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An Examination of Entertainment in the 21st Century Black Press

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Abstract

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An Examination of Entertainment in the 21st Century Black Press

Miya Williams Fayne

Journalism scholars have investigated how mainstream (typically white) news organizations are adapting to digital media, but this research has created the impression that the entire industry operates similarly. My research shows this is not the case. Although entertainment content has significantly increased in the new media age, it affects the black press differently than mainstream media. This dissertation puts conceptualizations of entertainment, journalism, digital technology and race into conversation. In doing so it extends scholarship on the black press, which typically focuses on the history of the medium from its inception through the 1970s. By understanding entertainment's effect on today's black press, we gain insight into how an African-American institution has endured and evolved.

I explore entertainment in the black press via interviews with journalists, focus groups with readers and descriptive web metrics data. Triangulating my research compensates for the limitations of any one approach and offers comprehensive insight into both production and consumption shifts in the black press. My primary objects of study are digital-first black press websites—that attract from 10,000 to over one million unique visitors monthly—and legacy black press publications—that have been continuously publishing for 49 to 135 years.

I find that black press journalists and consumers both value entertainment. Entertainment in the black press often represents black success, provides a space for emotional reprieve, serves educational purposes and is frequently entangled with politically significant topics. In an effort to escape hard news coverage of African Americans, which can be psychologically taxing, black

press readers consume entertainment as a form of self-care. Also, black press outlets often cover racism in the entertainment industry and the black entertainers who are increasingly using their platforms to make political statements. As such, entertainment is an integral component of depicting the fullness of black life and serving the needs of a diverse black community.

I also argue that the proliferation of entertainment is a result of the economic limitations on black press outlets and can have deleterious implications given that those outside of the black community comprise a large percentage of its readership. The nonblack audience for black press outlets is nearly three times larger than the black audience online. The significant presence of the white gaze troubles conceptions of entertainment in the black press as beneficial as it can present a one-dimensional view of African Americans. This is especially problematic when mainstream-owned black press outlets do not publish hard news content because it could alienate their nonblack audience. Additionally, although the entire journalism industry operates under financial constraints, the black press is disproportionately affected due to institutionalized racism among advertisers and the financial hardships of black consumers. Small budgets limit the amount of hard news content that black press outlets can publish and incentivize the production of the more affordable and lucrative entertainment content. Entertainment can then be perilous when it subverts hard news and prioritizes monetary gain.

This dissertation investigates how new media is challenging journalists' and readers' traditional understandings of the black press. The 192-year-old institution has continuously evolved over the years, yet an increase of entertainment content evidences a fundamental shift in how it is being conceptualized. My findings contribute to research on journalism's shift from print to digital media and highlight how entertainment in the black press is working to both advance and restrain the diversity of thoughts in the black community.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	10
Dissertation Overview	17
Chapter Two: Literature Review	21
History of the Black Press.....	21
Traditional Versus Digital Black Press.....	32
Entertainment Content	36
The Sustainability of the Black Press	44
Research Questions.....	47
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	53
Interviews with Journalists	53
Focus Groups with Consumers	57
Web Metrics.....	61
Outlet Descriptions	66
Terminology.....	71
Researcher’s Reflexivity.....	74
Chapter Four: The Benefits of Entertainment.....	76
Comprehensive Coverage	77
Representation.....	80
Political Relevance.....	83
Emotional Reprieve	87
Educational Purposes.....	90

Diversity of Content.....	8
Diversity of Content.....	93
Legitimacy	95
Bridging Generations	100
Chapter Summary	104
Chapter Five: The Perils of Entertainment	106
Incomplete Coverage	108
Gossip Content.....	109
Advocacy	112
Financial Resources	118
Ownership.....	131
The White Gaze	140
Chapter Summary	152
Chapter Six: A Reimagined Black Press.....	155
Reader-Journalist Agreement.....	156
Competition with Mainstream	162
Competition in the Black Press.....	173
Decentralization	177
The Digital Black Public Sphere.....	179
Resourcefulness and Survival.....	183
Limitations and Future Research	189
Conclusion	193
References.....	196

List of Tables

Table 1: Journalist Interview Subjects, Outlets and Ownership	56
Table 2: Top Black Press Websites	65
Table 3: Top Black Press Websites (Generation Y)	102
Table 4: Top Black Press Websites (Generation X)	103
Table 5: Top Black Press Websites (Total Unique Visitors vs. Black Unique Visitors)	145
Table 6: Top Black Press Websites (Total Minutes vs. Black Total Minutes)	146
Table 7: Top Black Press Mobile Websites and Apps (Total Unique Visitors vs. Black Unique Visitors)	150
Table 8: Top Black Press Mobile Websites and Apps (Total Minutes vs. Black Total Minutes)	151
Table 9: Top Mainstream and Black Press Websites (Black Unique Visitors vs. Total Unique Visitors)	166

Chapter One: Introduction

An A-list black celebrity performs on a national stage and receives media coverage from a plethora of news outlets without solicitation. Although nothing is stated explicitly, the performance has clear political undertones with costumes and choreography that reference the Black Panthers and the Black Lives Matter movement. The performance was intended for a wide audience but it is interpreted differently depending on the news outlet that covers it. Mainstream (typically white-targeted) outlets may distort what took place and critique the celebrity for race-baiting while black press outlets may celebrate the artist's creativity and bold political stance. Natasha Eubanks, founder of the popular black entertainment website The YBF said,

