to combat, the military and press reached an uneasy accommodation. Officials made modest changes by mid-1942 to quiet press criticism and ensure a more efficient use of manpower. The Army Air Corps admitted blacks, and the Navy and Marine Corps opened general-service positions to blacks. The Selective Service Act was rewritten to include nondiscrimination clauses. The Afro-American’s Ollie Stewart revisited training camps and discovered that some bases had made minor improvements, such as accepting applications for officer appointments and enhancing recreational opportunities. The Army’s public relations officers formed a special section to serve black journalists. In black newspapers, articles emphasizing the work and achievements of black soldiers began to appear beside stories decrying military segregation. Editors ran more news from Army press releases as the war expanded. In late 1943, a new order prohibited field officers from banning publications on military installations. Soon a process was set up for soldiers to buy black newspapers at post exchanges. Military officials believed they had effectively manipulated and pressured journalists

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into publishing favorable news. Editors and reporters took credit for convincing the military to improve its treatment of black troops.\footnote{Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, 51; Gibson to White, November 9, 1943, *NAACP Papers*, part 9, series A, reel 13, 817; and “Race Newspapers Okeh on Army List,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 22, 1944.}

The most significant change for journalists was the issuing of credentials for overseas assignments. During World War I, publishers could neither afford to send reporters overseas nor obtain military accreditation for them. Instead, race-angled news came from soldiers’ letters, freelance writers living in Europe, or dignitaries recently returned from abroad. Such reportage was marred by a constricted view of the overall war setting and an inability to interview officers or witness combat. The *Defender* sent Roscoe Conkling Simmons to France, but he never left Paris. Simmons occasionally interviewed soldiers on leave before his publisher recalled him in disappointment. The Committee on Public Information (CPI) accredited Ralph W. Tyler, a veteran journalist working as a Navy auditor, to report from France. Tyler’s expenses were paid by a publishers’ group, but he reported to CPI. Military intelligence officers urged “special care be exercised in censoring this subject’s communications.” Dispatches touting black bravery reached publishers, but stories critiquing American segregation stayed in censors’ offices.\footnote{Brig. Gen. M. Churchill to Assistant Chief of Staff, October 22, 1918, *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, 1917-1925: The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), microfilm, reel 19, 493; Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1955), 152; and John Maxwell Hamilton, *Journalism’s Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 335.}

During World War II, four of the five largest black newspapers – the *Amsterdam News* was the exception – sent accredited reporters into war zones. Correspondents filed copy from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The *Courier* and *Afro-American* offered the most extensive coverage. The *Courier* had eight accredited correspondents. They included anti-colonialist George Padmore who lived in London and also wrote for ANP; Roi Ottley, who also spent six months overseas for *PM*, a liberal New York daily; Ollie Harrington, a popular cartoonist who
reported from southern Europe; and Edgar Rouzeau, the first black reporter to receive credentials. The *Afro-American* sent seven reporters overseas, including Stewart, who emerged as one of the war’s most recognized journalists; Bettye Phillips, the publisher’s fast-talking daughter; and sports reporter Art Carter. The *Defender’s* four correspondents included veteran journalist Waters and company lawyer Ed Toles, who had almost no reporting experience. The *Journal and Guide’s* three reporters included the publisher’s son T.W. Young and John Q. Jordan, who had worked in Norfolk since 1933. The two major news services, ANP and NNPA, agreed to pool reports by their six correspondents. The War Department requested pooling, seeing it as a way to boost troop morale by better ensuring correspondents were available to publicize black soldiers’ uncelebrated labor. 44

Correspondents suffered the same slights and abuses as the troops they covered. Rouzeau felt the sting of segregation before his transport ship reached North Africa. He initially shared a stateroom with several other correspondents, all of whom were white. After polling the white reporters, Rouzeau rebuffed an officer’s suggestion that he bunk with a black chaplain and a few other black officers. “I bristled,” Rouzeau recalled. Then the commanding officer issued a direct order. Rouzeau, who could be court-martialed for failing to follow orders, moved in with a group of black doctors. To avoid being accused of discrimination, the officer also shuffled the living quarters of some white lieutenants. Stewart encountered a similar situation in Oran, a North African city on the Mediterranean Sea. During an air raid, a colonel yelled, “No

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44 John D. Stevens, *From the Back of the Foxhole: Black Correspondents in World War II* (Lexington, KY: Association for Education in Journalism, 1973); and “Newspaper Publishers to ‘Pool’ Reporters, *Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1943, 19. Stevens is the best source for information about black war correspondents, but also see Hamilton, *Journalism’s Roving Eye*, 331-349, for a general overview. Hamilton and Jinx C. Broussard examined the coverage of the Norfolk *Journal and Guide’s* three war correspondents in “Covering a Two-Front War: African American Foreign Correspondents during World War II,” *American Journalism* 22 (Summer 2005): 33-54. In this article, they stress the “urgency in conducting research on the foreign correspondence of outside-the-mainstream voices” (49).
black sonofabitch is going to sleep under the same roof with me.” The officer moved Stewart to a hotel three blocks from where white correspondents slept. 45

Despite such incidents, black reporters enjoyed unusual privileges and latitude as officers backed by powerful newspapers. Waters believed most officers, even those from the South, bent over backward to help black reporters. “I think they figured we had a lot more influence than we really did,” he said. “They knew we went down to headquarters a lot.” The Journal and Guide’s Jordan suspected most officers – as well as white reporters – simply ignored black journalists. Jordan took advantage of their indifference and belief in stereotypes. Even though no black journalist was an accredited photographer, Jordan carried a camera wherever he went. “We weren’t supposed to take pictures,” he said, “but, being ignorant black reporters, we took our cameras with us. I caught the devil many times, but you see, nobody cared much at first.” 46

The authority granted to military censors in combat zones forced correspondents to measure their words and tone. Several black correspondents claimed censors cut their copy only a little more than they excised white reporters’ copy. Even so, the topic of race remained ticklish so close to the frontlines. Baltimore publisher Carl Murphy claimed censors “cut to ribbons” dispatches describing a riot between white and black troops in England. Occasionally news got out despite censors’ objections. One censor refused to approve a story the Defender’s Deton “Jack” Brooks wrote about a swimming pool in India reserved on alternate days for blacks and whites. Brooks blustered and threatened to contact his newspaper and demand an investigation. The censor relented. The story was published. The pool was integrated. 47

46 Stevens, Back of the Foxhole, 13, 15.
47 Carl Murphy, “The Week,” Afro-American, November 20, 1943, 1; and Stevens, Back of the Foxhole, 15.
Field commanders assisted censors by pressuring reporters to soften criticisms before stories were filed. Jordan covered the Italian bombing runs by Tuskegee-trained pilots in the 99th Fighter Squadron, which was commanded by Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the son of the nation’s highest-ranking black officer. “He was so obsessed with doing well that he told me what to print and what not to print,” Jordan recalled. “I wasn’t supposed to even hint at anything unfavorable. He didn’t want me to mention a single casualty. So we had clash after clash.” Jordan told Davis he would help make the troops look as good as possible, but he could not pretend they were perfect. 48

White newspaper readers would have been familiar with the typical dispatch written by black journalists. Several correspondents referred to their stories as “Ernie Pyle stuff,” meaning they wrote – like the famed Scripps Howard reporter – about the tension and boredom, joy and sorrow experienced by common soldiers, not about overall strategy or political maneuvering. Since the Army seldom deployed black troops in combat, correspondents usually wrote about the unglamorous work of building roads and airstrips, driving supply trucks, outfitting combat troops, and cooking meals. Reporters often placed themselves in the midst of the action in their stories and concluded their dispatches with a long list of names, letting family and friends stateside know loved ones still lived. “I tried to answer the questions I thought were in the minds of people back home,” said Waters, who covered troops in the Pacific. 49

Press critics complained that Ernie Pyle and his imitators sacrificed analysis for superficiality. They accused journalists of conveying an overly optimistic view of the war by relying too often on the guy-in-the-trenches and the first-person, eyewitness-to-history forms of narrative. But editors and publishers liked stories that seemed patriotic merely by being written.

49 Stevens, Back of the Foxhole, 11; and Waters, American Diary, 385.
They also argued that censors scrubbed hard-nosed news that dwelled upon American setbacks, faulty military strategy, or realistic depictions of war’s horrors. Black publishers had an additional justification – the war’s day-to-day news was already known by the time their weeklies went to press. The “Ernie Pyle stuff” best suited their purposes. 50

Most soldiers welcomed visits by correspondents. They took pride in their work and appreciated the recognition offered by news coverage. They also used reporters to relay messages home and correct racial grievances. For example, African Americans represented 60 percent of the fifteen thousand American soldiers who carved the Ledo Road through the jungles of Burma to supply Chinese allies. Despite their work, no black drivers were included in the first convey to cross the road. Soldiers complained to the Courier’s Frank Bolden. Bolden flew to headquarters and relayed their concerns. Soon afterward, eleven black soldiers joined the convoy. 51

Black reporters also encountered genuine disgust when they joined up with soldiers. In New Guinea, a soldier stunned Waters when he waved a copy of the Defender and disparaged an editorial urging the Army to put black troops in combat. Others also complained. “It was the first time in my life,” Waters recalled, “I found myself the center of a group protesting the policies of the paper for which I worked.” Jordan encountered similar sentiments when he covered the 99th Fighter Squadron in Italy. His mental image of those storied airmen did not mesh with reality. “The guys didn’t look at all like the heroic flyers that we had grown used to from the reports in the black papers,” he recalled. “They were just a’ belly-aching. One guy was carrying on like hell, complaining about flying three missions a day and getting shot at every

50 Hamilton, Journalism’s Roving Eye, 312-317.
51 Stevens, Back of the Foxhole, 54-55.
time." Reporters characterized such complaints as good-natured razzing. To do otherwise jeopardized the patriotic appeal of "Double V"-style reporting. 52

As they praised black muscle and bravery, war correspondents expanded African Americans’ conception of racial justice by describing how the proponents of white supremacy attempted to structure the lives of people of color in Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa. Fascists were not the only enemy to fight overseas. Journalists observed firsthand how the Allied Powers undermined their pleas for sacrifice and service in the name of freedom by denying basic human liberties and rights to colonized populations. The war’s demands accentuated Western hypocrisy, revealing the privileged nature of Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms and the hollowness of Winston Churchill’s call for British colonies to share the war’s burdens. Writing from foreign shores, black journalists buttressed long-standing arguments that African Americans should play a leading role in mobilizing forces opposed to racism and colonialism—wherever they were located. “A wind is rising,” Walter White concluded after an overseas tour, “a wind of determination by the have-nots of the world to share the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the earth have tried to keep exclusively for themselves. That wind blows all over the world.” 53

The war complicated Vincent Tubbs’ binary understanding of race before he even left the United States. The Afro-American assigned Tubbs, a Morehouse College graduate who had recently joined the paper, to the Pacific Theater. Arriving in California to sail out of San Francisco, the Texas-born Tubbs investigated the confinement of Japanese residents to

52 Waters, American Diary, 389; and Terry, Missing Pages, 80. Troop resentment against the press campaign to put them in combat began while units were still training in the United States. Some soldiers complained middle-class leaders and publishers wanted to rush them into combat before they were adequately trained. See Robert F. Jefferson, Fighting for Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 149-150.

concentration camps. The flagrant trampling of civil rights stunned him. Tubbs realized "the race problem is not the colored man's concern alone." He depicted the decision to intern Japanese families as a self-interested collusion of nativism and racism coupled with war hysteria and economic insecurity. He bolstered his analysis by observing that similar restrictions did not apply to German and Italian citizens. "Thus the evacuation was conducted on a strictly racial basis," Tubbs concluded, "and therefore must be the concern of all minority groups." 54

The Courier's Edgar Rouzeau arrived in North Africa in fall 1942 already convinced the war's most important hidden lesson was "colored people must think globally in terms of freedom and democracy for colored people everywhere." Describing Hitler as "a symbol of his time," Rouzeau believed the aims of the "Double V" campaign, even if fulfilled, would remain "subject to constant threats as long as colored people were exploited in other parts of the world." Born in the British-ruled West Indies, Rouzeau moved to New York City at the height of the New Negro Movement. He lived with other West Indians who condemned capitalists for exploiting colonies and their people. Rouzeau was in his late thirties when he went overseas between June 1942 and November 1943. He reported on the war from Liberia, Egypt, and Italy. Other excursions took him into neighboring countries and colonies, including India, eastern and western Africa, and the Middle East. His reportage emulated aspects of J.A. Rogers' dispatches from Ethiopia and Langston Hughes' coverage of the Spanish Civil War. Like them, Rouzeau was as much a foreign correspondent and travel writer as a war reporter. He wrote a series, for example, examining the history, economy, geography, and politics of Liberia. 55

54 Vincent Tubbs, "How Japs Were Chased Out of Their West Coast Homes," Afro-American, April 24, 1943, 7; and "How Japs Were Forced Out of Their West Coast Homes," Afro-American, May 1, 1943, 5.
Rouzeau analyzed the international implications of soldiers of color fighting in combat. He condemned the U.S. Army’s policy of relegating black soldiers to support duties. Rouzeau believed African Americans would be denied their claim to full citizenship after the war if they did not spill blood for freedom. He warned that British imperialists intended to ban black soldiers from action in Africa and Asia because they feared their subjects would emulate the troops and either revolt at home or incite unrest in other colonies. “Either way,” Rouzeau wrote, “Great Britain is afraid of the consequences and has probably passed on a measure of this fear to white American statesmen.”

From Cairo, Rouzeau emphasized the contributions of people of color to the war effort by detailing “the complete composite picture of the United Nations at war.” Egypt served as a staging ground for campaigns in Africa and the Mediterranean region. Troops from around the world jostled in the city’s overcrowded streets. White troops from England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Australia, and South Africa mingled with “big and bearded copper-colored huskies from India, the so-called Cape Colored trooper from South Africa, who resents being called a Negro; the Maoris from New Zealand, East African fighters, West African fighters and, last but not least, the American Brown Buddies.” Here, in an Arab nation, soldiers of color prepared to fight and die for the Allied cause. In other dispatches, Rouzeau extolled the fearlessness of Nigerian soldiers, the ferociousness of Indian Sikhs, and the bravery of South African stretcher-bearers, who hurried away wounded white soldiers amid incessant gunfire. Such articles served as roundabout proof of African Americans’ fighting abilities and commitment to cause. These dispatches also forged a sense of shared identity among the Courier’s readers with colonial peoples in Africa and Asia.

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Jack Brooks ostensibly went overseas for the *Defender* to write about the construction of the Ledo Road in Burma and the supplying of combat troops in the region, but he suffused his reporting with anti-colonialism and anti-racism. Brooks arrived in India in October 1944 and reported from the China-Burma-India Theater for the next year. Brooks was a Chicago native who had studied mathematics and international relations at the University of Chicago. He helped shape the *Defender’s* Popular Front-style editorial policy before asking to cover the war in Southeast Asia. “I wanted to know what was happening in that section of the world,” he said. “I chose the Far East because I saw there, although the war wasn’t as big, the social implications of what was happening as far more significant.”

Brooks repeatedly emphasized the connections between Indians’ fight for freedom and African Americans’ fight for equality. He wrote in November 1944 about suspicions among Indian nationals that Churchill had convinced Roosevelt to endorse a continuation of the British Empire after the war to advance American imperialistic ambitions in Asia. Brooks interviewed opposition leader Mahatma Gandhi, opening his front-page article by referring to Gandhi’s “keen sympathy and understanding of the American Negro’s problems.” Brooks’ reporting helped familiarize the *Defender’s* readers to Gandhi’s nonviolent protest tactics. Brooks also interviewed Jawaharlal Nehru, who said he included some African Americans among his “valued friends.” “Their problems are obviously very different than ours,” Nehru told Brooks, “but inevitably, in the large context of human freedom and equality, there is much in common.”

No correspondent denounced colonialism more stridently than George Padmore, a West Indian communist turned Pan-Africanist who lived in London. While other reporters offered readers a tourist’s perspective of the world, Padmore never wavered from his role as a

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58 Stevens, *Back of the Foxhole*, 55.
critic of capitalism. Born Malcolm Nurse around 1903 to middle-class parents, Padmore moved to the United States in 1924 after condemning British exploitation. He later enrolled in law school at Howard University, joined the Communist Party, and took his radical pseudonym. A prolific writer, stirring speaker, and tireless organizer, Padmore was called to the Soviet Union and charged with coordinating the party’s involvement in racial issues. He openly and covertly recruited and organized black members across Europe and Africa. He renounced his party membership in 1934 after the party leaders softened their opposition to colonialism to gain favor with the West. Party officials labeled him a black nationalist, a dismissive epithet reserved for someone unable to rise above racial difference to achieve worker solidarity. Padmore became a regular contributor to Crisis in 1935 and the European correspondent for the Defender in 1938. He also wrote for ANP, his syndicated columns appearing regularly in leading newspapers. Padmore adjusted to writing for commercial newspaper publishers instead of fellow radicals, but a friend said he “used to laugh much about their lamentable outlook.”

Padmore’s wartime writings extolled his belief in an international freedom movement and made his Pan-Africanist ideology accessible to regular newspaper readers. Billed as a “reporter, writer analyst and interpreter all heaped into one,” Padmore filed most of his dispatches from London, where his home served as a meeting-place for empire’s opponents. He consistently claimed the war undermined British colonialism and readied Africans – as well as other people of color – for postwar independence. Even as he denounced British racism, Padmore observed that Great Britain offered more freedom to blacks than the American South. He credited British officers with improving the morale of African American troops by attempting to “break with Dixie Jim Crow traditions which certain cracker elements are trying to

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disseminate." Whenever possible, Padmore emphasized the global connections among people of color. After African American troops landed in Tripoli, Padmore wrote, "American descendants of Africans have returned to their ancestral homes whence three centuries again they were taken away as bondmen and with their tears, toil and sweat helped lay the foundation of the now mighty United States." This was black internationalism translated from theory to actuality. For here was a West Indian writing from London describing events in Africa that involved black soldiers born in the United States. 61

While Padmore showed how the war eroded colonialism, Roi Ottley used the war to illustrate how American racism and segregation were distinctive to the United States, crippling racists' contention that inherent black inferiority justified discrimination. The son of a real estate agent, Ottley was born in 1906 and grew up in a comfortable but modest home in Harlem. He joined the Amsterdam News in 1930 and worked there as a reporter, editor, and columnist until he was fired in 1937 with other former strikers. He then supervised historical research on African Americans for the Federal Writers’ Project. Ottley established himself as a rising star with ‘New World A-Coming’: Inside Black America (1943), a minor literary sensation. Mixing history and current events, politics and personalities, Ottley portrayed Harlem “as a sort of test tube in which the germs of Negro thought and action are isolated, examined, and held up to the full glare to reflect Black America.” 62

Ottley worked as a war correspondent for white and black newspapers. He went overseas in July 1944 on a six-month special assignment for Marshall Field’s liberal tabloids, PM and the Chicago Sun. He left again in February 1945, writing exclusive stories for the Courier through 1946. He traveled more than sixty thousand miles and visited twenty-two countries in

62 Ottley, ‘New World A-Coming’: Inside Black America (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1943), v
Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Despite his segregated readerships, Ottley’s style and perspective remained relatively uniform across publishing outlets. Editors’ presentation of Ottley varied more than his writing. The *Courier* touted his celebrity and recognition by white writers. *PM* emphasized his blackness, making sure his photo appeared with his stories far more regularly than other correspondents’ headshots ran with their dispatches.

