

“No Other But A Negro Can Represent the Negro”: How Black Newspapers ‘Founded’ Black America and Black Britain

exit editorial by

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Abstract

The first Black newspaper in the United States, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded by the small percentage of Blacks who were free in America in 1827. It began publishing during a period in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that historian Lerone Bennett Jr. called "The Founding of Black America"—a time in which free African-Americans built institutions to establish collective civic life in order to fight two battles: to survive in the East Coast North and to free their enslaved brethren elsewhere in the country. The Black press was founded in Britain with *The Pan-African* in 1901, a journal of the Pan-Africanist movement. The publication sort to capture and disseminate the ideas of the first Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900. Using Pan-Africanism as a theoretical thread, this chapter compares the founding of the Black press in America with its founding in Britain, comparing and contrasting the different "foundings" on both sides of the Atlantic, showing the centrality of Black newspapers to Black survival and progression.

The narrative of African-American history has yet to incorporate the centrality of the modern mass media to how African-Americans conceive of themselves as a people, how they communicate with one another, and how they preserve, transmit, and transform their music, culture, politics and religion.¹

Whether against numerous police frame-ups, to which West Indians and other colored migrants are frequently subject, to opposing discrimination.... WI [West Indian] news publications have attempted to emulate the path of progressive 'Negro' (Afro-Asian, Latin-American and Afro-American) journals who uncompromisingly and fearlessly fight against imperialist outrages and indignities to our peoples.

-- Claudia Jones, founder, *West Indian Gazette*²

Introduction: Pan-Africanism Through The Newspaper Printing Press

This discussion explores how the idea of Pan-Africanism developed through the newspaper printing presses of free African descendants in America and Black immigrants, also free African descendants, in Great Britain.³ We are defining Black newspapers as the start of Black media.

We are defining Black media as the Black-owned and/or Black-oriented transmission of Black experiences—the basis of Black mass (and now, *de-massified*) media, which would include magazines, radio, television and the World Wide Web, the latter of which combines all of them. Black media, for purposes of this exercise, serve to reflect and reinforce a respective African-American and Black British identity outside of white political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual hegemony. Black media create connections—exchanges of ideas and information—that lead to the development of a collective, albeit varied, political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual consciousness.⁴

We are defining, and using, Pan-Africanism the way the newspaper publishers defined it at the time, on both sides of the Atlantic: an attempt by Blacks outside of Africa to create a collective cultural and political Black identity based in African roots. The Black newspaper press in America began with the founding of *Freedom's Journal*, the first Black American newspaper, in 1827, in New York City. Black newspapering in the British Isles began with the *Pan African* journal, in 1901, the first publication written by and targeted towards people of African descent in the nation. We are exploring the Pan-African ideas surrounding the creation of these two periodicals.

This synopsis compares the socio-political context of the founding of African-American newspapering with that of the Black British newspapering. It tells a 186-year portion of the history of Black media from the point of view of how it was used by Black activists and community leaders in America and in the British Isles to empower themselves and others, to support Black organizations, to speak out against racial and social injustice, and to transmit Black cultural reality.

We are not doing a condensed history of Black newspapers, either in America or Britain. We are attempting a narrowly focused historical exploration of Black newspapers in America and in the British Isles by way of how they functioned as consciousness-raisers and organizers for African-American and Black British communities. It will illustrate how Blacks use media to impact the lives of people of African descent in racially divided, predominately white societies that marginalize non-white definitions of reality through a disproportionately white media. It will add to knowledge about the way in which Black newspapers can differ in focus and content, depending on geography, and give more knowledge about how Black communities developed differently around the world, using their own newspapers as their socio-politico-cultural center.

Pan-African Identity in Early 19th Century America and Britain

The Pan-Africanist historian John Henrik Clarke named two freedom paths chosen by African-Americans in the 19th century: slave revolts and the movements started by “freemen,” the small percent of free Black men (and women) in the country.⁵ The freemen had to build institutions in order to be able to survive and to fight for those brethren enslaved. Historian Lerone Bennett Jr., discussing these freemen, describes the time period between 1737 and 1837 as “perhaps the most important in the history of Black America.”⁶ He defines Black America’s “founding” as occurring between those years—the making of those free Black people in America as a cohesive unit. The names of the organizations and institutions they founded—the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, for example—show their continental consciousness.⁷

