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Introduction to Mass Communication

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The History of African-American Newspapers

Her lungs were lifted by the chilly, autumn air as she closed the classroom window in order to hear her teacher better. The school bell rang as she slipped into the seat of her first high school Journalism class. The teacher promptly began to write on the board while something caught the eye of the young lady. Examining the teacher's perfect shorthand, the girl read the words silently--*Freedom's Journal*. That day was spent learning about a newspaper that I would soon find myself completely enamored with and consumed by. Being that I am a young writer who also happens to be African-American and from New York, I felt an almost obligation to further educate myself with the history of black newspapers in general. Many people would deem it necessary for a student to be aware of everything there is to know about the history of the profession that interests them, and I would be no different. They say one cannot move forward without knowledge of where one began. Allow me to shed light on a few of the first African-American newspapers to have started it all.

I believe that it is crucial to first give a brief synopsis of the *Freedom's Journal* and how it all began. *Freedom's Journal* was the first African-American newspaper. This meant that it was both owned and ran by Blacks, which was a huge deal in the nineteenth century when it was first published. It was a four-columned paper that was published every Friday founded by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, along with several other free black men.

(Wikipedia-Freedom's Journal) According to BlackPast, *Freedom's Journal* featured "...both foreign and domestic news, editorials, biographies, births and deaths in the local African American community, and advertisements." In addition to the usual, editorials that would deride slavery, discrimination against race and other injustices were added with the purpose of opposing the earlier New York-style papers that featured blatant racism. (BlackPast) The paper offered

the lesser-heard voice of the “antislavery, or abolitionist movement...” (Campbell) by supporting a forum-like format where blacks were free to express their views and advocate for themselves.

The paper sold at three dollars for a year’s subscription. (BlackPast) The paper thrived from 1827 to 1829 until *The Rights of All* was published by Samuel Cornish. (Wikipedia-FD)

Although the paper only lasted for about two years, *Freedom’s Journal* “made an enormous impact on antebellum African American communities.” Thirty years after the end of the first African-American newspaper, there were over forty black-owned newspapers in the United States. (BlackPast) That is significant. Jacqueline Bacon, the author of *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* argues on page three that *Freedom’s Journal* is not given enough credit for the importance of its existence. Some might say it is because of the short period that the newspaper was alive and well. However, Bacon says that “Historians who have examined *Freedom’s Journal* in the context of African-American history or the history of the press have considered it only briefly, often making assumptions about the periodical--its founding, its focus, its goals, its editors--that overlook important facts or that do not fully account for the publication’s richness and depth.” (Bacon) In other words, those that do argue against, or even ignore, the notability of *Freedom’s Journal* as the first African-American newspaper are simply overlooking the prominent details by distracting themselves with the bare minimum of information. Their research is lacking depth which invalidates their arguments. I believe that Ms. Bacon would certainly agree that *Freedom’s Journal* began the long history of African American journalism, by means of traditional media.

As stated above, *Freedom’s Journal* was short lived as Samuel Cornish took over the African-American newspaper industry with the founding of *The Rights of All* in 1829.

(Wikipedia-The Right of All) At this time, New York City was a hot spot for journalism as the plot was thickening for the status of slavery. The 1830s birthed the Second Great Awakening and Nat Turner's famous revolt. Samuel Cornish, a former senior editor of *Freedom's Journal*, left the paper to pursue "greener pastures"--or so he thought. The paper ended promptly in 1830, giving Cornish only a year or so worth of glory days. The first black newspaper had now come to a complete end.

On August 5, 1928, *Atlanta Daily News* became the first daily black newspaper to grace the twentieth century. According to PBS, "when The Daily World was founded there was only one other black paper in the Atlanta area, The Atlanta Independent, which shut down in 1933, consequently leaving The Daily World as the lone voice for the city's growing black community." ("The Atlanta Daily News") In 1944, it became the first black newspaper with an assigned White House correspondent, Harry S. Alpin. It was also one of the firsts to report black-on-black crime, and in 2009 *Atlanta Daily News* was the first black newspaper to furnish a newsstand in a major airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport. (Wikipedia-Atlanta Daily News) Historically speaking, *Atlanta Daily News* was founded by William Alexander Scott II under the name of *Atlanta World* on August 5, 1928. The papers were printed in an office located on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia and remained stationed here until recently in 2008. (Sverdlik) Scott was a Morehouse graduate who was only twenty-six at the time. (Wikipedia-ADN) He used the college area to his advantage, thriving from the overwhelming support from the surrounding black businesses as well as both Morehouse and Spelman College. (Sverdlik) In the first published issue of the newspaper, William Alexander Scott II wrote, "The publishers of The Atlanta World have felt the need of a Southern Negro Newspaper, published by Southern Negroes, to be read by Southern Negroes." It became evident to his readers that he considered it his own personal responsibility to make sure southern blacks could and would read his newsletter as he

