

**PROPOSAL FOR THE MEDILL SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM SERIES:
VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN PRESS**

I. Title of the Work: Voices of Freedom: The Journey of the African-American Press

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III. General Description of the Work:

On March 16, 1827, John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish published the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in New York to counter attacks on blacks by other newspapers in the city. Neither of them was an experienced journalist, and the paper did not last long. Within six months, Cornish resigned after a disagreement over whether to colonize blacks, and Russwurm ran the paper alone for a year until he left for Liberia. Cornish returned to the paper, whose name he changed to *Rights of All* in May 1829, but it died within six months.

From that seemingly unpromising start, a black press sprouted in this country that grew into a powerful and potent national voice for blacks during the period from 1910 to 1950. The *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* led the way as the two most influential black newspapers in U.S. history and helped set the stage for the civil rights movement. Then, with black magazines beginning to gather strength and attention, black newspapers suddenly plummeted in circulation and declined in influence forever over the next fifteen years. Nowhere was this more obvious than at the *Courier*. From a high of about 350,000 circulation in the late 1940s, it declined to about 25,000 circulation in 1966, when it was bought by the *Defender*, its long-time rival.

This book will examine the rise and fall of black newspapers over a 140-year period and the important part they played in pushing for black rights and shaping the black experience in America. Throughout much of this period, blacks usually had no way to read about themselves other than in black newspapers unless they were athletic stars, entertainment icons (both in music and in motion pictures), or involved in criminal acts. So, black newspapers became a record of all areas of black history

and black accomplishments. And with escalating circulations beginning in the 1910s, they, along with preachers, became the most influential voice in the black community.

This is a rich, absorbing story of an advocacy press that never totally adopted the objectivity model of the traditional white press. Up until 1910, black newspapers sprung up quickly and frequently died just as quickly—some lasted no more than a month or two. The reasons were simple. Many blacks could not afford to buy a newspaper, a number of them could not read, and few persons wanted to advertise in them. Thus, unlike white newspapers, they had to exist primarily on circulation, not on advertising income. Then, in 1910, Robert Abbott was looking for a way to increase circulation and decided to model his newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, after the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. The sensational headlines and in-your-face push for black equality, which meant vigorously attacking those who denied equality for blacks, was avidly welcomed by readers and the *Defender* jumped from 10,000 circulation to 200,000 in a decade. Other black publishers, seeing the rising circulation of the *Defender*, quickly imitated Abbott, and black newspapers changed forever.

Thus, the stage was set for the glory years in black newspapers. In both World War I and World War II, the black press pressed hard for black rights and was heavily critical of the federal government. This, in turn, resulted in massive investigations of the black newspapers in both wars by numerous federal agencies and threats of Espionage Act indictments. And in the Red Scare period immediately after World War I, the Justice Department pushed hard but unsuccessfully for a peacetime sedition act, partly because of radical black publications such as *The Messenger*, a socialist monthly magazine in New York. In World War II, after the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s famous Double V campaign became a national rallying cry among blacks for equal treatment, Attorney General Francis Biddle saved the papers from an Espionage Act indictment in the summer of 1942 while encouraging them to tone down their criticism of the federal government. Black publishers were only too happy to oblige because of Congress' new Excess Profits Tax, which resulted in unheard of advertising in black newspapers, and they did not want to jeopardize their new-found riches. Fearing that they might lose readers if they toned down too much, however, they laid off the federal government while continuing to criticize state governments and others. With the criticism continuing, there is no evidence that readers noticed the subtle change. Meanwhile, in February 1944, the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association became the first group of American blacks to meet with a U.S. president and Harry McAlpin of the *Atlanta Daily World* became the first black White House correspondent. As a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote during the war, "When the war ends the colored American will be better off financially, spiritually and economically. War may be hell for some, but it bids fair to open up the portals of heaven for us."

However, the portals closed quickly for black newspapers. In the 1950s, with the white media interested in expanding its coverage of black communities, it actively sought the best young black journalistic talent, and black newspapers were unable to compete for them, partly because it could not match the salaries being offered by the white media. Furthermore, as the black activists of the World War II

era aged and continued to write on black newspapers, readers increasingly found their rhetoric too conservative. This was because the civil rights era energized blacks and their aspirations, and expectations for equality leaped far beyond what they had been in World War II. Thus, black newspapers lagged behind the readers and quickly spiraled downward, losing power much like the muckrakers did at the start of the century because readers also became disenchanted with them. Stepping into the void were black magazines, who clearly carried what blacks wanted to read. It was not a pretty demise, but yet black newspapers had left their mark. Without their continual push for equality from 1910 to 1950, which resulted in some important victories, the civil rights era would have started at a far lower level than it did.

While this book will not be a great man history, it will cover some of the influential persons who played major roles in the black press. These include: Frederick Douglass, a former slave who was the first influential black publisher with the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*; Ida B. Wells, who led a famous newspaper crusade against lynching with several black northern newspapers; Abbott of the *Defender*; W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote the famous "Close Ranks" editorial in the NAACP's *The Crisis* in World War I that left some blacks feeling betrayed because equality was not put on a par with winning the war; Robert L. Vann, who made the *Pittsburgh Courier* between the wars the most influential paper in black history; and John Sengstacke, who took over from Abbott in 1940 as publisher of the *Chicago Defender* and was the leading black newspaper publisher in the country for more than fifty years.