Meanwhile, by 1900 Britain had an empire that covered a quarter of the world’s surface. Though several agitating white colonies including Canada, Australia and New Zealand had been granted limited self-governance in 1901, Black ones remained firmly in Britain’s grasp. A united Black-led push began in earnest with the efforts of Trinidadian-born Henry Sylvester Williams who created the African Association in 1897, foreshadowing the first Pan-African Conference in 1900. Following the conference, a new organization (merging the African Association) the Pan-African Association declared among its aims to: “Secure to Africans throughout the world true civil and political rights.”⁸ It formed in London largely because the city was the seat of the empire’s power and thus the gathering spot for Africans, Caribbean and African-Americans many of whom had come to study and work like Williams.

Acknowledging that racial discrimination had rendered life difficult for Africans “either at home or under the flags of unknown powers,” the activists met in relative freedom in a city that was already familiar with vocal opposition to white supremacy. They were keenly aware that white writers were distorting black history, and determined that they would develop their “own chronicles” and set up their “own libraries,” in addition to legislative, educational and commercial efforts.⁹

America and Britain: The Construction of a Pan-Africanist Press

The beginnings of the Black press in America and in Great Britain are 74 years apart, so, at first glance, there are little *direct* connections between the American freemen who assembled in New York City to create *Freedom’s Journal*, the first Black American newspaper in 1827, and the activist-intellectuals from Africa and the Caribbean who gathered in London to create the 1900 Pan-African Conference, and, subsequently, *The Pan-African* in 1901.

Thus, the assumption could be made that *Freedom's Journal* inspired all Africans using the English language to create their own [Westernized] newspapers, but by the time *The Pan-African* was created, scores of newspapers had been published by Blacks in America, many of which were sent abroad. The novelty of people of African descent writing, editing, owning, publishing, printing and distributing a newspaper in the English language had long worn off. There are, to be sure, differences between the founding of Black American media and the founding of Black British newspapering; the surface-level discussion must suggest that these are different groups of people, gathering in radically different circumstances, to promote the same objectives.

In America, Blacks were fighting against their enslavement in a land that was not theirs. They were fighting for freedom from slavery, the right to create, build and maintain economic, social and political intuitions without the threat of violence raised against them and, ultimately, citizenship; their goal was to achieve an African-American identity or to reclaim an African one—to be made either citizens of America or emigrates back to Africa.¹⁰ Blacks in Great Britain, in contrast, were, for the most part, relatively freer Caribbean and African immigrants who were allowed to keep some of their African cultural norms. They wanted to make their voices heard in the heart of a European colonial empire. They wanted to protest their countries being colonized, their resources plundered and their traditional cultures and religions being forcibly Westernized. Forging a *Caribbean* or *African* identity, not a *British* one, they wanted the colonizers to know of their public resentment against them.

However, from the ideological perspective of this presentation, there are several similarities that bridge the gap of time and place and circumstance. We briefly find the respective periodicals' focus on political organizing, social organizing and Pan-African ideology. We are making, admittedly, a simplistic grouping of general themes and ignoring the juxtapositions the obvious circumstances would create. We are doing this to show commonality of thought and purpose as different groups of African people use media as vehicles of survival.

Political Organizing

Two freemen, the Rev. Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russwurm, led the group of Black Americans who created *Freedom's Journal* because the newspaper was a response to the racist editorials and cartoons of *The New York Enquirer*. They were part of a group of well-educated, politically conscious men who were, in Bennett's eyes, "founders" of Black America.

In England, the founders of *The Pan-African* were also well-educated men: they came out of the intellectual tradition of several Pan-Africanist intellectuals organizing in Europe, including Martin Robison Delany, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Henry Sylvester Williams and James Africanus Beale Horton. Led by Williams, *The Pan-African* was the outgrowth of the 1900 Pan-African Conference that recalls the Negro Convention movement of America between 1830 (only one year after *Freedom's Journal's* publication was discontinued) and the U.S. Civil War.¹¹ *The Pan-African*, like those who followed it, tackled several issues of concern to Blacks both inside and outside of Britain. Top of the agenda was freedom from British rule, but focus was also given to addressing negative stereotypes of Blacks all over the world. Keenly aware that it was the mouthpiece for voiceless Blacks under colonial rule, it declared in its first issue “no other but a Negro can represent the Negro.”¹²