hired door-to-door salesmen to sell subscriptions, as well as hiring paperboys to deliver. In the Deep South, the paper was, without a doubt, one of the most widely circulated black newspapers by 1930. (“The Atlanta Daily News) In addition to Scott’s own personal struggles to assure the success of the paper, he had to deal with the racist media. The media barely covered black educational institutions, businesses, people, and churches but made a conscious effort to report black crimes and deaths. To combat this continued racism in the way the media portrayed black people, Scott II made it his responsibility to educate whites on the successes of black individuals as well as uplift the black community by mirroring the good they did for their communities. (Wikipedia-ADN) Today, stories are published every day online and a print newspaper is distributed once a week. (Atlanta Daily News) Clearly, the newspaper has grown a lot from where it first began to where it lies today. Unlike a lot of the other black newspapers that began as a retaliation for the lack of positive black representation in the media, Scott created and published the *Atlanta Daily News* simply as a business venture. He promoted local, as well as national, advertisements for black and white businesses. These businesses included huge branding names such as “Coca-Cola, Sears, Roebuck & Company, and Rich’s, the largest department store in Atlanta.” (“The Atlanta Daily News”) I would suppose that he was able to land white advertisements in his newspaper as a result of his lack of dealership with anti-slavery and anti-racist society print-ups. William Alexander Scott II made sure that *Atlanta Daily News* remained under the control of black leadership. Alexis Scott, his grand daughter, ran the company upon the retiring of her father, Cornelius Adolphus Scott. Most recently, the company was sold to Real Times Media in Detroit, Michigan, however Alexis maintains her position as publisher. (Sverdlik)

The *North Star* is one of the most widely known African-American newspapers. The great Frederick Douglass, an noted abolitionist, created an anti-slavery newspaper and began publishing on December 3, 1847. The slogan, “Right is of no sex--Truth is of no color--God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren”, truly summed up the purpose of Douglass’ newspaper. Many people who have read

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass know how much William Lloyd Garrison has influenced Douglass. In fact, after subscribing to *The Liberator*, an anti-slavery, abolitionist paper organized by Garrison, Douglass was inspired to publish his own. The *North Star* received its title as a crafty allusion to the Underground Railroad. The slaves were told to follow the North Star if they ever wanted to reach the free North. Just as the allusion suggests, *The North Star* was written for guidance, it became one of the most influential publications to precede the Civil War era. In its prime, the *North Star* was four-paged newsletter that sold to over four thousand readers across the United States, Europe, and the West Indies at the cost of two dollars per year. That may seem like a little price to pay for a year-supply of papers, however, with inflation in mind, two dollars in the forties would amount up to almost twenty-two dollars today in the year two thousand and fifteen. As a result of the impacting influence of Garrison, the front page of the *North Star* was geared towards shedding light on current events revolving the abolition movement and its issues. The second and third pages were reserved for editorials, articles, poetry, book reviews, and letters from the reader. The fourth page consisted of paid advertisements. Unfortunately for Frederick Douglass, regardless of the ads, the paper was not a success financially. He eventually had to merge with *The Liberty Party Paper* in 1851. This newspaper was owned by Gerrit Smith, another abolitionist who, thankfully, accepted Douglass' original ideals and goals and even allowed him to rename the conglomerate paper *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. The new paper called for contributions from several greats such as Martin Delany, Douglass' co editor; Julia Griffiths, a white abolitionist; Harriet Jacobs, a former slave that had escaped; and Charles Dickens, a British Author who submitted excerpts of his novel Bleak House to the paper. One of the biggest issues that Frederick Douglass used his platform as the owner of a successful newspaper to address was the disconnect between what Americans acknowledged as Christian beliefs and the hypocritical prejudice and discrimination that they acted out. Frederick Douglass also made it a point to advocate for the education of his black brothers and sisters, equality and women's rights. (Britannica) Sadly, the success of Frederick Douglass, by means of the

newspaper industry, had to end shortly. In 1859, during the month of November, Douglass temporarily left the United States for a tour in England. Critics say that Douglass rather fled the States to avoid an arrest based on association with John Brown during his raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859 when several letters from Douglass were found. (Britannica)

Reflecting upon the eager young girl that I once was when I first learned about *Freedom's Journal*, I have realized that not many people are aware of the genius that exists among black individuals, especially in the field of journalism. These people were given nothing and made successful papers, most of which are still in circulation today. *Freedom's Journal*, *The Rights of All*, *Atlanta Daily News*, and *North Star* are all wonderful examples of how far African-American newspapers have come in terms of founding, content, and sales. I believe that having learned just a bit of the history of early black newspapers, creates a more cultured and knowledgeable individual.

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