Overall, the book will explain how black newspapers became what they did, their importance to blacks and the push for black equality, why they lost power and the legacy they left behind, and how and why black magazines took off as an influential media as the newspapers declined in prominence.

IV. Work's Central Argument:

A. 25-Word Version:

In pushing vigorously for equality for blacks from 1910 to 1950, black newspapers set the stage for the successes of the civil rights movement.

B. 250-World Version:

In pushing vigorously for equality for blacks from 1910 to 1950, black newspapers set the stage for the successes of the civil rights movement. This is a point that largely has been downplayed, and sometimes missed or ignored, by historians. And this is a point that I have found, in my talks about the black press around the country, is a surprise to both blacks and whites in the audience. They not only know little about the black press, but they seem to believe that the civil rights era just suddenly occurred, like a fire starting, with little advance preparation. In fact, this "fire" starting smoldering with the first black newspaper in 1827 and became an extremely hot "blaze" from 1910 to 1950, when blacks made rapid gains and black newspapers reached their zenith in circulation and power and influence. Without those black newspapers, which arguably led readers rather than followed them with an advocacy style of journalism that was extremely confrontational and brutal at

times, particularly when dealing with the federal government, the civil rights era would have started at a much lower level. Thus, an understanding of the black press before the civil rights era is extremely important because it not only puts into context the black experience in America, explaining how it evolved, but it demonstrates that history is a continuum rather than something that suddenly occurs with no advance notice or preparation.

V. Table of Contents:

Chapter 1: “Introduction.” This will introduce the subject, making the point that black newspapers set the stage for the successes of the civil right movement. Thus, knowing their history is important because it puts into context what came after they lost circulation and influence. A brief literature review will show that the book breaks new ground. In doing so, it will examine various scholarly interpretations of the value of the black press and reasons for the emergence of the civil rights era in the 1950s.

Chapter 2: “The Early Black Press.” This will move from the first black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827, through the 1840s to the 1860s, when Frederick Douglass published his papers, the *North Star* and then *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. It will establish how the black press pushed for equality for blacks from its beginning as well as examine the status of blacks in the country.

Chapter 3: “Struggling but Surviving, 1865-1905.” This will look at a period when numerous black newspapers were established, only to die quickly because of funding problems. Not only did it have few advertisements, but many blacks could not read or afford a black paper. It will particularly examine Ida B. Wells and her famous anti-lynching campaign as well as the accommodationist approach of the black press, which set a non-controversial tone.

Chapter 4: “A New Type of Journalism, 1905-1921.” This will focus on Robert Abbott and his newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, which adopted a yellow journalism model and changed black newspapers forever. Also examined will be how black newspapers differed from their white counterparts. In looking at World War I, when black newspapers were investigated by numerous government agencies, it will discuss Du Bois’ controversial “Close Ranks” editorial in *The Crisis* in 1918 that would anger some blacks. It will conclude with the Red Scare period of 1919-1921, looking at its impact on the black press and how a young J. Edgar Hoover became convinced that the black press was dangerous.

Chapter 5: “Between the Wars, 1921-1941.” This will focus on Robert Vann and his *Pittsburgh Courier*, which went from a small unimportant paper in World War I to the most powerful and influential black paper in history. It also will look at the government investigations, particularly by the Bureau of Intelligence (which became the FBI), in this period of the black press and the black community as both the Japanese and the communists attempted to curry support.

Chapter 6: “World War II, 1941-1945.” This will examine the black press’ role in the war, focusing on the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s Double V campaign, the federal government’s massive investigation of the press, the Espionage Act indictment threat by Francis Biddle, the influx of advertising dollars because of the Excess Profits Tax, and the *Atlanta Daily World*’s Harry McAlpin, the first black White House correspondent. It also will look at the changing status of blacks in the country. For example, a Department of Labor study showed that in the period from 1942 to 1944, blacks made more job-related gains in those three years than the previous seventy-five years combined. The importance in this period of the leadership of John Sengstacke of the *Chicago Defender* will be noted.

Chapter 7: “From an Incredible High to an Incredible Low, 1945-1966.” This will focus on how black newspapers went from being highly influential in the immediate post-war period to losing that influence, as well as a lot of circulation, in just twenty years. Meanwhile, black magazines assumed a leadership role for the first time among black media. Putting all of this into context will be important, and thus the changing status of blacks in the country, and the emergence of a black middle class, also will be examined.

Chapter 8: “The Civil Rights Era and the Black Press, 1950s to the 1970s.” Even as the black press was losing power and influence, influential southern black newspapers, such as the *Atlanta Daily World* and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, became particularly important in the civil rights era. Afraid to be very vocal about inequalities in World War II, they became increasingly outspoken and important during this period when the push for equal rights swirled around them. This chapter is necessary in order to truly look at the impact of the black press on the civil rights era.

Chapter 9: “Conclusion.” This will return to where the book started, talking about the value of black newspapers in terms of their effect on the civil rights era and the black experience in America. It also will discuss what can be learned from the rise and particularly the fall of the black press, particularly as it relates to the muckraking and Watergate eras, as it covered black America and as it moved from accommodationist to confrontationist to separatist eras.

VI. Existing Books on the Subject:

Books to be used in this study include:

Buni, Andrew. *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974. This is an excellent biography of the publisher of the *Courier*, who between the two world wars made it the leading black newspaper of all time.