



Selected Papers of AoIR 2016:  
The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Berlin, Germany / 5-8 October 2016

## **A DIGITAL BLACK PRESS?: EXPLORING WHAT CONSTITUTES THE BLACK PRESS ONLINE**

Miya Williams  
Northwestern University

The traditional black press in the United States is typically conceptualized as legacy print publications that have endured over many decades. Since the inception of the black press in 1827, there has been little debate about the categorization of newspapers and magazines that are produced by and for the African-American community. However, some efforts have been made to more concretely define the attributes of the black press. Oft-cited are De Felice's (1969) black press attributes, which include being owned and managed by blacks, intended for a black audience and advocating for the racial equality of African Americans. Yet in the current digital environment this conception is debatable as journalists are reconsidering what constitutes the black press. Black-targeted websites that primarily produce entertainment news and sites that target African-American readers but are owned by white media companies create ambiguity (Thompson Greenwell 2012). This paper examines how the black press has adapted to the digital landscape and how investigates how previous definitions of the black press have been affected as a result.

### **Method**

This study uses interviews and media metrics to understand the shifts in production and consumption practices in the black press during the new media age. Interviews with publishers of traditional black press publications and black-targeted news websites are employed to provide further insight into how the production of the black press is being re-imagined in digital spaces. Interview subjects were selected based on the following criteria: their publication attracted a sizable audience, their content was news related and had a clear emphasis on African Americans and their website was up-to-date. Only journalists in decision-making positions were interviewed for this study as they were thought to be more responsible for their publications' content.

The consumption of online news by black audiences is also integral to this research. As such, I include data from comScore, a platform that measures digital audiences, to observe which black news sites are attracting the most unique visitors. I examine the websites that correspond with the place of employment for the interview subjects and

Suggested Citation (APA): Williams, M. (2016, October 5-8). *A Digital Black Press?: Exploring What Constitutes The Black Press Online*. Paper presented at AoIR 2016: The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Berlin, Germany: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

other popular black news sites. I then use both interview data and media metrics information to inform my analysis of how these sites are serving black readers.

## **Discussion**

New understandings of the black press have already emerged in the new media age. Harris-Lacewell expands on previous definitions of the black press asserting, “To the extent that African Americans perceive a media source (television show, radio station, novel, magazine, movie, or Internet website) to be something that ‘belongs’ to black people, it can be considered a black media space” (2004, p. 10). This conceptualization allows room for scholars to analyze the cultural significance of spaces that are not black-owned yet influential in the black community. This paper analyzes what happens when this definition is applied to entertainment news sites and blogs that arguably do not uphold what some journalists consider the traditional goals of the black press. In his analysis of ten African-American-owned-and-targeted websites, Akil (2007) found that all of the sites offered more entertainment news than hard news and entertainment was the most likely type of content to be featured on each of the websites. As such, this paper will investigate the impact that increased entertainment content online has on understandings of the black press.

## **Conclusion**

As print circulation numbers continue to decline, determining whether there is an online black press increases in importance. The continuance or discontinuance of the nearly 200-year-old institution of the black press has implications for both the field of journalism and racial relations. Yet while the existence of a digital black press is contentious, as some journalists only consider print publications as legitimate, online news may fulfill the historical purpose of the black press better than print publications. Everett (2009) views the digital space as promising for the survival of the black press. She posits that the web allows for more uncensored content and provides unreported news. Black news sites may, in fact, be influencing the content of traditional black press publications (Brock et al. 2010). These legacy publications are necessarily entering into the digital environment where their competition increases exponentially. Squires (2009) finds that many consumers of traditional black publications have followed them online, which provides a more unambiguous demonstration of the continuance of the black press.

This study investigates how producers and consumers of black news content online are troubling previous definitions of the black press. I find that among digital journalists, expectations of advocating for the black community and African-American ownership, while preferable, are not essential elements in determining whether an outlet is part of the black press online. Journalists tend to be more inclusive than exclusive when characterizing the digital black press and most consider any website that targets African Americans, including entertainment sites and blogs, to be black press outlets. The types of websites that African-American audiences visit for black news content have implications for understandings of the black press both on and offline. By examining how black news publishers of print and online content conceptualize their publications

and how they are situated in the new media age, I am able to elucidate the effect that the changing digital landscape has on understandings of the black press.

## References

Akil, B. (2007). "African American Websites: Publishers' Views, Perspectives and Experiences in Relation to the Social Construction of News, Online News and The Black Press." Florida State University. Dissertation.

Brock, A., Kvasny, L., and Hales, K. (2010). "Cultural appropriations of technical capital: Black women, weblogs, and the digital divide." *Information, Communication & Society* 13: 1040-1059.

de Felice, K. (1969). *The Black Press Defined*. (M.A. Thesis). Syracuse University, New York

Everett, A. (2009). *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*. Albany: State University of New York.

Harris-Lacewell, M. (2004). *Bibles, Barbershops, and BET*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Squires, C. (2002). "Black Audiences, Past and Present: Commonsense Media Critics and Activists." In R. Means Coleman (Ed.) in *Say It Loud! African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity*. (pp. 45-76). New York and London: Routledge.

Squires, C. (2009). *African Americans and the Media*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Thompson Greenwell, A. (2012). "Twentieth-Century Ideology Meets Twenty-First-Century Technology: Black News Websites and Racial Uplift." *Fire!!!: The Multimedia Journal of Black Studies*, 2012, Vol.1(2), pp.111-138.