

The Black Ivy Influencer: How an “Outsider” Black Newsletter Became an Inside Force at the Columbia University Journalism School

by

Wayne J. Dawkins, M.S.,
Associate Professor,
Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications,
Hampton University

&

Todd Steven Burroughs, Ph.D.,
Independent Scholar

Abstract

The monthly newsletter Black Alumni Network (BAN), created by a group of newly-minted journalism Master's degree awardees at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1980, celebrated its 35th year of monthly publication in 2015. It was created independently by Black mainstream journalists, who are working corporate professionals whose purpose in the American mass media is to make them more racially inclusive. Hence, this qualitative essay argues that in using an insider strategy with the tactic of constant publication and visibility, the BAN newsletter persuaded Columbia University to acknowledge its existence, include the small periodical within its white hegemonic structure and to respond to its insider activism.

Biographical Note*

Wayne J. Dawkins, M.S., is a professor and author who has spent the last 25 years writing about Black journalism. Dawkins became interested in journalism at an early age when his mother sent him to the neighborhood candy store to buy the daily newspaper. In 1977, Dawkins graduated from Long Island University with his B.A. degree in journalism where he was a reporter and editor for the campus newspaper. After receiving advice from a mentor, he decided to further his education and enroll at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where he received a substantial scholarship. Dawkins graduated with his M.S. degree in journalism in 1980. He has worked as a writer, reporter and editor for *The Courier-Post* in New Jersey and *The Daily Press* of Hampton, Virginia, among other newspapers. He has been a local chapter president (in New Jersey) and national board member of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). After graduating from Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, he founded the alumni newsletter *Black Alumni Network*, the topic of this article, where he first wrote about the history of NABJ back in 1990. Sparking his interest, the books *Black Journalists: The NABJ Story* (1997) and its successor, *Rugged Waters: Black Journalists Swim the Mainstream* (2003) soon followed. They were published under Dawkins's own company, August Press. Dawkins began teaching journalism at Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications at Hampton University in 2005. While at Hampton, he has received many awards and honors both from Columbia and Hampton. He wrote the biography *City Son: Andrew W. Cooper's Impact on Modern Day Brooklyn* (University of Mississippi Press, 2012) and was the producer of "Voting Rights Northern Style," a 2007 public broadcasting digital media project. He is currently awaiting the 2016 publication of a biography of Emanuel Celler, the Brooklyn congressman who pushed through President Lyndon Baines Johnson's 1965 bill that opened up American immigration to large amounts of non-whites. That book will also be published by the University of Mississippi Press.

Todd Steven Burroughs, Ph.D., is a journalist with 30 years of experience in mass media. He has written for *The Source* and *The Crisis* magazines, *The Root.com*, newspapers such as *The New York Amsterdam News* and *The (Newark, N.J.) Star-Ledger*, New Jersey's largest newspaper, and for wire services such as the NNPA News Service, Capital News Service of the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the Knight-Ridder Wire. He began his career as a correspondent for The New Jersey edition of *The Afro-American* newspaper chain in 1985. Burroughs is a former National Correspondent and News Editor of the NNPA News Service. His media criticism column, "Drums in the Global Village," was syndicated to about 200 Black newspapers for much of the 1990s. A separate version of the column was published in 1999 on *The Black World Today*, a now-defunct Black Internet news site. His blog (www.drumsintheglobalvillage.com) continues his media criticism work. A Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, Burroughs is a lifelong student of the history of Black media. He has taught at Howard and Morgan State universities. He is the author of *Son-Shine on Cracked Sidewalks*, an online audiobook on the successful 2014 mayoral campaign of Ras Baraka, the son of the late poet-playwright Amiri Baraka, the co-author with Herb Boyd of *Civil Rights: Yesterday and Today* (West Side Publishing, 2010) and co-editor, with Jared A. Ball, of *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X* (Black Classic Press, 2012). He is co-writing a book on *Freedomways* magazine and solo authoring an anthology on Black broadcast journalism pioneer Gil Noble and a biography of imprisoned journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Introduction

Black American mainstream journalists walk an interesting intellectual and ideological tightrope between the very separate American histories of both Black press journalism and white hegemonic journalism. They are emotionally and intellectually attached to the activist tradition in the Black press, but they have a different mandate: their mission is not to serve as journalistic equivalents of racial advocates (also called “advocacy journalism”), but as educators and persuaders within the white hegemonic structure of American print and broadcast (and now web-smartphone multi-platform) mainstream media newsrooms. Black mainstream journalists, then, are a complex combination: both middle-class Black professionals working within white hegemony, but also advocates for the Black perspective—Black *truths*, as it were—to be included in mainstream media, on white terms, for white audiences. Because of this hegemonic-reinforced ideological self-restraint practiced by Black mainstream journalists, it has always been important for them to have media forums in which they can write for their own Black audiences, from undiluted perspectives.

