

THE BLACK PRESS: SOLDIERS WITHOUT SWORDS

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OVERVIEW

"We didn't exist in the early papers. We were never born, we didn't get married, we didn't die. We didn't fight in any wars. We never participated in anything of scientific achievement. We were truly invisible, unless we committed a crime.

But in the black press, the Negro press, we did get married. They showed us our babies being born. They showed us graduating. They showed our Ph.D.'s."

Vernon Jarrett, journalist

"No longer shall others speak for us," wrote the founders of the first black newspaper, Freedom's Journal, in 1827. From that moment on, stories of the struggles and the achievements of African Americans would no longer languish in invisibility, ignored by the white-owned press. The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords documents the history of many newspapers founded by and for African Americans, beginning with Freedom's Journal and proceeding through the contemporary era.

One of the preeminent themes of this program is the black press's legacy of spirited activism. African American publishers and journalists understood that their duty was not

only to report the news but to help black communities forge cohesive political movements. They often did so with remarkable success, from their roots in the antislavery movement, to crusades against Jim Crow segregation and racist violence, to championing the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

This legacy is all too often omitted from general histories of American journalism. The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords brings the history of the black press to light. It presents compelling archival film footage, still photographs, and illustrations depicting people and places that the black press reached. These images show us what these newspapers looked like, and allow us to read and hear their words. In addition, this film includes testimony from men and women who worked for the black press as reporters, artists, and publishers. While the film mentions dozens of black newspapers from throughout the black press's history, it examines the histories of the influential California Eagle, Chicago Defender, and Pittsburgh Courier in particular depth.

Section one: Too Long Have Others Spoken For Us, begins with the 1827 founding of Freedom's Journal in the context of the abolitionist movement. It traces the proliferation of black newspapers that followed emancipation, as the black press strove to help build communities for free African Americans.

Section two: Standing Up for the Race, describes the role of the black press in the migration of African Americans from the South to cities in the northern and western United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Section three : A Separate World, focuses on the strategies that black newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s used to help readers find jobs and other necessities under segregation. Just as importantly, these newspapers provided African Americans with positive images of themselves, countering the degrading representations of the white press.

Section four: Treason? The film presents the dilemma faced by African Americans asked to fight in World War II for a nation that denied them the rights of full citizenship.

Section five : Putting Itself Out of Business. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is at the heart of this section. Ironically, as the Civil Rights movement achieved some of its goals, the circulation of black newspapers declined and their political influence waned.

The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords concludes with the suggestion that we consider the role of contemporary African American newspapers in the communities in which they continue to exist, and the possibility of revitalizing this important institution as a forum for critical debate and a weapon of political activism in the twenty-first century.

TOO LONG HAVE OTHERS SPOKEN FOR US

"After the Civil war, there was an enormous burst of energy, a desire to communicate, a desire to connect, with black people establishing newspapers in any town, even tiny ones. It was their first opportunity to use the written word without fear of reprisal."

-- Phyl Garland- Journalist

The year 1827 marked the beginning of an era in which African Americans would use the printed word as a means of political protest, when few other outlets for black public expression were available. Before the Civil War, newspapers in the North became a vital force in the antislavery movement; after the war, black newspapers in both the North and the South helped to forge cohesive communities of formerly enslaved African Americans. And when, following Reconstruction, racist violence targeted African Americans, the black press once again took up the mantle of political activism.

The black press came to life in 1827, when a group of African American New Yorkers, no longer able to tolerate constant denigration of the black population in the pages of the mainstream press, pooled their resources to found Freedom's Journal. John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish, the editors of Freedom's Journal, proclaimed in their first issue that black Americans would now have a means by which to "plead our own cause"; they would no longer have to depend on white abolitionists to speak for them in the white press. Freedom's Journal ceased publication after only two years, but broke new ground both as an experiment in black entrepreneurship and as the inaugural instrument for public expression by African Americans where none had existed before.

Between 1827 and 1861, when the Civil War began, some two dozen black-owned and -operated newspapers were founded in Northern cities. The North Star, edited by Frederick Douglass, was the most influential. Its readership included not only African Americans but also presidents and members of Congress, who used the paper to keep abreast of the activities of the antislavery movement. Under Douglass's visionary leadership, The North Star firmly established the black press as an indispensable tool of abolitionism. It would also provide a model for generations of black political and social activism to come.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, emancipation from slavery sparked a new wave of black newspapers -- and whole new reasons for them to exist. Prior to emancipation, the black press could not publish or circulate its papers in the slave states of the South. Further, under slavery, African Americans had been barred from learning to read. With their newfound access to education, African Americans strove to achieve literacy. They embraced the newspapers as a sign of their freedom, and as a source of information about

their people and their communities. The black press of the Reconstruction era dedicated itself to building communities of free black men and women in both the North and South.