Ottley's interracial appeal stemmed from his carefully hedged analysis of race, which spoke a truth both black and white readers could tolerate. Ottley summarized what he learned overseas in *No Green Pastures* (1951), which he described as an “intimately detailed account of racialism abroad.” In his book, Ottley described race as a social construction. He judged the severity of racism in different nations, explained the historical forces that shaped that racism, and examined how oppressed people responded. He condemned American racism by contrasting it against the relative freedom African Americans experienced in other parts of the world. Travel abroad, he said, allowed an African American to feel like “a whole being” for the first time in his life. “Briefly: in the absence of America’s elaborate racial etiquette, he enjoys a self-respect, dignity and personal worth unknown to Negroes in the U.S.” 63

But Ottley worried globetrotting writers and journalists — such as Richard Wright, Ollie Stewart, and J.A. Rogers — overestimated the racial progressiveness of Europeans, which caused them to mistakenly diminish the benefits of American citizenship. Europeans viewed black tourists as “glamorous novelties” and “dollar-carrying Americans.” Despite knowing and liking African Americans, the citizens of imperialist nations rarely pondered the morality of exploiting colonial populations. “The simple and inescapable conclusion is this,” Ottley wrote, “if a country has a Negro population, automatically that country is more or less prejudiced toward a dark skin. This is the logic of colony ownership.” With this assertion, Ottley pivoted to praise the

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United States for offering African Americans more social and economic opportunities than European nations shared with their colonial subjects. That explained why so many dark-skinned foreigners sought admittance to the United States, he said, but comparatively few African Americans desired to leave their homeland. "America still is the fabulous land of rags to riches, even for Negroes – at least in the eyes of Negroes abroad." 64

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Black newspapers reached the pinnacle of their national influence immediately after the war. The U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that overall newspaper circulation jumped from under 1.3 million in 1940 to more than 1.8 million in 1945 – an increase of about 30 percent. By 1948, independent audits showed that the Courier sold about 280,000 copies per week, followed by the Afro-American (235,000), Defender (195,000), Amsterdam News (105,000), and Journal and Guide (62,850). Opinion polls indicated that roughly nine out of ten readers believed their political views were accurately portrayed in newsprint. Readers' allegiance translated into profit and power. Publishers met privately with presidents and Cabinet-level officials and received appointments to federal committees. The Washington Post established the Wendell L. Willkie Awards in 1946 to promote interracial understanding and honor black journalists' best work. Sports writers won acclaim for crusading to integrate Major League Baseball, which occurred in 1947 when the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson. Columnists and editors aired their views over national radio broadcasts. War correspondents were treated as celebrities, drawing capacity crowds on publicity tours. When the Korean War broke out in June

64 Ibid., 5, 7, 12.
1950, the Army swiftly issued press credentials to black reporters who were granted unprecedented access to the frontlines. 65

Black journalism's widening acceptability was reflected in its expansion into radio broadcasting. The Courier's Floyd J. Calvin had produced the first black-oriented news program in New York City in 1927. Most news programs, though, ignored racial matters. The national networks – National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) – strictly enforced segregation. They hired black entertainers but not journalists, commentators, or producers. No network affiliate was black-owned. Modest improvements occurred during the war. The Department of Education aired Freedom's People on NBC. A critical but brief success, the program touted the contributions of past and present African Americans. In New York, Ottley broadcasted an assertive radio series with the same name as his first book, New World A'Comming. The program aired from 1944 to 1957 on independent WMCA. It emphasized African Americans' hopes for the future and tackled topics like military segregation and southern poll taxes. In Chicago, Richard Durham's Destination Freedom aired on NBC affiliate WMAQ from 1948 to 1950. Durham, a former Defender reporter, wrote half-hour scripts that dramatized key moments in the lives of historical figures. He feuded constantly with white executives. Such marginal toeholds did not impress Defender columnist Langston Hughes. "I DO NOT LIKE

RADIO,” he wrote, “and I feel that it is almost as far from being a free medium of expression for Negro writers as Hitler’s airlanes are for the Jews.” 66

More remarkable growth occurred in magazine publishing, with a trade publication claiming in 1946 that black magazines “had finally entered the mass circulation field as we know it today.” In Washington, D.C., James and Helen Mason launched Pulse in February 1943 “to present some desirable aspects of the Negro in contemporary life that are either unknown or overlooked by other racial groups.” Out of Birmingham, Alabama, the ten-cent NEWSPIC was touted as “The Complete News-Picture Magazine,” but it tended to focus on the South. From New York, Spotlighter Magazine mostly ran photos and stories about black celebrities. Also in New York, Sengstacke published Headlines and Pictures, a 52-page monthly news magazine cross-promoted in his Defender newspapers. The New York-based Our World appeared in April 1946, with publisher John P. Davis billing it as “A Picture Magazine for the Whole Family.” Davis was a Harvard-trained journalist and lawyer, former Crisis editor, and a founder of the leftist National Negro Congress. By decade’s end, Our World sold more than 165,000 copies monthly. 67

No magazine publisher, though, rivaled the success of John “Johnny” H. Johnson, founder of Negro Digest and Ebony. Born poor in Arkansas in 1918, Johnson migrated to Chicago with his widowed mother in 1933. During an academic awards banquet, the confident, self-promoting Johnson introduced himself to Harry H. Pace, president of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, one of the nation’s largest black-owned businesses. Pace offered him a job. Johnson launched Negro Digest in 1942 after borrowing Supreme Liberty’s customer list and

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soliciting prepaid $2 subscriptions for a magazine that did not yet exist. *Negro Digest* summarized and excerpted the top race stories from leading publications. In less than a year, Johnson sold fifty thousand copies a month. Circulation doubled after First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote an essay in October 1943 for the magazine’s “If I Were a Negro” feature. Newsstand dealers told Johnson only *Life*, Henry Luce’s weekly news picture magazine, rivaled *Negro Digest*’s popularity in black neighborhoods. So in November 1945, Johnson launched the *Life*-inspired *Ebony*, which became his flagship publication. Monthly circulation reached 250,000 within a half year and rose to 315,000 by 1950.  

Unlike black newspapers, *Ebony* was slick and shiny, and determinedly cheerful and upbeat. “*Ebony* will try to mirror the happier side of Negro life – the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood,” the editors wrote in the first issue. “But when we talk about race as the No. 1 problem of America, we’ll talk turkey.” Ben Burns, a white ex-Communist who served as *Ebony*’s executive editor from 1945 to 1954, described the magazine’s editorial policy as “escaping the negative ‘radical’ stigma of the Negro press” by constantly emphasizing successes that could be categorized as the “first, only, biggest.” Johnson and Burns appealed to a rising middle class by showcasing black celebrity as a balm for everyday worries and promoting capitalism as a venue for righting racial wrongs. *Ebony* emphasized the wealth and fame acquired despite racism, rather than the poverty and violence that resulted from discrimination.  

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68 John H. Johnson, with Lerone Bennett Jr., *Succeeding Against the Odds* (New York: Warner Books, 1989). Johnson’s carefully scripted autobiography telescopes his life story into a single-minded, Horatio Alger-style narrative. Black magazine publishers, like black newspaper owners, frequently emulated the layout and design of successful white magazines, hoping tried-and-true methods would bolster slim chances of success. It should be noted that white upstarts also copied and then tweaked their established rivals. Nevertheless, contemporary critics, journalists, and scholars frequently noted black emulation to describe a periodical or newspaper never seen by white readers and oftentimes dismissed race publications as derivative. This seems especially true in the case of the very profitable *Ebony*, the implication being that John H. Johnson could not have succeeded without Henry Luce.

69 Ibid., 160; Miles, “Negro Magazines Come of Age,” 18; and Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 94.
Critics – particularly envious newspaper publishers – dismissed *Ebony* as entertainment and accused Johnson of failing to use his substantial platform to aggressively attack racism. One journalist, who eventually wrote for a comparable rival, dismissed the magazine as “odoriferous.” A prominent columnist later declined Johnson’s repeated requests for articles, saying “I did not consider them sufficiently ‘high class.’” In particular, *Ebony* drew fire for a November 1947 editorial that urged African Americans to appreciate what the United States offered them while they fought for equality. “Much remains to be done to give the Negro his just due in the American way of life. But it cannot be done by bitterness, cynicism, and singing the blues.” Critics characterized the editorial as proof of *Ebony*’s capitulation to the status quo. “*Ebony* reads like a white man’s idea of what Negroes want in a publication,” *Our World’s* Davis said.  

Black journalism’s impressive circulation tempted white advertising executives who had long refused to partner with black publishers. As wartime rationing gave way to postwar consumption, trade publications implored white businessmen to abandon racist assumptions and reexamine the buying power of the “Negro market.” “Business can learn to its profit that Uncle Remus is dead,” *Kiplinger Magazine* observed in 1947. Marketing research emphasized black America’s population growth, northward migration, urbanization, and increased buying power. Research characterized black consumers as more accessible, possibly lucrative, and largely overlooked. New tax laws also encouraged race-oriented advertising. Congress helped pay for the war by taxing excess profits. Rather than give that money to the government, some companies bought ads in black publications.  

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Publishers attempted to capitalize on Madison Avenue’s interest. Newspaper publishers formed companies that solicited national advertisers by touting the combined reach of cooperating publications. Associated Publishers was led by the Defender and Afro-American, and Interstate United Newspapers represented the Courier and Amsterdam News, among others. Johnson credited much of Ebony’s success to his relentless pursuit of advertising. Unlucky with uninterested advertising agencies, Johnson bypassed them and met directly with company executives. By late 1948, Ebony boasted an issue with forty-eight pages of advertising. Johnson held accounts with Pepsi-Cola, Colgate, Seagram, Zenith Radio, MGM, and many others. In contrast, writer Alvin White of Our World complained that Davis neglected his advertising staff. National advertisers eventually regarded Our World as a less effective duplication of Ebony. They pulled their advertising, and Davis filed for bankruptcy in 1955.  

Like advertisers, white journalists also reconsidered how they approached race news. Dawning racial awareness inspired modest change but seldom translated into significant reform. Editors devoted more space to racial issues but the tone of most coverage stayed the same. Harvard University’s Nieman Fellows for 1945-46 criticized editors and journalists for trading in stereotypes and inflaming racial prejudices with sensationalistic headlines and misleading stories and page designs. “North and South,” the fellows wrote, “most newspapers are consistently cruel to the colored man, patronizing him, keeping him in his place, thoughtlessly crucifying him in a thousand big and little ways.” White southern journalists solicited African-American subscribers while reinforcing segregation. They printed “black star editions,” zoned sections with news about local black citizens delivered only to black neighborhoods.  


72 Johnson, Succeeding Against the Odds, 178-191; and Alvin White to Barnett, November 1950, box 141, folder 4, and White to Barnett, undated, box 141, folder 5, Barnett Papers.  

By the late 1940s, a dozen or so black reporters covered general news for metropolitan daily newspapers. They were hired to assuage guilty liberal consciences, generate positive publicity, or remedy charges of hypocrisy regarding fair employment practices. The Communist Party’s *Daily Worker* was the only daily to employ more than one full-time black reporter. It had two. Ted Poston returned to the *New York Post* after the war. Elsewhere in New York, Earl Brown worked at *Life*, and Edgar Rouzeau joined the *New York Herald-Tribune*. In Chicago, the Hearst-owned *Herald-American* paid legman James Burr to run down crime news on the city’s predominantly black South Side. Sports reporter Wendell Smith worked at the *Herald-American* three days a week and then commuted to Pittsburgh to edit the *Courier’s* sports section. Other reporters worked at less prestigious papers. George Moore covered courts for the *Cleveland Press*. He was hired after the Urban League campaigned to gain jobs for black employees at white newspapers. The *Toledo Blade* hired William Brower, who had worked for the *Afro-American*, to deflect criticism of its hiring practices. 74

The *New York Times* hired its first black reporter in 1945, viewing the appointment as an experiment that would distance the paper from past publisher Adolph Ochs’ reputation for racial intolerance. “As a teacher of race hatred the New York Times was long unsurpassed,” claimed Oswald Garrison Villard, a former NAACP president and owner of *The Nation*. The NAACP regarded the *Times* as “anti-Negro” into the early 1950s. Turner Catledge, the paper’s assistant managing editor, asked ANP’s Claude Barnett to recommend candidates. He cautioned Barnett that “we should find good general reporters rather than racial advocates.” Barnett needed no reminders about the stakes involved. “I am eager,” he said, “not only that you get a man who is top notch professionally but who also can create the sort of personal appreciation which will make it easier for others to follow him.” Barnett provided a list of names. Instead, the

Times hired George Streator, a forty-something Nashville native with a master’s degree from Western Reserve University and post-graduate work at the University of Chicago and Columbia University. 75

Streator seemed an odd choice given the Times’ emphasis on journalism over agitation. Streator organized a student strike in 1924 at Fisk University, demanding the school’s paternalistic white leaders involve students and alumni in their decision-making. He allied himself with Du Bois in the early 1930s while working as the business manager and managing editor of the Crisis. Then he worked as an organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and conducted research for other unions. Streator at least sympathized with the Communist Party during this time but claimed to have abandoned leftist circles by the early 1940s. When the war came, Streator joined the federal government as a labor race relations specialist, working at various times for the Office of Production Management, War Manpower Commission, and War Production Board. In late 1944, black leaders in Seattle demanded his removal, saying he had opposed efforts to integrate wartime housing and had “expressed his lack of confidence in the sympathy and friendliness of any white person or persons.” The NAACP and National Urban League supported his ouster. 76

Streator understood he was a token hire for the Times. He wrote mostly about race news, covering NAACP conventions and controversies, highlighting government efforts to improve housing and employment conditions, and keeping abreast of liberals’ bids for interracial cooperation. Streator attempted to cover stories he believed would interest a mostly white readership. He angered Earl Conrad, a white columnist with the Defender, when he dismissed an


interracial couple’s plans to open an integrated church as “only worth two lines in the *Times*.” Conrad had arranged a press conference for the couple, and he accused Streator of attempting to demean them with his flip attitude and embarrassing questions. He asked Streator to weigh the story’s merits in furthering cooperation between the races. Streator claimed none of that mattered to the *Times*. “I don’t think like a Negro,” he reportedly replied. “I think like a white man.”

Regardless, Streator’s editors were dissatisfied. Catledge later said Streator “found it almost impossible to be objective when covering stories involving race.” Streator once made up quotes and attributed them to A. Philip Randolph “because he was sure he knew what Randolph meant to say, whether or not he said it.” Conferences with editors were held, and corrections were written. The final mistake came in July 1949 when an article scrutinizing Texas’ commitment to building a quality black university contained “certain regrettable errors and omissions.” Streator got the tone right but left out facts. More construction had occurred than he reported, indicating the state was perhaps following through on its promises more than the article implied. Later, though, the law school dean who complained to Streator’s editors resigned his post, criticizing the state for failing to do what was necessary to ensure quality education at the university. Suspecting he was on his way out, Streator warned Arthur Gelb, a future managing editor, that the *Times* would not accurately cover African Americans until it hired and trained more black journalists. Streator was fired in 1949.

Although Streator’s stint ended sourly, the *Times*’ hiring of a black reporter illustrated how black journalism’s expanded influence had forced the federal government, military, and

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white press to reach an uneasy détente with black publishers and journalists. When World War II began, officials with those institutions regarded black journalists as malicious and disloyal.

After the war, they reluctantly accepted them as legitimate political actors. Backed by several million readers, black publishers and journalists were welcomed but watched, alternately mollified and intimidated. Toleration, though, came only after publishers and journalists tempered their most radical views — the very views that propelled black journalism’s greatest triumphs. As anticommunism reordered the American political system in the late 1940s and early 1950s, black journalists faced new demands to renounce the politics of anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and black separatism. Refusal meant losing limited access to the political establishment. Capitulation, though, threatened to undermine their effectiveness as disseminators of black opinion. Complicating matters, white reporters began to encroach upon black journalists’ monopoly over race news as expanding civil rights protests gradually seized the nation’s attention.
Chapter Four

“Persons of Questionable Leanings”: The “New Crowd” Driven Out

Several months after returning from the Korean War’s frontlines, James “Jimmy” Hicks of the *Baltimore Afro-American* testified before a New York administrative board to the loyalty of colleague Conrad Clark, a federal employee who also wrote for the Associated Negro Press (ANP). The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board was investigating whether it should fire Clark for belonging to a supposedly subversive organization and marching in a parade to protest racism. Hicks wanted to help a friend and see firsthand how the mania of anticommunism threatened free speech and racial justice. He vouched for Clark even though associating with a suspected radical could spur inquiries into his own activities. “I had the smug satisfaction of knowing that I was not, had never been a Communist,” Hicks wrote, “and of feeling that I would match my loyalty to America against any American in the country today.”

Hicks’ political orientation was forged from experiences with want, racism, and wartime combat. An Ohio native born in 1915, Hicks was too young to participate in the Depression-era’s leftist agitation. With his father unemployed, Hicks dropped out of Akron University to help support his family by working as a bellhop and then as a clerk in Washington, D.C. He later took night courses at Howard University and wrote for the *Cleveland Call and Post*. He enlisted in the Army in 1940. Hicks served three years in the Pacific Theater, becoming a lieutenant who commanded a supply unit. He survived a submarine attack, air raids, gunfire, and three bouts of malaria. He buried friends and wrote letters to their next of kin. Returning stateside, he was promoted to captain and assigned to a Pentagon publicity desk. After he was discharged, Hicks covered veterans’ issues for the *Afro-American* and NNPA news service. He argued the federal

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government should reward black veterans' sacrifices by dismantling segregation. When
discrimination persisted, Hicks pointedly rejected civil disobedience as a credible form of
protest. “The colored soldier has been cited for everything from rape to bravery,” he wrote,
“but here are two charges he has stayed away from – cowardice and treason.” Hicks had spilled
too much of his “blood and sweat and tears” to have his citizenship – or his patriotism –
questioned.²

Hicks’ refusal to embrace aspects of progressive ideologies illustrated how
anticommunism narrowed the fight for racial justice from a global crusade for human dignity in
the late 1940s to a domestic drive for civil rights by the early 1950s. Other young journalists
shared Hicks’ outlook, having reached adulthood amid pleas for shared wartime sacrifice and a
creeping distrust of leftist politics. Hicks viewed himself as a legitimate dissenter because he
claimed his rights as a loyal American citizen. In contrast, anticomunists depicted radical
journalists as subversive propagandists who threatened national security by advocating aspects
of communism, socialism, and black radicalism to question the legitimacy of the American state.

As the anticomunism movement gained momentum, publishers purged their newspapers of
radical affiliations to safeguard their newfound prosperity and political influence. Harassed
radicals returned to writing from the margins, their criticisms appearing in small interracial
journals and floundering alternative black publications. Readers responded to publishers’
forfeiture of militancy by buying far fewer newspapers.

More than anti-radicalism buffeted black journalism in the 1950s. The U.S. Supreme
Court outlawed segregated public schools in a 1954 ruling that touched off the modern Civil
Rights Movement, a fifteen-year period of escalating black protest against unrepentant
southern white supremacy. Newspaper publishers soon found themselves competing for control

² Hicks, “Veterans Whirl,” Afro-American, April 17, 1948, M14; and “I Am an American Too,”
Afro-American, May 26, 1951, 4.
of black-oriented news with white journalists and broadcasters and writers from Ebony and Jet, the nation's leading black magazines. Despite declining profitability, publishers sent reporters into the South to cover trials and demonstrations. Compared to white reporters, black journalists expressed greater skepticism of official explanations for racial wrongs and more aggressively investigated black claims of injustice. While white editors treated African Americans as news subjects, black reporters wrote about them as citizens pushing for social change. Scorned as outsiders and agitators, black reporters were threatened, harassed, and beaten by white supremacists. As the protest movement unfolded, black journalists tapped into Cold War fears and urged federal officials to strike down segregation to counter Soviet propaganda and win foreign allies in Asia and Africa. Newspapers that had endorsed the racial views of communism as a balm to American racism a decade earlier now blamed Western hypocrisy for transforming communism into an ideology that appealed to people of color elsewhere in the world.  

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Before World War II even ended, American officials began backpedaling from the pro-democracy and anti-imperialism rhetoric spouted to mobilize citizens and allies against the fascist powers. The fault lines of the dawning Cold War had already materialized, and officials

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sacrificed the United States' political ideals to curry favor with Western colonial powers and maintain strategic footholds, economic and militaristic, in what was labeled the Third World. Confronted by the nuclear menace of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, American leaders refused to revert to the isolationism of the inter-war years. With the Iron Curtain figuratively dividing Europe into East and West, the under-industrialized nations of Asia and Africa emerged as proxy battlegrounds. Americans' sense of the Cold War as a global ideological confrontation solidified after Mao Zedong's communist forces seized control of China in 1949, and U.S. troops were nearly pushed off the Korean peninsula the following year by the North Korean army.

The containment of communism became the nation's No. 1 priority, remaking domestic politics and foreign diplomacy. At home, legislators and administrators battled the Cold War by equating dissidence with disloyalty and recasting once tolerable leftist politics as sinister, fifth-column plotting. White southerners wielded anticommunism sentiment in defense of segregation. Moderate Cold War liberals used Red-baiting rhetoric to defuse expansive demands for equality in favor of a narrow definition of civil rights based on existing laws. In Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, the United States protected its interests through decidedly undemocratic methods—backroom brokering, propaganda, covert operations, and financial assistance laced with pro-American assumptions. Colonized peoples were deemed a threat to the United States' security when they demanded self-determination and condemned imperial rule. Historian Kenneth A. Osgood observes that American leaders feared limitations on access to raw materials, strategic locations, and new markets would benefit the Soviet Union in the

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4 For informative essays analyzing American policy toward the Third World during the Cold War, see Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

American journalists fired the anticommunism movement and were burned by it. Reporters were manipulated and demonized by the likes of Mississippi Senator James Eastland, a segregationist who chaired the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee; J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who established his reputation as a lawman by deporting suspected leftists after World War I; and Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose name came to define the era’s violation of civil liberties. The anticommunists’ greatest leverage over those accused of harboring communist sympathies was fear of public exposure and the personal damage that would result – lost income, social and professional blacklisting, and public ridicule. Journalists often collaborated in outing suspected communists, no matter how flimsy the proof, particularly at the Scripps-Howard and Hearst newspaper chains. Hoover fed leaks to friendly reporters and columnists. McCarthy catered to the insatiable news appetite of wire service reporters by being ever ready to level vague but threatening charges, knowing little effort would be made to follow up his pronouncements.

Reporters and editors were also targeted by anticommunists. Journalism professor Edward Alwood estimates more than one hundred journalists were subpoenaed between 1952 and 1957 by the federal government’s primary investigative committees – those headed by

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5 Kenneth A. Osgood, “Words and Deeds: Race, Colonialism, and Eisenhower’s Propaganda War in the Third World,” in *Eisenhower Administration, the Third World*, 3-4.

Eastland and McCarthy as well as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Like government employees, union members, and college professors, individual reporters and editors alternately battled false accusations, dissembled to save careers, defiantly refused to name names, and caved to government pressure. James A. Wechsler, editor of the liberal *New York Post* and a short-time member of the Young Communist League in the mid-1930s, characterized the government's anticommunism hearings as an effort to silence government critics, not root out spies and traitors. "I regard this proceeding," Wechsler told McCarthy, "as the first in a long line of attempts to intimidate editors who do not equate McCarthyism with patriotism." 7

Throughout the 1950s, any criticism of the American state, any call for liberal reform, had the potential to be regarded as Soviet-inspired propaganda. Labor unions and civil rights organizations endured particularly intense scrutiny. As early as 1946, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. claimed in *Life* that the Communist Party was trying to win black converts by exploiting a Tennessee race riot and "by sinking tentacles into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." Soon afterward, Walter White and Roy Wilkins purged the NAACP's membership rolls, distanced themselves from known leftists, and deemphasized demands for freedom in Asia and Africa. Similarly, black journalists—dissident by the very nature of their work—were again eyed with distrust. 8

Publishers and journalists were vulnerable to anticommunism attacks because they had endorsed the Communist Party's anti-racism policies and appropriated Popular Front techniques to fight for equality. Few publishers had openly endorsed communism, but few had stridently

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denounced it. Publishers had abided party members and fellow travelers as long as communism advanced their goal of achieving racial justice and, incongruously, bolstered profits. Claude Barnett, of ANP, explained his pragmatic approach to Frank Marshall Davis, an editor with leftist sympathies: "I recall telling him we were interested in news about Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Capitalists, Communists so long as it was news and that we would use news about anarchists, which was the worst word I knew, if it had a news relation to Negroes." Barnett's news judgment, though, changed in early 1947. He steered Davis away from asking black educators, activists, and journalists for their views on what Davis characterized as "the rising wave of anti-Communist hysteria and attempts by many leaders in political and industrial circles to indiscriminately condemn militant Negroes and Negro organizations as 'communistic.'" Barnett wanted to avoid provoking anticommunists. He warned Davis, "there is an apparent attempt to draw a line on Communism. If this happens we ought not be involved except as specific cases need to be reported upon." 9

At the Chicago Defender, publisher John Sengstacke aggressively erased signs of his newspaper's wartime advocacy of Popular Front agitation. He dismissed longtime editorial editor Metz T.P. Lochard, a communist sympathizer who helped conceive the paper's progressive outlook. Sengstacke also dumped W.E.B. Du Bois as a columnist a few months after Du Bois embraced the controversial Progressive Party, which had sprung up to support former Vice President Henry A. Wallace's run for president in 1948. Wallace campaigned on a platform of ending segregation, supporting unions, and providing universal health care. His party refused to expel communist supporters. Anti-colonialist and former communist George Padmore wrote his last column for the Defender in June 1949. Padmore's byline essentially disappeared from

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leading black newspapers, despite his strong denunciations of communism. Padmore accused communists of exploiting want and misery in Africa to recruit expendable black revolutionaries to fight imperialist nations. His criticisms did not offset the political liability of his past party membership. 10

While Sengstacke overhauled his newspaper, Thomas W. Young defended black journalism and his race by distinguishing the fight for civil rights from the broader aims of black radicalism. Young had succeeded his father as president and general manager of the Norfolk Journal and Guide, the most conservative of the national newspapers. In 1949, he testified before HUAC, touting the loyalty of African Americans against widely publicized remarks made by entertainer Paul Robeson, a leading black radical. Robeson had provoked controversy by reportedly saying black men and women would not fight against the more racially tolerant Soviet Union. (Robeson said he was misquoted.) Young denounced Robeson and praised blacks for their patriotism, citing examples that reached back to Crispus Attucks’ death before the American Revolution. African Americans demanded racial reform, Young said, but they knew change could be accomplished through “the machinery which we in this country have embraced for the realization of our declared way of life.” Young claimed Robeson’s belief in communism had warped his views on race in America. “He does not speak,” Young said, “for the common people who read and believe in the Negro newspapers. He does not speak for the masses of the

Negro people whom he has so shamelessly deserted.” Editorial nationwide mirrored Young’s sentiments.  