For 35 years, one of these intra-racial outlets has been the Black Alumni Network newsletter. (In its own newsletter, it is nicknamed The BA Network or just known by its initials, BAN.¹) It was founded in 1980 by a newly graduated class of Black students of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, considered the nation’s top journalism school. For many Black professional groups, a newsletter would have just served a social function. For Black mainstream journalists, however, it became a font of information, perspective and the limited activism Black mainstream journalists are allowed. The newsletter served three practical purposes: 1) as a nationally-distributed Black alternative newspaper/magazine, 2) as a bulletin board that listed the accomplishments of fellow Black Columbia Journalism school alumni, and 3) a forum to spotlight, and sometimes lead, activities and campaigns within Columbia’s journalism school that would benefit its few Black journalism students, staff and faculty.

For the purpose of this intellectual discussion, the independently-published, all-volunteer newsletter served two ideological purposes during its history, which continues in 2016: 1) it gave Black mainstream journalists a forum to write about themselves on Black terms, and 2) it served as an example of what David Pettinicchio calls “institutional activism” within its marked territory, Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. This qualitative essay focuses on that second ideological purpose. It argues that, using that insider strategy coupled with the tactic of constant publication and visibility, the Black Alumni Network newsletter and its editors and publisher not only persuaded Columbia University to acknowledge its existence, but also to include the small periodical within its white hegemonic structure *and* to respond to its insider activism.

Theory

This article is using the idea of David Pettinicchio’s “institutional activism,” which states that the “insider/outsider” dichotomy needs to be revised to deal with existing challenges in a variety of ways, including entrepreneurial. ² These institutional activists “pro-actively work on issues that overlap with social movements,” ³ and don’t necessarily need outsiders to help them. ⁴ Those in charge of hegemony can also act based on their own ambitions or goals in ways that align with the goals of activists. ⁵

From a theoretical perspective, The Black Alumni Network newsletter is a perfect vehicle for Black mainstream journalists. As a volunteer organization, the newsletter allowed Black people who were/are corporate employees for white hegemonic media to make a symbolic-yet-practical contribution to the advocacy Black press journalism/Black Freedom struggle that allowed them to secure their journalistic employment. As an independent Black platform organization, the newsletter created for Black mainstream journalists the self-generated freedom to write from their own intellectual and cultural spheres. And, significantly, as a monitoring and advocacy organization, it gives them a significant practical goal in which they were/are familiar in their white hegemonic corporate identities: to push a white hegemonic institution—in this case, their alma mater, the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism—to include African-Americans there in significant, visible and permanent ways. In sum, the BAN newsletter gives the Black mainstream journalists who contribute to it an independent, Black-centered, “pro-active” purpose that both “overlapped with social movements” and pushed for a more racially and ideologically inclusive white mainstream journalism hegemony. It is an example of part-time, night-and-weekend (outsider) *kujichagulia* (self-determination) within the confines of Monday-through-Friday fulltime (insider) white corporate ideological hegemony—a strong example, by the nature of the newsletter’s practical and ideological purposes, of the “institutional activism” Pettinicchio outlines.

Evidence

Historical Context of the BAN Newsletter’s Founding

In May 1980, a dozen Black graduates of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism gathered at the neighborhood West End tavern in New York City to raise cocktail glasses in celebration of earning Masters of Science degrees. At the soiree the men and women pondered the media environment they were about to enter. For nine months the graduate students took note of an “old boy network” that was dominated by white men who decided what was news and who was worthy to tell and package those stories. ⁶

In essence, these Black graduates and other Black journalists (and other journalists of color) nationwide had decided that they wanted to compete with their white colleagues and bosses over who was going to define America's history and its current political, social and economic reality. Black mainstream journalists agreed that that battle would be on white, corporate terms because, they believed, that those white media institutions had a disproportionate power over definition in American society. They also, unapologetically, wanted the middle-class lifestyle that desegregation now offered, but were determined that their desegregated careers and lifestyle were going to be on negotiated Black terms.

Although a small number of Black journalists had worked in white mainstream news media—defined here as major- and minor-market radio, newspapers and television—in many of America's major cities/markets since the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, these 1980 Black journalism graduates were still considered pioneers in their recently desegregated industry. In 1980, not many journalists of color worked in white mainstream journalism. The American Society of Newspaper Editors non-white census began in 1978. The 1980 report said 4.9 percent of 47,000 daily newspaper journalists were non-whites.⁷ High-ranking Black editors, such as Robert Maynard of The Oakland Tribune, John L. Dotson of Newsweek magazine or Les Payne of Long Island Newsday, were rare. The majority of newsrooms in small- to medium-size markets had not yet hired their *first* Black journalists. In the major markets, too many news organizations practiced tokenism or grudging desegregation.⁸

Not realizing it at the time, those gathered at the tavern were about to serve, from their point of view as Black mainstream journalists, as Trojan horses of a self-survival tradition of the segregated Black press from the days of John H. Johnson, founder and publisher of Ebony magazine, C.A. Scott, publisher of The Atlanta Daily World, Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press wire service, and Griffith Davis, J-'49, international freelancer for the Black Star Agency into present-day white mainstream media.⁹