Reconstruction came to a close in 1876. President Rutherford B. Hayes removed protections that had been extended to newly freed slaves, unleashing a torrent of violence against African Americans. Between 1876 and 1919, at least 3,000 black men were murdered by white lynch mobs. The Southern white press failed to condemn racist violence and even encouraged the hatred that fueled the mobs. In response, black reporters made a public record of crimes against African Americans that went unprosecuted and unreported by the mainstream press, in order to inform their readers about these new dangers. The black press also attempted to stem the tide of false accusations levied against black men by whites to justify the actions of the lynch mobs. These efforts were not without risk. Ida B. Wells, editor of the *Memphis Free Speech*, traveled throughout the South to report on lynching. When a mob attacked her paper's office, Wells realized that her life was in danger. Left with little choice but to flee the South, she headed north and continued her career as a writer for the *New York Age*.

In 1893, representatives of the black press's ante-bellum roots and its new radical leadership joined forces to protest the grievous lack of African American participation in the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The exposition commemorated the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus's fleet on North American soil. It completely omitted mention of black history and culture in the United States. Frederick Douglass had been a journalist for almost fifty years. Ida B. Wells was just emerging as one of the black press's most prominent young activist journalists. They co-wrote a pamphlet condemning the exposition planners' oversights. When the exposition acquiesced and hastily organized Colored American Day, Wells boycotted the event but Douglass attended and gave a rousing speech, one of the last of his long career. A young man from Georgia named Robert S. Abbott was in the audience. Thwarted by racism in his attempts to pursue careers in the printing trade and in law, Abbott was inspired by Frederick Douglass's speech to enter the field of journalism. His tenure as founding publisher of the *Chicago Defender* is a subject of the next section.

Witnesses

- Phyl Garland, journalist
- James Grossman, historian
- Vernon Jarrett, journalist
- Christopher Reed, historian
- Jane Rhodes, historian

Discussion Questions

- What social and political factors contributed to the founding of the ante-bellum black press in cities of the northern United States?
- During Reconstruction, what changes led to the growing importance of the black press in African American communities?
- How did the black press in northern cities differ from the black press in southern cities? Try to describe the conditions under which black newspapers operated in the North and the South after the Civil War.
- Consider that even in the free northern states, few African Americans owned property, and that the privileges of citizenship, such as voting rights, were denied to the black population. Under these conditions, what role could the black press play in the political process?

STANDING UP FOR THE RACE

“The North was the promised land. It was the land of hope. But it was not quite the fulfillment of the promised land as they had anticipated. Yes, they had better jobs, their children could go to better schools, and they could vote. But there were so many other obstacles, like racism: the transfer of the Jim Crow of the South, to the racism of the North.”

-- Timuel Black, Historian

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the United States was transformed by technological innovation, powerful social movements, and political upheaval abroad and at home. African Americans often found themselves at the forefront of change in the political and economic landscape, as the nation shifted from a predominantly agrarian economy to industrialization. Correspondingly, the black population, once concentrated in the South, moved northward and westward. These changes did not always take place easily: white mobs still terrorized southern blacks and by the late 1910s, race riots reached northern cities. The black press flourished in its dual role as an adversarial force committed to protesting racial injustice, and as a catalyst for the growth and vibrancy of new African American communities across the nation.

With the industrialization revolutionized production, late 19th century and early twentieth century Americans experienced not only an explosion of new consumer goods, but also, and perhaps more importantly, an infrastructure of communications and transportation technologies that criss-crossed the nation. From airplanes and automobiles to telephones

and motion pictures and other innovations, people and information traveled at unprecedented rates. Benefitting from increasingly industrialized printing processes and the growing thirst for information, newspapers of all types flourished. Black newspapers were no exception. By 1910, over 275 black newspapers were being published in cities throughout the United States, reaching a cumulative circulation of half a million readers.