Social Organizing

In the beginning, the Black press served as offense and defense. It began both as a response to white media supremacy and the vehicle for free African-Americans to see and refer to their own words. The heart of African communication—the drum and *nommo* (which in Kiswahili roughly translates into “the power of the word”), the voices of the village—met the technology of the European-created printing press with empowering results. In America, *Freedom's Journal* was a signal to the predominately white abolitionist movement that free Blacks were ready to define themselves and fight their own battles.¹³ However, they also used the vehicle to record births, deaths, marriages and all other parts of free Black American life the white press chose to ignore.¹⁴ This duality of purpose—to explain and defend Black life while documenting its everyday happenings—would become Black media's permanent *raison d'être*. In the case of Great Britain, *The Pan-African* lasted too short to make that impact, but subsequent newspapers attempted to fill in those gaps. They include the *African Telegraph*, which was launched in 1903 by Sierra Leone journalist and businessman John Eldred Taylor. In addition to politics, the paper covered social and commercial issues in Britain and Europe's colonies.

Pan-Africanist Ideology

In the case of America, *Freedom's Journal* attempted to create a bridge between Africans trapped in America and Africans. It understood that the racist media portrayal of *all* Africans created by Europeans (and European descendants in America) applied to them, too:

Useful knowledge of every kind, and everything that relates to Africa, shall find a ready admission into our columns; and as that vast continent becomes daily more known, we trust that many things will come to light, proving that the natives of it are neither so ignorant nor stupid as they have generally been supposed to be.¹⁵

In the case of Great Britain, these Black Britons did not need to be educated about Africa. They were fighting against their colonial status and for, ultimately, the freedom of their ancestral lands from colonization and the unification of the African continent and its peoples around the world. Though *The Pan-African* was short-lived, producing probably only one issue, it was soon succeeded by other anti-colonialist organs, including *The African Times and Orient Review*. It became Britain's first Black political publication. The magazine was created by Egyptian-born Duse Mohammed Ali and John Eldred Taylor in 1912 following another all-Black gathering, the Universal Race Congress in 1911. Ali, who lived mainly in Britain from 1883 to 1921 wrote in its first edition, the Congress needs "a Pan-Oriental, Pan-African journal at the seat of the British Empire which would lay the aims, desires and intentions of the Black, Brown, and Yellow Races—within and without the Empire—at the throne of Caesar." ¹⁶

Conclusion: Deconstruction of "The Black Press:" Changing Media, Changing Identities

The Black American and Afro-British press of the 20th century grew as all mass media grew. As populations flourished, and newspapers continued their monopoly on classified advertising, all newspapers grew in circulation and power. With each development of mass media technology that could contain news and public affairs, Blacks claimed a specific political-social cultural space to sustain and foster a Black identity in contrast to white American or British media hegemony.

As the 20th century progressed in America, weekly Black newspapers, the primary carrier of the Black experience, became secondary because of the development of Black radio, then tertiary because of Black public-affairs local and national television, national Black magazines and, most importantly the hiring of Black journalists at mainstream daily newspapers, radio stations and local and national television news divisions, the "White press" as traditionally defined by the Black worldview. In the second decade of the 21st century, an explosion of "Black media" exists online, created for Black Americans—several Black-oriented websites (some white-conglomerate-owned, some not, but each carrying some combination of audio, video and text), several cable television networks (some with news and talk show programming), several national syndicated radio programs, various Black social networking spaces, as well as the friend-based Facebook and the world's town hall Twitter. With media interaction moving from consumption to production, Black individuals can now not only speak for and organize for themselves, but also can produce reportage and opinions in any form they choose.

In America, this has created, paradoxically, a personal-yet-collective interactive, 24-hour text/audio/video Black American media world for the consumer who wants to participate in one. The political and cultural identity of “the Black community,” pushed by the “founding” of Black America and its first newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, is both fulfilled and damaged, together realized and forever changed. Black newspapers, like all newspapers in America, are dying a slow death, with the collective cultural identities that defined them fading like newsprint into recycled trash bins and largely unused microfilm and newspaper databases.

In Great Britain, many of the same changes happened that did in America. But with a relatively small Black population, any loss is more greatly felt. The tradition had waned significantly by 2009, when *The Voice*, a former powerhouse stopped publishing audited circulation figures, and became the only remaining Black newsprint newspaper that attempts to serve all the needs of Black Britons. (In comparison, there are still 200 small [6,000-circulation or under, on average] Black newsprint weekly newspapers serving Black communities in approximately 30 U.S. states.) There are very small targeted print publications such as *The Vine* and *Engage* that serve specific demographic areas or specific topics, respectively, the North of England for *The Vine* and entrepreneurship for *Engage*.