Robeson’s continued popularity, though, pointed to the broad support enjoyed by radicals. “It is fait accompli,” a Defender reader wrote, “that a considerable percentage of Afro-Americans are disgusted with the idea of fighting Russia or any other country in the role of second-class citizens.” In early 1949, tens of thousands of African Americans attended rallies headlined by Robeson and organized by the leftist Civil Rights Congress. The Afro-American, in particular, wrote extensively about the organizers’ efforts to pass civil rights legislation.

Pittsburgh Courier columnists J.A. Rogers and Marjorie McKenzie distanced themselves from Robeson’s politics but acknowledged that he sounded commonly held frustrations. Rogers suggested that Robeson’s loudest critics, including the NAACP’s White, should keep quiet. “Negroes are jim crowed through fear and greed,” Rogers wrote, “hence they have nothing to lose by keeping the enemy guessing.” Unlike Young, Baltimore publisher Carl Murphy refused his invitation from Rep. John S. Wood, a Georgia Democrat, to testify before HUAC. Murphy still regarded communism as a legitimate means for criticizing and eradicating racism. “If anybody asks us,” his paper editorialized, “Paul Robeson’s eye is on Georgia, not Russia. He is using Communism as a vehicle to get relief from jim crow [sic].”

Even so, the political pressure applied by anticommunists compelled two of the nation’s most radical black newspapers to change ownership. Founded in 1942, the People’s Voice was a progressive Harlem tabloid owned by businessman Charles Buchanan, general manager of the Savoy Ballroom, and the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr., pastor of Harlem’s largest church

and a New York City councilman. Powell characterized his paper as the “Lenox Avenue edition of the Daily Worker.” Communist sympathizers and party members filled key editorial positions. The paper sold forty to fifty thousand copies each week at its peak. But Powell sold his ownership stake after he was elected in 1946 to the U.S. House of Representatives. His political advisors encouraged him to cut ties with known leftists to bolster his influence in Congress. The paper’s treasurer, Max Yergan, assumed control.  

Like Powell, Yergan sensed the nation’s rising suspicion of communism and transformed himself into a staunch anticommunist. A longtime radical, Yergan turned government informant. He fired suspected communists, including general manager Doxey Wilkerson and Marvel Cooke, the assistant managing editor. Yergan hired Wilkerson’s successor – Deton “Jack” Brooks, the Defender’s former war correspondent – and initiated a “new, non-sectarian” editorial policy. Wilkerson accused his former employer of “cowering before the witch hunters” and claimed the paper’s new editorial perspective would “lead only to the betrayal of the basic interests of the Negro people and the alienation of its progressive white and Negro readers.” The People’s Voice folded in 1948.  

Similarly, fellow traveler Charlotta Bass sold the California Eagle in 1951 after struggling to raise enough money to cover expenses. Bass had embraced communism during World War II, believing its analysis of race pointed “the way to an open door to freedom.” Her outspokenness offended advertisers, and Bass subsidized the Eagle with donations from “liberal progressive

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forces in the community." Bass needed $20,000 to stay afloat when donors stopped giving. She claimed liberals had too few dollars to support all the worthy groups fighting racial wrongs and fending off anticommmunist witch-hunting. But she also criticized "a disturbing number of former liberals—many of them well-to-do" who had found it "convenient" to abandon political activism to avoid government scrutiny. "They are not to be heard from," Bass said. "They will, of course, find that the path they have chosen will not bring them security." After publishing the Eagle for nearly forty years, Bass sold it to Loren Miller, the former Eagle reporter-turned-lawyer who helped start the Los Angeles Sentinel. In 1952, Bass ran as the Progressive Party's candidate for vice president. She accused black newspapers of conducting a news “blackout” against her during the campaign season. 15

Journalists endured state harassment and prosecution for holding progressive political beliefs and condemning racism. None were found to have betrayed their country. The FBI investigated ANP’s Barnett on charges he associated with a known communist, most likely a reference to Frank Marshall Davis. Fortunately for Barnett, a cabinet-level administrator intervened on his behalf. “You see how defenseless is an accused person without your connections or record of working with ‘safe’ groups,” Davis wrote his boss. Without those safeguards, Davis left on a Hawaiian vacation with his wife and decided to make his home in the distant, tropical territory. Similarly, Ollie Harrington, a popular cartoonist and former Pittsburgh Courier war correspondent, sailed to Paris after a friend warned him that investigators suspected he was a communist and would call him to testify. Two decades passed before Harrington returned to the United States. Marvel Cooke testified before McCarthy's committee.

She declined to answer questions, citing her constitutional right to avoid self-incrimination. She never held another newspaper job. Her husband soon lost his position at a New York brewery. Defender columnist Langston Hughes also testified before McCarthy. Unlike Cooke, Hughes' had worked since the early 1940s to distance himself from his past radicalism. Standing before McCarthy, Hughes apologized for his past politics and kept his newspaper job. 16

A flawed indictment likely did more to muffle black radicalism than any other government action. In February 1951, the Justice Department indicted Du Bois for failing to register as a foreign agent for the Peace Information Center (PIC). Du Bois and others had formed the group the previous year to promote peace and publicize nuclear disarmament. Du Bois served as the center's chairman for the six months it existed. The indictment stemmed from PIC's backing of the Stockholm Peace Appeal, an international petition seeking to ban nuclear weapons. Du Bois was disappointed with the limited public support initially offered him. He credited black newspapers – perhaps more attuned to mass sentiment and still more independent than other black institutions – for showing "unusual leadership" in defending him. He praised a few journalists by name, including Murphy, Rogers, and Courier editor Percival L. Prattis. Otherwise, Du Bois believed black America's business, political, and intellectual elites failed to rally to his cause. "They did not understand the indictment," he wrote, "and assumed that I had let myself be drawn into some treasonable acts or movements in retaliation for continued discrimination in this land, which I had long fought." Du Bois later received overwhelming support from progressive activists and everyday African Americans. He was

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ultimately acquitted, but the victory was pyrrhic. The indictment destroyed Du Bois' national reputation and quieted other radicals. "I believe the indictment was sought as the easiest means of intimidating all Negroes," Lochard wrote. "The Justice Department, in this regard, has succeeded pretty well." 17

Prosecutors achieved more tangible success against Claudia Jones, the Daily Worker's black affairs editor. Jones was jailed four times between 1948 and 1955. A Trinidad native who joined the Communist Party in 1936, Jones challenged what she called the "super-exploitation" of black women by explaining how gender discrimination exacerbated class and racial oppression. She was charged with violating the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (also known as the Smith Act) and the Internal Security Act of 1950 (commonly called the McCarran Act). The Smith Act made it illegal to advocate the violent overthrow of the United States and required alien residents to document their political beliefs. Federal prosecutors embraced the seldom used act to dismantle the Communist Party. The McCarran Act required Communist groups to register with the United States and established a board to investigate individuals suspected of threatening national security. The act denied citizenship to suspected subversives. Jones, who had sought American citizenship for nearly twenty years, argued that her brand of communism advocated the reform of American society, not its overthrow. But her writings and her party membership led to conviction. She dropped her legal challenges after suffering a heart attack and was deported to England in late 1955. "I was a victim of the McCarthyite hysteria against independent political ideas in the USA," Jones said, "a hysteria which penalizes anyone who

holds ideas contrary to the official pro-war, pro-reactionary, pro-fascist one of the white ruling class of that country.”  

Anticommunism marginalized ardent leftist writers but failed to suppress their politics. They kept writing for either small but influential leftist political journals or a curtailed alternative black press. Du Bois contributed regularly to the *National Guardian*, a weekly founded by Progressive Party supporters. He described the journal as “a few pages of real facts and honestly interpreted truth” that contrasted starkly with the typical daily newspaper, which “calculated to make upon the reader the impression which the owners of this vast economic organization want made on the people of the U.S. and the world.” A radical black press reemerged to express viewpoints commercial publishers forbid. This alternative press resembled the radical publications of the early 1920s in its militantly progressive perspective, irregular publication, and unreliable finances. Lochard, for example, launched the weekly *Chicago Globe* in April 1950 to espouse the progressive views once endorsed by the *Defender*. But he struggled to stay solvent at the height of McCarthyism and shuttered his one-man operation before the year ended. Even so, the fleeting, fragile existence of this press rebukes historians who insist anticommmunism repression destroyed black radicals’ freedom dreams.  

The most prominent black-themed progressive journal was Robeson’s *Freedom*, a New York-based monthly the federal government labeled a communist front. Robeson founded *Freedom* after the State Department stripped him of his passport in August 1950 to prevent him from condemning American racism while traveling in Europe. Given his celebrity, Robeson and

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his supporters believed commercial black newspapers and magazines failed to provide adequate
coverage of the case, although Robeson continued to view the black press as more democratic
than the white press. Financed mostly by communists, Freedom provided a public forum for
defending Roberson’s case and airing his political views. Editor Louis Burnham established an
editorial policy that endorsed third-party politics, opposed the Korean War, supported the labor
movement, denounced racism and colonialism, and promoted world peace. The paper’s
business manager was George B. Murphy Jr., nephew of the Afro-American’s publisher. Freedom
helped launch the careers of notable writers. Aspiring playwright Lorraine Hansberry got her
first full-time job at Freedom, hiring on as Burnham’s chief assistant before becoming an
assistant editor. Another future playwright, Alice Childress, introduced a popular column written
from the perspective of a domestic named Mildred. (She later wrote it for the Afro-American.)
The paper, though, was never self-sufficient. The FBI contributed to Freedom’s money problems
by harassing distributors and subscribers. Dwindling finances led to increasingly erratic
publication. Freedom folded in summer 1955. 20

With progressive writers sidelined, commercial editors and journalists tended to either
ignore radicals or minimize coverage of them. Columnists occasionally defended progressives
but only after assuring readers they were not communists themselves. Like Hicks, Prattis
explained why he had always opposed communism when he warned that anticommunism
threatened to erode civil liberties. Prattis denounced anticommunists’ excesses more than he
defended their targets, although he wrote columns supporting Du Bois and educator Mary
Bethune McLeod. In private, Prattis avoided affiliating with radicals. He declined an invitation to

20 Lawrence Lamphere, “Paul Robeson, Freedom Newspaper, and the Black Press” (PhD diss.,
Boston College, 2003). Concerning the political radicalism of Childress and Hansberry, see Mary Helen
Washington, “Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular
Front,” in Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States,
join a foundation supporting Du Bois. Prattis worried his participation would taint his reputation.

“I can only write, and be effective as long as I can maintain my personal invulnerability,” he said.

“If outside, or inside, forces should convince the publisher that positions which I take jeopardize The Courier, I would lose my vehicle for expression.” As a top editor, Prattis enjoyed more leeway than his reporters. Washington bureau chief Levi Jolley reminded an editor who complained he had been scooped on a story about Robeson that, “I was also instructed that persons of questionable leanings (communistic) should not be exploited and played too big.”

Editors and journalists also reoriented their foreign news coverage, particularly stories about Africa. During World War II, journalists had consistently underscored Africa’s demands for equality and justice and explained the steps taken to fulfill those demands. Du Bois complimented black newspapers in 1947 for their “broad and well done” coverage. By the mid-1950s, though, coverage of Africa and Asia had shifted from explaining political developments to emphasizing personalities and headline events. These stories stoked a shared sense of racial identity and played up racial pride by reinforcing the sentiment that success against racism – whether in Birmingham, Alabama, or Pretoria, South Africa – enhanced the global standing of all people of color. But a focus on spirit and spectacle resulted in superficial, erratic, and uneven coverage. Du Bois complained that American media in general failed to accurately report on events in Africa, particularly in nations and colonies outside of British West Africa. Padmore agreed. “It is a great pity that the Afroamerican newspapers are not giving the struggle the publicity it deserves,” he wrote. “Even the Courier and Defender that at one time carried my despatches [sic] are no longer interested. I presume they feel that they have nothing in Africa.” Padmore assumed correctly. ANP’s Barnett asked his forty or so subscribers to evaluate the

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quality of the service’s Africa coverage. “Practically every reply said we were sending too much,” he wrote. “They did not use too much and I think they have not awakened even as much as their readers.”

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The purging of radical writers coincided with slight but growing integration in white newsrooms, expanding competition from a pair of black magazines, and falling circulations for black newspapers. Some young journalists aspired for better careers than black newspapers offered. They judged black journalism – as well as other segregated businesses – as symbols of a fading past. Robert E. Johnson, the future executive editor of Jet, was a student pursuing a master’s degree in journalism at Syracuse University when he “declined with distaste and disdain” the suggestion he write a history of the black press. “This was a result of the fables of the 1950s,” Johnson later explained. “It wasn’t hip to be that black and proud. It was a time to be ashamed if your white classmates caught you reading a black newspaper.” Roger Wilkins shared Johnson’s interest in writing – and his disregard for black newspapers. Wilkins was the son of a business manager for the Kansas City Call and nephew of the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins. Despite wanting to be a journalist, Wilkins enrolled in law school. “They weren’t hiring Negroes on papers of general circulation in those days,” he recalled, “and to go back to doing what my father had done twelve years before didn’t advance the ball one inch.” Unlike Wilkins, Benjamin “Ben” Holman applied for reporting jobs at nearly one hundred daily newspapers across the nation. The top student in his journalism school class at the University of Kansas, Holman

persevered despite almost complete disinterest. “I was pretty much an integrationist,” Holman recalled. “I believed that I ought to get as good a job as any white person. I was truly idealistic. I really did think I would live to see the day when race wasn’t an issue in this country.”

Black publishers worried incessantly about losing their best and brightest journalists to better-paying, more prestigious daily newspapers. Their concerns were overblown in the 1950s but spotlighted early on a transformation that rocked black journalism in the 1960s. “We must remember that this so-called ‘trend’ is nothing new and that the movement is two-way,” said Armistead Pride, a Lincoln University journalism professor. “The movement onto general publications is a mere trickle, nothing to become excited over.” Pride expected a slow transition toward integrated newsrooms. Most white editors, he said, hired a single black reporter only to appear to comply with regulations for fair employment practices. Black publishers’ greatest threat, Pride said, came from small southern dailies and weeklies that hired black reporters for segregated “black star” editions. Pride figured about eighteen blacks worked as editorial employees in 1953 at white-owned publications. None held executive positions. Two years later, Ebony estimated thirty-one African Americans covered general reporting assignments for white publications—about double its estimate from 1948.

Despite Pride’s assurances, black publishers realized white editors’ hiring of black reporters marked a new era of competition for race news. The manager of the Afro-American’s New Jersey office sent a memo to publisher Murphy in August 1951 after he heard the Newark Evening News had hired its first black reporter, Luther P. Jackson Jr. The young reporter posed a

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serious threat. Jackson was a 26-year-old war veteran with a master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University. His father, a prominent historian at Virginia State College in Petersburg, had penned a long-running column for the Journal and Guide. Jackson knew his stuff, and he had a prime spot to showcase it. “Jackson’s addition to the staff,” the manager wrote, “means that he will become the ‘Pet’ of a large number of our professional and civic leaders and heads of organizations who prefer to give their news first to the white daily, then tell the AFRO to copy what it saw in the News.”

White editors hired a mix of new college graduates and polished veterans. Some reporters spent their entire careers working for white publications, while others returned to black journalism or left the profession. They typically wrote in restrictive, hostile workplaces.

Idealistic Holman finally landed a job in 1952 as a police reporter at the Chicago Daily News. On his first day, Holman walked into the bureau shared with competing reporters, and every other journalist stood up and left. “I sat there stunned,” Holman recalled. “I sat at my desk. I didn’t know what to do.” He persevered. His editors stood by him. A few weeks later, a white reporter pulled Holman aside and apologized for shunning him. It was a start.

Elsewhere in Chicago, Fletcher Martin joined the Sun-Times in 1952 as a staff writer. Martin was a former city editor for the Louisville Leader and Louisville Defender and a former war correspondent. He was the first African American named a Nieman Fellow, a prestigious appointment designed to raise journalism standards by allowing select journalists to study at Harvard University for a year. Despite Martin’s credentials, an assistant editor had to intervene when the Sun-Times’ copyboys refused to grab his typed pages and rush them to the city desk for editing. At the rival Chicago Tribune, celebrated author and globetrotting reporter Roi Ottley

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25 Samuel A. Haynes to Carl Murphy, August 5, 1951, box 50, folder Haynes, Afro-American Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

26 Newkirk, Within the Veil, 60-61.
began writing a weekly column in 1953. His columns profiled the careers and good deeds of African Americans from local neighborhoods. Ottley also wrote special assignments, which tended to be explanatory studies of urban problems associated with minorities, such as escalating drug usage and inadequate housing. His work purposely avoided controversy. 27

By 1957, three black editorial employees worked in the New York Times’ newsroom – reporter Layhmond Robinson Jr., news assistant Robert Claybrooks, and copyboy Theodore “Ted” Jones. When Jones interviewed for his job, an assistant managing editor discussed George Streator’s querulous departure eight years earlier. For Jones, the message was clear – “The lesson learned: if you hire them, don’t let them be rowdy blacks.” 28

The Washington Post’s Simeon Booker was the highest-profile reporter to return to black journalism after landing a job with a major metropolitan newspaper. Born in 1918, Booker graduated from Virginia Union University and worked at the Afro-American before joining the Call and Post in 1944. In Cleveland, Booker won an award for a series on discrimination in public schools. He also earned publisher William O. Walker’s wrath for attempting to unionize the newsroom. Frustrated with the Call and Post’s work conditions and editorial quality, Booker applied for and received a Nieman Fellowship. After his year of study, he applied for jobs at forty daily newspapers. Only Phil Graham, the Post’s publisher, was interested. He eventually hired Booker as a reporter in 1952. Nearly no one in the newsroom spoke to him. “It was recommended to me that I only use the bathroom on the fourth floor – editorial – so I did,” Booker recalled. “I could eat in the cafeteria, and I was thankful for that. But I was always alone.” Booker found no relief covering stories in a thoroughly segregated city. Police officers

kept him away from fires in white neighborhoods. Interviewees laughed when he introduced himself as a reporter. He could not interview government insiders over lunch because restaurants refused to seat him. He mostly covered crime news. Otherwise, he wrote about racial issues. "It was a real tense situation and had me neurotic," he said. Booker quit in 1954. He moved to Chicago to work for Ebony and Jet, a snappy, pocket-sized weekly digest founded by John "Johnny" Johnson in 1951.  

In contrast, Carl Rowan of the Minneapolis Tribune emerged as the most influential black journalist working in white newspapers. Rowan grew up poor at the foot of the Cumberland Mountains in McMinnville, Tennessee. A high school valedictorian, he enlisted in the Navy in 1943. Honorably discharged three years later, Rowan soon enrolled in Oberlin College in Ohio. After graduating with a mathematics degree, he joined the Afro-American to cover the Midwest from Minnesota. While working, he earned a master's degree in journalism from the University of Minnesota. He decided to apply for a reporting position at Minneapolis' two daily newspapers. The Tribune hired him for its copydesk in 1948 and made him a reporter two years later. Rowan wondered what his role should be as a reporter for a white newspaper. He did not want to cover only race news. And yet, he had a personal interest in racial issues. He decided he should be "'just a reporter' and help change America" without violating his professional ethics. He pitched his editors on sending him on a tour of the South, characterizing the resulting series as a black man's view of what it meant to be black in the postwar United States. His editors liked the idea. Rowan flew to Louisville, Kentucky, in January 1951.  