One of the most influential of these papers was the California Eagle, founded in 1879 by John James Neimore. The Eagle served as a catalyst in the growth of African American communities in Los Angeles. It reached out to African Americans in the rest of the nation, calling for them to seize opportunities available in the growing cities of the West, especially Los Angeles. When Neimore died in 1912, he turned control of the paper over to Charlotta Spears Bass. Mrs. Bass, as she was known, had joined the Eagle a few years earlier, selling subscriptions and working her way up its ranks. She was a deeply committed publisher and editor, as well as a dynamic community activist and leader. Through the newspaper and other public forums, Mrs. Bass spoke out on issues facing Los Angeles' black communities, from police brutality to discrimination in housing. She even took on the nascent film industry, leading a boycott that spread nationwide against D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, an epic that celebrated the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.

Meanwhile, in the Midwest, Robert S. Abbott founded the Chicago Defender. Abbott had made Chicago his home after hearing Frederick Douglass's inspirational speech at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Abbott composed and published the first issue of the paper in his landlady's kitchen in 1905, and sold it himself on the street. It later made him a millionaire.

It was not uncommon for newspapers of the era to take positions in the issues they covered, or to use humor and irony to rouse the emotions of the readers. The journalistic style that purported to be objective and claimed that its role is simply to report factual information, was a recent innovation of some late nineteenth century white newspapers. However, Abbott's Defender cultivated the art of irony, even sarcasm, and became known for its use of acerbic language and huge, bold headlines. Moreover, Abbott took full advantage of the fact that his paper was located in Chicago. Unlike publishers and editors of Southern black newspapers, Abbott could take an aggressive stance against the lynchings which still raged through the South, with little concern that his press would be destroyed or his life threatened.

Black Southerners did, however, read the Defender. Abbott sent copies to newspaper vendors in the South, creating an enthusiastic market for news from the North. As agricultural mechanization displaced the livelihoods of some sharecroppers, Abbott saw a chance for poor southern blacks to make better lives for themselves in the industrial North.

The Defender published the names of companies who were hiring workers, train schedules, tips on how to adjust to urban life, and even poems and songs encouraging African Americans to head north.

By 1916, they did, by the thousands. The black migration northward escalated even further when the United States entered World War I and the draft left many jobs vacant. With thousands of agricultural workers leaving the South, its economy suffered. Many communities tried to ban the sale of black newspapers. But Abbott was determined to keep the Defender in circulation throughout the South, and resorted to surreptitious distribution through helpful Pullman car porters. The exodus from the South continued while black communities in northern cities grew.

Not all northern whites welcomed their new neighbors. Racial tension in Chicago and other northern cities flared. By the time violence peaked during the 'Red Summer' of 1919, race riots had killed hundreds of people, most of them African American.

Despite the pall that these riots cast, African Americans across the nation continued to strive for economic security and freedom from injustice. The black press continued to grow; in the early 1920s, 500 black newspapers were in print. They offered news of the day, information that helped newcomers make their way in the urban North and West. Just as importantly, they sought to instill hope and pride in black people.

Witnesses

- Timuel Black, historian
- Wallace Burney
- Earl Calloway, journalist
- Dora Harris Glasco
- Walter Gordon, former newsboy
- James Grossman, historian
- Vernon Jarrett, journalist
- Christopher Reed, historian
- Jane Rhodes, historian
- Patrick Washburn, historian

Discussion Questions

- What is advocacy journalism? How does it differ from other journalistic models?
- What major developments in transportation and communications, of which black newspapers were a part, occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century?
- Discuss the evolution of the black press as an activist tool. Give examples of both protests led by the papers and how they helped build black communities in cities of the North and West.
- What was the role of women in the black press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

A SEPARATE WORLD

"It didn't feel bad to be the only woman. When I was in the way of some photographer's picture, I would challenge him. Sometimes they would say, 'Well, you didn't get anything.' And I'd say, 'Well, it's better than what you got, I'm sure!' We, constantly at that time, were fighting for a certain image, a certain feeling, and we really worked hard at it, to put the best foot forward in every picture."

-- Vera Jackson, Photographer

In the 1920s and 1930s, the black press provided crucial information to African Americans seeking employment, housing, and places to shop that would not discriminate against them. The black press also, through its society pages, photographs, cartoons, and other aspects, provided positive, uplifting images of African Americans and their communities. While many black newspapers thrived, others failed due at least in part to their difficulty in generating advertising revenue. The papers that survived hired some of the best known black scholars and activists as writers. They introduced new commercial strategies to increase circulation. At the same time, they continued to serve their communities as a sort of printed public sphere, in which issues of the day could be analyzed, discussed, even hotly debated.