You see something good that a celebrity did and they [mainstream news outlets] totally took it and ... made it something negative or made it something more salacious than it actually was. And I saw really quickly that if they can control the narrative, everything we've been getting up until this point has been second-hand information. So, I just take pride in being able to do this firsthand. And that means more to me than money. I think that controlling your own narrative in media, especially when it comes to black people, is very important. (personal communication, February 6, 2018)

As the owner of a black press outlet, Eubanks understands the importance of African Americans controlling their own narrative. She was encouraged to create her website because she saw the value in covering African Americans through a black lens. This motivation, which is shared by many black press editors, can at times supersede the need to be profitable. However, black press editors continue to publish because readers also want to consume content that is written from a black perspective. In response to the negative coverage that R&B and pop singer Beyoncé

received from mainstream outlets after her 2016 Super Bowl performance, one reader stated that she wanted those outlets to “Let us have our heroes.” Black celebrities are representations of black success and act as inspirational figures for a community that has been systemically oppressed (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). As such, when the black press covers entertainment it is not a frivolous act but rather an important intervention.

Sometimes black celebrities are not covered by mainstream media at all. This is especially true when they are not globally known entities. Black press outlets then become the only places where the majority of African-American entertainers receive coverage. Eubanks continued,

There’s a lot of news that happens outside of the top A-listers that white Hollywood or white mainstream would know. So, if you make a point to focus on, elevate, talk about, discuss with, have interviews with, create content around people who are not always talked about on those platforms and they happen to be black or issues and culture that affect black people, then you’re black press. (personal communication, February 6, 2018)

The black press serves as a space of representation for a community that is often ignored by mainstream outlets. Whether it is via entertainment or hard news content, the black press has always been intentional about covering people or topics that are significant in the African-American community. Nearly two centuries after the first black press newspaper was published, the mission remains the same, but in the new media age, the core tenets of the black press, which include expectations of advocacy content, are being manifested in myriad ways.

While many have studied how mainstream news outlets have adapted to digital media (e.g., C.W. Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2005; Schudson, 2011), few have examined how the black press has been affected by the changing landscape. In fact, much of the scholarship on the

transition from print to digital journalism has focused on mainstream publications and assumed that the entire industry operates as one. The disparity is not troubling if one views “whiteness as normality” (Brock, 2011, p. 1088). Yet, there are consequential differences in how entertainment operates in the black press. When scholars have researched the black press they have typically focused on its inception (during the fight for slavery abolition), its zenith (post-World War II) and its attrition (during the civil rights movement when mainstream media began covering issues concerning African Americans) (Washburn, 2006). There is not much scholarship on what has been happening in the black press post the 1970s. Yet there is reason to believe that many changes have taken place in order for the black press to remain relevant and capitalize on the evolving media consumption patterns in the US.

The mainstream press consists of news outlets that are majority white owned and managed and target a predominantly white audience. Many African Americans regard the mainstream press as the white press due to its inability to fairly report on the black community. Danny Bakewell, Jr., executive editor of the 86-year-old black press newspaper *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, explained,

What we focus on at *The Sentinel* is telling the African-American story from an African-American perspective. *The LA Times* is writing a story on a police shooting on Crenshaw Boulevard. They’re going to say, “There was a shooting. The person was identified as a gang member. LAPD used force ...” An African-American perspective may look deeper. They may talk to other witnesses that *The LA Times* won’t ... We’re not going to immediately call that person out and define that person as a gang member ... We’re not going to look to villainize the police either, but we’re going to look at it based upon the realities we know people in the African-American community live with every day. I have

friends that say, they don't believe the police pull you over for no reason. African Americans understand that that happens every day. Our perspective is our reality and our perspective is different than another person's, so we're going to look at the story differently. (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

Even when reporting on the same story, black press editors contextualize coverage by using knowledge gained from their black lived experience. Whereas the mainstream press may report on a news story that involves an African American and immediately highlight their unflattering characteristics, the black press is going to be more diplomatic in its coverage. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) noted that African Americans describe the mainstream press as “‘the white press’—a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases and paternalism, the indifference of white America” (p. 366). The same is true for most content that is produced on digital news outlets. Brock (2011) contends that “‘the Western internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains White, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual and Christian culture through its content” (p. 1088). Although the proportion of black-targeted websites is nominal in the context of all digital media, there has been a limited amount of examination into how and why black audiences interact with these spaces. This dissertation investigates how African Americans are using the 21st century black press to reflect and circulate information that is culturally situated (Nakamura, 2002; Squires & Haggins, 2011).

The traditional black press is typically conceptualized as legacy print publications that have endured over many decades. The black press has been in existence for nearly 200 years and over time there has been little debate about the categorization of newspapers and magazines that are produced by and for the African-American community—such as *The Chicago Defender* newspaper, *The Philadelphia Tribune* newspaper, *Ebony* magazine and *Black Enterprise*

magazine. However, some efforts have been made to more concretely define the attributes of the black press. The most prominent definition that is often cited in scholarship originated from de Felice's (1969) research. De Felice interviewed several black journalists to determine what constitutes a black press publication. He concluded that in order to be considered part of the black press, a publication must be owned and managed by blacks, intended for a black audience and committed to advocating for the racial equality of African Americans (as cited in Wolseley, 1990). Yet in the current digital environment, this definition is malleable as journalists are reconsidering what constitutes the black press. Black-targeted websites that primarily produce entertainment news and outlets that target African-American readers but are owned by white media companies create ambiguity (Greenwell, 2012).