The dozen Columbia journalism graduates were about to depart to jobs in Dallas, Houston, Louisville, Ky., Wilmington, Del., and Mount Vernon, N.Y. They considered themselves pioneers of white corporate integration—Black American foot soldiers on a mission to racially integrate the American news media, then one of the whitest and most powerful institutions in American society. They were confident and talented, but inexperienced. What would they do? They could not complain or sulk about the long-established old-boy network. It was time to build their own, they believed: an independent instrument in order to grow a comparable pool of talent.¹⁰

The instrument and method would begin modestly. Mount Vernon-bound Wayne J. Dawkins asked colleagues to send updates on what they were doing at their new jobs. He typed up their notes on his Olivetti manual typewriter into a two-page newsletter, then photocopied 25 and in July mailed them to 1980 graduates.¹¹

That act launched the Black Alumni Network newsletter. “When you’re looking for inspiration at 7:30 in the a.m.,” wrote Louisville-bound Bill Hamilton, “It is good to know that BAN is alive and well. It is always refreshing to get a breeze from the East.”¹² Founding editor Dawkins was influenced by futurist John Nesbitt’s book Megatrends that identified networks as a trend of that decade. Nesbitt’s definition fit The Black Alumni Network mission: Exist to offer self-help, exchange information and share resources. The newsletter became a medium in which career development, struggles, successes and triumphs were chronicled and a vibrant network of journalists and other media professionals of color were in plain view.

Operation and Format of the BAN Newsletter

The Black Alumni Network newsletter is an independent publication underwritten primarily by alumni subscriptions. For the first 15 years, budget updates published in January and July reported how much money was collected and how much was spent on production, mailing and newsgathering.

The newsletter format began as a one-sheet, 8.5-by-11-inch, two sided, two-page edition. It was typeset with an Olivetti manual typewriter for the first two years, and then the newsletter was formatted with a Brother electric typewriter equipped with correcting tape. In 1983 the page format was redesigned into a 7-by-8.5-inch, four-to-eight page edition. The July 1985 fifth anniversary edition had a record page count – 16 – created with four 8.5-by-14-inch sheets.

In order to present bolder headlines, scratch-on Letraset provided, for example, 36-point [half-inch tall] sans serif letters. Black and white photographs or drawings were converted by a printer into veloxes, also known as half-tone images. The type and images were often formatted into two-column pages and then pasted onto boards that were delivered to a Sir Speedy or Kinkos store for photocopying. For color, ivory, light blue or mint green paper was used.

First-class postage was 15 cents in 1980 in order to mail 25 copies. Two decades later the postal rate rose to 34 cents per piece. At that time several hundred newsletters were mailed monthly.¹³ In April 1986, typewriter typesetting was replaced by PC word processing with a first-generation Apple MacIntosh computer. In the pre-Internet desktop publishing age, The BAN newsletter returned to an 8.5-by-11 inch format usually done with an 11-by-17-inch sheet that was folded in half to create four content pages. The newsletters were then tri-folded into 8.5-by-3.67-inch self-mailers. The lower third back page was the area for the address, return address and stamp.

In 1996, the format was changed to an 8.5-by-14-inch broadsheet that was folded in quarters to become an 8.5-by-3.5 inch self-mailing newsletter. The format change occurred during the year that cataclysmic changes altered the media landscape. E-mail and Internet use became mainstream. Disney bought the ABC television network, and FCC deregulation allowed cable TV systems, telephone companies and Internet providers to merge and bundle their services then sell them to consumers. At the start of the 21st century, The Black Alumni Network newsletter returned to an 8.5-by-11-inch format.

In 2002, the newsletter was launched in cyberspace at journalism.columbia.edu, the official website of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Deborah Creighton, J-'97, a Wall Street Journal copy editor, suggested the alternative platform and followed through by successfully asking the school administration for space.

In 2003, Ken Smikle, publisher of Chicago-based Target Market News, and a friend and admirer of the newsletter, redesigned BAN and introduced color images. The lion's share of reader-subscribers – 80 percent then and 90 percent by 2010 – was switched to email delivery in order to cut postal costs.

From modest beginnings – two manually typed pages that was photocopied 25 times, then mailed to Class of 1980 African-American Columbia Graduate School of Journalism graduates – the monthly periodical grew and added future classes of graduates and reached back to connect with and find alumni from pre-1980 classes. The newsletter was/is independent and self-supporting. About 10 percent of the readers during its golden print era of the mid-1980s to late 1990s paid \$25 annual subscriptions to underwrite printing and mailings costs. Occasionally, a handful of readers made additional gifts – \$100 at a time – as votes of confidence in the work of the newsletter. In 2015, 610 people were on the e-mail distribution list and 54 percent of those readers were alumni, and 46 percent were leaders or very active members of the National Association of Black Journalists, a national professional organization comprised mostly of Black mainstream journalists.¹⁴ About a dozen Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism administration members, including present and former deans, faculty and admission and development staff, were also reader-subscribers through 2015.¹⁵

Impact of the BAN Newsletter

The BAN newsletter's impact from its inception in 1980 to 2015, for the purpose of this article, is divided here in four sub-categories. The first is as a celebrator and reminder of those who had gone to ancestry. The second is as a forum for the telling of heretofore untold workplace stories, cultural views and alumni gatherings of Black journalists. The third is as a chronicler and critic of the activities of the National Association of Black Journalists. The fourth is as a fundraising vehicle for two separate scholarships for non-whites at the journalism school.

