

The Residue of the African American Press

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Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* focuses on the difference between primary orality cultures, those who lack any knowledge of writing, and chirographic cultures. Specifically, he exams how progressing from an oral culture to a literate culture restructures thought because oral verbalization is not the same as written verbalization. Written words have residue because they can be seen and touched; orality has no such residue. Ong examines "thought and its verbal expression in oral culture," followed by how literate and written words restructure society's consciousness, and finally, how the future of orality and literacy might create new insight into literary criticism (Ong1). On the other hand, in *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*, Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish focus on the visual design and graphic concepts of the written word and images. However, they, too, focus on society's consciousness and how "graphic communication has always depended upon the design of symbols and images that are recognized according to the conventions of a community" to structure that consciousness (Drucker and McVarish 3). Drucker and McVarish are not describing the history of graphic design, but are looking at a diachronic study of graphic design in history and providing a critical analysis or critical history of visual communication. In their study, they focus on the role society and history play in the development of design. They show how society has shaped graphic design throughout history, and this analysis expands society's consciousness and understanding of its culture in relation to graphic design. Their book illustrates communication through the written word and images as if it were a "lively slide show or well curated exhibition" (Drucker and McVarish xi).

In addition to the histories of Drucker, McVarish, and Ong, Hayden White asserts that histories are composed. Using an encyclopedic format, Drucker and McVarish compose their version of history as it relates to graphic design, and Ong, using another historical format, composes his version of history as it relates to orality and literacy. However, literacy is not needed for the understanding of images. An oral observer need not be literate to understand the meaning of an image or its design.

During slavery, African Americans, most of which were illiterate, composed their own history, a history different from that of white society. In the beginning, it was an oral history. However, as time progresses, the history was written. They argued for the humanity of blacks over the system of slavery, which was seen by African Americans as a dehumanizing process for both whites and blacks. They fought against the institution of slavery by humanizing the African American culture through both orality (spirituals, speeches, slave songs, sermons) and literacy (narratives, poems, novels, pamphlets, letters, and newspapers). Many arguments presented by Drucker and McVarish exist in the written words and images of African Americans, especially in black owned newspapers, as their message is conveyed through those words and images.

Scholars estimate that African Americans have published more than 3,000 newspapers since the first African American newspaper was published in 1827. Charles A. Simmons estimates the number of African American newspapers to be closer to 4000 (Simmons 2). Simmons has divided the history of black newspapers into nine distinct historical eras. Although newspapers in each era had a similar message, their black brethren deserved fair treatment, the message has shifted over time depending on the current culture of the time period. Therefore, “the basic editorial philosophy of the black press has not changed much since 1827” (Simmons 5). It has only been modified as black editors and publishers struggled to demonstrate to the white community that black citizens were human and were being treated unfairly, and this unjust treatment needed to end.

Antislavery Era 1827-1861

The first black owned newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*,¹ was published in 1827 during the Antislavery Era. During this time period, there were 42 African-American newspapers (Simmons 13). All protested the mistreatment of blacks, especially slaves, and all fought to end slavery. Since much of the African American community was illiterate before the Civil War, *Freedom's Journal* was not established, like many white newspapers, to gain a loyal readership. It was established to challenge the views and opinions of white newspapers that supported slavery and portrayed blacks as inarticulate, inferior, immoral, and ill-mannered. Opposing this stereotype was the main goal because “too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, though in the estimation of some mere trifles; for though there are many in society who exercise towards us benevolent feelings; still

(with sorrow we confess it) there are others who make it their business to enlarge upon the least trifle...”

(Senna14). The articles in *Freedom's Journal* placed blacks in a positive light as good parents, honest employees, and well-mannered everyday citizens.