Scholars have noted the high production and consumption of entertainment content in the new media age (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). They have found that an increase in soft news lessens the amount of hard news, which is troubling because it creates an uninformed public (Prior, 2005). However, the implications of entertainment content for the black press may not be as problematic as with mainstream news. I find that in the black press, entertainment often serves the purpose of representing black success and providing a space for emotional reprieve. Many black press readers consume entertainment as a form of self-care in response to being overly inundated with negative hard news coverage of the black community. Entertainment content offers positive coverage of African Americans that counters mainstream media and provides an avenue for readers to connect with black culture in a manner that is not emotionally taxing. Entertainment can also be used for educational purposes and double as political content when it intersects with social issues. Unflattering coverage of black celebrities can act as a cautionary tale of behavior other African Americans should avoid or provide a segue for

discussing social issues that affect the larger black community. Additionally, given that black celebrities are increasingly using their platforms to make political statements, entertainment in the black press is frequently associated with politics and can serve as a space for “incidental learning” about hard news topics (Baum, 2002, p. 96).

Yet just as entertainment can serve more positive purposes in the black press, it can also be more problematic. I find that nearly three fourths of black press outlets’ unique visitors via desktop are not black and nonblack consumers comprise close to half of the black press audience on mobile. The significant presence of the white gaze on the black press gives credence for concern regarding the prevalence of entertainment. If nonblack audiences are only seeing one aspect of African Americans it can skew their perceptions of a community that is in fact diverse and multidimensional. Also, although the entire journalism industry is operating under financial constraints (J. T. Hamilton, 2004), the black press is disproportionately affected, which at times translates to an inability to keep up with technological advances and deliver well-researched, edited and original or investigative journalism (Wilson, 1991). The scarcity of hard news content is especially troublesome for black press outlets that are not black owned given that nonblack owners at times prioritize the monetary advantages of producing entertainment over the goal of serving the black community. When entertainment is produced out of a need to be more profitable it can be a greater disservice to the black press as the institution has historically been purposed for advocacy content (Pride & Wilson, 1997).

The present-day high consumption of entertainment content by African Americans has historical underpinnings. The early black press used sensationalism to attract readers. In the 1900s *The Chicago Defender*, a nationally circulated paper with one of the highest African-American readerships during that time, emulated the practices of the mainstream press.

Potentially in an effort to sell more papers, sensational stories were placed on the front page of the publication (Pride & Wilson, 1997). While the culpability for providing this content may be placed on black press news producers, black consumers' demand for entertainment news was later supported by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. The committee noted, "When ghetto residents do turn to newspapers, most read tabloids, if available, far more frequently than standard size newspapers and rely on the tabloids primarily for light features, racing charts, comic strips, fashion news and display advertising" (1968, p. 377). Also, Stroman and Becker (1978) found that when African Americans read newspapers, they are less likely to read the news content as compared to whites. There has yet to be a significant amount of research to explain the reasons behind this variation. Some scholars have associated the lower socioeconomic status of African Americans, as compared to whites, with their preference for sensational content (Burma, 1947). Others have posited that lower education levels among blacks affect newspaper consumption (Stroman & Becker, 1978).

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the entertainment is operating in the black press, I interviewed journalists, conducted focus groups and used comScore web metrics data for descriptive purposes. I primarily researched black press outlets that have a national reach. This allowed me to have a more holistic understanding of how the black press is operating nationwide as opposed to observing its impact in silos. I included a few of the larger historical black press newspapers in my research because they also had a digital presence, which expanded their readership beyond their local communities. Traditional black press publications also helped me make comparisons between how digital-first and legacy black press outlets define the black press in the 21st century. Highly circulated black press magazines and high-traffic black press websites were my primary objects of study due to their ability to reach a larger percentage

of the black community. Most prior journalism studies research has focused on the producers of news content (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Usher, 2014). Currently, more scholars are extending their sites of inquiry to consumers by conducting focus groups (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2018; Nielsen, 2016; Robinson & Culver, 2019) and incorporating web metrics (Hindman, 2008; Nelson & Lei, 2018). Triangulating my research, by employing each of these methods, allowed me to draw conclusions that have implications for the future of entertainment in the black press. The reconceptualization of the black press due to the introduction of digital technology expands understandings of how journalism operates in the new media age and is essential in determining the sustainability of a time-honored black institution.

Dissertation Overview

In Chapter Two I provide a literature review of research that scholars have already conducted on the mainstream press' transition from print to digital media and on the history of the black press. I discuss how mainstream news journalists typically view entertainment negatively and I distinguish mainstream concepts of legitimacy from those of the black press. This chapter also includes an overview of the black press historically to help contextualize how the medium has retained some tenets and diverged from others. For example, the black press still serves as a space that counters mainstream news depictions of blackness and is consistently viewed as a trustworthy source among black press readers. However, other components of the black press, such as ownership and advocacy, have adapted to the current new media landscape and may no longer be considered requirements in black press definitions. The chapter concludes with the research questions that guided this dissertation.

In Chapter Three I detail the methodology I used for this research. I interviewed 30 black press journalists from legacy black press publications, online-only websites and defunct outlets. In this chapter I provide descriptions of the journalists I interviewed, including their publication and job title at the time of the interview. I also held two focus groups in Los Angeles and two in Chicago with a total of 30 participants. I share my focus group recruitment methods and describe how I facilitated the sessions. I explain why I separated groups by generation and include the average age and gender demographics for my participants. For this research, I used web metrics data to provide descriptive support for journalists' and consumers' perceptions of entertainment in the black press. As such, I detail how I compiled a list of the top 36 black press sites using comScore data. Lastly, I provide short descriptions of each black press outlet that corresponds with a journalist I interviewed for this dissertation. Information on the history and content focus of each outlet helps to better understand how each is currently operating in the black press space.