The series, "How Far From Slavery?," ran over the following two months and established Rowan as a rising star in journalism. A savvy self-promoter always seeking a bigger readership,

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Rowan condensed his reporting for a high profile picture-story in Look and then adapted it for the more personal South of Freedom, a book published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1952. In the book, Rowan recounted how he struggled with the dilemma of presenting himself as an objective reporter who also felt the need to right racial wrongs. Weeks into his tour, Rowan made a nighttime visit to an isolated shanty in backcountry Georgia where an overworked doctor treated a 6-year-old boy ill with pneumonia. Stressed from the pressures of investigating segregation and standing in a place reminiscent of his childhood home, Rowan suddenly felt the full force of what blackness meant in America. “I had begun my journey,” he wrote, “feeling that, as a reporter, I could live a black life and write about it as a black man, and then wipe away the effects upon the lives of the people involved. I found that it was not that easy, because the mind is human, and it tried to make human things make sense.” Rowan realized he could never separate his identity as a black man from his work as a reporter. 31

Publisher John Johnson’s magazines posed a more substantial threat to the viability of black newspapers than white editors’ occasional interest in race news and black employment. No publisher embraced the period’s integrationist spirit more prosperously than Johnson. His success, though, came only after steep circulation losses forced him to overhaul his sales practices and redesign his editorial content. On the business side, Johnson promoted yearly subscriptions, which eased advertisers’ unease by solidifying circulation guarantees. Editorially, Ebony and Jet veered away in the mid-1950s from lurid stories of sex and scandal, interracial love and passing, and improved their coverage of the developing Civil Rights Movement. “The world was changing,” Johnson recalled, “and people wanted Ebony to be more serious.” Sales

rebounded. Combined, the two magazines sold more than one million copies annually by decade’s end.  

While white press critics praised Johnson’s success, many black publishers questioned his commitment to fighting for civil rights. Pointing to Johnson’s rising circulations, white commentators accused black newspaper publishers of being too negative and too separatist. Johnson was eager to play up the differences between his magazines and newspapers, telling Time, “The Negro press has depended too much on emotion and racial pride. Negroes have grown out of that.” (He later backtracked from the statement.) Newspaper publishers persisted in dismissing Johnson as a promoter of celebrity fluff. “We can delude ourselves with the opiate of magazines that publish beautiful pictures and Pollyanna articles,” said Cleveland’s Walker, “but, the more we seek to fool ourselves in this manner, the more difficult we are making our fight for our civil rights.”

Scholar Adam Green’s recent reassessment of Ebony’s significance better explains the magazine’s popularity than causal references to its color photography and focus on celebrity. Green argues Ebony depicted racial identity as “a shared life, rather than a common problem.” While newspapers often highlighted white America’s wrongdoing, Ebony introduced a modern twist on racial uplift’s emphasis on accomplishment by extolling black glamour. While newspapers focused on politics and protest, Ebony examined life in the home and workplace. Ebony expressed a genuine faith, Green says, in the “core values presumed to animate national society, particularly the equation of individual ambition and development with civil worth.”

Green argues Ebony succeeded because it embraced “modern ideas of black community” before

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they were even fully formed. Acceptance of these modern values – with their emphasis on individuality, consumerism, and professionalism – pointed as much toward a new style of reportage as a new understanding of race. 34

Newspaper publishers reinforced a sense of their obsolescence by clinging to reporting conventions that seemed stodgy and dated in an era of both greater promise and growing unrest. The purging of progressivism stripped from black reportage the connotation that it offered an expansive, forward-moving response to white supremacy. “Much of the decline of our press has been its own fault,” said Alvin White, a former ANP Washington correspondent and writer for Our World. “It is one thing to proclaim the evils that exist, it is another to do something about them.” Stories and columns that seemed brash and militant in the 1930s and 1940s appeared familiar and routine by the 1950s. Articles tended to focus on the singular details of a particular event rather than broader societal causes and consequences. Countless descriptions of racial abuses – lynchings, cross burnings, riots – blurred into an undifferentiated parade of wrongdoing. Newspapers still treated African American history as if it were unknown, as if black historians, novelists, and journalists had not spent several decades educating children and adults about their past. Stories that touted racial advancement by profiling African Americans elevated to positions of “first and only” seemed more ambiguous, reflecting tokenism and gradualism as much as achievement and activism. “Negro newspapers, as such, are running out of gas,” Pratis warned. “The times, the conditions and the competition have changed.” 35

34 Adam Green, Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 142-143.
Newspapers’ circulations melted away in the early 1950s as publishers dumped radical journalists, white editors dabbled in race news, and *Ebony* and *Jet* offered colorful, upbeat alternatives to traditional news coverage. Readership declines deflated publishers’ political influence and undermined their posturing as the voice of black America. By 1955, more than half the *Courier’s* readers were gone from its peak weekly circulation of 358,000 in 1948. The *Afro-American* lost nearly a fifth of its readers after World War II, selling 188,000 papers in 1955. The *Defender, Journal and Guide*, and *New York Amsterdam News* experienced similar losses. Circulation among regional newspapers was more erratic but generally downward. (Exceptions included the *Call and Post* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which held steady, and the union-backing *Michigan Chronicle*, which gained readers.)

Slumping circulations coincided with a postwar hike in operating and newsprint costs, which fostered a need for expensive, modern mechanical upgrades. Daily newspapers offset their new expenses through steady increases in circulation and advertising revenue. Black weeklies, though, still earned comparatively little revenue from national advertising accounts, despite the ballyhoo about the “Negro market.” Circulation losses accelerated if publishers hiked subscription and newsstand prices. Leading black newspapers still catered to large readerships, but their profitability was rapidly eroding. The dilemma prompted retooling and retrenching.

The *Defender* and *Courier* moved in strikingly different ways to regain readership and profitability. In Chicago, Sengstacke embarked on an ambitious expansion. He hoped to grow the *Defender* out of trouble as his once lucrative national edition bled readers, plummeting from 145,000 copies sold weekly in 1946 to 36,000 copies in 1955. Sengstacke planned to preserve

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national advertising accounts—the company’s largest source of revenue—by establishing or
buying local newspapers in major cities. He no longer courted advertisers by pointing to the
reach of a single national edition. Instead, he touted how his chain of papers saturated cities
with large black markets. In 1951, he founded the Memphis-based Tri-State Defender. L. Alex
Wilson, a 34-year-old former Marine who had reported from the Korean front, served as editor
and general manager. Wilson’s goal was to make the Tri-State Defender the go-to-source for
black news from the Deep South, directly challenging the supremacy of the Atlanta-based Scott
family, which owned influential but conservative papers in Memphis and Birmingham. In 1952,
Sengstacke bought the venerable but nearly bankrupt New York Age. With this purchase,
Sengstacke published a national edition plus put out local newspapers in six cities—Chicago,
New York, Detroit, Louisville, Memphis, and Gary, Indiana. He organized those papers into
Defender Publications, which he billed as “the first national group of Negro Newspapers to
operate through a special coordinated organization to serve advertising agencies,
manufacturers and others.”

In Pittsburgh, the Courier’s executives attempted to restore profitability by slashing
costs, particularly the expenses of newsgathering. They hoped to disguise their cutbacks and
revive reader interest by redesigning the layout and editorial perspective of news pages. As
early as November 1950, managing editor William “Bill” Nunn warned the paper’s Washington
bureau of looming layoffs. “We don’t like to cry wolf, nor do we want to sound threatening,”
Nunn wrote, “but it is a definite fact that the Courier is facing a financial crisis.” The downsized
bureau closed a few years later. The Courier struggled more than the other national newspapers

because Pittsburgh lacked a sizable black community, meaning the Courier’s existence as a newspaper of influence depended upon a national readership. Poor management decisions exacerbated financial troubles. In 1955, the Courier ended its financial year with a $127,000 deficit. Prattis warned the paper would close the following year unless the entire operation was overhauled. The company’s officers consolidated editions, reduced payroll, and switched from a standard-sized newspaper to a tabloid. Executives also proposed a new approach to presenting news. “We are going to change,” Prattis said, “almost imperceptibly, into a different kind of paper, not depending on news (which the dailies NOW beat us to anyhow), which will have a broader appeal to more people. We feel that is the only way in which we can maintain circulation.”

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Ideologically-constrained, financially-strapped black newspapers confronted formidable challenges as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Anticommunists used Cold War politics to characterize journalists’ opposition to segregation as disloyal subversion. To forestall charges of disloyalty, publishers and journalists depicted protest as a patriotic attempt to combat communism by eliminating racism as an exploitable target of Soviet propaganda. As anticommunists acted to neutralize journalists’ militancy, white publishers and editors moved to replace them as the dominant source for race news. The nation’s racial problems emerged as a prominent story after the Supreme Court ruled against segregated schools in May 1954. News coverage expanded one year later when the justices equivocated on the pace of integration, giving segregationists the latitude they needed to stall. Delay, protest, and violence ensued,

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compelling white journalists and broadcasters to devote more attention to racial protest. White journalists enjoyed distinct advantages over their black colleagues: Their editors could assign more reporters to a story and readily cover travel expenses. They had more access to white-controlled courtrooms, city halls, and police departments. They could report the news almost immediately, either over the airwaves or in multiple daily editions.  

Black journalists' coverage of the schools ruling accentuated newspapers' diversity, technological shortcomings, and narrowed ideological perspective. Since the major weeklies did not publish national editions on Tuesdays, the Atlanta Daily World was one of the few black newspapers to cover the story on the day it happened. The paper's editorial conservatism - forged from having to live amid southern white hostility - led its editors to minimize the significance of the Supreme Court's ruling. In a front-page column, managing editor William Gordon claimed black citizens would neither gloat nor brag about the decision. "As in the past, they will exhibit the same loyalty and sanity," Gordon wrote, "and they will work quietly along with their fellow Americans in abiding by what the highest tribunal has handed us." Two days later, the Los Angeles Sentinel devoted its entire front page to the story. The Sentinel called the ruling "a historic milestone in the struggle for human rights" and characterized it as Cold War victory that offered "hope to mistreated people everywhere." In contrast to their past leftist sympathies, the Sentinel's editors claimed the decision gave "the lie to the Communist tale that Americans are completely indifferent to aspirations of its minority groups."  

The news was five days old by Saturday. The Afro-American and Defender ran stories about the Supreme Court's ruling on the front page but focused on racial news less publicized in

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daily newspapers, particularly a decision by the Pullman Company to hire black conductors. The court decision dominated the front page of the *Amsterdam News* and *Courier*. The *Amsterdam News*’ editors referred to the ruling as “the second emancipation,” but they cautioned that successful fulfillment meant more work for African Americans. The *Courier*’s editors urged black men and women to keep battling for civil rights by tying the ruling to an ongoing fight over segregated pools in Pittsburgh. Like the *Sentinel*, the *Courier* imbued the ruling with international significance. “This decision ought to stun and silence every Communist traducer behind the Iron Curtain,” said publisher Jessie Vann, Robert Vann’s widow, “and demonstrate to the colored people of Asia and Africa that America has the idealism and moral courage to do what is right, regardless of race, creed or color.”

Journalists’ dispatches from the Asian-African Conference in April 1955 provided a fuller display of how their reportage adapted to repressive Cold War politics to remain consequential. Held in the sweltering Indonesian provincial capital of Bandung, the conference was a watershed international event—the first major meeting organized by colonies and countries from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Organizers deliberately sidelined European and American officials. The conference’s agenda called for the twenty-nine attendees to discuss their mutual problems of colonialism and racism, identify common interests that would allow them to navigate between the Cold War powers, and promote world peace. “All of us are united by more important things than those which superficially divide us,” Indonesian President Sukarno said in his opening address. “We are united by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form

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it appears, by a common detestation of racialism, and a common determination to preserve and to stabilize peace in the world." 43

The small contingent of black journalists that arrived on the island of Java resembled the idiosyncratic and fractious nature of black journalism in the mid-1950s. Reporters from national newspapers mixed with leftist writers from small political journals. Celebrities served as special correspondents, and virtual unknowns finagled press credentials. A few reporters wrote for white dailies. Indonesian children swarmed around delegates and reporters alike, indiscriminately asking for autographs, knowing only that these foreign visitors were “colored and important.” 44

Cold War intrigue pervaded the atmosphere, and rumors circulated that the American government or its intermediaries had attempted to influence coverage by black correspondents. Freelancer Eugene Gordon, a communist writer who had worked for the Boston Post in the 1920s, was told by a Chicago Tribune reporter that his passport had been issued by “mistake.” At the other end of the political spectrum, the Courier ran articles by Max Yergan, the radical turned anticommmunist government informant. Freelance journalist William Worthy asked to serve as correspondent for the Afro-American but was told the State Department had offered to pay expenses for Louis Lautier, the paper’s Washington correspondent. “This is a blind for the state department,” editor Cliff Mackay told Worthy. “They think Mr. Lautier is safer than a person who has had such a well rounded knowledge of the situation as you have.” Worthy was credentialed by Worldover Press, a progressive international news service. The Minneapolis Tribune sent Carl Rowan after fielding a telephone call from CIA Director Allen Dulles. Rowan


had just returned from an eight-month speaking tour, which was sponsored by the State
Department, through India and Southeast Asia. The American consul general in Hong Kong had
suggested that Rowan "might be able to do some excellent backstage public relations work for
the United States among the delegates and observers." 45

Black journalists were far less dismissive of the conference than white reporters,
although both tailored their coverage to the Cold War's bipolar framework. White journalists
judged whether the United States had gained or lost influence in Asia and Africa. They treated
delegates' condemnations of racism and colonialism as secondary concerns and communist
propaganda. In contrast, black reporters acknowledged the legitimacy of the delegates' anti-
colonialism statements. ANP columnist Marguerite Cartwright, a widely-traveled Hunter College
educator, accused white reporters of mischaracterizing the conference. "Communism is an evil
which must be fought," Cartwright wrote, "but it was not the man who came to dinner at
Bandung. That man might be better described as 'Mr. Get Acquainted.'" She described the
United States' anxiety over the conference's racial outlook as "a sort of collective paranoia and
unconscious projection of its own guilt." In contrast, Rowan ended his trip convinced the Red
menace was "greater and more frightening than I imagined." Even so, he still argued that the
West must stop pretending Asian hostility sprung from communist plotting rather than "the two
most explosive ingredients in the Asian revolution — anti-colonialism and anti-racism." 46

Regardless of political orientation, black journalists frequently depicted the conference
as an event that transformed their views of themselves and the place of African Americans in

45 Eugene Gordon, "Seven Years Since Bandung," Freedomways 2 (Summer 1962): 301; Mackay
to Worthy, February 15, 1955, box 98, folder Bill Worthy, Afro-American Papers; and Rowan,
Breaking Barriers, 128-129. The U.S. consul general in Hong Kong is quoted in Cary Fraser, "An American
Dilemma: Race and Realpolitik in the American Response to the Bandung Conference, 1955," in Window
on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1943-1988, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill:
46 "Communism Was No Issue at Bandung," Courier, May 28, 1955, 1; Marguerite Cartwright,
"Bandung: For the Record," Amsterdam News, June 4, 1955, 4; and Rowan, The Pitiful and the Proud
world affairs. Lautier marveled how his status as a racial minority changed once he reached Honolulu. “As an American moves out into the Pacific,” Lautier wrote, “he becomes impressed with the fact that this is not a white man’s world.” Worthy emphasized the prediction by India’s Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that the conference’s most important outcome was a long-term, intangible transformation in the mindset of Asian and African peoples. Worthy agreed, concluding “no one with memories of the huge barefoot throngs of cheering, illiterate Indonesians standing outside the conference halls in heat and tropical rains can doubt this intuitive knowledge.”

No reporter conveyed this transformational perspective more enthusiastically than Ethel Payne, a 43-year-old Chicagoan on her first overseas assignment as the Defender’s national political reporter. For Payne, the conference was not merely a professional obligation. “More important, as a Black American,” she wrote, “it meant the emotional experience of interrelating my own ethnic background with those individuals of other ‘colored’ origins.” Payne scored exclusive access to meetings closed to white reporters: She was mistaken as an Arab delegate by Indonesian soldiers guarding the convention. “I never was stopped,” she recalled. “I just would go through the lines. They would lift their bayonets.” One day, broadcast journalist Chet Huntley, whom Payne characterized as a Cold War warrior who worried she would be fooled by communist propaganda, was stopped by a soldier while Payne kept walking. Huntley argued. Payne smiled and laughed. “So suddenly, just like a big light came over me, for the first time in my life, I realized that I was part of a majority; I was not a minority.” Afterward, Payne summarized the conference’s main objective as obtaining “the right of self-determination and the privileges that go with freedom of mind and body.” Her travels led to a deeper appreciation.

of America’s democratic promise and a stronger will to fight for its fulfillment. She got her chance as racial unrest erupted across the South. 48

The five-day murder trial of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman, drew unprecedented press scrutiny in September 1955 to the racial wrongs of southern justice. More than fifty reporters and photographers, including a dozen black journalists, covered the court proceedings in Sumner, Mississippi. Media interest stemmed from the decision by Till’s mother, Mamie Bradley, to hold an open casket funeral “so all the world can see what they did to my boy.” Tens of thousands viewed the extremely disfigured corpse. Jet ran an exclusive close-up – snapped by photographer David Jackson – of Till’s grotesque face. The cutline claimed the image “bares mute evidence of horrible slaying.” The issue sold out, and, for the first time, Jet printed additional copies. Sociologist Joyce Ladner later claimed the photograph “left an indelible impression on many young Southern blacks who, like my sister and I, became the vanguard of the Southern student movement.” 49

The mere presence of black journalists as working professionals at the murder trial undermined the code of white supremacy that assured the defendants’ freedom, despite their apparent guilt. Unlike in earlier decades, black reporters covered the trial without posing as white men or disguising themselves. They wore suits and ties or dresses, openly took notes, and discreetly questioned white officials and citizens. They sat at a segregated press table.

Ostracized to a corner of the courtroom, Jet’s Booker said black journalists served as “the

antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on low-rating the South.” Inside the courtroom, reporters were harassed and insulted. Each day, Sheriff H.C.

Strider walked past their table and asked, “How you niggers doing this morning? Are you niggers all right?” Ernest C. Withers, a Memphis-based freelance photographer, played along to minimize conflict. “We’re in good shape,” Withers always replied. “You looking out for us just fine.” ^50

Threats were more sinister outside the courthouse. When Ebony’s Cloyte Murdock interviewed Till’s great uncle on his front porch, white men armed with shotguns slowly rolled by in a pickup truck. “The menace was obvious,” she recalled, “the message clear.” Unknown callers rang the motel room taken by Hicks, writing for the Afro-American and NNPA, in the all black town of Mound Bayou. After one caller promised to come by later, Hicks borrowed a .38-caliber pistol and clutched it when someone knocked on his door and then on Booker’s door. Neither reporter answered. Another day, a jittery deputy waved a gun at Hicks and arrested him for allegedly passing a stopped school bus. Instead of taking him to the courthouse, the deputy veered into another building. Sensing trouble, three white reporters followed, including Hicks’ friend Murray Kempton, a New York Post columnist. Soon a local reporter arrived with Strider, warning the sheriff that he was “getting ready to give this town the biggest black eye it ever has had.” After meeting in private, Strider returned with a justice of the peace, who declared court open and dismissed the charge as a favor to Hicks. A local reporter later told Murray the sheriff had intended to beat Hicks. ^51

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Black reporters strengthened the case against the alleged murderers by participating in what Booker characterized as “Mississippi’s first major interracial manhunt.” During the trial, T.R.M. Howard, a Mound Bayou surgeon and Mississippi’s leading civil rights activist, learned from a field hand that five or so other black workers might have witnessed Till’s kidnapping and heard his screams as he was beaten to death in a barn. Prosecutors did not know about these witnesses. Howard asked Hicks, Booker, Murdock, and the Tri-State Defender’s Wilson to help find the men and persuade them to testify. He then asked three white reporters – one from the Memphis Press-Scimitar and two from the Jackson Daily News – to tell the authorities that new witnesses would soon turn themselves in. That night, though, the white reporters and law officers joined the search. Riding with the officers, the black reporters convinced three witnesses to take the stand. 52

On their own, Wilson and Hicks searched for two other witnesses rumored to have cleaned the murder scene after Till was killed. Both reporters tracked down sources who claimed the men were locked up under false names to prevent them from testifying. Prosecutors refused to pursue the matter. After the trial ended, Wilson found one of the missing witnesses. A contact lured the man into a meeting with Wilson who convinced him to go to Chicago. A Defender lawyer deposed the man for two days. The interview ran in the paper. The man, whose family still lived in Mississippi, denied seeing anything. 53

Fearing deadly repercussions, Hicks saved his juiciest bombshells until he returned to Harlem. “I have never been under the kind of pressure the story produced, even at Korea’s most crucial moments,” Hicks told his editors. “I’m not proud of it, but I will admit that at times I was just plain scared.” And yet, about a month later, Hicks returned to Mississippi to cover a grand

52 Booker, “1956: A Negro Reporter at the Till Trial,”; and Roberts and Klibanoff, Race Beat, 99-100. Booker’s article was originally published in January 1956.
jury's refusal to indict on kidnapping charges the two men accused of killing Till. Hicks' wife and mother urged him to stay home. But Hicks believed Till's murder was just the first in a series of racial incidents sure to rock the South as integration accelerated. "And every such incident should, and must be covered by the colored press," Hicks wrote. "Who is better qualified to do this than a colored reporter?" 54

The 381-day boycott of public bus service in Montgomery, Alabama, illustrated why hundreds of thousands of African Americans would keep reading black newspapers long after the white media had seized control of the protest story. The boycott drew periodic national interest throughout 1956 as white journalists reported on lawsuits, arrests, threats of violence, and significant developments in negotiations between the boycott's leaders and city officials. Boycott news percolated in the back pages of the New York Times, occasionally bubbling into a more prominent placement. The Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a boycott organizer, credited national press coverage with unifying the boycotters and raising their morale. Such publicity increased organizers' political clout when they discussed a settlement with city leaders. But most daily newspapers and broadcast outlets gave the story little more than a passing mention. White reporters turned elsewhere for news when negotiations stalled. "A story with no new developments is no story at all," Abernathy said. "And when our struggle was not being carried on the Associated Press wires, the nation forgot about us." 55

Black newspapers provided more consistent, more detailed coverage. They ran regular updates, solicited donations, and covered lecture tours by the boycott's leaders. Photographs inspired African Americans nationwide by showing that a mild-mannered Rosa Parks, an

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54 Hicks to Carl Murphy, Art Carter, Cliff Mackay, September 27, 1955, Afro-American Papers, box 50, folder Hicks; and Hicks, "Why Hicks Just Had to Go Back to Mississippi," Afro-American, November 26, 1955. Hicks' letter to his editors was published on October 8, 1955.
energetic Martin Luther King Jr., and well-dressed church crowds were familiar to them—indicating they were capable of similar actions. Black reporters scooped their white competitors. Emory Overton Jackson, a tireless NAACP activist who edited the *Birmingham World*, a feisty newspaper affiliated with the Scott Newspaper Syndicate, reported inside information after attending early sessions of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was organized to guide the boycott. (Jackson also offered his advice.) Black reporters corrected false statements. The *Minneapolis Tribune*’s Rowan secured an enduring footnote in history after noticing a discrepancy overlooked by white reporters. When the Associated Press reported that the boycott had abruptly and unexpectedly ended, Rowan, who had just returned from Montgomery, phoned King to confirm the story. King told him the boycott was still on. Rowan’s call gave the boycott’s leaders enough time to discredit the ruse before it disrupted the protest.  