BAN Newsletter as Celebrator, Reminder of Those Gone to Ancestry

The Black Alumni Network newsletter was a periodical that recognized and celebrated the lives of Black alumni who died. Too many died young from illnesses. Some alumni died nearly unnoticed, however the monthly newsletters brought many moving stories to light. In the 30th anniversary edition there was a roll call of 17 deceased men and women.

The included J-'80 classmates Susan E. Johnson [55, attorney, complications associated with connective tissue disease] and Barbara Nelson [researcher/writer at the United Nations], Michael Crawford, J-'79 [41, heart attack, praised as a soft-spoken and gentlemanly Wall Street Journal copy editor], Wilmer Ames, J-'71 [43, founder of Emerge magazine, launched in 1989 and published until 2000], Janet McDonald, J-'84 [53, colon cancer, a lawyer who lived in Paris and in 1999 wrote the critically acclaimed novel Project Girl, plus six young adult novels], Philippe Wamba, J-'94 [31, died in an automobile accident near Nairobi, editor of Africana.com and author of the 1999 memoir Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America] Herman T. Wilson, J-'71 [57, heart attack, night metropolitan editor of The Baltimore Sun], and Sam W. Averiett, J-'72 [56, who was homeless in Manhattan. ¹⁶ Kenneth Maurice Jones, '81, [freelance writer], and Adimu Amili, J-'80, [the former Michael A. Lewis and a graduate of Columbia University's School of Law] both succumbed to HIV/AIDS. Luther P. Jackson Jr., J-'51, was the first tenured African-American Columbia Journalism school professor and reporter at The Washington Post in the 1950s. Washington Post foreign correspondent Lynne Duke, J-'85, died in spring 2013. Although deceased, Duke's byline co-authored The Washington Post's December 2013 obituary appreciation of Nelson Mandela. ¹⁷

BAN Newsletter as a Forum for the Telling of Heretofore Untold Workplace Stories, Cultural Views and Alumni Gatherings of Black Journalists

As the newsletter aged and matured, features were added that became conventions and institutions. January 1986 was inaugural Year in Review roundup written by Cheryl Devall. The feature analyzed events of special interest to African-Americans and in the diaspora, and milestones in the news industry. Devall's narratives were blends of controlled rage, irony, compassion and late-night comic humor. "Oh, how the mighty fell," was the headline of the 2011 review published in January 2012. ¹⁸ Devall linked the falls from grace of Dominique Strauss-Kahn [sex assault scandal], Rupert Murdoch [news empire phone hacking scandal], and Joe Paterno [his assistant coach's pedophilia]. In the new century, the sidebar "Notable deaths," by Dawkins was a roll call of departed newsmakers, news gatherers, entertainers & artists and not-so-famous however important people such as Stanley Robertson, pioneering Black TV executive with NBC and Dorothy E. Brunson, co-founder of Inner City Broadcasting.

July 1988 marked the launch of "Datelines," first-person alumni accounts of their workplaces and communities. Twenty-four dispatches that were published until 1991 included visits to Raleigh, North Carolina, Omaha, Nebraska, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Portland, Oregon, and Fayetteville, Arkansas. December 1998 marked the new books by alumni feature intended to encourage holiday gift giving. Popular authors included mystery writer Valerie Wilson Wesley, J-'82, novelist Yolanda Joe, J-'85, and coffee table book author Craig Marberry, J-'85.

June 2007 was the launch of the inaugural Black Music Month edition. Through personal anecdotes and historic milestones, alumni surveyed the last 50 years of popular music in five-year intervals. For example, in the seventh annual edition Evelyn C. White, J-'85, chose 1989 ["Many stand on the shoulders of bad boy Bobby Brown"] regarding his hit "My Prerogative," and Kissette Bundy, J-'87, favored 1969 ["Sly and Family Stone strike chords for everyday people"] regarding the hit song "Stand."¹⁹

A May tradition that began sometime in the 1990s was coverage of the spring alumni weekend at the journalism school. There was a focus on the four Distinguished Alumni Award winners selected each year and anecdotal news about individuals and their class reunions. Marquita Pool-Eckert, J-'69 of CBS "Sunday Morning" said it was "cool" to receive the 2002 distinguished alumni.²⁰ She made a generous gift to The Black Alumni Network endowment fund. There was moving words too from Michele Montes-Dominique, J-69, widow of murdered Haitian journalist Jean Leopold Dominique, and Liberian journalist Kenneth Best, J-'67, who vowed to return to his native land and reopen a newspaper. Dawkins often made the pilgrimage to New York City via Amtrak and filled his notebook with material he would use in BAN. He became a class agent of his 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015 reunions.²¹

BAN Newsletter as Chronicler, Critic of National Association of Black Journalists

By the mid-1980s members of The Black Alumni Network expanded its interests to the rapid growth of the National Association of Black Journalists. Betty Winston Baye became northeast regional director of the association and got the New York chapter affiliated on her watch. In 1984 when she left the region to go to The Courier-Journal of Louisville, Kentucky, Dawkins succeeded her and served for five years, through 1989. He helped affiliate chapters in New Jersey, Connecticut and Syracuse, N.Y. Classmate Jill Nelson, J-'80, a full-time freelance writer, was elected New York ABJ chapter president in 1985.