Chapter Four investigates how entertainment is benefiting the black community. It explicates the advantages of the increase of entertainment in the black press by detailing how journalists frame the content and how consumers receive it. Entertainment is a space where African Americans have typically not been represented by mainstream media outlets. The black press covers entertainers who may not otherwise receive recognition and provides black consumers with images of black success. Entertainment in the black press is also often intertwined with political topics as celebrities use their platforms to make socially conscious statements. This chapter also addresses how entertainment content works as an alternative to hard news content that can be emotionally taxing for African Americans to regularly consume. While most black press coverage is positive, in contradistinction to mainstream media's

sometimes negative and stereotyped coverage of African Americans, at times entertainment in the black press will include unflattering coverage of black celebrities. I argue that problematic content can yet be used as an opportunity for others in the black community to learn what behavior they should not emulate. Given that the black audience is multifaceted, entertainment serves the needs of a particular segment of the community and evidences an expansion in producers' and consumers' understandings of what constitutes a legitimate black press outlet. Lastly I discuss how Generation X and Generation Y are equally consuming entertainment content and contend that it is helping to connect the black community across generations.

Chapter Five explores how entertainment can be detrimental to the black community. Some of my interlocutors argued that entertainment-focused outlets only provide one aspect of the black community and that gossip is not part of the press because it is not fact-checked. Additionally, I find that advocacy definitions have expanded to include any space that is providing representation of blackness, but when advocacy is defined as hard news it can be jeopardized by the increase in entertainment content. Entertainment can also be troublesome when it is produced as a response to the black press' lack of financial resources. African Americans' lower incomes and discrimination in the advertising industry constrains the black press' ability to publish hard news and incentivizes the more lucrative entertainment content. This chapter also addresses the affect of mainstream ownership and consumption of black press content. When a black press outlet is sold to a mainstream media company or a nonblack company creates a vertical to target African Americans, the company may produce more entertainment content than black-owned outlets. As opposed to hard news content, entertainment does not threaten the nonblack audiences that mainstream outlets attract. The white gaze on black press content becomes even more salient when observing total audience traffic to black

press websites. I find that nonblack audiences comprise the majority (72 percent on average) of unique visitors to black press outlets via desktop and they make up almost half of black press outlets' mobile traffic, which shifts understandings of how entertainment is and is not serving the black community.

In the last chapter I provide a mezzo- and macro-level analysis of the black press in the 21st century. Beyond the context of entertainment, which provides a micro-level view of the black press, the institution is adapting to the new media age in unique ways. I detail how journalists' and readers' opinions about the role of the black press are more convergent than divergent and explain how digital media has caused the black press to become more decentralized. This chapter addresses how mainstream media's increased coverage of issues affecting African Americans has affected how competition operates and argues that competition in the black press is more familial than adversarial. Additionally, I explicate how the black press has been able to endure for nearly 200 years, via resourcefulness coupled with a robust public sphere online and offline, and suggest ways it can continue to remain relevant. I also acknowledge the limitations of this dissertation and suggest areas for future research. Finally, I synthesize the information provided in previous chapters and discuss the larger implications of entertainment in the black press as it relates to African Americans' participation in American democracy and communal discourse.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

History of the Black Press

From the advent of the black press, with the publication of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, until the current moment, the black press has served unique functions in American society. As Newkirk stated, "At its best, the black press provided and continues to provide the most definitive social history of the African American experience" (2000, p. 66). It is most often conceptualized as an advocacy press and is acknowledged as a significant contributor to many advancements African Americans have achieved, such as civil rights laws and the abolition of slavery (Washburn, 2006; Wilson, 2014). It has also served as a means for community building and the circulation of African-American ideologies (Rhodes, 1998). Wilson noted, "In general terms the Black press was founded as a vehicle to uplift, educate, and encourage its readers and imbue them with a sense of cultural identity while fighting the forces of social injustice" (2014, p. 149). As such, Brown (2011) found that African Americans often look to the black press as gatekeepers and agenda setters for the black community. In addition to addressing social issues, black press journalists often highlight the achievements of African Americans individually and collectively (Broussard, 2003). Accepting this charge from its inception, the black press has served a dual role as the distributor of ideas within the black community while also combating inequalities present in larger society. The black press has historically operated as a corrective to mainstream news' absent or stereotyped depictions of the black community (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2013). As a result, African Americans typically trust the black press more than mainstream outlets (Brown, 2011). While not every African American reads black press

publications, the dissemination and influence of the ideas these outlets present typically resounds beyond what circulation numbers can indicate (Cohen, 1999).

Representation

Mainstream news content is often written from a white perspective and for white consumers (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). This dynamic was present in the 19th century and is still evident today. According to Newkirk, “News continues to be constructed for a primarily white audience” (2000, p. 5). Mainstream news stories often lack perspective and do not show an understanding or appreciation for black life in America. Additionally, to further exacerbate the problem, most mainstream news outlets completely ignore their African-American audience altogether and only provide coverage that is white in appearance and ideology (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

The exclusion of African Americans from mainstream news coverage is systemic and can oft be attributed to journalistic notions of objectivity. Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown noted, “‘Objectivity’ is often something that journalists hide behind when defending coverage that is actually unbalanced, unfair and (our primary concern) racist” (2011, p. 257). Heider (2000) used the term “incognizant racism” to refer to how mainstream journalists often omit minorities in their news stories (p. 52). While it can be intentional, he viewed it as an often-unnoticed practice that results from years of journalism training. Objectivity in journalism is typically defined as the ability to report on a story without inserting any personal bias. In Mindich’s (1998) interview with Jill Nelson, a black *Washington Post* journalist, Nelson equated objectivity with “a white voice” (p. 4). Even when black journalists work at mainstream outlets, requiring them to write objectively is in essence a mandate to erase their cultural perspective and

forgo the nonwhite lens that is usually needed in order to provide more nuanced coverage.