Between World War I and World War II, the black press provided its readers with information that they needed to navigate through a segregated world. Black newspapers could be used to identify potential employers, or stores whose doors would not close on African American customers. They also contained sports and society pages, and hard news ignored by the white press. The black press also differed from the mainstream press in the

types of advertising that filled its pages, and its uniquely uplifting photographs, illustrations, and cartoons.

Mainstream papers depended on department stores and large advertising accounts for much of their revenue, but white-owned businesses were usually not interested in advertising to black consumers. As a result, most black newspapers operated on shoestring budgets, and all of them depended on circulation rather than advertising for the majority of their income. Still, desperate for revenue, most papers accepted ads for cosmetics, patent medicines, and goods and services promoted by black entrepreneurs with small businesses and little to spend on ads. Some of these products, such as straighteners and skin lighteners, would come under attack in some circles for promoting white standards of beauty at the expense of black self-esteem.

At the same time, newspapers devoted themselves to countering the degrading images of African Americans commonly found in the mainstream press. Grotesque caricatures appeared in comics carried by white newspapers. In the black press, cartoonists such as Chester Commodore and illustrators such as Romare Bearden (later well-known as an artist), created black heroes, rendered to project dignity, courage, and intelligence. "Your History," written by J. A. Rogers and illustrated by Samuel Milai, brought to light little-known facts about black history. From the pages of the widely read Pittsburgh Courier, readers marvelled at the revelations that Rogers unearthed. In this educational comic strip, many heard for the first time about achievements by people of African descent in the governance, arts, and sciences of both the ancient and modern worlds.

Photographs appearing in black newspapers also offered readers uplifting images of themselves and their communities. Photojournalists including Charles "Teenie" Harris and Vera Jackson avoided demeaning sensationalism. They treated their subjects with dignity and respect, whether they were called upon to document a crime scene or a glamorous social event.

The papers also employed many of the most promising young black intellectuals. The Chicago Defender, for example, hired Langston Hughes as a columnist and published Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. Vibrant in both written and visual content, many black newspapers of the era thrived. The Amsterdam News of New York City, Baltimore's Afro American, and the Atlanta Daily World were among the most prosperous, long-lasting black newspapers.

The Pittsburgh Courier achieved unprecedented success by introducing a number of innovations to newspaper publishing. While the Chicago Defender was essentially a local paper distributed nationally, the Courier appealed to readers outside of Pittsburgh by

basing fifteen different editions in cities across the country. Eventually, the Courier surpassed the Defender in circulation.

Further, the Courier's publisher, Robert L. Vann, did not use the paper to promote a single point of view. Vann was an astute lawyer and businessman. He hired well-known black scholars and political activists, including the civil rights leader Dr. W. E. B. DuBois and the anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Columns by Marcus Garvey, who led the radical back-to-Africa movement, ran alongside those by the politically conservative George Schuyler. Some critics charge Vann with opportunistically orchestrating controversy only to increase circulation. Others maintain that the Courier fulfilled the potential of the black press as a forum for the exchange of ideas and political debate, through its commitment to representing the true diversity of opinion among African Americans.

Only on rare occasion did Vann use the Courier to put forth his own political agenda. At least once, he did so with astonishing impact. In 1932, he called for black voters to leave the Republican Party -- the party of Abraham Lincoln. African Americans joined the Democratic Party in such large numbers that Franklin Delano Roosevelt, after his election that year to the presidency, rewarded Vann with a post as Assistant Attorney General.

The Courier and other successful black newspapers provided forums for political expression and influence. It had helped lead African American communities through over a century of struggle. Nevertheless, the black press was yet to face one of its greatest challenges, which would unfold when the United States entered the second world war.

Witnesses

- George Barbour, journalist
- Frank Bolden, journalist
- Chester Commodore, cartoonist
- Phyl Garland, journalist
- Charles "Teenie" Harris, photographer
- Vera Jackson, photographer
- Robert R. Lavelle, Pittsburgh Courier staff
- Edward "Abie" Robinson, journalist
- Patrick Washburn, historian

Discussion Questions

- In the early and mid-twentieth century, many black newspapers struggled financially. How did some publishers achieve economic success? How and why did some of their strategies for building up their businesses differ from those used by mainstream newspapers?
 - What role did visual representations of African Americans play in the black press?
 - How does the press benefit its readers by serving as a platform for a variety of political opinions, even radically opposing views?
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TREASON?