Since 1982 The Black Alumni Network newsletter was chronicling NABJ activities at the local and national level. Over time the monthly newsletter expanded its role as a watchdog and critic of the association. Cheryl Devall, J-'82, a Chicago-based journalist and Dan Holly, J-'85, a Miami-based journalist, became correspondents. Holly caused a stir in 1987 when he reported that some convention sponsorship money was linked to apartheid South Africa. Again in 1989 Holly's reporting grabbed attention when he reported that money from media companies attempted to influence candidates and supporters in a three-way association presidential race.

In September of 1984, the newsletter editors published what they believed was the best coverage of the National Association of Black Journalists conventions. In 1984, the entire September edition was devoted to coverage of the Atlanta convention, where NABJ membership nearly tripled and the association received national media exposure.

In October 1989, a three-member reporting team covered the first and only convention in New York. In 2000, a five-member team covered the Phoenix convention. There, Deborah Creighton, J-'97, promised to inquire about obtaining space on the Columbia Journalism school website in order place The Black Alumni Network in cyberspace. That wish came true in 2002.

In 1991, Dawkins verified the number of men and women [44] who founded NABJ in 1975. His research led to the publication of Black Journalists: The NABJ Story [1997], the seminal history of the association's early days, then Rugged Waters: Black Journalists Swim the Mainstream, the 2003 sequel about the more mature association.

BAN Newsletter as Scholarship Promoter

Since 1990, on the Saturday morning of annual NABJ conventions, a dozen or more Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism alumni get together for breakfast, networking and strategizing, for example, on scholarship and endowment initiatives. At these meetings the decision to create a BA Network Scholarship was hatched. ²²

The alumni's first step was to spread the word about an existing scholarship for non-whites. In 1991, The Black Alumni Network newsletter promoted the announcement of the Sylvia L. Wilson Scholarship. Wilson, a J-'85 graduate and highly praised New York Times copy editor, died at age 28 from brain cancer. Wilson's family successfully raised the funds and endowed the scholarship. ²³

At that time it cost \$25,000 to endow a scholarship. Mindful of the soaring cost of Columbia's journalism graduate school that could easily discourage African-American candidates, at least a dozen alumni at the 1998 networking breakfast at NABJ agreed to launch a Black Alumni Network scholarship. At that time \$100,000 was the minimum amount needed to create an endowed scholarship fund that would generate future awards. When about \$20,000 in alumni gifts were in the fund, the Journalism school announced it was giving an additional \$25,000 to the fund. The money was a bequest from an elderly white alumna who wanted to promote diversity. ²⁴ Columbia journalism school officials believed The Black Alumni Network (the newsletter and its audience) honored the late donor's wishes. ²⁵

In 2006, the school awarded the first scholarship – \$5,000 – to Dani McClain. Subsequent awards went to Sabrina Ford [2007]; Lylah Holmes [2008]; Jessica Hopper [2009], and Michelle "Micki" Steele [2010]. In spring 2007 the award was renamed The Black Alumni Network/Phyllis T. Garland scholarship in memory of Garland, who died in 2007. Garland was beloved as a nurturing yet rigorous writing coach and her passion was cultural and performing arts reporting. ²⁶

In fall 2010 the journalism school suspended the awarding of scholarships after it was told that it was not supposed to make awards before the minimum \$100,000 was raised.²⁷ At that time the fund was \$22,000 short of the endowment minimum. The editors of The Black Alumni Network newsletter in October launched a close-the-gap campaign that resulted in three articles over the final quarter of 2010. In the closing days, the minimum endowment goal was reached and exceeded. Between December 24 and January 1, at least \$10,000 in gifts poured in in order to close the deal. Days after the January 2011 edition published, The BA Network published an “Extra!” edition that celebrated the scholarship fund victory. The journalism school resumed awarding BAN/Garland scholarships in fall 2012 with dual awards to Salima Koroma and Kristen Reed.²⁸

Editorial Limits of the Newsletter: Mute on University’s Racism, Apartheid, Audubon Ballroom

The critical tone that the BAN newsletter sometimes leveled against the National Association of Black Journalists did not extend toward Columbia University *en masse* as an elite, white Ivy League institution whose campus sat well within the boundaries of the Black community of Harlem and for decades had investments in corporations doing business in apartheid South Africa. The newsletter editors did not focus coverage on Columbia’s longstanding, antagonistic relationship with the city’s Black communities, specifically the institution as acquirer of property in Harlem, including the iconic Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was slain in 1965.²⁹ The editors narrowed its focus to reporting on or commenting about activities only inside the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism at 116th Street and Broadway. The editors saw themselves as part-time but diligent monitors of only that specific school’s commitment to African-Americans.³⁰

This idea of focusing on the specific site of the journalism school, with specific goals for just it, fits into the “institutional activism” paradigm. Since the Black Alumni Network newsletter was not an official publication of the Graduate School of Journalism, the editors were not censored by Columbia University. However, they did collectively—and ideologically—decide that the reason of the newsletter’s existence was to make the journalism school respond to their specific requests: 1) recruitment and retention of Black students; 2) recruitment and retention of Black faculty, and 3) recognition of the accomplishments of Black students, faculty and alumni.³¹ The editorial tone of the newsletter was more collaborative than combative.