Cohen (1999) found that “much of the distinctiveness of the black press has been built on the premise of challenging the purported objectivity of dominant media institutions” (pp. 199-200).

While there are currently more mainstream news outlets covering issues of concern to African Americans than ever before, they do not cover it in the same manner as the black press. Even if the same story is covered in a mainstream and black press outlet, the black press will present it from a viewpoint that may feel more authentic or resonate more with black consumers. Cohen (1999) noted, “the black press has functioned as a source of information formulated from the perspective of black Americans as distinct from white Americans” (p. 190). Black press journalists are unfettered by conceptions of objectivity and are able to provide perspectives that are often not found elsewhere.

Misrepresentation/Mistrust of Mainstream

Unfortunately, when African Americans are included in mainstream news coverage, at times, it can be more problematic than having no representation at all (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Heider (2000) found that high crime coverage of minorities and even coverage of cultural events, such as festivals, detrimentally skews the public’s perspective by reinforcing stereotypes. He stated,

When newsmakers continually choose to include images of people of color as perpetrators of crimes and omit images of people of color as normal citizens, they reinforce the idea that people of color primarily exist outside the bounds of legitimate social behavior. (2000, p. 42)

This draws upon Gerbner's (1970) cultivation theory, which argues that television produces reoccurring messages that can be more salient than reality. This is especially true for television news, which has a higher impact on viewers' perceptions of crime (Callanan, 2012).

Additionally, when African Americans are included on mainstream news platforms, many outlets only cover the extreme successes or extreme failures in the black community (LeDuff, 2011).

This treatment of African-American news stories provides unbalanced coverage of a multifarious community.

Many African Americans do not believe that mainstream news outlets are creating content for the black audience. Mainstream media may in fact be antagonizing and precipitating racial discord. A 1994 USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll that found that among blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians, blacks were twice as likely to view the media as responsible for worsening race relations (as cited in Newkirk, 2000). After their research into mainstream media's coverage of the race riots in the 1960s, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders came to a similar conclusion. They found,

Most Negroes distrust what they refer to as the "white press." As one interviewer reported: "The average black person couldn't give less of a damn about what the media say. The intelligent black person is resentful at what he considers to be a totally false portrayal of what goes on in the ghetto. Most black people see the newspapers as mouthpieces of the 'power structure.'" (1968, p. 374)

Mainstream news outlets are then termed the white press because they are perceived as catering to a white audience and providing inaccurate coverage of the black community. The committee found that mainstream news stories often lack perspective and do not show an understanding or appreciation for black life in America. While the report led to the first national black public

affairs programs, the television shows were yet white-managed or white-funded, which limited the content and ultimately led to their de-funding (Heitner, 2013). Any mainstream-owned news outlet is then viewed as working against the black community when it does not include and support content created by African Americans.

Trust in the Black Press

Research has shown that African Americans regard the black press more positively than mainstream publications (Vercellotti & Brewer, 2006). Black press outlets are more trusted by black readers and, as a result, African Americans are more receptive to the information provided from black media sources (Brown, 2011). Cohen stated,

Historically, the black press has been thought to present a more fair and accurate (usually meaning positive) representation of black Americans. As noted above, African Americans who were skeptical of ‘white reporting’ turned to the black press for crucial information about the political issues, actions, and agenda of the black community. (1999, p. 190)

Black audiences that mistrust mainstream news believe black press outlets will provide more factual and authentic coverage of African Americans. Black readers then look to the black press for news about issues that are important to the black community.

The trust that African Americans have in black press print publications extends to online outlets as well. Appiah (2003) found that many African Americans trust black-targeted websites more than white-targeted sites. They also prefer to read online stories that concern African Americans over those featuring whites (Appiah et al., 2013). Black readers also interact with content that is not purposed for them but there can be tension in these interactions (Squires &

Haggins, 2011). Yet, according to Appiah (2003), simply adding an image of an African American next to a race-neutral story can increase black readers' response to websites. He discovers that African Americans spend more time with and recall more information from black-targeted websites versus white-targeted sites. Interestingly, whites spend the same amount of time on sites regardless of targeting. While whites use cues such as occupational status or social class to establish similarity, African-Americans primarily use racial cues as a means to connect with media (Appiah, 2003).

Resistance to Mainstream

African-American audiences consume black-targeted news content as a means of opposition to mainstream content. Squires' (2002) work indicated that African Americans use mainstream media for information and diversionary purposes but often supplement it with black-owned media. The black press serves a unique purpose for African-American readers as it provides content and a perspective not typically found elsewhere (Owens, 1996). Black-targeted content fills gaps that are left by the mainstream publications (Cohen, 1999; Vercellotti & Brewer, 2006). Squires and Haggins (2011) stated that some African Americans may choose to consume black-owned media content to "reinforce a strong, African American-centered 'oppositional consciousness' to deal with dominant media depictions of Blackness" (p. 297).