Black reporters more fully depicted the pain and jubilation of protest. Both Hicks and Payne profiled Jeannetta Reese, a woman ostracized by boycotters after she claimed a lawyer with the Montgomery Improvement Association never had permission to use her name in an anti-segregation lawsuit. Their stories examined how Montgomery’s surprisingly unified and vigorous protest exposed an older generation’s willingness to relent to white demands, whether from fear or for favor. Calling Reese “the white man’s masterpiece,” Hicks emphasized her personal confliction, her desire to live freely and her need to avoid trouble and please whites. Payne depicted Reese’s plight as a cautionary tale for other African Americans who might betray their race’s cause. In contrast, the day after the boycott ended, the *Tri-State Defender*’s Wilson

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and photographer Withers boarded a bus at 6:30 a.m. to test whether drivers would adhere to the court ruling forbidding segregation. "It was an inspiring and exhilarating experience," Wilson wrote, "to observe true, Christian democracy function deep in the heart of bias-ridden Alabama and deep in the heart of Dixie." 57

Journalists portrayed King’s use of passive resistance as a potentially dynamic way for other African Americans to strike against southern segregation. Just a few weeks after Parks’ arrest sparked the boycott, the World’s Jackson wrote that King seemingly wanted “to find a suitable adaptation of the Gandhi philosophy and method and apply it to the Montgomery problem.” By March 1956, newspapers were filled with news and commentary about “Alabama’s Gandhi.” A Courier writer explained how Mahatma Gandhi’s Hindu beliefs shaped King’s conception of nonviolence. Then the writer connected the practice of nonviolence to the teachings of Christianity. William Worthy, a conscientious objector during World War II who advised King on passive resistance, assured the Afro-American’s readers that no one visiting Montgomery “could ever be the same after seeing the mystic force of nonviolence erode the vainly guarded dikes of southern tribalism.” The Defender ran Payne’s extended interview with King on the front page, allowing him to explain his intentions to a large readership before he was recognized as a national leader. Although space existed for disagreement, as the Courier’s Prattis showed the following year, nonviolence was almost universally endorsed by journalists. Passive resistance was a pliable tactic that seemed sufficiently militant to northern reporters and suitably accommodating to southern publishers. One year after the boycott started, Jackson

described King as the “chief architect” of an expanded freedom fight that regarded nonviolence as its guiding philosophy and impulse. 58

Despite printing news unavailable elsewhere, black newspapers continued to struggle financially. The Defender and Courier again illustrated the extremes taken to halt circulation losses. Sengstacke decided to double-down on expansion after his buying spree failed to preserve his most valuable national advertising accounts. While celebrating the Defender’s golden anniversary in December 1955, Sengstacke announced plans to transform his flagship newspaper into a daily. He had contemplated the move for ten years. The changeover cost more than $1 million, including money spent to build a new printing plant, buy modern production equipment, and hire more editorial and mechanical employees. Sengstacke believed a five-day-a-week newspaper could allow a more economical use of his equipment and boost circulation by expanding news coverage for “readership appeal beyond the limits of race or partisanship.” Within two years, daily circulation rose from under 20,000 to nearly 30,000. Satisfyingly, the weekly national edition maintained its circulation. 59

At the Courier, declining profitability eroded reporting capabilities. Reporter Phyl Garland chafed when “the paper could not afford to send its writers out to cover what were to emerge as some of the biggest black stories of the century.” For example, editor Prattis dismissed as “a substantial expense” the suggestion that he assign a reporter to tour the South and write an overview of southern race relations – an increasingly common newspaper practice.

When the Courier did send reporters into the South, Prattis complained their coverage was not only late compared to the dailies but also undistinguished.  

The Courier's bleak finances entangled it in a perplexing relationship with the Nation of Islam, an obscure religious sect that promoted black separatism and self-help and characterized whites as devils. In spring 1956, the Courier introduced its readers to the group in a fawning, two-part story. Two months later, the paper began running a weekly column titled “Mr. Muhammad Speaks,” reputedly written by the group's leader, Elijah Muhammad, but typically penned by his top spokesman, Malcolm X. The Muslims hoped to win converts and expected no editorial interference. The Courier's editors figured to sell as many as 25,000 additional papers nationwide to new Muslim readers. The arrangement was destined for failure. Within months, Malcolm X complained that editors wanted to “censor” his copy because they feared angering both black and white leaders. Publisher W. Beverly Carter Jr. characterized the changes as routine editing done “in the best journalistic fashion.” But privately, Carter confided to Prattis that he saw “no justification for our using something that we can anticipate as being antagonistic to an already existing segment of our readers and supporters.” The executives were soon caught in a trap of their own making. When Muhammad decided the paper had slighted him, he told Muslims to boycott it. One week, 5,800 Muslims cancelled their subscriptions because Muhammad believed the Courier had “lost interest in their business.” In response, the paper's circulation director urged Courier executives to “treat this account as a preferred customer.”

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61 Carter to Malcolm X, November 28, 1956, box 144-9, folder 9; Carter to Prattis, June 12, 1957, box 144-3, folder 15; and Nunn to Prattis, April 28, 1958; and Sylvestre C. Watkins to Carter, May 6, 1958, box 144-10, folder 19, Prattis Papers.
White journalists and broadcasters effectively replaced black reporters as the dominant disseminator of race news in September 1957 when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to integrate Central High School in Little Rock. Faubus’ belligerence drew international condemnation and forced President Dwight D. Eisenhower to mobilize an Army division and federalize the Arkansas National Guard. The standoff mesmerized the nation for two months. For the first time, television cameras played a significant role in capturing the drama of racial unrest. While only 7 percent of the nation’s homes owned a television in 1950, sets were found in 82 percent of homes seven years later. Intimate and visual, television footage of hostile white crowds jeering black children gripped viewers – black and white – across the nation. Leading news outlets dispatched teams of reporters for saturation coverage.  

Race news reporting was forever altered. After Little Rock, the national white media turned a sharper critical eye upon the South. Editors dispatched reporters, photographers, and cameramen on an assignment they called the “race beat.” These new “race reporters” traveled from one hotspot to the next. Their crisis-oriented stories and images focused public opinion on southern racism, compelling federal officials and politicians to take action. In The Race Beat (2006), veteran journalists Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff depict race reporters as “the witnesses, transmitters, and agents of change” needed to dismantle American discrimination.  

Black journalists reported the Little Rock crisis just as they had covered countless other racial controversies. Editors wrote blistering editorials. “There is no other way to evaluate the present situation,” the Afro-American declared, “than to recognize the unvarnished truth that Arkansas has declared war on the United States.” Reporters attended press conferences, scored scoops, and wrote compelling stories. They noted the presence of black soldiers among

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63 Roberts and Klibanoff, Race Beat, 196.
mobilized troops and praised the fortitude of the nine students. They enjoyed unusually intimate access to a key figure – Daisy Bates, a NAACP activist who served as the students’ spokeswoman. Bates also published the Arkansas State Press with her husband L.C. The Bates’ home functioned as a strategy center and press bureau. Activists and reporters ate and slept there, sharing advice and information. 64

New challenges, though, stymied black journalists in Little Rock. The crisis’ speed and scope overwhelmed the resources of struggling newspapers. Television’s expanded role amplified the slowness of weekly reporting. White journalists still focused mostly on political negotiations and violent clashes, but demands for saturation coverage compelled them to examine angles once exclusive to black journalists. The New York Post, for example, ran an eleven-part series profiling the students. (The Defender reprinted the series, written by Ted Poston, a few weeks later.) An Arkansas National Guard commander barred black reporters from standing near school grounds. He claimed he was protecting them from physical attacks. Moses Newson of the Afro-American complained no one was harassing him when four guardsmen escorted him to his car. Guardsmen also booted reporters from the Defender and Amsterdam News. Sengstacke wired Faubus to protest this interference with press freedom, saying the governor, if necessary, should assign guardsmen to protect black reporters. 65

Military strong-arming failed to protect journalists from being beaten by white protesters. On a late September Sunday, Bates said in a radio interview that the students would not attempt to enroll the following day. She hoped to discourage protesters from lining up outside the school. Privately, she told several black reporters to be ready to go the next morning. Heeding Bates’ tip, Wilson drove to Central High with three other reporters – Hicks,
Newson, and Earl Davy, a photographer for the Bates’ *Arkansas State Press*. Wilson parked a couple of blocks away. As the reporters neared the school, angry bystanders glared at them.

“Here come the niggers,” someone yelled. Angry men blocked the sidewalk. Wilson and Hicks explained they were journalists. A policeman told them to leave. As they turned back, the crowd followed. Then it attacked. The reporters ran. Someone kicked Newson. A one-armed man slugged Hicks on the side of his head. Confusion ensued. A man tripped Davy and others kicked him and smashed his camera. 66

Wilson halted for a moment. He thought of student Elizabeth Eckford, who had withstood insults and jeers weeks earlier before being turned away from the school. He thought back to his days as a Marine in World War II and as a correspondent covering the Korean War. “I decided not to run,” he said. “If I were to be beaten, I’d take it walking if I could – not running.”

His calm and determination enraged the mob. A man struck him in his right side. Then someone hit him in the jaw. Another man jumped on his back and choked him. Wilson shook him off.

“Run, damn you, run,” the man yelled. Wilson bent down and picked up his hat. He re-creased it. And again he walked. His body buckled when he was struck. Wilson staggered to his car and was shoved again. The mob turned back. Photographs of Wilson’s beating landed on the front page of newspapers nationwide. “Yes, I was abused – a victim of misguided violence – but I am not bitter,” he wrote. “If my effort to help bring human dignity in its fullest sense to the oppressed minority here is successful, then the welfare of all will be enhanced.” 67

Segregationists also attempted to intimidate black journalists through economic sanction. A delegate for a group of “Southern Christian women” urged Daisy Bates to persuade the students to withdraw from Central High. The woman promised future cooperation on

66 Hicks, “‘We Were Kicked, Beaten,’” *Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1957, 1.
67 Wilson, “*Defender* Reporter Beaten by Mob, Tells His Story,” *Defender*, October 5, 1957, 12. Also see Klibanoff, “L. Alex Wilson.”
integration in exchange for more time. Daisy and L.C. saw the request as a familiar, do-nothing
dodge. They refused to help. "You'll be destroyed—you, your newspaper, your reputation,"
Daisy recalled the woman saying. "Everything!" Soon after the visit, the State Press' financial
troubles worsened. Utility companies, real estate ventures, and small local businesses stopped
advertising in the newspaper. A supportive grocer was told his store would be bombed if he
continued advertise with the Bates. Circulation agents were warned not to distribute the paper.
"Being a friend of the Bates' in Little Rock is a risky enterprise," L.C. said. By 1959, the paper
survived on donations and NAACP advertising. Publication ceased that November. "Our friends
all over the country have kept us going since 1957," Daisy told Jet, "but we couldn't expect the
American people to keep up their support forever." 68

Ultimately, purged radicalism and expanding competition undermined the influence of
commercial black newspapers more than advertising boycotts and violent attacks on reporters.
Without its progressive impulse, commercial black journalism often seemed a stale rehashing of
stories that readers had already learned about from daily newspapers and network television.
Readers no longer bought commercial black newspapers for national news. Instead, they bought
them to learn about local news and events ignored by white journalists and to read commentary
interpreting race news from a black perspective. For the racial militancy once offered by
commercial newspapers, readers in the 1960s increasingly turned to the editors, activists, and
writers of a resurgent alternative black press.

"Bates Tells Why Ark. Paper Folded, Defender, December 2, 1959, A2; and "Paper in Red, Bateses Give
Chapter Five

Black Power Assaults the Black Newspaper

Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier ridiculed commercial publishers in 1957 for lopping off their most radical political aspirations and reinforcing the middle class' false sense of achievement. In *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier accused well-to-do African Americans of abandoning black cultural traditions and embracing consumer capitalism in hopes of gaining white society's acceptance. Frazier claimed the rejection of black values and the persistence of racial exclusion fostered feelings of inferiority among professionals and business owners. To compensate, they flaunted their wealth at debutante balls where they paraded before photographers' cameras. Frazier blistered publishers and journalists, particularly John Johnson of *Ebony*, for serving as the "mouthpiece" of this intellectually stunted middle class. ¹

Frazier accused publishers of celebrating a "make-believe" high society that deluded wealthy African Americans into thinking they had achieved notable success, even though racism helped power the free-market economy. Journalists promoted this illusion by reveling in the acquisition of wealth, inflating the importance of minor accomplishments, and equating recognition by the rich and powerful with actual achievement. Frazier concluded that journalists had a shallow understanding of the economic and social forces that shaped the world. He blamed their ignorance on "the inferior, segregated Negro schools" and a mindset "restricted by the social and mental isolation of the Negro world." Since journalists lacked a robust worldview, they heedlessly shored the self-deception that inhibited the middle class' political awakening. ²

Frazier scored some telling insights but opened himself to criticism through his selective mining of newspapers and magazines and his overstated smearing of journalists. His ire was

focused mostly on *Ebony*, the nation’s most popular black publication, which also happened to be a lifestyle magazine more than a protest publication. More broadly, Frazier denounced a self-censoring, self-congratulatory commercial press for the seeming triviality of its day-to-day journalism. While *Black Bourgeoisie* stirred controversy, it received only modest news coverage—several book reviews, a few columns, and occasional snide asides. Lester Granger, who headed the business-friendly National Urban League and wrote a column for the *New York Amsterdam News*, claimed Frazier’s ill-timed grumbling could delay social change because of his “unforgivable (among scientists) crime of dealing in stereotypes.” Anticommunist George Schuyler of the *Pittsburgh Courier* described the book as “a shameless, pamphleteering imposture, venting Leftist spleen under the thin guise of objectivity.” *Michigan Chronicle* editor Louis Martin, a stalwart Democrat, praised Frazier for writing “an important book which deserves a wide audience” but defended black publications as a supplement to, not a substitute for, the nation’s general press. ³

Despite the book’s flaws, Frazier captured young adults’ and progressives’ growing dissatisfaction with the halting pace of integration and what they saw as publishers’ easy acceptance of negotiated justice. Stymied by white southerners’ obstructionism, student protesters and radical activists re-energized the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s by steering black protest toward escalating militancy. Distrusting commercial publishers and journalists, these protesters birthed a revitalized alternative press that questioned the value of integration, endorsed armed self-defense, stoked an aggressive racial pride, and often embraced a Marxist critique of American capitalism. Such political views were ignored, downplayed, and panned by publishers who had participated in World War II’s “Double V”

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campaigns and journalists whose early careers coincided with the rise of McCarthyism. The meaning and influence of this alternative press emerged from a diverse body of idiosyncratic publishing ventures. It included student pamphlets, mimeographed newsletters, political journals edited by Old Left progressives, commentary by the artists of the Black Arts Movement, and in-house publications for Black Power groups. By the late 1960s, the militancy of the alternative press’ writers percolated throughout Black America, refuting white journalists’ depiction of the rising Black Power Movement as an abrupt rupture from the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. One radical publication, the Nation of Islam’s *Muhammad Speaks*, claimed a circulation rivaled only by *Ebony*. 4

Commercial publishers still boasted the largest concentration of black readers in the nation, but they alienated substantial numbers of them as they shifted from checking militancy to denouncing the Black Power Movement. Publishers attempted to corral and redirect young protesters in the early 1960s, describing the hundreds of sit-ins across the South as a justified, if potentially dangerous, politicization of nonviolence. In the mid-1960s, publishers wavered between validating and disavowing black anger. They challenged white journalists’ depictions of urban riots by acknowledging the legitimacy of African-American frustrations and blaming police brutality for sparking violence. But they also attempted to strip “Black Power” of its provocative overtones of suspended violence by assigning it a narrow political meaning. By the late 1960s, publishers openly condemned Black Power militants. They feared the outrageousness of Black Power rhetoric would destroy hard-won gains in voting rights, political representation, and legal protection. Unwilling to embrace the era’s militancy, publishers maintained relevance by

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supplying local news to large communities whose daily affairs were still ignored by the white media.

For black journalists, the Black Power Movement incongruously limited and expanded employment opportunities. The splintering of black print culture sapped the profitability of commercial newspapers and further eroded their capacity to adequately report on far-flung protests and controversial politics. Ironically, though, militancy also compelled white editors’ to hire more black journalists. As riots erupted in their hometowns, northern white editors realized black residents regarded their reporters with suspicion and hostility. These editors slowly began to hire black journalists to help them explain the causes of local riots. Increased minority hiring, though, did not translate into equal employment opportunities.

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Robert Williams, a gun-toting, discharged Marine and NAACP chapter president in Monroe, North Carolina, was one of the first militant activists to evade the silencing of his political views by self-publishing. Williams publicly advocated armed self-defense in the pursuit of racial justice. In May 1959, Williams declared he would “meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching” after a racially-motivated jury acquitted a white man who had attempted to rape a black woman. His comments ignited a national controversy. Soon afterward, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins suspended Williams, contending his views undermined the NAACP’s credibility and effectiveness. Williams circumvented his suspension by publishing the Crusader, a short-lived mimeographed newsletter. Williams used the newsletter to publicize his fight for equality in Monroe and to highlight protests and demonstrations that occurred in small towns across the South. Too often, he said, such activism was ignored by white journalists. “The real Afro-American struggle,” Williams wrote, “was merely a disjointed network of pockets of
resistance and the shameful thing about it was that Negroes were relying upon the white man’s inaccurate reports as their sources of information about these isolated struggles. As the Crusader’s circulation increased, so did membership in Monroe’s NAACP chapter.

Nine months later and about one hundred miles away, four college freshmen triggered student protests across the South after they sat down at a segregated lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina, and refused to get up. The sit-ins marked a bold, confrontational adaptation of Martin Luther King Jr.’s conception of nonviolence. Instead of boycotting segregated businesses until they integrated—as citizens in Montgomery, Alabama, had done—the students entered stores and stayed until they were served or arrested. Their actions visibly and forcibly disrupted the flow of everyday life in southern cities. The widespread popularity of sit-ins forced black leaders, including publishers and columnists, to demand integration more aggressively or risk losing credibility with readers. Within two years, student protests spurred more than two hundred cities in the upper South to desegregate public services. Demonstrators experienced far fewer successes in the Deep South.

Nationally, publishers supported students’ protests but lectured young activists on the need for proper leadership and organization. They advocated restraint. The Baltimore Afro-American’s editors advised students to consult a local lawyer, align themselves with a civil rights organization, and review their plans with city and police officials. Such advice was sound, but it stripped students of leadership responsibilities and diminished the spontaneity and urgency of their actions.

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7 "They Can’t Lose," Baltimore Afro-American, March 5, 1960, 4.
Publishers could issue parental-style endorsements because they linked student demonstrations to past examples of mass protest. The Chicago Defender compared the sit-ins to A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement and the bus boycott in Montgomery. Publishers did not recognize the sit-ins as a pivotal moment marking the escalation of youth militancy. Most saw the sit-ins as a threat only to southern white supremacists, not as an opening salvo rebuking establishmentarian black leadership. Editorials defending the students skimmed over the implicit aggressiveness of their actions by emphasizing the peacefulness and legality of their protests.  

Lutrelle Palmer, editor of the Memphis-based Tri-State Defender, was one of the first journalists to recognize the new militancy that infused student demonstrations. In March 1960, Palmer wrote a five-part series, "The New Face of Young Negro America," that attempted to explain why college students had become such ardent protesters so quickly. Palmer interviewed students in Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and elsewhere. "At every stop we made," he wrote, "we stood in awe as young people explained why they were all of sudden in such hot pursuit against the screaming devils of prejudice." Palmer connected students' growing unrest to the accretion of past injustices, King's effective use of nonviolence, and the success of African independence movements. He noted that students could afford to sacrifice more because they had less to lose than their parents, who were concerned with protecting jobs and families. He debunked speculation that the student movement was controlled by adults.  

Palmer also experienced how the heavy-handedness of southern justice inspired students to continue their protests despite hardships. Palmer was one of five black reporters and photographers arrested and convicted of disorderly conduct in Memphis while covering a sit-down demonstration at a segregated public library. Despite the humiliation of arrest and

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9 L.F. Palmer Jr., "Bare 'New Face of Young Negro America,'" Defender, March 26, 1960, 1.
being confined in an overcrowded prison cell, Palmer “was proud to lift my voice with those of the college men who sang out clearly and lustily the words of such stirring songs as ‘America the Beautiful,’ ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing,’ ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.’” After he and the demonstrators were bailed out, Palmer witnessed “even greater determination on the part of the students to continue their protest until victory was won.”

The limits of publishers’ tolerance for youth-led militancy were exposed in Atlanta by a dispute between student activists and C.M. Scott of the Daily World. Scott had found favor with white politicians and businessmen over the decades by supporting gradual integration and endorsing negotiation over protest. Scott’s views reflected the concerns and interests of Atlanta’s black business and professional class, which had achieved societal standing and financial stability through accommodation. Scott claimed to “understand the impatience of youth” when students attending Atlanta’s six black colleges picketed downtown businesses and organized sit-ins. He approved of nonviolence and recognized the legitimacy of the students’ demands. But he balked at direct protest, arguing it only created hostility and slowed reform. “Wise, mature counsel, combined with youthful energy and enthusiasm,” Scott’s newspaper editorialized, “can carry the march toward full freedom and citizenship farther with more permanent results and with less racial ill-will being generated.”