Black Alumni Desegregate Journalism School’s “Old Boy” Network

During fall 1982, non-white applications to the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism collapsed. Members of The Black Alumni Network made recommendations to the school and helped recruit talent. Osborn Elliott, the dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism that year, wrote, “Wayne Dawkins, Betty [Winston] Baye and others who have so loyally and energetically been producing the Black Alumni Network deserve a lot of credit for their work, and I am happy to salute them on their third anniversary of BAN.”

Because of the bad economy [the 1981-82 recession was the culprit], a lot of confusion over the availability of student loans, we suffered a sharp dip in non-white applicants and members of the Class of '83. But it is good to be able to report that this year minority applicants soared to a new record of 115 and the percentage of minorities in the class of '84 should be back to around 20 percent.”³²

BAN staffers played a public role as Black alumni engagement with the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism continued. Dawkins was invited to serve on the alumni executive committee in the early 1980s and again in the first decade of the 21st century. Dorothy Davis, J-'77, was elected secretary of the school committee. By 2007, A'Lelia Bundles, J-'76, was elected chairwoman of a Journalism school task force that razed the old alumni executive committee and recreated a new alumni board that was less Manhattan-centric in serving 13,000 global alumni and included representatives from around the United States and overseas. The alumni network in 2010 endowed a scholarship in memory of Phyllis T. Garland, the first tenured woman (and second African-American) on the Journalism school faculty.³³ (Garland, a Black press veteran, connects the Jim Crow Black press to the mainstream Black journalists who honored her via Columbia University.) By the 21st century, African-American alumni recognized as distinguished alumni became customary instead of accidental. Five such alumni were recognized as contributors to a list of 100 best stories of the Columbia Journalism Centennial, 1912 to 2012. Recognized were Dele Olojede, J-'88, for coverage of Rwanda [2004]; Lydia Polgreen, J-'00, for coverage of Darfur [2006]; Suzanne Malveaux, J-'91, for the 2008 Presidential election of Barack Obama [2008] for CNN; Reginald Stuart, J-'71, for “Kemba’s Nightmare,” the 1996 Emerge magazine massive cover story on mandatory minimum sentencing, and James McBride, J-'80, for his 1995 memoir The Color of Water. David Peterkin, J-'82, of ABC News in New York, and Gayle Pollard-Terry, J-'73, a longtime Los Angeles-based journalist, became members of the new journalism alumni board. Peterkin ascended to president in spring 2011.³⁴

Public Recognition of the BAN Newsletter and Its Editors/Contributors

The newsletter, and its editors and contributors, became, over time, a significant presence in the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In 2002, the newsletter became part of the school’s official website, journalism.columbia.edu. In 2015, the newsletter is listed on the school’s “Alumni Publications” page.³⁵ Dawkins won the 1990 Distinguished Alumni Award in large part for co-founding the newsletter and helping Columbia locate Black graduates, since journalism is a transient career. In 2004, Dawkins received the Columbia Alumni Federation medal for “conspicuous service.” In 1990, Betty Winston Baye was named a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. Cheryl Devall was named a Knight Fellow at Stanford in the mid-1990s.³⁶

In 1998 BAN contributor A'Lelia Bundles, J-'76, successfully campaigned to get a First-Class postage stamp memorializing Madam C. J. Walker. Bundles, the great, great-granddaughter of the hair care entrepreneur and self-made millionaire, was named after Walker's daughter. Bundles was named a Columbia University trustee in fall 2007. That spring she also received the university alumni association medal. Suzanne Malveaux of CNN was also named distinguished journalism alumna in 2013.

Black Columbia grads (some of whom were BAN contributors) were receiving major American journalism awards, including American journalism's greatest prize. Pulitzer Prize winners included the late Toni Y. Joseph, J-'86 [1994]; Dele Ojeje, J-'88 [2005, and 2008 J-alumni award]; and E.R. Shipp, J-'80 [1996].³⁷ As of summer 2014 there were 205 Columbia Journalism Distinguished Alumni Award winners. Before the 21st century, six African-American were members of this august group. In the new century there have been 10 winners in 14 years.³⁸

BAN members had earned a place in American mainstream journalism history. During the 2012 centennial celebration of the journalism school, 100 great stories of the century were recognized, initially in a booklet and then in an online roll call. The first 50 were vetted by faculty and other scholars and the winners included Suzanne Malveaux, J-'91, of CNN for her coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama; Lydia Polgreen, J-'00, of The New York Times for her 2006 foreign correspondence of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and Ojeje for his 2004 international reporting on the Rwanda genocide. The remaining 50 greatest stories were selected by an alumni vote and the winners included James McBride, J-'80, for The Color of Water, the 1996 New York Times bestseller about his biracial family, and Reginald Stuart, J-'71, whose 10,000-word-plus Emerge magazine article "Kemba's Nightmare," exposed the toll of mandatory minimum federal prison sentences on first time non-violent offenders.³⁹