The editors challenged the stereotype of the white newspapers because “every object expresses a point of view with particular cultural biases” (Drucker and McVarish xxix), and it is that point of view, according to Drucker and McVarish, that implicitly or explicitly participates in the power to assert control over a society’s way of thinking and acting (xxvi). White newspapers painting the African American society in a negative light reinforced harmful stereotypes that caused its readership, a white readership, to support slavery and dehumanize a portion of society. Black newspapers felt an obligation to combat the power instilled in whites through the printed word, and many editors were effective in delivering their message to the reader. Drucker and McVarish also noted that newspapers had the power to shape public opinion (Drucker and McVarish 103), and throughout history, the black press has shaped the views of both the white and black communities. One powerful example came on July 4, 1827 when New York emancipated its slaves, much to the distress of many whites and the south. *Freedom's Journal* was commended by those who felt the paper’s argumentative rhetoric against slavery persuaded New York’s legislature to free its slaves.



The Civil War and Reconstruction Era 1861-1877

By the beginning of the Civil War, a number of newspapers succeeded *Freedom's Journal*, and during the Civil War and Reconstruction era, 115 new black newspapers were founded. The longevity of most was short, an average of eight years (Simmons 15). This era saw newspapers modify their message. Although they still continued to fight for the end of slavery and better conditions, editors now focused on educating blacks and attempting to create a black national identity (Simmons15).

Before the Civil War, a black owned newspaper did not exist in the south; however, every southern state saw the arrival of their first black published newspaper during the Civil War. Although being an editor or publisher was position of respect in the black community, it was a dangerous position, especially in the south, where white mobs were known to destroy newspaper buildings and cause editors to disappear. One survival technique used by southern editors was to protest issues outside of not only their own geographical area, but outside of the south. This technique was used “when the editor wanted to overtly protest but also stay alive” (Simmons15). Although Reconstruction brought hope to the African American community, black newspapers saw a new concern. African Americans were now faced with adjusting from the role of slave to the role of free man. Black newspapers now had a new responsibility. They needed to educate and create a racial identity, so “in addition to publishing survival techniques, [they] made greater efforts to educate the masses by arousing, informing, and mobilizing them” (Simmons16). Drucker and McVarish discuss how during the 19th century, newspapers “reshaped the mission and design of papers...and brought with it a goal of universal education” (Drucker and McVarish 121). Black newspapers became a cultural force as they shaped identities and educated their audience.

Era of Reaction and Adjustment 1877-1915

A record number of black newspapers² were established during the Era of Reaction and Adjustment. It was also a time period in which the African American community encountered more lynching and violence than any other era. Even though the Civil War had ended, many of the practices black newspapers fought against still existed, and because of the animosity within the country after the war, African American editors found it more difficult to survive during this time period than they did during slavery (Simmons 20). They continued to fight to end the violence during this era; however, a credibility gap occurred between the editors and their readership because the violence diminished their editorial intensity since they had to consider their own survival. As a result, many black newspapers “became virtually mute on race issues. Those editors who became mute on rare topics survived; many of those who did not suppress or tone down their views did



not” (Simmons 16). Exceptions to this muted role are seen in Chicago and New York; however, only one newspaper in the south, the Memphis *Free Speech and Headlight* was willing to risk reciprocity. Its editor was Ida B. Wells.³

Great Migration and WWI Era 1915-1928

During the era of the Great Migration and WWI, many blacks migrated to the north and midwest from the south. Although black newspapers were divided in their opinion concerning migration, they were probably the cause of the migration as “every negro newspaper...in this broad land...with a backbone and courage are constantly protesting against the injustice done the Negro. And possibly these agents have been the greatest incentives to help create and crystallize this unrest of migration” (Detweiler 73). Again, newspapers possessed the power to not only sway public opinion, but to mobilize the community.

In addition migration, black editors fought for equal treatment of black soldiers during WWI. Drucker and McVarish illustrate how propaganda campaigns during WWI created mass persuasion techniques “to build support among civilian populations for the war” (Drucker and McVarish 196). However, white propaganda slogans were ill-received by black newspaper editors. In addition, black



citizens lacked enthusiasm for WWI because of they felt no need to “save a democracy they did not experience” (Wolseley 75).⁴ So, editors used the government’s propaganda slogan, “Make the world safe for democracy” in their own newspapers to point out the contradiction between the rights of black and white citizens (Simmons 25). Black editors used the government’s same white slogan in their own newspapers, so “what was actually going on would not fade from the minds of their readers” (Simmons 25).⁵