Frustrated with the Daily World’s news coverage, student protesters launched a rival newspaper. The Daily World’s journalists seldom wrote about the students’ aspirations. Their coverage was mostly procedural. They identified who was arrested and listed the charges. They reported on courtroom hearings. Morehouse College student Julian Bond claimed Scott’s opposition stemmed from financial concerns, not philosophical differences: An A&P store

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yanked its advertising after students picketed it. The inaugural issue of the Atlanta Inquirer appeared in July 1960. It was edited by M. Carl Holman, an English professor at Clark College, and J. Lowell Ware, who owned a printing press. The editors described the two-page paper as “the brain child of a group of young men who felt a void existed in the reporting of news in the Atlanta Negro community.” One writer pointedly told Atlanta’s black leaders to “either join hands and lead us together down the path of freedom or step aside.” The Inquirer’s existence rebuked Scott’s style of conciliatory politics. “When people say a story should be suppressed ‘for the good of the community,’” Holman said, “what they usually mean is peace at any price. We just don’t believe in that.”

The Inquirer’s pluck won it admiration and sales. Its editors refused advertising from segregated businesses. Reporters maneuvered a leading hospital into accepting all emergency room patients, regardless of their color. They also exposed Jim Crow practices at the Lockheed Aircraft Corp. plant in Marietta, Georgia, which violated a federal order prohibiting discrimination in government contract work. Charlayne Hunter, who integrated the University of Georgia and later wrote for the New Yorker and New York Times, said she “began applying my developing journalistic skills to social issues” at the Inquirer. Within a few years, the Inquirer was a modest financial success. The paper expanded from its emphasis on racial protests and politics into the broader coverage typical of commercial newspapers. By 1963, even early opponents advertised in it. Circulation topped 24,000 weekly in 1965, which compared favorably to the

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30,000 copies the *World* sold daily. Success was not welcomed by all. Ware believed the *Inquirer’s* advocacy mellowed as it matured. He left in 1966 to start the *Atlanta Voice*. ¹³

The alternative black press expanded and diversified in the early 1960s as rapidly as student demonstrations spread across the South. Like Williams’ *Crusader*, some publications built the influence of individual activists, readying them for national campaigns. In Detroit, for example, the Reverend Albert Cleage Jr. launched the biweekly *Illustrated News*. Started with help from family and friends, the *Illustrated News* was distributed for free to more than 35,000 readers. Cleage, who later changed the name of his Central Congregational Church to the Shrine of the Black Madonna, wrote most of the articles. One brother edited copy and another printed the paper. The paper’s printed words amplified those spoken from the pulpit. Cleage criticized the complacency of the black middle class and explained his militant, nationalistic theology, which depicted Jesus Christ as a strong critic of political and economic oppression. He exposed the poor condition of Detroit’s schools, criticized the empty promises of white liberals, and urged African Americans to vote only for black candidates in local elections. ¹⁴

Another publication bore the professional, progressive imprint of leftist writers once affiliated with Paul Robeson’s *Freedom*, illustrating the persistence of black radicalism. Founded in 1961, *Freedomways* was edited by Shirley Graham, the Communist Party member who had helped radicalize her husband, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Esther Cooper Jackson, an activist and former social worker married to a prominent Communist Party official. While Graham had wanted to publish an expressly Marxist journal, *Freedomways* ultimately sought a broader readership. The editors called the journal “a quarterly review of the Negro freedom movement,”


and they promised to “mirror developments in the diversified and many sided struggles of the Negro people.” Freedomways’ cultural influence far outstripped its small circulation, which started at 2,000 and rose to about 15,000. The journal boasted an eclectic mix of contributions from acclaimed scholars, writers, and activists. Reoccurring topics included union organization, the Civil Rights Movement, African independence, and opposition to the Vietnam War. The journal was a signature influence in explaining and propagating the Black Arts Movement, the intellectual and cultural extension of the Black Power Movement. Despite their affinity for politicized art, the editors avoided interacting with the leading political proponents of Black Power. 15

The Nation of Islam showed how radical editors could exploit notoriety created by commercial news coverage to launch their own publications. Despite a regular column and frequent articles in black newspapers, the sect remained relatively obscure until independent WNTA-TV, Channel 13 in New York aired a provocative television newscast in mid-July 1959. Malcolm X, who managed the group’s publicity, granted interviews by Muhammad and himself to Louis Lomax, a veteran black reporter working as a commentator for Channel 13. (They refused to take questions from Mike Wallace, the white anchorman for the station’s evening news broadcast.) The five-part series, “The Hate that Hate Produced,” created immediate controversy. Wallace introduced the program as “a story of the rise of black racism,” a compelling reversal of the typical civil rights story reported from the South. Few viewers had heard of Black Muslims and fewer had seen footage of their worship services or rallies. Viewers’ fascination prompted the station to re-air the program the following week. Malcolm X regarded

the report as purposely sensationalistic, saying “Every phrase was edited to increase the shock mood.” But he credited the program with catapulting the Nation of Islam into the national consciousness.  

Other news outlets – black and white – followed up with their own stories, and the ensuing coverage elevated the sect’s influence far beyond its membership. The controversy provoked the Courier’s new board chairman, an assimilationist Chicago cosmetics manufacturer, to dump Muhammad’s column. Other black publishers, seeking to capitalize on the sect’s newfound fame, eagerly aligned themselves with the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X placed Muhammad’s column in the Los Angeles Herald Dispatch, which began to operate as an affiliated organization. Other newspapers, including the Amsterdam News and Milwaukee Defender, continued to run occasional columns and news articles. Articles also appeared in national white publications, including the New York Times, Time, and Newsweek. As whites learned more about Black Muslims, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) moved to discredit the group. Federal agents fed negative information to journalists, and unfriendly stories later appeared in Time, U.S. News & World, Saturday Evening Post, and other publications. Scholar Jane Rhodes argues that the FBI’s wide-ranging media campaign backfired because “the adverse publicity actually heightened black interest in the organization and helped increase its membership.”

By 1961, swelling membership allowed the Nation of Islam’s leaders to start Muhammad Speaks, their most successful publication, and reassert control over how their

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beliefs were presented publicly. Malcolm X wanted the monthly tabloid, which became a weekly
two years later, to serve as a concentrated news source for information about the sect's
 teachings, beliefs, and views on world events. While the white media had extended the group's
influence, Malcolm X believed only an independent black publication could accurately portray
black viewpoints. "The Negro press is our only medium," he said, "for voicing the true plight of
our oppressed people in the world." The editors depicted integration as a failure, promoted
black separatism and racial solidarity, and disparaged black leaders who disagreed with them.
They wrote extensively about political developments in Asia and Africa and condemned the
abuses of Western imperialism. The paper's editorial staff consisted mostly of non-Muslim,
leftist writers and editors. Lomax helped put out the first few issues. Malcolm X was succeeded
as editor by Dan Burley, a popular writer who had worked for the Defender, Amsterdam News,
Ebony, and other black publications. Burley recruited other journalists from commercial
newspapers and magazines. Veteran journalist Richard Durham, the former Defender reporter
and radio broadcaster, joined the staff and was later named editor. These journalists
transformed Muhammad Speaks into one of the nation's most popular black publications. 18

Black journalists' coverage of the Nation of Islam illustrated why commercial black
newspapers remained relevant in the early 1960s, despite severe newsgathering limitations and
falling circulations. Both black and white journalists typically covered Black Muslims when they
were arrested or appeared in court. But when white reporters wrote about followers' beliefs,
they portrayed them as extremists who threatened racial progress. In contrast, black editors and
columnists tended to depict the Nation of Islam's ideology as understandable, if wrongheaded,
given America's history of racism. Black writers frequently compared Black Muslims to race-
baiting white southern politicians and white supremacist groups — not to justify or discredit the

18 Rhodes, "The Black Press and Radical Print Culture," 295-296; and Turner, Islam in the
African-American Experience, 199.
sect’s beliefs but to deflate white America’s outrage by emphasizing the nation’s long-standing tolerance of racial hatred. Retired baseball star Jackie Robinson criticized the House Un-American Activities Committee in his *Amsterdam News* column for wanting to investigate the Nation of Islam. Committee members never uttered “a mumbling word,” Robinson observed, about the Ku Klux Klan or White Citizens Councils. Even as book reviewer J. Saunders Redding criticized Black Muslims for race hatred, he traced aspects of their views to Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, the ill-fated antihero defeated by racism in *Native Son* (1940), and Marcus Garvey’s separatist back-to-Africa movement. By opposing but defending Black Muslims’ teachings, Robinson and Saunders managed to marginalize the sect as a source of legitimate race leadership and undermine its use as propaganda by segregation’s defenders. 19

A few black writers published by white editors, particularly those working for literary magazines of politics and opinion, ensured that white America was not completely blindsided by the rising tide of black militancy. Writers like James Baldwin, Louis Lomax, and William Worthy wrote for an interracial readership, their commentary informed by their familiarity with black print culture, including its radical publications. Their articles appeared in magazines like *Harper’s, New Republic, Nation, Commentary, Saturday Review, Mademoiselle,* and *Esquire.* These writers foretold the Civil Rights Movement’s turn toward unrest well before hundreds of riots erupted in cities nationwide. They warned that young African Americans were fed up with white opposition to equality and black leaders’ willingness to compromise. “A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay,” Baldwin wrote in a *New Yorker* essay that became the bulk of his critically acclaimed *The Fire Next Time* (1963). After studying student demonstrations in twenty-six southern cities, Lomax wrote in *Harper’s* that young activists

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realized older black leaders in education and business might undermine the fight for integration because their livelihoods depended upon pleasing white officials who paid their wages. “But the students told me they are not prejudiced,” Lomax reported, “they are willing to stand up to their enemies, Negro and white alike.” 20

More than other writers, Worthy linked the militancy of the Black Power Movement to colonial revolutions in the Third World. Worthy was a pacifist who helped organize an all-black political party and barred whites from a committee organized to defend him against government prosecution. And yet, he enjoyed the respect of national news outlets, thanks to the early patronage of legendary newsman Edward R. Murrow, his opposition to the State Department’s efforts to restrict journalists’ foreign travels, and his unrivaled access to international leaders who challenged America’s foreign policy interests. Worthy’s most high-profile pieces on black radicalism appeared in Esquire, a men’s magazine celebrated for its quality journalism. His articles examined how American hypocrisy in its dealings with African and Asian nations inspired black militants to embrace aggression. 21

Worthy’s first Esquire article was a dispassionate explanation of the Nation of Islam aimed at a white readership. Worthy neither shied away from the sect’s excesses nor sensationalized them. He noted that Black Muslims “believe in discrimination against whites,” but refuted a government report that characterized them as a national security threat. Like Saunders, Worthy compared the sect to Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement. He explained how its appeal was broader than most observers realized by noting that the group’s definition of black identity included “all of the darker peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.” As a black writer for a white magazine, Worthy provided his readers with the context

21 Regarding Worthy’s militancy, see Joseph, Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour.
(sorely lacking in daily newspaper coverage) they needed to understand — without agreeing with — the Black Muslims. 22

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By 1963, the escalation of black militancy and white violence was inescapable. Time described the year “as the time when the U.S. Negro’s revolution for equality exploded on all fronts.” More than 1,400 separate demonstrations occurred that summer — an unprecedented wave of protest. In the North, picketers protested job discrimination at construction sites in Philadelphia and New York. In both cities, police officers squared off against activists. During a rally in Chicago, militants jeered moderate black leaders and booed Mayor Richard J. Daley. In the South, sit-in protesters were beaten in Mississippi, and police used tear gas against demonstrators in Florida. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) encouraged children and teenagers to march in Birmingham’s streets. Police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Conner earned international condemnation when he blasted them with fire hoses and deployed attack dogs. Months later, four schoolgirls died when white supremacists bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Growing discontent led African Americans to question the leadership of civil rights organizations and commercial newspapers, prompting many to explore the words and aims of black militants. 23

The New York-based Liberator reflected rising black anger as Daniel H. Watts, an architect turned activist, built a national circulation by promoting armed self-defense as the only responsible option for securing full equality. Started in 1961, the Liberator evolved from a newsletter for supporters of African independence into a militant monthly that juxtaposed

Africa’s independence movements with the black freedom struggle in the United States. Watts believed his journal could serve as “a bridge for unity between the two movements which must eventually become one.” When moderates began 1963 by celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Watts questioned the claims of progress that he heard in polite speeches. “Racism and jim crow [sic] are such basic ingredients of the American way of life,” he wrote, “that they will not be eliminated without major surgery.” His statement explained his opposition to nonviolence and negotiation: Reform was impossible. Only radical change could eradicate racism. Watts dismissed the March on Washington as a co-opted display of integrationist unity “more concerned about keeping the demonstration orderly and controlled than making it a demonstration of the uncompromising militant mood of the people.” He encouraged his readers to disrupt the march, confident others would abandon the doctrine of nonviolence if provoked. Watts pointed to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing to explain the difference between King’s “dream” of integration and the “reality” of violent white supremacy. He criticized King “for continuing to preach a policy of non-violence and love in spite of the daily toll of humiliation, blood and life which this policy has cost his people.”

In July 1964, a white police officer shot and killed a black teenager in New York City, touching off the first in a series of urban uprisings that would occur each summer for the rest of the decade. Rioters burned buildings and looted stores. One person was killed, and more than one hundred were injured. Hundreds were arrested. The uprising stunned white officials. It occurred just two weeks after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation and other forms of racial discrimination. Later that summer, riots

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also occurred in Rochester, New York, and Philadelphia. White reporters speculated about the riots' causes, frequently faulting radical agitators and black pathology.  

Commercial black editors and journalists blamed the Harlem uprising on unjustified police brutality, but they also criticized black citizens for expressing their legitimate frustrations through destruction. Unlike Watts' Liberator, they did not welcome violence. As rioting raged, the Amsterdam News' editors urged readers "to do everything within your power to bring an end to the riots in our Negro communities, which are hurting us all." They attempted to restore calm by arguing that rioting solved none of Harlem's problems and only reinforced its enemies' preconceptions. Attempts to curb violence were matched with political demands. The editors proposed the creation of a civilian review board to investigate charges of police brutality and encouraged the promotion of black officers to supervisory positions. Only a sincere attempt at reform, they argued, could "restore the confidence of our community in its Police Department." 

In Chicago, Defender editors warned that urban uprisings would spread unless the federal government attempted to resolve the inner-city's joblessness, dilapidated housing, and slum conditions. "America's social order must undergo drastic revisions," an editorial stated, "if it is to meet the challenge of the new Negro." Such remedies were substantial and expensive. 

Defender columnist Chuck Stone argued that white officials and commentators preferred "a superficial analysis" of rioting because blaming militants and communists for plotting fiery insurrections allowed them to propose "equally superficial remedies." 

Black militancy coupled with urban uprisings frightened and baffled most white journalists. They adopted a new journalistic narrative that reflected their alarm, as well as their readers' fears. Public opinion polls showed that a majority of whites were fed up with black

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protest and wanted more repressive measures taken to control black behavior. Before the riots, national news coverage pitted snarling southern racists against nonviolent, conscientious objectors. It emphasized the wrongness of segregation and sided with protesters. Afterward, black protest was increasingly characterized as extremist, unexplainable, and self-defeating. The news focused on northern black aggressiveness, and the threat posed to the status quo. Activist Stokely Carmichael sensed white reporters’ consternation when he held a press conference to discuss the new militancy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). “What I do remember clearly,” Carmichael recalled, “is how little they seemed to understand, as though they were stuck in 1960 with the student sit-ins and we were speaking in unknown tongues.” The white reporters who had supplanted black journalists as chroniclers of the Civil Rights Movement characterized Black Power activists as a foreign threat — “apparently from outer space,” Carmichael observed — rather than an evolution in the movement’s character. 27

Veteran Newsweek reporter Karl Fleming, for example, struggled to comprehend the new tenor of black protest. Fleming had covered nonviolent marches and sit-ins across the South. Black men and women had welcomed him into their homes and churches. He had shared their distrust of racist cops and blanched when protesters were beaten. Segregationists had stalked and harassed him. Then Fleming transferred to California and covered the uprising in Watts. That black working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles burned for six days in August 1965 after a traffic stop for drunk driving escalated into a riot. Thirty-four people died. Fires gutted more than one thousand buildings. The National Guard was mobilized. Authorities arrested nearly four thousand people. Fleming once again encountered hostility covering racial protest, but this time his presence angered African Americans. Eight months later, Fleming attended a

rally where Carmichael pointed him out to the crowd and accused him of feeding off of black misery. Later, an assailant attacked Fleming from behind, apparently hitting him over the head with a board and kicking him after he fell. Fleming fractured his skull and jaw. “To blacks in the South, I was one of the good guys, someone to trust and shelter,” he recalled. “To blacks in Watts, I was just another faceless exploitive whitey, someone to hate, and hurt.”

White editors remained oblivious to how deeply they misunderstood black protest and the nature of institutionalized racism. Claude Sitton, a race reporter for the New York Times, complained that newspapers neither devoted enough time nor assigned enough reporters to adequately cover racial issues. Northern publishers and editors often congratulated themselves on disseminating news about racial injustice in the South but were blind to prejudices in their own newsrooms and hometowns. Token employment persisted. The American Newspaper Guild estimated in 1964 that only forty-five blacks worked as reporters, copyreaders, photographers, or deskmen at large daily newspapers. The U.S. Census Bureau figured African Americans occupied just one hundred of the fifty thousand newsroom positions at such papers. News coverage reflected this employment disparity. “Despite the admittedly fine job many Northern papers have done on the racial struggle in the South,” said the New York Post’s Ted Poston, “few of them have met their responsibilities to those of their readers who are hemmed in, hopeless, and sometimes helpless in their own back yards.” Jet’s Simeon Booker was more damning. “I feel the profession, more than any other, represents the hypocrisy in America to Negroes and corrodes, in too many cases, the faith of those of my people who wish only a fair shake.”

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When white journalists critiqued their coverage of the “Negro revolution,” they narrowly examined whether professional standards were upheld. The central debate about coverage revolved around geography rather than justice. Southern editors accused northern reporters of engaging in sensationalism and ignoring racial wrongs in their own circulation areas. Such charges challenged the neutrality of race reporters and pressured them to adopt a narrow, technocratic understanding of journalistic objectivity. Northern editors defended their work but often debated whether they made news—instead of covering it—when they assigned reporters to cover protests. The undercurrent of such discussions questioned the legitimacy of black protest. Northern editors also pondered who qualified as a legitimate black spokesman, a debate that tended to conflate diverse political perspectives into a monolithic black community and implied an inherent distrust of words spoken by average black men and women. White journalists less often asked themselves whether they had a moral obligation to advance integration.30

The new journalistic plotline disturbed civil rights activists who had worked closely with white reporters in the South. They sensed a widening gulf between their outlook and the views

30 My characterization of how race reporters critiqued their coverage of race news comes from my examination of Editor & Publisher during the 1960s. Also see David R. Davies, The Postwar Decline of American Newspapers, 1945-1965 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 63-76. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff illustrate how the standard journalistic narrative concerning news coverage of the Civil Rights Movement continues to shape history in The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). Roberts and Klibanoff present a sympathetic account of a particular set of journalists—white reporters covering race news for national news outlets. These objective reporters are contrasted with well-intentioned liberal, white Southern journalists who favored gradual desegregation, reactionary white Southern editors who aimed to halt integration, and brave but partisan black reporters relegated to the movement’s sidelines. In this framing, black journalists are attributed minor relevance because they work for slow-paced weeklies, are unable to breach the color line when on assignment, and violate the professional dictate of objectivity. Their courage is praised but their work is mostly ignored after the Little Rock crisis in 1957. With black journalists marginalized, the authors emphasize geographical difference as the main fault line in news perspective rather than racial difference. This emphasis exaggerates the racial progressiveness of race reporters by having them serve as a counterpoint to intolerance rather than full equality.

When examining the totality of media coverage, scholars are more critical of how journalists framed 1960s social movements for public consumption. For examples, see Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; Richard Lentz, Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and Rhodes, Framing the Black Panthers.
of previously supportive news outlets. "This new phase," SNCC's Bond recalled, "was characterized by much greater press suspicion of what appeared to be ever more radical black demands for the restructuring of America's economic, political, and social system." SCLC's Ralph Abernathy believed the movement's shift northward challenged notions of moral superiority held by white publishers and journalists. "When you attacked Mississippi, New Yorkers and San Franciscans felt good about themselves," Abernathy said. "When you attacked Chicago, everybody felt uncomfortable. So the press backed off, and when we went back down South, they never quite rejoined us, not with their previous enthusiasm." 31

No outlet scrutinized white journalists' framing of racial protest as intently as Negro Digest (later renamed Black World). Publisher John Johnson re-launched his first magazine in 1961, hiring Hoyt W. Fuller as his editor. Fuller had quit Ebony in dissatisfaction several years earlier, observing that the magazine "did not seem to be moving in any direction that it seemed important for me to go." Under Fuller's editorial guidance, Negro Digest evolved into a sophisticated journal of politics, art, and culture. Despite Johnson's integrationist political views, Fuller treated black militancy as a credible political response to racism and became a leading patron of the Black Arts Movement. 32

In Negro Digest, writers challenged the language adopted by white journalists to depict black protest. Psychologist Kenneth B. Clark said the popular use of "Negro revolution" mischaracterized racial protest because African Americans did not want to overthrow American society, they wanted to join it. "The year 1963, therefore, was a year of revulsion—a year of confrontation of hypocrisy." Poet Calvin C. Hernton described the misapplication of "revolution"

as a purposeful manipulation of language to prevent substantial social change. "If Negroes can be made to think they are being revolutionary," he wrote, "they will become satisfied with what they are getting or will become illusioned as to the exact nature of what it takes to really make them free, and what it is really like to be free." Similarly, Fuller rejected the idea of "white backlash," a term used to blame black militants for a decline in white support for equality. Fuller asked when white support had ever existed for black demands. He wondered whether journalists’ used the concept of a backlash “to blackmail Negroes into submission.”