Near the turn of the century, BAN itself began to be placed into Black history. In March 1998, the newsletter was included in reference book African-American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography, by James P. Danky and published by Harvard University Press. After a decade-long National Endowment for the Arts-funded search by Danky, The Black Alumni Network was included among 6,500 periodicals identified, dating back to Freedom's Journal, the first Black American newspaper, in 1827. Also, by the mid-1990s the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture asked to subscribe to the periodical and began to collect and bound the monthly newsletters dating back to the inaugural 1980 year. The Black Alumni Network is also housed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which assigned an ISSN number to the newsletter.⁴⁰

Jackie Greene, a visual journalist and manager with USA Today, in 2013 told Dawkins that the newsletter inspired him to launch Blackbooksandreviews.com, a literary site. Jerome Reid, J-'82, told The Black Alumni Network editors, that the periodical inspired him to launch a Midwest civil rights newsletter, based in Detroit. Esther Iverem, J-'83, who in 2001 launched the arts, culture and news site SeeingBlack.com, uploaded the June Music edition to her site in 2013 and 2012.⁴¹

In April 2015, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism dean Steve Coll presented the ninth Dean's Medal for Public Service to Dawkins—who, by this time, had become an academic and established Black journalism historian—for his decades of journalism and historical work with BAN and NABJ. “The educators at the J-school gave this former shy guy from Brooklyn permission to be brash and bold if it were in the name of good journalism and civic virtue,” said Dawkins after accepting the medal from the dean. “I recognize that I've come this far because I stood on the shoulders of giants at 116th and Broadway.”⁴²

Conclusion

The Black Alumni Network's mission was to alert the mostly white mainstream journalism industry that there was an available pool of aspiring Black journalists who were ready to work. Through promotion, exposure and construction of a nationwide network of professionals The Black Alumni Network strived to discredit news manager's claims that they could not find quality journalists of color. Thirty-five years of publishing later, at least a score of network members have grown up in the media industry to become foreign correspondents, TV news producers, professors, authors and anchors.⁴³ Their prestige, in turn, would reflect well on the newsletter *and* on the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

The power of the Black Alumni Network newsletter shows how insider persistence—institutional activism—doesn't necessarily have to be quiet and out of the public eye. More scholarship needs to be done on the pressure-valve release that newsletters such as the BAN provide Black mainstream journalists. (A prime candidate, for example, could be The NABJ Journal, the organ of the National Association of Black Journalists.) But perhaps more importantly, more scholarship needs to be done on how independent Black newsletters influence white hegemonic industry and white hegemonic institutions, particularly when done in ways that directly empower African-Americans.



The BAN newsletter was founded by Black members of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism class of 1980. From left, Norman 'Akili' Buchanan, Fred Johnson, Wayne Dawkins, Gil McDonald, Betty Winston Baye. Columbia University J-school, winter 1980 (photo by William H. Hamilton Jr.).

Endnotes

¹ These three names are used interchangeably throughout the text.

² Pettinicchio, David, "Institutional activism: Reconsidering the 'insider/outsider' dichotomy," Sociology Compass Vol. 6, No. 6, 2012, 502.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁶ Black Alumni Network, July 2010, Vol. 30, No. 7. For more on that West End meeting, see: <http://centennial.journalism.columbia.edu/reflections/greatest-year-of-my-life/index.html>. Retrieved January 5, 2016.

⁷ Dawkins, Wayne, Black Journalists: The NABJ Story, Merrillville, Indiana, August Press, 1997, 49. The American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Radio and Television News Directors Association have annual censuses of all non-white journalists. ASNE.org/RTNDA.org. For example, Black participation in television and radio was about 7 percent of 34,000 professionals, reported the FCC in the late 1970s. See: <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=140&sl=129&contentid=129> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

⁸ For more information on the history of Black mainstream media journalists during the 20th century mass media era, see co-author Wayne Dawkins' Black Journalists: The NABJ Story (Merrillville, Indiana: August Press, 1997) and the sequel, Rugged Waters: Black Journalists Swim The Mainstream (Newport News, Virginia: August Press, 2003). There have also been several memoirs of Black mainstream journalists—at least 10—published during the last 40 years. These memoirs detail their individual and collective fights against institutional racism in their white newsrooms. (These memoirs are an interesting sub-set of the books that detail the problems of the Black middle-class, desegregated professional.) Another book that explains Black mainstream journalists' "insider/outsider" philosophy from an academic viewpoint is Pamela Newkirk's Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

⁹ Griffith Davis' daughter Dorothy [J-'77] was a second-generation Columbia Journalism school graduate.

¹⁰ Observations by co-author Dawkins.

¹¹ Recollection by co-author Dawkins.

¹² Letter to co-author Dawkins, circa 1981. From co-author Dawkins' Black Alumni Network newsletter archives.

¹³ Estimate by co-author Dawkins.

¹⁴ Statistics provided by co-author Dawkins.

¹⁵ Estimate by co-author Dawkins.