The Great Depression Era 1929-1939

The Great Depression era saw the continued fight by black editors for civil rights for its black communities. They also focused on the unfair treatment of blacks with regard to employment. Many times newspapers owned by black and white publishers would carry the

same story, such as an event about civil rights or employment. However, “every object expresses a point of view with particular cultural biases” (Drucker and McVarish xxix), and this was seen in the difference between newspaper articles written by white and black newspapers. Each newspaper presented their own view of an event, so the African American “reading the story did so to note not only what was being said about Negroes in the white press but also how it was said” (Simmons 71). The government felt “something should be done to the editors of these publications as they are beyond doubt exciting the negro element” (Washburn 116) with their stories and initiated a plan to stop them. Drucker and McVarish said that “[social] institutions are constantly being modified by cultural changes” (Drucker and McVarish xxvii). Black newspapers, institutions themselves, were closely watched during the Cold War era by other institutions, such as the General Intelligence Division. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the General Intelligence Division, wanted to stop the editorial commentary of the black newspapers. However, enough change had occurred in the country, that they were unable to file a lawsuit that could be won in court, so black publications “did not have to worry about being suppressed by the federal government for the first time since 1917” (Washburn 118).

WWII Era 1939-1945

During the WWII era, black editors focused their efforts on unification. They needed “a combined, organized entity to coordinate major problems, local or national, and report all findings to the public from as many geographical locations as possible at the same time”⁶ (Simmons 69). The focus became equal treatment of military personnel. By focusing on an issue that affected the African American community nationally, editors could combine their efforts. Just like with WWI, they had to decide on the issue of loyalty to the country, while continuing to fight for equality among the military. However, by unifying and organizing their message they were able to establish a community of African Americans, who were no longer separated by the geography of the north, south, and west. According to Drucker and McVarish, “an increase in the variety and distribution of printed matter helped establish communities among readers who were connected by common interests and beliefs, rather than geographical proximity” (Drucker and McVarish 95). This is seen as African American newspapers focused on an issue that affected the entire country: war.

The Cold War Era 1946-1959

The Cold War era continued the fight for civil liberties; however, this caused them to fall under fire as communists by their own government. Many used their editorials to respond, saying, “most Negro publishers are arch-conservatives in their thinking on every public issue with one exception – the race problem. The owners of the biggest newspapers have but two main missions – to promote racial unity and to make money” (Wolseley80).

The Civil Rights Movement Era 1960-1976

During the Civil Rights Movement era (1960-1976) black editors were faced with a different situation than previously. Their race was divided between a passive resistance, accommodation, and violence. Many editors had to make tough decisions concerning their own editorial policies, so rather than providing the guidance and leadership for obtaining equal rights as they had done so many times in the past, they found themselves merely reporting it (Simmons 102). However, as Drucker and McVarish point out, social institutions are modified by cultural changes, and integration was on the forefront because “after years of extensively...covering black responses to white resistance to integration, the 1960s media had increasingly begun to report news about black life” (Senna 134). In addition, black reporters were being hired by the white mainstream media to cover developments in the black community, and “white newspapers needed black editors to interpret black news” (Senna 135). The institutions were changing as the culture was changing.

Post Civil Rights Era 1976-present

The Post Civil Rights era sees the black press facing a paradox. As society becomes more integrated, black newspapers are losing ground with their black audience, who read white owned newspapers. Many black publishers, by the 1980s, were “operating daily newspapers for predominately white readers” (Senna 139). Anna Everett, in her article “The Black Press in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” cites the president of the NNPA as saying, “once the [mainstream white press] routinely reported the Negro’s personal and group news, crusaded against injustices and inequalities, and chronicled the achievements of the race, the foundations for Negro organs ‘would cease to exist’” (Everett 245). However, Everett believes that the black press will again

be “at the forefront of a bold new migration” as it adapts to the times and goes online (Everett 246).