The urban uprisings represented both opportunity and dilemma for black journalists working in the white media. Robert C. Maynard, a Nieman Fellow who wrote for the Washington Post, credited the rebellions with spurring white editors to move beyond token racial hiring in their newsrooms. In particular, Maynard cited the Watts riot as a moment of transition because attacks on white journalists forced them to retreat from scenes of violence and looting in black neighborhoods. Since the Los Angeles Times had no black journalists on its editorial staff, editors could not obtain an eyewitness account of rioting. Forced by necessity, editors asked 24-year-old office messenger Robert Richardson to phone in reports from the riot’s frontlines. An editor’s note touted the authenticity of Richardson’s first front-page report by identifying him as “a Negro” who had observed rioters for nearly eight hours. Maynard noted that such coverage – repeated in many other cities – was inherently flawed. Editors would ask a copy aide, librarian’s assistant, or even a circulation truck driver to blend in with the crowd and report what they saw “so that others could write a story they had not in most instances

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witnessed and whose causes they could only dimly perceive.” The following year, the Los Angeles Times hired its first black reporter. 34

Austin Scott, an Associated Press reporter in New York, realized as he covered uprisings in Harlem, Rochester, and elsewhere that his editors prevented him from printing objective reports. White editors distrusted what he told them. Scott learned that “they did not know enough about black communities to find what was going on in the streets of America believable.” When editors did not believe what Scott told them, they accused him of being biased. “I soon learned there was no such thing as objective reporting,” Scott later said. “Everybody has a point of view. If someone tells you that you’re objective, they are probably saying that you have met their biases in terms of what you are reporting.” To counter his editors’ preconceptions, Scott decided to focus his riot reporting on “what black people were feeling,” rather than talk to police captains or politicians. “Nobody was going to cover the streets,” he said, “if I didn’t do it.” 35

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SNCC’s Carmichael popularized the powerful but ambiguous “Black Power” slogan in mid-June 1966, and white journalists soon transformed it into an abbreviation that signified the escalating menace of black protest. Carmichael led chants of “Black Power” as he, King, and other activists completed the journey through Mississippi started by James Meredith, who was shot just thirty miles into his publicity-raising march. Within weeks, the rallying cry had commandeered white journalists’ attention and transformed Carmichael into a national

spokesman. Despite reporters' repeated questioning, the cagey Carmichael refused to clarify what he meant by Black Power. His equivocal statements played upon white racial phobias.

Black journalists and activists accused white reporters of fear-mongering when they elevated Carmichael's national stature. Afro-American columnist Ralph Matthews contended that white journalists expected Carmichael to replace the murdered Malcolm X as the incendiary black bogeyman in journalistic narratives. "They wanted somebody with a switch blade tongue like Malcolm," Matthews wrote. "Stokely was their boy." Similarly, King believed journalists inflated the division among civil rights organizations concerning Black Power to create heroes and villains for their storylines. If not for sensationalistic news coverage, King claimed, the debate about Black Power might have been "little more than a healthy internal difference of opinion." "In every drama," King wrote, "there has to be an antagonist and a protagonist, and if the antagonist is not there the press will find and build one." 36

Black commercial publishers attempted to neutralize Black Power's violent undertones by defining it as the effective use of voting rights available to all citizens in a representative democracy. Unlike militants, publishers and editors valued landmark federal legislation – the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 – that outlawed segregation and ordered racial fairness in political participation. At the Amsterdam News, publisher C.B. Powell and editor James Hicks viewed Black Power as a means to secure the political rights promised by the government. They defined Black Power as "all acts of self defense by black men to force white city, state and Federal governments to comply with the civil rights laws guaranteed by the Federal Government and the Constitution of the United States." At the Afro-American, editors conflated Black Power with political representation. "There is nothing wrong with 'power,'" they

editorialized. “In American democracy, the majority rules. Majority is the equivalent of power and everybody, colored or white, seeks it.” The editors warned against armed self-defense, which could easily “lead to an underground movement and violence without restraint.” In Chicago, the Defender’s editors distinguished Black Power from separatism and political extremism. They emphasized the need to cooperate with liberal whites. For them, Black Power was the “development of a black power structure that will command attention and compel action in areas where progress is now at snail’s pace or where the Negro has to depend on the shifting attitudes of the white folk for resolution of critical issues.”

Leading publishers attributed conventional political meaning to Black Power as they worried about losing access to influential lawmakers because they no longer boasted a meaningful national readership. Like white newspaper executives, they had dismissed television as an entertainment medium, only to see the national networks lure away their readers, advertisers, and even a few reporters. Like other metropolitan publishers, they saw suburbanization and climbing production costs erode their profitability. As profits dwindled, the mechanics of national distribution simply cost too much to maintain. “We can’t afford field men any longer,” said John Jordan, managing editor of the Norfolk Journal and Guide, “and transportation is too complicated and expensive. It is virtually impossible to provide adequate coverage of the national scene anyway.”

The expansion of black-oriented radio exacerbated newspaper publishers' circulation problems. The number of black-oriented stations increased by two and half times in a dozen years, jumping from forty-three stations located largely in the South in 1956 to 108 stations

nationwide in 1968. One study estimated 90 percent of black households regularly listened to black-oriented radio. Julian Bond, SNCC’s publicity director, turned to the airwaves when he wanted to reach a mass audience. “Radio was what they listened to,” he said, “and radio was where they got their information.” Focused on music and entertainment and overseen by white owners, black-oriented stations lacked the resources and commitment needed to cover the Civil Rights Movement as newsgathering organizations. Instead, the stations functioned as electronic community bulletin boards. Deejays announced registration drives and meeting dates. They aired racially-themed public affairs programming. They announced news immediately and could increase turnout for live protests. 39

Meanwhile, newspapers retrenched. The 74-year-old Claude Barnett retired and shuttered his news service, the Associated Negro Press, when he failed to find a buyer. The Amsterdam News focused more intently on Harlem. The Afro-American’s front page retained a national perspective — partly because the federal government was part of its local coverage — but its readership was concentrated in cities with individualized local editions — Baltimore, Richmond, Newark, and Washington, D.C. Defender publisher John Sengstacke had conceded his inability to grow a national readership when he transformed his flagship newspaper into a daily. The diminished relevance of commercial black newspapers was fully realized in October 1966 when Sengstacke bought the nearly bankrupt Pittsburgh Courier. 40

Despite publishers’ worries, national politicians and federal bureaucrats recognized the value of acknowledging and accommodating black journalists and their newspapers. Democratic Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson knew black voters were crucial to their

electoral ambitions. Both curried favor with publishers in hopes of reaching their readers. Each president met with delegations of publishers to discuss civil rights. Each appointed journalists and publishers to various boards and commissions and issued them prestigious invitations. Louis Martin, the founding editor of the Michigan Chronicle, served as deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee. He ensured publishers were represented when political patronage was distributed. Kennedy appointed Sengstacke to the President’s Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces, which was formed to study ways to accelerate racial integration and curb discrimination occurring just outside of bases. Reporter Carl Rowan was appointed deputy assistant director with the State Department. Rowan immediately broadened the agency’s racial perspective by culling briefing materials from black publications, observing that the frustrations of African diplomats “often are reflected in the pages of these publications long before they come to the official attention of anyone in Government.” Later, Rowan served as the director of the U.S. Information Agency and encouraged Johnson to expand the American propaganda campaign against North Vietnam.  

Black newspapers remained relevant because their editors and reporters still printed news unavailable elsewhere. White editors refused to print photographs of black brides and obituaries for domestics and laborers. They never wrote up black charity galas, sorority fundraisers, church events, and school award ceremonies. “If you only read the regular press,” said Lee Blackwell, the Defender’s managing editor, “you’d think Negroes never were born, never got married, and didn’t die.” Blackwell’s boss characterized such editorial decision-making as “censorship by omission.” For Sengstacke, purposeful exclusion of African Americans in most sections of daily newspapers exposed white journalists’ interest in racial justice as a fraud

designed to boost circulation through tokenism. While black editors neglected in-depth reporting and investigations, they compensated by keeping readers updated on prolonged protests and providing space for coverage of speeches and rallies and diverse commentary. The *Amsterdam News*, for example, boasted a heavy-hitting columnist lineup in the mid-1960s that included six leading activists—Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, and Dorothy Height. Hicks joked that he got so mad when his celebrity columnists turned in their copy late that he dressed down his regular writers.  

Even so, no newspaper publisher merited the special presidential attention lavished on the publisher of *Jet* and *Ebony*. Johnson’s publishing company easily boasted the nation’s largest black readership. His accommodating politics posed fewer obstacles to politicians who wanted to gain black voters without upsetting their white constituents. Both Kennedy and Johnson complained to the publisher about criticism dished in *Jet*. Each time, Johnson agreed with the president’s criticism and promised fairer coverage in the future. His amenability was rewarded. Johnson claimed Kennedy offered him a government post. Instead, he asked for help lining up new advertisers. Soon afterward, the Ford Motor Company began advertising with Johnson Publications. Kennedy later asked Johnson to attend the Ivory Coast’s independence celebration as an official delegate. After President Johnson berated publisher Johnson for thirty minutes, the publisher conceded some of “our people were Kennedy people who resented the fact that Kennedy was dead and that somebody was trying to take his place.” The duo then held up a copy of *Jet* (which the president had brought with him) and posed for a photograph. President Johnson appointed the publisher to a presidential commission that examined ways to fix the Selective Service System and eliminate discrimination in the military draft. Former *Ebony* writer

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and editor John Woodford claimed his employer spiked stories to please politicians. An opinion poll was canned—despite having been promoted—after readers indicated they strongly favored Democratic presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy over the incumbent Johnson.  

By the late 1960s, commercial black publishers almost universally condemned the Black Power Movement, particularly the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Co-founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the Black Panthers simultaneously courted and baited white journalists with their provocative language and menacing demeanor. Armed and attired in fatigues, members intentionally displayed themselves as freedom fighters staging a revolution against an imperialist American state that abused its police powers. They seized the national imagination with what scholar Nikhal Pal Singh calls “an insurgent form of visibility, a literal-minded and deadly serious kind of guerrilla theater.”

The Black Panthers perfectly suited the white media’s need for gripping visuals and memorable sound bites. For example, H. Rap Brown, the SNCC chairman who joined the Black Panthers in 1968, told a mostly black audience during a typical speech in Washington, D.C., that any white man entering a black neighborhood should understand “you are going to come in with the intent of dying or you don’t come in at all.” He advocated “more shooting than looting, so if you loot, loot a gun store.” His words landed in the New York Times. Brown later griped about white journalists’ coverage of his incendiary statements. “I’m a crazy, dangerous nigger, who hates white folks, according to the media,” he wrote in his political autobiography. “The news

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media is one of the greatest enemies to Black people. It is controlled by the ruling classes and is used to articulate their point of view." 45

Content analysis studies show that, regardless of region or politics, commercial black publishers and editors overwhelmingly opposed the Black Panthers, as well as other militant groups. In Oklahoma City, the Black Dispatch’s John Dunjee dismissed the Black Panthers as “false prophets and instant saviors of the black race.” In Norfolk, Journal and Guide editor Jordan contrasted the venerable NAACP with upstart militant organizations, calling it “a perennial warrior for equality, not a flash in the pan pugilist.” When the Defender offered cash prizes for the best suggestions to prevent summertime riots, editors warned readers to avoid “the professional haters who conceal their basic hatred by assuming the mantle of fighters of freedom.” The leading exception to publishers’ opposition was psychologist Carlton Goodlett, who owned the San Francisco Sun-Reporter. His paper covered the Black Panthers as local news. While Goodlett distanced himself from the Black Panthers’ most provocative remarks, he asserted the legitimacy of their perspective and criticized their harassment by law enforcement officers. 46

Publishers insisted Black Power advocates were bogus leaders without a following. They lobbied white journalists to ignore them. “Let’s stop giving birth to Negro leaders,” Louisville publisher Frank Stanley told journalists at the National Press Club in 1967. “No one Negro, not

even Dr. Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins or Whitney Young, speaks for the entire American Negro population. It is unrealistic to assume such and it is ridiculous to print it.” 47

In turn, Black Power activists accused commercial publishers of neglecting their mission of protest for personal profit. Like E. Franklin Frazier, militants accused publishers of seeking white favor and serving only the needs of the black middle class. “A crusading, militant, educational press is one pre-requisite for the sort of battle we are in,” H. Rap Brown wrote, “today’s black press, controlled as it usually is by whites, does not meet the needs.” John Woodford believed Ebony avoided writing about the Black Panther Party because Johnson regarded its members not only “as bad apples, but also considered covering them as not worth the financial risk.” Militants’ criticisms seeped into white coverage of black newspapers. A dissident press deemed radical just two decades earlier was now depicted as moderate, even conservative. A writer for Holiday, a large-circulation travel magazine, wrote in 1967 that even the most outspoken black newspapers “usually sounded middle-aged; tired, exasperated and cautious.” 48

Like other progressives and social reformers, Black Power militants increasingly turned to self-publishing to bypass the ideological blinders of an establishmentarian media wedded to conventional political wisdom. The alternative black press was just one component of a flowering underground press that opposed the Vietnam War and the two-party political system and promoted progressive politics, feminism, and minority and gay rights. Militants and leftists saw alternative publications as a way to clarify their beliefs, communicate with supporters, and recruit new followers. Their readership and political vibrancy peaked in the late 1960s and early

1970s. Birthed by perceived political necessity, most of these small publications ceased to exist within a few years. Others established lengthy press runs. Their political and cultural influence outstripped their usually meager circulations.⁴⁹

Radical journalists informed the Black Arts Movement and, in turn, were shaped by Black Power’s intellectual and artistic endeavors. Alternative journals – including Freedomways, Liberator, and Negro Digest/Black World – introduced the works of new poets, authors, and artists to create what scholar James Edward Smethurst calls “a national community in which ideology and aesthetics were debated and a wide range of approaches to African American artistic style and subject displayed.” A new racial consciousness, a sense of black cultural nationalism, emerged from these debates to challenge the centrality of nonviolence and integration to the Civil Rights Movement. Poet Larry Neal said the militant political orientation of this new black aesthetic spoke to “the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” and related broadly “to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood.” Activist artists emphasized the political implications of artistic creation. While teaching at San Francisco State College in 1967, Amiri Baraka (née LeRoi Jones) formulated a “Black Communications Plan” carried out by members of the Black Students Union. The plan outlined how to promote black militancy through a range of artistic endeavors, including dance, drama, arts, and literature, and media platforms, from community bulletin boards to newsletters to newspapers.⁵⁰

Among alternative black publications, the Nation of Islam’s Muhammad Speaks and the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service (BPINS) surpassed commercial black newspapers in popularity. Muhammad Speaks had evolved by the late 1960s into a wide-ranging weekly

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⁴⁹ For examples of the 1960s alternative press, see Wachsberger, Voices from the Underground, vol. 1.

newspaper that championed the sect's teachings but also reported on world events from a black nationalist perspective. Celebrated writers like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes wrote for the newspaper. Former *Ebony* writer John Woodford regarded the Nation of Islam's theology with "a sort of scoffing amazement," but joined *Muhammad Speaks*’ staff because he admired its aggressive news coverage. Woodford believed the paper "was presenting more stories about issues and events that concerned African-Americans and Africans than any other publication, and that it was doing so in a more forthright, more 'together' way." When Woodford took over as editor in 1969, a typical issue included a sixteen-page insert promoting the Nation of Islam plus another four pages of religious essays and a centerpiece spread written by Muhammad. That left Woodford with about twenty-eight pages where he was mostly free to assign news stories as he saw fit. (Occasionally, Muhammad’s intermediaries reminded him that the Nation of Islam did not participate in the white man’s politics.) Woodford sent correspondents to the Soviet Union, Cuba, North Vietnam, and various African nations. His writers condemned the Vietnam War and America’s imperialistic foreign policy. "We never supposed that the nations we supported were chock full of selfless, flawless peasant heroes and heroines," Woodford said. "We supported their right to get Uncle Sam & Co. off their backs." By 1970, *Muhammad Speaks* claimed an unaudited circulation of more than 400,000.  

The Black Panthers viewed BPINS as a way to explain their political views directly to the people they wanted to recruit. The paper began as a four-page monthly newsletter published in April 1967 to protest the death of member Denzil Dowell, who was shot in the back by a police officer. The paper initially focused on defining the party’s ideology and sharing party business. Its most influential editor was Eldridge Cleaver, a paroled convict who won acclaim for *Soul on Ice*, his 1968 collection of essays on race and culture. Emory Douglas, an artist who learned

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51 Woodford, "Messaging the Blackman," 82, 84, 86.
printing in juvenile detention, designed and laid out the paper. An editorial described the publication as “the alternative to the ‘government approved’ stories presented in the mass media and the product of an effort to present the facts not stories as dictated by the oppressor, but as seen from the other end of a gun.” BPINS became a weekly newspaper in January 1968. It expanded within a few years into a 32-page publication with frequent color inserts. 52

The paper’s content evolved with its production standards. Writers tackled issues concerning the black inner city, asking hard questions about police brutality, a biased criminal justice system, substandard housing, and inadequate healthcare. They regularly linked the African American quest for racial justice to revolutionary causes around the world and openly embraced Marxist thought. Articles celebrated China’s Chairman Mao Zedong and Cuba’s President Fidel Castro as heroes of the people. Editors not only condemned American military involvement in Vietnam but sided with the communist North Vietnamese government. As the paper grew, so did the party’s membership and cultural influence. Street sales and subscriptions provided a steady source of income for ambitious social outreach programs, which included free health clinics, legal aid, and breakfasts for children. The Black Panthers claimed a circulation of 110,000 in 1970. 53

BPINS’ visual militancy reinforced its textual aggressiveness, provoking police surveillance and inspiring racial pride. The newspaper’s design was as inflammatory as its spokesmen. Headlines referred to the “pig power structure.” The use of red shading reiterated the party’s commitment to bloody violence and Marxist-inspired revolution. Columns and statements by party officials, particularly Newton, were framed as intellectual revolutionary

53 Ibid.
manifestos, with rules and belief statements starkly numbered, titled, and officially issued – as if
by decree. Iconic photographs and sketches portrayed party members as colonial freedom
fighters, their hard looks paired with raised rifles. Law enforcement agents took these visual
cues and written statements at face value and treated the newspaper as a criminal enterprise.
Canadian customs officials seized shipments, and FBI agents harassed street hawkers and
sabotaged print runs.  

Most readers were more likely to raise their racial consciousness than a gun. Living in
Minneapolis, future party member Craig L. Rice felt isolated from the Black Power Movement
until BPINS roused “the sense of wrong, the thirst for justice I already felt burning in my soul.”
The paper’s content radicalized him. “The centuries of degrading images that Black people had
endured,” Rice recalled, “the images of us as weak and subservient, the images of us ‘getting
along to get along’ – went away. Instead images of power and pride radiated from the pages.”

Black Power publications raised new challenges for black journalists in the white media
by amplifying the editorial compromises made when presenting black viewpoints to white
readers. Even a writer with William Worthy’s reputation for racial protest and progressive
politics drew scrutiny and criticism. Worthy argued in Esquire in 1967 that white America’s
conception of the Black Power Movement was too narrowly focused on urban inner cities. “But
Negroes increasingly see Black Power as not confined to ghetto rebellions,” he wrote, “but
rather as a part of a general fight of the oppressed against the oppressor all over the world.”
Worthy explained how the militancy of Carmichael and Floyd McKissick, of the Congress of
Racial Equality (CORE), was inspired by the revolutionary ideologies of North Vietnam’s Ho Chi
Minh and Cuba’s Castro. He examined how the suspected involvement of the Central

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54 See David Hilliard, ed., The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service (New York: Atria
Books, 2007); and Rhodes, Framing the Black Panthers, 101-115.
55 Ibid., xvii.
Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the murder of deposed Congo premier Patrice Lumumba and rumors concerning the government’s role in Malcolm X’s assassination “made Negroes aware of the global character of the fight against black men.” He warned that Black Power advocates — informed by revolutionaries abroad and harassed by the state at home — might “move into the underground stage of activity with outside forces challenging U.S. power.”

Militants and moderates alike accused Worthy of betraying his race. Militants claimed he had exposed their secrets to a white audience — even though most of what he reported was readily verified by browsing alternative black publications. Moderates accused him of playing to racial stereotypes and needlessly heightening white anxiety by attributing legitimacy to the spokesmen of Black Power — even though his reporting conveyed greater nuance and understanding than coverage by white journalists. Both militants and moderates berated Worthy for sensationalized headlines and promotions written by white copyeditors. Worthy, though, maintained his belief that the journalist’s role was to inform the entire public, not just segments of it. He criticized white editors for distorting his work, but he rejected black demands that he alter his reporting for a white audience. “It is an unworkable and undesirable concept of halfway censorship-by-boycott,” he said, “to which no self-respecting reporter can subscribe.”

Other black reporters working for the white press agreed, but few could match Worthy’s credentials and independence.

As the 1960s ended, black journalists peered ahead to an uncertain future. Black print culture was splintered and transformed by shifting politics and technological change. Before World War II, many publishers, journalists, and readers had embraced the full spectrum of black protest to combat the seemingly impregnable forces of racism and segregation. After the war, many African Americans renounced their support for anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and black

separatism as the anticommunism movement marginalized and criminalized black radicals.

Publishers recast their newspapers and magazines as defenders of the American way and dependable allies in the Cold War. They characterized the Civil Rights Movement as an attempt to restore black civil liberties and prove to a skeptical world that the United States would fulfill its democratic ideals. This commitment to integration complemented the political orientation of middle-class African Americans and also fulfilled advertisers’ desires to reach those comparatively well-to-do readers. When the Civil Rights Movement stalled, though, publishers hesitated to suggest alternative means of protest, accelerating the collapse of their newspapers just as radio and television appeared as formidable competitors. By the early 1970s, black print culture was just one component in an emerging black media. The largest newspapers retained the prestige earned from journalists’ past successes, but their publishers and editors seldom shaped events outside their local markets.

Radical journalists also faced a precarious future. They remained relevant only as long as the social turmoil that fueled the Black Power Movement compelled readers to browse alternative publications. Radical journalists kept pace with the times, expanding beyond their anti-colonialism stances to envision post-colonial opportunities in Africa and Asia. Unlike reporters at commercial newspapers, though, radical journalists’ livelihoods depended upon financial supporters for whom mass communications was a secondary concern – a means for spreading political views rather than a business enterprise that defined their purpose. By around 1975, as black militancy receded from national attention and shifted in new directions, radical journalists saw most of the leading alternative publications downsize or fold.