¹⁶ Averiett was known to neighbors on the Upper West Side, according to a February 19, 2006 New York Times account. According to the article, one of the neighbors handed Averiett a poorly written article for an archeology journal after learning the homeless man was a Journalism school graduate. Averiett returned the piece edited with proofreader marks. For more on Averiett, see the aforementioned article here:

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/nyregion/thecity/19sam.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

¹⁷ Black Alumni Network, January 2014, Vol. 34, No. 1. In American major media professional practice, it is not unusual for a major media institution to have an advance obituary of a major national and/or international figure, such as Nelson Mandela, written months or years in advance.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, January 2012, Vol. 32, No. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, June 2014, Vol. 34, No. 6.

²⁰ Observations by co-author Dawkins.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Black Alumni Network, May 1991, Vol. 21, No. 5. The Wilson scholarship exists as of this writing in 2016.

²⁴ Observations by co-author Dawkins.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Waldron, Clarence, "Columbia University Names Scholarship in Honor of Late Ebony Editor Phyllis T. Garland," Jet, June 18, 2007; Black Alumni Network, July 2010, pp 7.

²⁷ Black Alumni Network, October 2010, Vol. 30, No. 10; November 2010, Vol. 30, No. 11; December 2010, Vol. 30, No. 12; January 15, 2011, Vol. 30, No. 1A.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, February 2013, Vol. 33, 3.

²⁹ For several decades, Columbia University was the site and target of major protests by Black student activists, most notably in 1968. See Stefan M. Bradley's Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

In 1985, the university's student activists held a three-week, university-wide protest demanding the university disinvest in firms doing business with South Africa. For the controversy that erupted in 1990, when Columbia University bought the Audubon Ballroom—the site of the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X—and attempted to turn it into a laboratory, see: Leonard Buder's "A Proposal to raze Audubon Ballroom Causes Controversy," The New York Times, May 3, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/03/nyregion/a-proposal-to-raze-audubon-ballroom-causes-controversy.html> . (Retrieved January 5, 2016), Russell J. Rickford's Betty Shabazz: A Remarkable Story of Survival and Faith Before and After Malcolm X (Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003); and the link to the history of the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center, which came about as a result of the uproar over the Audubon: http://theshabazzcenter.net/page/the_shabazz_center.html . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

³⁰ Observation by co-author Dawkins.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Black Alumni Network, July 1983, Vol. 3, No. 7.

³³ During the last years of Jim Crow, Garland was also a staffer at major Black publications such as Ebony magazine and The Pittsburgh Courier newspaper. For an appreciation of her, see here: <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/obituaries/2006/11/10/Obituary-Phyllis-Garland-Journalism-professor-at-Columbia-University/stories/200611100275> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

³⁴ Black Alumni Network, May 2011, Vol. 31, No. 5.

³⁵ <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/143-alumni-publications/144>. Current back issues of the Black Alumni Network, from 2015 and 2014, can be found there on .pdf. The page describing the Black Alumni Network is <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/153-Black-alumni-network/154> . Retrieved January 5, 2016. It is notable that the BAN is the only newsletter listed on that page that is *not* published by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

³⁶ For more on the John S. Knight fellowship for Cheryl Devall, see: <http://knight.stanford.edu/fellows/class-of-1996/> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

³⁷ For more, see: Pulitzer Prize winners E.R. Shipp <http://www.pulitzer.org/biography/1996-Commentary> ; Toni Yvonne Joseph <http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/International-Reporting>, and Dele Oledede <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/promise-of-leadership-sessions-focus-on-leaving-a-legacy-in-africa> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

³⁸ The Black winners of the 20th Century Distinguished Alumni were: Ernest Boynton, J-71; co-author Wayne Dawkins, J-80; Dorothy Butler Gilliam, J-61; Reginald Stuart, J-71, Vincent Harding, J-'53 and Neil Henry, J-78. The 21st Century winners were Kenneth Best, J-67; James McBride, J-80; Suzanne Malveaux, J-91 [2013]; Vanessa Bush, J-97 [2014]; Marquita Pool Eckert, J-69 [2002], Lydia Polgreen, J-00; Dele Olojede, J-88, Michele Montes-Dominique, J-69; Rehema Ellis, J-77, Lolis Eric Elie, J-86 [2012]. For a list, see: <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/475-past-alumni-awards-winners/152> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

³⁹ Black Alumni Network, April 2013. Stuart wrote a 2001 follow-up piece and in the final days of the Bill Clinton presidency, Kemba Smith's sentence was commuted and she was freed. James McBride, J-'80, and Stuart were among the remaining "50 [of 100] Great stories of the J-school" centennial, selected by alumni in 2012. In December 2013, McBride won the National Book Award for his novel The Good Lord Bird (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013).

⁴⁰ From co-author Dawkins' Black Alumni Network newsletter archives.

⁴¹ See SeeingBlack.com, June 7, 2012, http://www.seeingBlack.com/article_1051.shtml and August 29, 2011, http://www.seeingBlack.com/printer_955.shtml . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

⁴² The presentation can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp2zQTsmD00> . Retrieved January 5, 2016.

⁴³ Observation by co-author Dawkins.