"We were at war, and in war you don't have friendly relationships, you're out to kill each other. That's how it was at the Courier. We were trying to kill Jim Crow, and racism. They didn't seem to understand that we had every right to fight for full citizenship at home if we were expected to give our lives overseas."

Edna Chappell McKenzie, journalist/historian

During World War II, African Americans faced a new dilemma. Thousands of black soldiers served willingly in the armed forces. At the same time, many African Americans wondered how they could support the war effort and even give their lives if called upon to fight, while Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation remained in place. Some black newspapers reflected these concerns, and openly criticized the segregation of the military and other policies. As a result, the black press faced harassment by government agencies. Still, its readership continued to soar, and as the war ended, black troops returned, more dedicated than ever to fighting injustice at home.

In 1941, the United States entered World War II. Most mainstream papers lauded the war effort. Patriotism among black publishers and journalists, however, was tempered by the pressing reality of segregation. While thousands of African Americans served willingly in the armed forces, many others felt that they could not support the war wholeheartedly.

Among the latter was a cafeteria worker named James Thompson. This young man wrote a letter to the Pittsburgh Courier, troubled by the fact that he might be called upon to defend a nation in which he was treated like a second-class citizen. He suggested that African Americans espouse a 'double V' campaign. The symbol stood for victory at war over enemies 'from without,' and victory at home against the enemy of prejudice 'from within.'

When other readers wrote to congratulate Thompson on his idea, the Courier launched a huge publicity campaign, complete with lapel pins and stickers, 'double V' hair styles and songs.

The campaign kept awareness of the injustices of segregation alive during the war. It also brought attention to Jim Crow-style segregation in the armed forces. The troops themselves were segregated, but black outfits were assigned white commanding officers. Even the military's blood supply for the wounded was segregated by race. White soldiers brutalized black soldiers, and race riots took place in camps where troops of both races resided. The military tried to suppress word of these events, with partial success; only the black press reported discrimination and discord within the troops.

Such controversial reporting, coupled with the double V campaign and the new international mobility and visibility of the few black war correspondents, made those in various branches of the government nervous. The power of the black press to influence public opinion and excite its readers never seemed more threatening. Concerned that the black press would actually discourage its readers from supporting the war (it didn't), the military banned black newspapers from its libraries. It confiscated black papers from newsboys, and burned the papers to keep them out of the hands of black soldiers.

J. Edgar Hoover saw the double V campaign as an act of sedition. With President Franklin D. Roosevelt's approval, he sought to indict black publishers for treason. Hearing of Hoover's intentions, John Sengstacke, who had replaced Robert S. Abbott as publisher of the Chicago Defender, insisted on meeting with Attorney General Francis Biddle. Sengstacke convinced Biddle that it was the black press's duty to print the truth, and that African Americans only sought their due rights and privileges as citizens. Biddle agreed to block the indictments so long as the black press did not escalate its criticism of the war. Without the cooperation of the Attorney General's office, Hoover's plan was foiled.

Attempts, such as Hoover's, to destroy the black press failed. In fact, the papers' combined circulation reached a record high of two million readers each week by the end of the war in 1945. For soldiers stationed overseas, the Allied victory, and news from home instilling hope for the future, bolstered their spirits. African American soldiers returned from the war with redoubled commitment to fight for equality and dignity on American soil.

Witnesses

- George Barbour, journalist
- Timuel Black, historian
- Frank Bolden, journalist
- Vernon Jarrett, journalist
- Robert R. Lavelle, Pittsburgh Courier staff
- Edna Chappell McKenzie, journalist/historian
- Christopher Reed, historian
- John Sengstacke, publisher
- Patrick Washington, historian

Discussion Questions

- What was the role of the black press in influencing black public opinion about foreign policy?
- Why were some black newspapers seen as a threat to the war effort?
- How did the war contribute to the increasing visibility of the black press?