Increasingly then, black journalists viewed the white media as the most influential venue for their work. As white-owned news outlets hired more black journalists, those reporters fought to dismantle the barriers of institutionalized racism and expand the presence of black-
oriented perspectives in the mainstream of American news coverage. Their struggle was daunting.
Chapter Six

The White Newsroom

A presidential commission spotlighted the civic cost of American journalism's institutionalized racism in February 1968 when it criticized news coverage of the previous summer's urban uprisings. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, commonly known as the Kerner Commission, accused editors and reporters of inaccuracy and indifference. In print and on air, journalists exaggerated the breadth and destructiveness of the uprisings. Journalists, particularly on television, fostered fear and misunderstanding by characterizing the uprisings as race riots that pitted blacks against whites, even though nearly all deaths, injuries, and property destruction occurred in black neighborhoods. Reporters minimized rioters' frustrations with slum conditions and inequality. "The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man's world," the commission stated. "The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro's burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed." The commission credited journalists with avoiding sensationalism and acknowledging their flaws but urgently warned "much more must be done, and it must be done soon." Two months later, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, and riots erupted in more than one hundred cities across the nation.¹

The commission's findings prompted public handwringing among white editors who moved to repair their reputations and flawed news coverage by heeding the recommendation to hire more black journalists. The commission described the news profession as "shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting Negroes." One survey estimated that black journalists made up just 2.6 percent of the front-line editorial personnel – copy desk

editors, news editors, reporters, and photographers — at major metropolitan newspapers. Put another way, only one in forty journalists was black at daily newspapers. Black journalists were even rarer in management. The survey listed one black editor among 532 newsroom executives. Publicly shamed, white editors intensified minority recruiting efforts, established minority training programs, and pledged greater racial sensitivity in future news coverage. But they also shifted blame for newsroom racial disparity to others. Editors complained that they could only be as progressive as society at large allowed them to be. They claimed to struggle to find qualified black journalists and worried over the intense competition for the few properly trained reporters available. They continued to view black journalists’ work with skepticism. Newsroom integration was slow and fitful.  

Black journalists exploited their limited employment opportunities in the early 1970s to force white editors and producers to recast how they framed racial news, a push that eventually led to fairer but imperfect coverage of minority concerns. Black journalists’ workplace activism was part of a larger trend toward newsroom democratization that one press critic described as employees’ efforts “to impress their professional beliefs and occupational misgivings upon management.” Journalists’ activism was informed by the Civil Rights Movement, antiwar protests, campus uprisings, women’s equality, and militancy among other minority groups. Their actions contested conservative law-and-order campaigns that defended the status quo in the workplace by equating employer concessions with capitulation to agitators and the erosion of institutional authority. Regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, editorial employees demanded more involvement in establishing coverage priorities and making staff assignments and hiring decisions. Black journalists safeguarded their professional rights by forming advocacy organizations, filing employment discrimination complaints and lawsuits, and challenging

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government subpoenas. Their efforts were reinforced by pressure from black consumers who also demanded greater fairness in content and employment practices, particularly in television.  

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As the Civil Rights Movement evolved, Ted Poston wondered whether he should have pushed harder to convince the New York Post’s editors to hire other black reporters. African Americans had once applauded the liberal newspaper for simply writing about them. But in 1962, Poston warned an editor of a “growing resentment in the community against The Post for what many regard as a patronizing attitude towards the Negro and an effort to segregate him from the rest of the larger community as something different and bizarre.” Poston chafed at the unstated rules that prohibited his promotion and often restricted his reporting. He joked to the handful of other black reporters working for New York dailies that they covered the “RUINS beat,” an acronym for “Riots, Urban affairs, Indians, and Niggers.” By the late 1960s, an aging, alcoholic Poston was celebrated by his colleagues as a trailblazing reporter, but he was also ridiculed by young African Americans as a token hire used to assuage white liberal guilt. Poston had long worked behind-the-scenes to improve his editors’ awareness of their racial biases, but he could point to few examples where his efforts had improved coverage.  

The Post’s editors pursued minority hiring more vigorously after the Kerner Commission, with Poston mentoring new reporters and covertly assisting one of them prepare discrimination charges. Poston felt obligated to help, remarking, “I was the Post’s alibi Negro for 25 years.”

Ironically, well-intentioned but ambiguous minority recruitment and hiring practices frequently

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turned liberal publishers and editors into targets of discrimination lawsuits. From 1968 to 1970, the Post offered tryouts to nine probationary minority reporters and hired two of them. Poston told William Artis, a 28-year-old graduate of Ohio State University who had worked at the Buffalo Evening News, that the Post would not hire him because it already employed three black reporters. (The paper briefly had five black reporters on staff but two took jobs elsewhere.) Artis filed a complaint with the New York State Division of Human Rights when he was dismissed after six weeks. He accused the Post of capping its minority hires with an unwritten quota. Poston helped Artis obtain supporting statements from other black reporters. The Post denied the charge. Publisher Dorothy Schiff said she had brought in Artis and others specifically to expand the paper's roster of black writers. Schiff also observed that the Post employed more black reporters percentagewise than either the New York Times or New York Daily News. A human rights commissioner ordered Artis reinstated because he had not served his full three-month tryout. The Post gave him another tryout and again dismissed him. The Post was ultimately cleared of wrongdoing by the State Supreme Court. Throughout the 1970s, similar disputes played out in newsrooms across the nation.  

As Artis battled for a job at the Post, Earl Caldwell fought to protect his journalistic integrity at the New York Times after the Justice Department subpoenaed his unpublished notes on the Black Panther Party. Caldwell had joined the Times in 1967 and quickly proved himself covering that summer's riots. Later, he was the only reporter to witness King's assassination. Then an editor told him to try to contact Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panthers' minister of information. "When I linked up with the Panthers late in 1968 on the West Coast, they called me

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a cop," Caldwell recalled. "I had to be a cop, they reasoned: The New York Times was not about to send a black reporter 3,000 miles just to cover them." 6

Caldwell’s reporting caught the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) because he provided the Times’ readers with angles on the Panthers seldom described elsewhere. Unlike most other reporters, Caldwell delved behind the party’s rhetoric and posturing to explain why its strident nationalism appealed to young black men. He covered the Panthers’ shootouts and trials, but he also wrote about a free breakfast program that fed schoolchildren. He explained a shift in party ideology in 1969 that led members to tone down their heated language, cooperate with white radicals, and embrace Marxism. Caldwell met with Cleaver the morning before the party leader fled the country while on bail for an attempted murder charge. After Caldwell wrote about the Panthers’ transporting guns, FBI agents asked for additional details. Caldwell told them that everything he knew had appeared in the newspaper. Then agents asked him to spy for them. Caldwell refused. "I could be physically harmed if I presented myself as a reporter to the Panthers," he said, "and then ran around being some kind of spy for the FBI." 7

Since Caldwell refused to cooperate with the FBI, he was subpoenaed and ordered to testify before a grand jury – an unprecedented expansion of subpoena powers against the press that posed particular concerns to black journalists. Caldwell’s subpoena was part of a comprehensive campaign against media independence orchestrated by President Richard M. Nixon’s administration. The Justice Department issued many subpoenas in early 1970 against reporters who had interviewed Black Panthers and antiwar protesters. Several leading news organizations complied with the court orders, but others challenged them. Caldwell decided to

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6 Earl Caldwell, "‘Ask Me. I Know. I Was the Test Case,’" Saturday Review, August 5, 1972, 4.
fight his subpoena, which was issued against him, not the *Times*. Before he was subpoenaed, Caldwell destroyed two years’ worth of notes, tapes, and documents, ruining his plans to write a book. Then he refused to testify, claiming his reputation as a trustworthy journalist would be destroyed if he answered questions in a secret legal proceeding. A lower court judge granted Caldwell a partial victory. The judge ruled Caldwell had to testify before a grand jury like every other citizen, but he did not have to divulge confidential information. Against the advice of the *Times’* lawyers, Caldwell still refused to testify. Although the paper’s executives were sympathetic, Caldwell said “the *Times* sort of cut me loose at that point.”

Other black journalists supported Caldwell, worrying that testifying in secret would destroy their credibility with African American citizens who distrusted a justice system discredited by its past racial abuses. In an advertisement that ran in the *New York Amsterdam News*, about seventy journalists promised not to spy on their communities for the government. They pledged to protect their confidential sources, “using every means at our disposal.” They characterized subpoenas like the one issued against Caldwell as “attempts by law enforcement agencies to exploit our blackness.” The journalists argued that such subpoenas threatened their ability to do their jobs more than they disrupted white reporters’ work. They knew editors were more likely to assign them to cover Black Power groups and other racial news. They also knew they were more likely to ask for such assignments “out of a sense of responsibility to bring about a greater understanding and clarity of the dynamics and nuances of the black revolution.” Since they lived and worked in black communities, the journalists could not afford to appear compromised, either professionally or personally. “Any appearance of such a ‘deal’ between the police and black journalists,” they argued, “kills the credibility and trust black reporters have built up over the years.” Black journalists emphasized their commitment to their professional

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principles by supporting Caldwell’s legal defense. Black Perspective, an advocacy group formed by black reporters in 1967, cooperated with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund to provide Caldwell with his own lawyer.  

Caldwell ultimately lost his lawsuit—and his unrivaled access to the Black Panthers. An appeals court sided with Caldwell, saying he did not have to testify because the government had not shown a strong need for his testimony. But in 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 against Caldwell and two other reporters with similar cases. Even so, Caldwell never testified—the grand jury and its subpoena had lapsed. He also never again reported in depth on the Black Panther Party, recalling that “by then, the Panthers that I knew were either in jail, out of the country, or in the graveyard.”

Public awareness of black journalists’ professional struggles peaked in early 1972 after a series of controversies in Washington, D.C., focused press criticism on the role of minorities in white newsrooms. The first incident involved charges of employment discrimination against Newsweek, the most racially progressive of the nation’s major newsweeklies. In December 1971, Newsweek editor Osborn Elliott fired reporter Samuel F. Yette, a four-year employee who worked in the Washington bureau. Elliott said the dismissal was based “purely on professional grounds.” Yette promptly filed a discrimination complaint with the Washington, D.C., Commission on Human Relations. Yette acknowledged long-standing tensions with his employer. (He later said editors sent him to King’s funeral, not to cover the ceremony, but to argue against his widow, Coretta Scott King, being named his successor at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.) Yette attributed his firing to the militancy of his recently published book, The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America. In the book, Yette argued

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10 Terry, Missing Pages, 282.
that the Nixon administration had used the social protests of the 1960s as an excuse to violate constitutional rights and create a police state that targeted black militants for “selective genocide.” According to Yette, his bureau chief asked him to tone down his criticisms. “I do not mean to be pejorative or vindictive when I say this,” Yette told Jet, “but had I been a nigger instead of Black, a spy instead of a reporter, a tool instead of a man, I could have stayed at Newsweek indefinitely.” 11

Yette’s discrimination complaints prompted the Congressional Black Caucus to hold an unofficial two-day hearing in March 1972 on the relationship between the mass media and African Americans. Chaired by Rep. William L. Clay, a Missouri Democrat, the Caucus intended to investigate white editors’ “failure to properly interpret the Black movement and the issues affecting the Black community, their unwillingness to adequately increase minority employment on their staffs, and the insidious method of firing a number of highly competent Black journalists.” About two dozen witnesses testified, including black journalists who worked for black and white newspapers and magazines, as well as television. Clay concluded that African Americans in general and black journalists in particular were “grossly excluded, distorted, mishandled and exploited by the white-controlled news media.” The Caucus urged Nixon to appoint black representatives to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), asked media companies to promote African Americans into management, and encouraged watchdog groups to monitor media fairness and file lawsuits against discriminatory news outlets. Later that year,

Nixon appointed the first black – Benjamin Hooks, a Memphis lawyer and Baptist minister – to a five-year term on the FCC.  

In April, seven black reporters on the metro desk at the Washington Post filed discrimination charges with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Office (EEOC). It was the first complaint lodged by a group of black journalists with the agency. The reporters alleged they were denied “an equal opportunity with respect to job assignments, promotional opportunities, including promotions to management positions and other terms and conditions of employment.” The Post’s parent company also owned Newsweek. The paper’s lawyer defended the Post by pointing to its affirmative action program and noting that it employed twenty-one black reporters, editors, and photographers – more than any other white-owned newspaper. None of those journalists, though, covered foreign or national news, and none were included in top editorial management.  

Discrimination complaints, lawsuits, and the congressional hearing reflected a growing recognition by many black reporters that they could counter the racial blindness of journalistic objectivity only by pairing factual reporting with an overriding commitment to racial justice. While offensive to most newspaper editors, so-called “activist journalism” was informed by the popularity of New Journalism, a style of reportage embraced by leading magazines that infused traditional reporting with literary techniques to convey the counterculture’s skepticism of institutional authority. Activist journalists were also empowered by the protest mission of the black press and the editorial acuity of the leftist alternative press. “For too long black people have been subjected to exhortations of whites who in the name of ‘objectivity’ have imposed their subjective views on the world about us,” said Tony Brown, director of Howard University’s  

newly opened School of Communications. "There is another witness with important evidence—the black man with a black viewpoint." 14

Supporters of activist journalism advocated reporting that acknowledged racial identity as a central determinant in the framing of news articles. Its practitioners believed white editors would not admit their biases without counter-reporting written from a black perspective. They claimed black journalists needed a firm awareness of their racial identity to prevent their work from being used to reinforce stereotypes or harass activists. They also said a strong sense of self helped sustain them through the hardships of challenging white supervisors. Lutrelle Palmer, a Chicago Daily News columnist and radio commentator who once worked for the Chicago Defender, warned Howard's student journalists that "if I had not established in my present job that I was a black man first and a newspaperman second, I would've gone crazy. I would have lost my sense of identity." While radical black writers articulated political alternatives to the inherent racism of the capitalistic American nation-state, activist journalists demanded social equality within existing institutions—namely the white media. Activist journalists encouraged African Americans to pursue careers in the white media in hopes of increasing the news industry's racial awareness and sensitivity. "Black reporters must become revolutionaries—agents of changes rather than agents; part of the solution," said Charlayne Hunter, the onetime Atlanta Inquirer reporter who had joined the New York Times. "And it can be done, while maintaining a sense of fairness—some prefer objectivity—and ethical correctness, as well." 15

Black journalists who challenged white editors' claims to objectivity were typically frustrated and marginalized. Reporter Austin Scott resigned from the Associated Press in early

1972 after working there for eleven years. While grateful for the "exceptional treatment" he received, Scott told general manager Wes Gallagher that he quit because the wire service refused to extend the same courtesies to its eighteen other black reporters. Scott considered himself a token on the editorial staff, his mere presence justifying editors' decisions to ignore his requests to reorient the framing of racial news, hire more black reporters, and promote them to prominent beats and supervisory positions. Scott figured his resignation would "help stop the pretense that we have done what we should, or help us to move faster." Scott joined the Washington Post just as the EEOC complaint was filed there. 16

Similarly, Palmer resigned from the Daily News in January 1973, telling his employer "the white establishment press and the honest views of a black journalist are totally incompatible." Palmer had feuded frequently over edits to his stories. He quit after managing editor Don Gormley spiked a column demanding community control measures to ensure police officers were held accountable for shootings. Gormley reportedly told Palmer that his views went beyond what his mostly white readership could accept. 17

Black consumers bolstered activist journalists' mission by pressuring news organizations, particularly television broadcasters, to commit themselves to fairer representation of African Americans in media employment and news coverage. A coalition of Harlem churches and political organizations formed Black Citizens for a Fair Media soon after the Congressional Black Caucus encouraged black consumers to monitor the media. The coalition's leaders promised to negotiate with television news executives for improvements but warned they would challenge FCC license renewals and launch boycotts and pickets if their demands were ignored. "When they're going to be up in the offices negotiating in their way," said 17-year-old Al Sharpton, 16, 17

"we’ll be down on the street or in the lobby negotiating our way.” Watchdog groups also pressured local stations to increase minority involvement in Kansas City, Houston, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and elsewhere. FCC commissioners met privately with more than twenty citizens groups the following year, marking the first time the agency listened to black consumers’ demands. In early 1973, consumer activism helped save Black Journal, a groundbreaking public affairs program that provided a forum for controversial black viewpoints on public television. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) intended to eliminate the program but instead cut its budget from $900,000 to $350,000. More than one hundred protesters picketed outside the CPB meeting held on budget matters. “The picketing culminated it,” said executive producer Tony Brown. “This proves that cohesiveness among Black people is our salvation.” Black Journal, though, faced repeated threats to its survival. 18

Activist journalists and consumers valued black newspapers and magazines because those publications reaffirmed and promoted their critique of the white mass media. Thomas A. Johnson, a New York Times foreign correspondent, argued that black journalists in white newsrooms benefitted from “the strongest possible black media.” Its presence spoke to the diverse perspectives and needs of African Americans. Its independence allowed its editors and reporters to expose the biases of white objectivity. 19

By the mid-1970s, commercial black newspapers and alternative publications had declined in influence but continued to publish, despite persistent predictions of their imminent demise. Ebony and Jet enjoyed unprecedented popularity. A slew of new niche lifestyle magazines – Black Enterprise, Essence, Black Sports, among others – revealed a vast demand for

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a variety of news written from a black perspective. "Black America's media needs go far beyond the now and again special of Newsweek, CBS or the New York Times, good though they generally are," Johnson wrote. "This is an abiding and permanent need and it will also require a media of abiding and permanent interest." Black publications enabled activist journalism by providing black journalists in the white media a sympathetic forum for their concerns and employment if protest led to dismissal. For example, Yette wrote a column for the Baltimore Afro-American in the late 1970s. After quitting the Daily News, Palmer founded the Chicago-based Black X-Press in May 1973. He touted the weekly newspaper as "planned and geared to elevate information, awareness, interest and involvement levels of Black people." 20

By 1975, white editors' obstructions to integration compelled black journalists to cooperate more closely to win greater workplace equality. Representatives from journalists' associations in Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., met in December to organize the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). The national advocacy group aimed to expand black journalists' career opportunities and improve white media's coverage of racial issues. While focused on professional development, NABJ also extended the reach of black activist journalism when its officers spoke directly on controversial issues. One month before the 1976 presidential election, the group criticized Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter and Republican candidate Gerald Ford for "assiduously bypassing black voters." NABJ President Chuck Stone, a former Defender columnist with the Philadelphia Daily News, also condemned the crude and derogatory remark that forced the resignation of Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. 21

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Ten years after the Kerner Commission’s report, black journalists had secured a foothold in white newsrooms, but they were still excluded from the management positions that would allow them to hire more minority journalists and recast coverage of racial issues. A survey commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) estimated that minority journalists made up just 4 percent of the editorial workforce at daily newspapers. Black journalists accounted for about half of those 1,700 journalists, or 2 percent of all editorial employees. Only four African Americans held top management positions – in Philadelphia, Akron, Portland, and Niagara Falls. About 68 percent of daily newspapers still employed no minority journalists, compared to 80 percent in 1968. White editors continued to defend their poor hiring records by claiming they could not find quality minority applicants. The ASNE’s Committee on Minorities challenged that common refrain when it concluded “the newspapers that have the best minority employment record are those papers that have tried the hardest – have set an objective and then done their utmost to reach it.” The Washington Post, for example, significantly improved minority representation in its newsroom after the EEOC complaint filed in 1972. Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee more than doubled the number of minority editorial employees, raising the total to thirty-five, and promoted four black journalists to editorships.22

Limited opportunities for black journalists meant black communities were still subject to inadequate and biased news coverage. As early as 1972, Washington Post staffer Dorothy Gilliam observed that “the bloom is off when it comes to hiring and promoting nonwhite reporters.” Like others, Gilliam saw white editors’ interest in integration slacken as the potential

for more urban uprisings receded. Significant industrywide changes never occurred. While small daily newspapers were the most common training ground for inexperienced reporters, their editors seldom hired minority journalists. (ASNE estimated thirty-four metropolitan newspapers employed about one-third of all minority journalists.) At large daily newspapers, black reporters entered hostile workplaces where little, if any, mentoring was provided, diminishing their chances for success. Since editors refused to promote black journalists, college students and good reporters often pursued other careers. By 1978, Gilliam observed that most white editors had grown comfortable with the few black reporters they worked alongside; consequently, they saw no need to either hire more minority journalists or substantially alter their coverage plans. At larger papers, Gilliam said, “we seem to be in the age of the cross-over reporter, where the black reporter is often told to cover stories of the white communities, but the cruel joke is that nobody is still paying attention to the black community.”

As the 1980s approached, many black journalists wondered what future awaited them as they pressed for workplace rights through the courts. Black and women journalists filed a discrimination lawsuit in 1978 at the Associated Press after failing to negotiate an affirmative action hiring plan with management. Employees believed two Wire Service Guild leaders were forced from their jobs for helping file the suit. AP president and general manager Keith Fuller urged employees to recognize management’s need “to preserve the high caliber of our news service by retaining the right to hire and promote the most qualified persons without regard to what could be irrelevant or reverse discriminatory factors.” The New York Times experienced similar turmoil. Nineteen black editorial employees joined an affirmative-action lawsuit filed four years earlier by the paper’s non-editorial minority employees. “Blacks at the Times have a

sense of doom,” said Paul Delaney, an assistant national news editor. “There is a feeling that they are not going to get good assignments, they are not going to advance, and that their editors think poorly of them.”

And yet, black journalists had forged the inroads required to broaden future minority involvement in American journalism. Never again could white publishers and editors completely ignore black communities and refuse to hire any black reporters. Despite the obstacles of institutionalized racism, issues of interest to African Americans were a regular, if an inconsistent and frequently misconstrued, aspect of news coverage. “Integration of the press is no longer a protest issue, it’s a matter of process,” said Robert Maynard, a black journalist who had served as an associate editor at the *Washington Post*. Maynard could make such a statement in 1979 because black journalists had agitated for racial justice in American society and inclusion in white newsrooms for more than one hundred years. Even so, black media would remain relevant in the decades to come. Black newspapers would continue to publish, even as their readership shrunk. An increasingly fragmented media marketplace provided opportunities for the development of new black-themed publications, radio and television programs, cable channels, and Internet websites. These outlets remained viable by fully exploring black perspectives on domestic and foreign affairs, as well as sports, entertainment, and lifestyles. Their writers and producers scrutinized and challenged how white-led publications framed racial issues. By working inside and outside of the not-so-white media, black journalists would press for racial justice into the twenty-first century.

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**Dissertations and Theses**


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