Meanwhile, the nation’s broadcast mainstream has also made overtures to non-white Britons. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for example, now has radio shows throughout its vast network targeting Black Britons, including “The Ace Show” in Derby, northern England and “UK Black,” which highlights from African and Caribbean programs on BBC local radio. In 2002, the outlet established its digital broadcasting strand BBC Radio 1Xtra to focus on new Black music. As with America, Black online forums in 2012 are now the primary vehicle for the dissemination of tidbits and opinion. Among them *Catch A Vibe*, which focuses on Black culture and entertainment and *Precious Online*, which targets women of color in the UK. Most are owned and operated by Blacks.

The UK situation is even worse, however, because the loss of Black newspapers is one of the examples of a new, multicultural Black British reality—a generational shift away from the collective “Black” British identity once promoted (in traditional Black newspapers and periodicals) by the nation’s Black activists and intellectuals. Though many more news sources are available for the nation’s Blacks, they tend to target audiences based on their ethnic origin, rather than any shared Black British experience. Sites like itzcaribbean.com abound. It builds itself as “The UK’s Leading Website for the Caribbean Community,” while *UK Zambians*, a lifestyle print and online magazine focuses on southern African community in the United Kingdom. In the UK, the “Pan” has abandoned the “African.”

The most distressing thing about the development of Black media in both nations is the shift away from news, analysis and political and social content Black newspapers carried and into the non-stop entertainment world of “new media.” Black America may be united by, say, relatively superficial discussions on “Black Twitter” about President Barack Obama’s iPod selections and the doings of entertainers Sean (“Jay-Z”) Carter and his wife, Beyoncé, but that is not the same kind of informational unity that traditionally created socio-political cohesion in Black America.¹⁷ Black Britons, meanwhile, may have the choice to keep their own traditional “national” identity while also claiming British citizenship, but it is an identity based on targeted popular culture media, not the political and social consciousness carried by the Pan-Africanist *Freedom’s Journal* and its historical brethren in England and America, or even *The Voice*. Perhaps repairing this problem is the next challenge for the heirs of traditional Black media.

Notes

A previous version of this paper was published in 1999 via *The Black World Today*, a now-defunct Black internet news site.

¹ Savage, D. B. , *Broadcasting freedom: Radio, war and the politics of race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3.

² Boyce Davis, C. , *Left of Karl Marx: the Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 88.

³ The authors are using “Black” as the cultural identifier of African descendants in the Old and New World. We are using “Black” as an identifier because the development of both late 20th century Black American history and Black American press/media history (see following paragraph) chart the development of racial identity among African descendants from Negro to Black, but collectively reject the term “Negro,” identifying it as backward and separate from a Black/African consciousness the history is documenting and situating. The term “Black” is used here throughout the text to identify the historical actors involved and their racial consciousness, vis-à-vis Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism.

The authors are also defining what is known as American “Black press/media history” by starting with the development of Black periodicals (In this case, newspapers), although we understand that Black book and pamphlet publishers, some of whom were Pan-Africanist in orientation, pre-dated the first Black newspaper and were, chronologically, the first “Black mass media” in America. By starting with the development of Black American newspapers as the beginning of Black mass media history, we are accepting the starting point of the historical current of scholarship on Black American media.

⁴ For more on the ideology of Black American media, see Burroughs, T. S. “Drums in the global village: toward an ideological history of black media” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2001). In that dissertation, Burroughs defines Black media as Black-owned/editorially controlled and -operated, Black-oriented and for Black audiences directly. The purpose of pure Black media, Burroughs argues, is defined by “Black media function”—the idea that Black media serve as a bulletin board, school, community vehicle, rally organizer and church of sorts for Black communities. Black media function, then, is the practical application of *Njia*—the Afrocentric worldview, which centers the best of African cultural, spiritual, psychological, social and historical values. The best of Black media, then, Burroughs argues, applies such values. Much of how we define Black media here comes from Burroughs’ conception.

⁵ Clarke, J.H., *Africans at the crossroads: Notes for an African world revolution* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991), 47-48. Clarke (1915-1998), a history professor, poet and short story writer based in Harlem, was a participant in every major Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist movement from the 1940s to his death in 1996, and was a personal comrade of Malcolm X and Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. He was one of the editors of the quarterly Freedomways journal, a “little magazine” founded by W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois, among others, from its inception in 1961 until right before its demise in 1985.