In his research on the *New York Times*' blog about the predominately black-casted TV show *The Wire*, Brock (2009a) found that reading mainstream news content can also be framed as an anti-black activity. One of the *New York Times*' readers noted in the comments section that the New York-based black press publication *Amsterdam News* was a more acceptable place for African Americans to obtain information. Therefore, abstaining from mainstream and

intentionally consuming black press content can be viewed as a pro-black activity. Cohen (1999) stated, “It [the black press] has...served as a source of perseverance and resistance used to build self-esteem, a sense of community, and a common historical narrative of struggle” (p. 190). Consuming black press content instead of mainstream can then be seen as a political and communal tactic to counter mainstream and simultaneously reinforce positive cultural beliefs.

Black Broadcast Media

Black-owned radio and television stations are integral components of the black media landscape as African Americans also turn to them for community-related information. The National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NABOB) was founded in 1976 and currently represents 12 television stations and 180 radio stations (Zook, 2008; K. Nickens, personal communication, May 8, 2019). It is the first and largest trade organization that represents African-American broadcast owners. NABOB’s goals have always been to educate advertisers about the African-American market and to increase the number of black owners (Zook, 2008). In the second decade of the 21st century, African Americans own less than one percent of television stations and less than two percent of radio stations (Craig, 2014; Zook, 2015). Due to racism and consolidation a lot of minorities have been pushed out of the industry or prevented from entering it (Zook, 2015). Since black ownership is closely related to the type and amount of content targeting the black audience, it becomes a signifier for broadcast companies’ continued investment in the black community.

Jesse B. Blayton purchased the first African-American owned radio station, WERD (AM 860), in 1949 (Wilson, 2014). Although WDIA, which was founded in 1947, was the first all-black formatted radio station, it was not black owned. In 1949 there were only four black-

oriented radio stations but by the end of the 1960s (after The Great Migration when many African Americans moved to urban areas) there were over 300, though only 16 were black owned. By 1980, 88 stations were black owned but the majority of their programming was music with only about five percent dedicated to news. While the number of black-owned stations increased over time, it coincided with an increase in the overall number of commercial radio stations, leaving the percentage of black ownership dismally low (Barlow, 1993). Catherine L. Hughes bought her first radio station in 1980 and subsequently founded Radio One, which has become one of the largest radio networks in the country (Zook, 2008). Hughes recognized early on that African Americans wanted to hear news from a black perspective and said that she viewed “radio as the heir to black newspapers” (Zook, 2008, p. 21). However, due to syndication and conglomerate ownership many mainstream media companies do not cover news about the local communities that they serve and DJs who are hired have little control over their program’s content (Barlow, 1993; Wilson, 2014). Even though Radio One initially had public affairs programming, it has been significantly reduced in order to facilitate syndication (Wilson, 2014).

In 1975 William V. Banks became the first African American to purchase a broadcast television station (Smith-Shomade, 2008). Just a year later, in 1976, the US Court of Appeals advised that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should include race when making decisions about broadcast licenses. In response, the FCC created the Minority Ownership Policy, which stayed in place until Congress repealed it in 1995 (Zook, 2008). During the time the policy was in place black ownership rose but it began to decline again after the FCC’s 2003 decision to allow large corporations to own more media outlets (Smith-Shomade, 2008; Zook, 2008). As a result, just five years later media conglomerates—including Viacom, Disney, Time Warner, News Corp. and NBC—owned 70 percent of broadcast television stations (Zook, 2008).

Conglomerates have a negative effect on the diversity of content as minorities often cannot afford to enter or stay in the market (Craig, 2014). Also, with conglomerates' increased focus on profit, black-owned stations are at more of a disadvantage since they target smaller markets (Smith-Shomade, 2008). Low black ownership of broadcast stations is especially problematic because minorities typically report more local news and consciously endeavor to serve their communities (Zook, 2008).

Black Entertainment Television (BET) was founded by Robert Johnson in 1979 and sold to Viacom in 2000 (Smith-Shomade, 2008). At one time it was the only African-American cable network; before BET, the only national programming for African Americans was public television programs, the occasional black sitcom and *Soul Train* (Craig, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2008). The network launched a spinoff, BET Jazz in 1996, which was rebranded as BET J in 2006, Centric in 2009 and as BET Her in 2017 (Obenson, 2014; Umstead, 2017). When Johnson owned BET, the network aired five news programs, four of which were still airing when Viacom acquired the company. However after gaining ownership, Viacom reduced the amount of time and resources given to news programming and by 2005 all of the public affairs programs had been cancelled (Craig, 2014). Although BET will occasionally air public affairs programming, such as a Martin Luther King Day special, and has tried streaming news events, news remains a low priority at the network (Prince, 2019).

A few black-targeted television networks have emerged in the 21st century but many are not black owned. Bounce TV became the first African-American broadcast network when it was founded in 2011 but it has never been fully black owned (Williams, 2011). Martin Luther King, III and Andrew Young, were among the founders along with Jonathan Katz, but it was headed by Katz (a white TV executive) and sold to the media conglomerate E. W. Scripps in 2017 (Ariens,

2017; Williams, 2011). Similarly, Oprah Winfrey initially founded The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) in 2011 as a 50/50 joint venture with Discovery Communications, but Discovery became the majority owner in 2017 (Flint, 2017). Both networks primarily focus on entertainment content but Bounce has offered the *Ed Gordon* newsmagazine show since 2016 and although OWN's *Where Are They Now?* is no longer airing, Winfrey still occasionally conducts interview-style shows with celebrity guests and others affiliated with the entertainment industry (Bounce TV, 2016; Yahr, 2019).