Drucker and McVarish argue that both artifacts and histories serve a purpose. Critical histories “try to unmask the ideological bases that are concealed by a conventional history. Stories conceal multiple layers of disjunction and tension in a culture” (Drucker and McVarish xxviii). Slavery, segregation, and civil rights are all covered in school curriculums; however, they are covered superficially to satisfy the requirement. There isn’t time to delve in depth into the social and cultural issues concerning black history. Without the black press, a significant amount of history would not be present. As Hayden White said, histories are composed, so the difference between American history told through white newspapers and that of black newspapers is significant, but it offers two perspectives of one history in one diverse country. By composing their version of history, African American newspapers have produced a written residue that will survive in history.

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End Notes

¹ John B. Russwurm and Reverend Samuel E. Cornish were the owners and publishers. Both were educated men. They justified their new endeavor, saying, "Daily slandered, we think that there ought to be some channel of communication between us and the public, through which a single voice may be heard, in defense of five hundred thousand free people of colour. Too often has injustice been heaped upon us, when our only defense was an appeal to the Almighty, but we believe that the time has now arrived, when the calumnies of our enemies should be refuted by forcible arguments" (Senna 16). The newspaper was devoted to black human interest features, and it covered antislavery notices, entertainment, notices of marriage and death, court trials, and advertisements.

Cornish resigned in 1827 to devote himself to other interests. Russwurm turned his attention, and the newspaper, to expatriation. This was an unpopular view with many black Americans, and it caused the paper to start to decline. In 1828, Russwurm changed the name of the newspaper to *Rights of All*. (Simmons says it was Cornish who changed the name – page 11.) Russwurm resigned in 1829, and Cornish resumed his position, but he was unable to save the newspaper and it folded in March of 1829. "Cornish maintained his position of protest and is credited 'in part for the black press becoming identified with the role of protest'" (Simmons 11).

Cornish was born in Delaware to free black parents. He was educated in Philadelphia and New York City. Became a minister after graduation and organized the first black Presbyterian church in New York City. Russwurm was from Jamaica, the son of a white planter and black slave. The planter sent him secretly to Canada to be educated. When his wife discovered this, she arranged for Russwurm to adopt the planter's name and she financed his college education. He was the second black man to graduate from college in the U.S. (Simmons 10).

² From 1880-1890, more than 504 black newspapers existed (Simmons 20). From 1895-1915, more than 2,099 newspapers made attempts (Simmons 21).

- a. ³ Ida B. Wells became an editor for the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* in 1889 and the newspaper became known for its militant protest tone. Her soapbox issue was lynching, and she provoked strong reactions from whites in Memphis. Her editorials brought her national and international recognition. Her support of the black community brought loyalty and the newspaper circulation increased from 1500 to 4000 a week (Simmons 17). When she wrote in her editorials that nothing had changed in Memphis and blacks should move "to the new Oklahoma territory where a lynch-free world could be found" (Simmons 18). Her newspaper was destroyed after a biting rebuttal editorial against the two white newspapers in town who advocated lynching to protect their white women. Wells accused white women of provoking the rapes that got black men hanged.
- b. Another example was the *Boston Guardian*. William Monroe Trotter took aim at Washington and any black politician who "failed to speak out against Washington's traitorous surrender of the rights of Negro men" (Simmons 22). He also attacked WEB DuBois and Booker T. Washington for their accommodating philosophies (waiting and being patient) where white society was concerned. However, DuBois eventually changed his mind, and some said "Trotter probably persuaded DuBois to side with the opposition" (Simmons 22). Trotter also used the *Guardian* to "arouse, mobilize, and 'kick' some backbone into lethargic race members who once had been very active but recently had retreated to the role of accommodation" (Simmons 23).
- c. The *Chicago Defender* (1915-1928): ignored the traditional way of news telling. Used graphic and detailed accounts of violent news and large glaring headlines in red type. It was successful among black readers.

Started a tradition of militant reporting; for example, they criticized the federal government for allowing the unfair treatment of black military personnel during WWI (Simmons 7).

4 The main issue was black loyalty to the United States and the treatment of the black soldiers. Should editors encourage members of the black community to fight for democracy when they were not afforded the same rights as the white community? They decided it was necessary for blacks to fight for democracy because the alternative if WWI was lost was worse than the current situation.

5

⁶ The National Negro Publishing Association (NNPA) was formed in 1940 in response to this unification need.