⁶ Bennett, L. Jr., *The shaping of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 reprint of 1991 revised ed.), 114. During these years, Bennett argues, with the majority of African-Americans still enslaved, Black Americans struggled to build their own institutions to escape the virulent racism they lived with each day. The North's free Blacks and escaped slaves had developed several institutions. Churches, schools and clubs were the most common. The need to know each other and to gather meant more than social advancement; it meant survival. Blacks were not allowed to mix with whites in any of those institutions, so they had to build their own. Separated from Africa and by America, they began to think of themselves as “as a common people with common aspirations and a common enemy” (116).

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois makes this point in his 1957 speech, “The American Negro in the Darker World,” April 30, 1957, New York City. “From the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, the Africans imported to America regarded themselves as temporary settlers destined to return eventually to Africa.

Their increasing revolts against the slave system, which culminated in the eighteenth century, showed a feeling of closeness to the Motherland and even well into the nineteenth century [our emphasis] they called their organizations ‘African,’ as witness the ‘African Unions’ of New York and Newport, and the African [Methodist Episcopal] Churches of Philadelphia and New York. In the West Indies and South America there was even closer indication of feelings of kinship with Africa and the East.” As quoted in Clarke, 56.

⁸ Frayer, P., *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 284.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁰ *Freedom’s Journal* lasted only two short years because it was the victim of the intra-racial controversy over colonization—the idea that free Blacks should leave America and settle in West Africa. (*Freedom’s Journal* co-publisher John Brown Russwurm eventually moved to Liberia, the African nation founded by the United States, and became editor of *The Liberia Herald*. For more on Russwurm’s ideology, check Winston James’ *The struggle of John Brown Russwurm: Writings of a Pan-Africanist pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012). However, Black media’s torch was permanently set ablaze. The Black press of the 19th century began articulating the themes that would propel it into the 21st century: 1) freedom, 2) self-determination and 3) social and political equality for African-Americans. Others followed in the footsteps of Cornish and Russwurm—David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Written and published words, in the hands of free African-Americans, were forged into human rights documents demanding emancipation.

¹¹ A decade later, in 1910, W. E. B. Du Bois—who would organize and participate in all five subsequent Pan-African conferences in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927 and 1945—would create and edit *The Crisis* magazine, the official organ of the then-newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Under Du Bois, the NAACP’s Director of Publicity and Research, it would become a leading proponent of Black thought in America. *The Crisis* would find ideological competition in America coming from *The Negro World*, the newspaper organ of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. Incidentally, Booker T. Washington—like Du Bois, another participant in the 1901 conference—would secretly purchase Black newspapers that dared to criticize him.

¹² Frayer, 286.

¹³ Quarles, B. , *The Negro in the making of America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1987), 106-107. He continues: “As in the other phases of the abolitionist movement, Negroes were active participants in newspaper work, owning and managing twenty-four periodicals during the thirty years preceding the Civil War. Generally these Negro-run newspapers were not the official organs of any of the abolitionist societies... but they gave their full support to the crusade. These journals invariably had financial problems, and some of them were issued only a few times. Their common devotion to the principles of freedom and equality is evidenced in some of their titles—*Freedom’s Journal*, *The Rights of All*, *Mirror of Liberty*, *Impartial Citizen*, and *Herald of Freedom*.”

¹⁴ Barrow, L. C. Jr., “Our own cause: *Freedom’s Journal* and the beginnings of the Black press,” In *Media voices: An historical perspective*, ed. Jean Folkerts (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 59.

¹⁵ “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 17, 1827, pp. 1. For more on the history and development of *Freedom’s Journal*, see Bacon, Jacqueline (2007). *Freedom’s Journal: The first African-American newspaper* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books). A complete run of *Freedom’s Journal* can be found on the website of the Wisconsin Historical Society: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/>. Retrieved November 18, 2012.

¹⁶ Dabydeen D., Gilmore J., Jones, C, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 18.

¹⁷ Obviously, a major exception to this rule is the massive, and successful, organization efforts from all Black American media—old and new, mass and de-massified—to get Black Americans to turn out in record numbers to vote for Barack Obama, the son of an African, for U.S. president in 2008 and 2012.