PUTTING ITSELF OUT OF BUSINESS

"Hell was breaking loose down south. This young man, this young preacher in Montgomery, was beginning to appear in the papers, and I wanted to get down there. So they sent me down south. I'm in one of those sad little hotels in Montgomery, when I heard a bomb. So I dashed over to Dr. King's house and sure enough the front of the house was demolished. You have no idea of the impact of standing and watching this young man plead with these hundreds of people who were standing in front of his house with Coke bottles and pipes, getting ready to go into town and beat up somebody, to watch him tell them to be calm, be calm, that was not the way."

-- Evelyn Cunningham, Journalist

The postwar era brought enormous changes to the black press. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, black newspapers helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement. Ironically, the black press's greatest achievements in this era -- uncompromising political activism, increasing visibility, and recognition of its journalistic excellence -- were also the sources of its setbacks. Black newspapers muted their militancy to fend off accusations of

Communism, and to appease big advertisers who had finally become interested in attracting black consumers. At the same time, the mainstream press began to integrate its staffs, and hired some of the best African American reporters away from black newspapers. By the 1960s, the circulation and the political power of the black press was waning.

Government persecution of the black press did not end with World War II. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, under J. Edgar Hoover, continued to target black newspapers. Meanwhile, the House Unamerican Activities Committee, under Senator Joe McCarthy, was charged with rooting out the threat of Communism on American soil. From 1945 to 1957, HUAC falsely accused thousands of Americans in all walks of life of disloyalty, destroying their personal and professional lives.

Members of the black press were targeted by these efforts. Charlotta Bass, editor and publisher of the California Eagle and a committed community activist, was suspected of being a member of the Communist Party. The FBI's investigation of Bass brought negative attention to the Eagle. To many Americans, black and white, the specter of a Communist threat to national security seemed real. To others, fear of guilt by association prompted them to turn away from the California Eagle. Readers flocked to the less militant Los Angeles Sentinel. Bass sold the failing Eagle in 1951 and launched her political career. At age 71, she was the first woman to run for national office, as the Progressive Party's candidate for vice-president in 1952. When new management shut down its presses in 1964, the California Eagle had been in print for 86 years, and was the longest continuously published black newspaper.

Anti-communism was not the only force dulling the sharp critical edge of the black press. More visible than ever, with readership in the millions, large corporations began placing ads in black newspapers. However, the papers found that they would lose lucrative ads for department stores and automobiles if their editorial policies were too radical. Some papers adopted a more moderate tone in order to achieve financial security.

As the Civil Rights movement developed, the black press covered breaking events across the country. Black newspapers sent reporters into whites-only lunch counters, to write about their experiences of being harassed and refused service. They covered demonstrations, riots, and speeches by leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But for the first time, the black press was not alone in covering these events of vital importance to African Americans. The Civil Rights movement was a national news story, and white-owned newspapers could not ignore it. After decades of invisibility and degradation, news of the struggles of black men and women appeared in the pages of the mainstream press.

Further, the mainstream press of the late 1950s and early 1960s did not depend solely on its white reporters to cover the civil rights movement. Offering higher salaries and greater exposure, white-owned newspapers, along with the news divisions of television and radio networks, lured black journalists away from their jobs on black newspapers. Integration of the mainstream press made these outlets more appealing to African American readers, which cut even further into the black press's readership.

These factors -- the suppression of radical thought in the midst of the 'red scare' of the 1940s and 1950s, pressure from conservative advertisers, the 'brain drain' on black newspapers, and the integration of the mainstream press -- contributed to the black press's declining circulation and diminishing political power. Black newspapers remain a vital part of many African American communities today, but some people feel that the black press no longer plays the leadership role that it embraced in the past. These critics call for the revitalization of the black press as a forum in which African Americans can exchange ideas, debate social and political issues, and develop and choose their own leaders. In the tradition of the advocacy press, the black press of the twenty-first century might bring together African American communities in collective struggle. It might serve as a weapon in ongoing movements against racial injustice.

Witnesses

- Frank Bolden, journalist
- Evelyn Cunningham, journalist
- Phyl Garland, historian
- Vera Jackson, photographer
- Edna Chappell McKenzie, journalist/historian
- Jane Rhodes, historian
- Edward 'Abie' Robinson, journalist

Discussion Questions

- What was the role of the black press in the civil rights movement?
- How did gains resulting from the civil rights movement have a deleterious effect on the black press?
- Despite the declining visibility of the black press, many vital African American newspapers continue publishing today. What has been the role of the black press in the post-civil rights movement era?
- Do African American communities need an independent advocacy press today? Why or why not?