Black-owned cable networks such as TV One (owned by Radio One founder, Cathy Hughes), Aspire (owned by Magic Johnson) and Revolt (owned by Sean "P. Diddy" Combs), were founded in 2004, 2012 and 2013 respectively, but television outlets holistically do not offer as much news content as the black press (Wilson, 2014). Hughes, launched TV One in conjunction with Comcast and it became the only black-owned TV network when it bought out Comcast's shares in 2015 (Zook, 2008; Radio One, 2015). The network initially did not have news content due to the high cost of original programming but in 2013 it launched the morning news program NewsOne Now (D. Hamilton, 2017; Zook, 2008). Unfortunately the show was indefinitely suspended in 2017 due to budget cuts, which again left a dearth of black-targeted news coverage on television (D. Hamilton, 2017). Given the low amount of hard news content distributed via black-owned radio and television stations, the black press remains the premier source for content about sociopolitical issues concerning the black community.

Communal Thought

Black media outlets are responsible for the production and circulation of social and political ideologies within the black community (Dawson, 1995; Squires, 2002). Even with

increased participation and representation of African Americans in mainstream media, the black press has continued to provide a space to focus on the needs and interests of African Americans. Jordan (2001) asserted, “black newspapers have acted as both a ‘mirror’ of black life in America and an institution that ‘defines the Negro group to the Negroes themselves’” (p. 3). The black press therefore enables the spread and establishment of cultural beliefs and values assisting in the formation of group identity (Squires, 2002). Everett (2002) stated that the black press “has served as a potent political and ideological force in galvanizing mass support for a wide array of black protest and cultural movements” (p. 140). The black press, therefore, helps African Americans negotiate their relationship to collective black culture and public opinion.

The black press’ circulation of black communal thought contributes to a black public sphere. Most conceptions of the public sphere build off of Habermas’ (1989) notion of the bourgeois public sphere, which depended on journals, pamphlets and newspapers to initiate and augment discussion. Yet, Habermas’ ideal participant was a white, upper- or middle-class male (Baker, 1995). Fraser (1990) introduced the idea of a “subaltern counterpublic” as a means to dispel the idealization of a single public sphere when there are in fact many. She noted that minority groups require spaces that enable them to create alternative interpretations of their own identities. The black public sphere has historically existed in response to exclusion from white institutions and provides space for African-American discourse. It is composed of various cultural institutions—such as the black press, the black church and barbershops—and influences ideologies within the community (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). While often viewed as a collective, there is yet diversity within the sphere as it relates to identities such as class, gender or ethnicity. Yet this internal diversity is sometimes suppressed in favor of maintaining or establishing a cohesive group identity (Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Squires, 2002). The black public sphere is

neither ideologically monolithic nor static as it is continuing to expand and adapt in the digital age. According to Fraser (1990), Habermas did not believe the public sphere was ever fully realized. As such, the goals of an ideal black public sphere may not need to be fully achieved, only strived toward.

Traditional Versus Digital Black Press

Digital media have challenged the traditions and business models of all media. The most important of these for the black press are the increased diversity of content, shifts in format and increased visibility. The affordances and limitations of the digital black press are evidenced through an analysis of how each of the aforementioned concepts operate in both print and online spaces. Although new media has created additional ways to reach African-American consumers, it is worth acknowledging how such engagement differs from that of the traditional black press and how it reaches audiences outside of the black community.

Diversity of Content

While the traditional black press only allowed a few people to speak for the black community, the digital landscape allows more African Americans to speak for themselves (Greenwell, 2012). However, there is yet contention about *who* should be speaking on behalf of the black community in the public sphere. Brock (2009b) stated, “Black communities feel that only those who conform best to White values should represent Blacks to the world” (p. 32). Cohen (1999) took up the deleterious effects of such tactics in her book *The Boundaries of Blackness*. She argued that publications such as *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines are targeted toward the black middle class to the detriment of those outside of that group. She stated that such “norms

constrain and limit subject matter and reporting patterns” (p. 223). This creates “secondary marginalization” in the black community as it overlooks differences in beliefs, practices and socioeconomic status (p. 207). Her research on the AIDS epidemic challenges notions of group progress as some people in the black community were inevitably marginalized in the process. Cohen defined this as “qualified linked fate” where not everyone is viewed as worthy of community support and what happens to some black bodies is not correlated with the interests of the collective black community (p. xi). She noted,

...recognizing the distinct and complicated nature of power in black communities does not deny the ability of patriarchy and sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, as well as classism to define the experiences and concerns of certain group members, primarily middle-class, heterosexual men, as representatives and markers of the progress or threat experienced by the entire community. (p. 12)

Given that the illness affected mostly black women and gay men, not black heterosexual males, it was not prioritized. Many legacy black press publications then only served as representation for one segment of the black community.

Presenting the race as homogenous, however, can also be beneficial. Black press outlets’ targeting of the middle class allows individuals to see themselves as connected to racial advancement. Cohen stated,

By exaggerating out-group differences and minimizing in-group variation, many African Americans use racial group interests as a proxy for self-interest. The progress of the group, therefore, is understood as an appropriate, accurate, and accessible evaluative measure of one’s individual success. (1999, p. 10)

Highlighting similarities among African Americans helps individuals to gauge their own success. Having a limited number of black press outlets in print provided a unified voice and aided in strategic essentialism, which simplifies group identities as a means to achieve larger goals (Bell, 2004). This strategy focuses on the interests of the majority of the black community, but can certainly be detrimental to those who fall outside of those “norms.” While strategic essentialism may prove useful in the short term, it is ultimately harmful for everyone in the long term. Prioritizing the interests of heteronormative masculinity over the benefits of intersectional inclusivity can eventually lead to resentment and dissent within the larger black community.