Bibliography

"The black press taught me how to write, how to make up a newspaper, the value of news, and the value of being truthful. The black press was the advocate of all of our dreams, wishes, and desires. I still think it was the greatest advocate for equal and civil rights that black people had in America. It had an effect on everybody."

—**Frank Bolden, Journalist**

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Lesson 1

Communication

Recommended age group - 3rd and 4th grade

OBJECTIVE: The student will understand the effectiveness both positive and negative of print media.

SET: The definition of communication is a giving or exchanging of information. Let's brainstorm tools that we use to communicate.

(Have the students generate a list of the ways people communicate, newspaper, radio, tv, computers, letters, books, and magazines.)

What do you think is the affect of communicating or giving and exchanging information?

1. changes opinions
2. Entertains
3. educates

Model: When commnication changes us in a positive way it is great but when it has a negative affect, then it can cause immeasurable harm. One of the most famous examples of negative results is the 50 year old 'War of the Worlds' broadcast by Orson Wells. People who turned their radios on late did not know it was fiction thought the world had come to an end. Many panicked. Some committed suicide. This is a very negative result. On the other hand, people who heard or read about the Pope coming to St. Louis, bought tickets, took off work and lived in a state of excitement until his arrival and subsequent departure. This had positive results.

Guided Practice: Fold your paper in-half. Label half, positive and the other half, negative. List as many negative and positive results of communication you can think of.

Instruction: In the history of America you will learn about how the print media used by some Americans had a very negative affect on a group of people and how using the very same media of print the people were able to fight back and make it have a positive affect.

The story:

During the 1800s when newspapers were the most important way to inform citizens about activities in America, the newspapers reporters made a silent agreement not to write anything about black people. No one wrote about the babies who were born or the people who got married or anyone who was a hero. No one told about any black person that died. So most whites simply forgot blacks were there except when there was a crime committed. Then the people were told it must have been a black person. "Everyone knows those blacks are no good". Just like the listeners of the War of the Worlds", the listeners believed. The punishment for serious crime was death by lynching. So many blacks were lynched. Lynchings were not written about either so many blacks were lynched just because they were black and the people thought they were no good. After the Civil War, the blacks fought back.

Robert Abbott owned the Chicago Defender. He became a millionaire fighting back with the same tool that was used to hurt black people like him. He wrote about jobs and a better life in the North. Southern blacks had to sneak and get the papers. When they read them they believed and hundreds of thousands left the south and got jobs in the north.

Independent study:

Given a list of events the students will select one and write an article to persuade listeners to support the event. Students will predict the outcome of their reporting in the summary of their paper.

Lesson 2

Communication

Recommended age group - 3rd and 4th grade

OBJECTIVE: The student will understand the effectiveness both positive and negative of print media.

SET: Yesterday we talked about 2 groups in print media. Remember the white newspaper reporters ignored the black citizens except when someone black committed a bad deed. Then they wrote about it and said that all black people were that way. The black citizens were upset and decided to start their own papers.

Would you say the people were fighting against each other?

Well the black newspaper writers felt they were fighting to get the truth out.

They named themselves 'Soldiers Without Swords'.

Model: Let's read a copy of one of the white newspapers and one of the black newspapers from the days of the 'Soldiers Without Swords'.

Guided Practice Let's review our daily newspaper and the type of information we find in it.

First let's list what we expect to find. 1. articles about all types of people. 2. good and bad articles about all kinds of people. 3. articles that provide information that helps people

Instruction: Today's newspapers provide information about a variety of subjects; just like the newspapers of the 1800's and early 1900's. There are however, many differences. Today many ethnic groups are written about. People who contribute great things are written about regardless of their ethnicity. Some people feel that newspaper reporters still tell people to feel that certain groups are not as good as other groups. We are going to see what you think.

Today we will divide into groups and each group will have a copy of a major newspaper, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, etc. Each group needs to find 2 articles that about an ethnic group. Tell whether the article is negative or positive about the groups. List the reasons you find it to be negative or positive. We will return together and share our findings.

Independent study:

Write an essay about your findings. compare today's newspaper with the old newspapers.

Do you feel the today's reporters write fairly about all groups? Do you think readers get better feelings about some groups more than others? Why? What words were used?

In you summary write your opinion about the name 'Soldiers Without Swords' picked by the black reporters? What do you think of it? If you were a reporter what name would you choose to tell people about your writing?