While legacy publications such as *Ebony* may have needed to cover all aspects of black life when it was founded in 1945, given the few media outlets catering to African Americans at the time, the breadth of black press outlets online allows for more niche content. The Internet tends to fragment audiences mainly as a result of the specialization of websites (Tewksbury, 2005). For example, while all black press sites target African Americans, Blavity specifically attracts millennial tastemakers and cultural influencers, The Undefeated is designed for sports fans, Hip Hop Wired caters to fans of the music genre and The G-Listed provides content for the LGBTQ community. Today’s multiplicity of black press options stands in stark contrast to the previously nominal number of print publications and creates more spaces for representation among black consumers.

Digital Format and The White Gaze

Online black press outlets benefit from the affordances of having the Internet as its medium. Digital journalists can use audio and video capabilities to enhance stories or provide a different point of entry for consumers to engage with content. The Web also provides

immediacy, which allows journalists to publish content as it happens instead of being constrained by print schedules. Additionally, online publications have a greater reach in that subscriptions are not required in order for consumers to access content and stories are able to travel globally. This affordance creates an overall increased visibility for issues affecting the African-American community, allowing those outside the community to be privy to previously less-public discourse.

Black Twitter is an example of content relating to African Americans being more subject to the white gaze in digital spaces. Whether used for entertainment or social critique purposes, the presence of black cultural discourse on Twitter subverts mainstream understandings of the platform's demographics and usage (Brock, 2012). The increased visibility of trending topics featuring racialized hashtags or "blacktags," is purposeful as African-American users choose to engage and make their identities known (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). Florini (2014) stated, "In a medium such as Twitter, where users could 'pass,' many Black users seem to be prioritizing the performance of their racial identity" (p. 12). This performance of race serves as a means to resist marginalization or erasure in white spaces (Nakamura, 2008). While these cultural discourses previously existed in offline spaces, they are now available for others outside of the black community to observe (McDonald, 2014). The increased visibility of content typically confined within the African-American community offline adds some nuance to how digital media is conceptualized in terms of race. The presence of the white gaze on black discourse may have implications for present and future race relations. However, Steele (2014) argued that online spaces still provide an illusion of privacy for participants. This dynamic is further complicated when juxtaposed with understandings of how the black press operates both on and offline and consumers' understandings of what constitutes a black space.

Entertainment Content

Entertainment-focused websites are representative of the increased diversity of black press outlets in the 21st century. As a complement to the hard news content present in many black press publications, entertainment is a welcome addition. Entertainment provides additional space for coverage of African Americans who are often ignored or stereotyped by mainstream news outlets. Yet, some black press outlets produce entertainment out of financial necessity, and others preference entertainment over advocacy content; this then creates ambiguity regarding the long-term effects of entertainment on the medium.

Entertainment as Beneficial

Both mainstream and black press consumers typically prefer entertainment content. Baum (2002) argued that the *National Enquirer*, which most would consider a tabloid, is actually the highest circulating newspaper in the US as opposed to the *Wall Street Journal*, which is a hard news publication. The general population's preference for entertainment news is also present online. A 2011 study of Google concluded that nearly a third of searches on the site are related to popular culture or news events (as cited in Webster, 2014). Yet James T. Hamilton (2004) found that people search the Internet for information on celebrities more than issues concerning politics. In today's high-choice media environment, people are choosing entertainment over news "simply because they like it better" (Prior, 2005, p. 578).

While both mainstream and black press journalists are increasingly producing entertainment content, the implications for this practice vary. The prevalence of entertainment on many digital news outlets may appear problematic to some scholars studying journalism online

(Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Prior, 2005), but the shift is less contentious in the black press. Scholarship on the mainstream press has argued that consumers prefer entertainment content while journalists prefer hard news—yet black press journalists value both types of content. Stroman and Becker (1978) found that blacks use media differently than whites and to serve different purposes. Entertainment is seen as another means for positive imagery of African Americans that is oft missing in mainstream outlets. It is a space where visual and written content about African Americans needs to be included. In the black press, entertainment content can be used as a means of unification, positive representation and as an alternative to consuming traumatic hard news coverage of violence against black bodies. As a result, many black press journalists embrace the inclusion of entertainment content as evidenced by Akil's (2007) findings that many black-targeted sites contain an arguably disproportionate amount of entertainment as compared to hard news content.

African Americans' consumption of entertainment news content can be productive for the community collectively. Vercellotti and Brewer (2006) claimed, "consumption of Black news and entertainment media is positively associated with a number of core beliefs for African Americans, including a sense of 'linked fate' with other Blacks" (p. 233). Dawson's (1994) concept of "linked fate" argued that African Americans believe what happens to blacks collectively also happens to them individually. This lens can be used to identify with the success of black entertainers and/or the plight of working class African Americans. Harris-Lacewell (2004) explained, "Black linked fate acts as a heuristic through which African Americans use the interests of the race as a shortcut for discerning personal political interests" (p. 86). Black audiences then intentionally and unintentionally engage with entertainment and hard news content that meets their needs as a race.

There are many reasons why consumers may intentionally avoid hard news (Van den Bulck, 2006). Trilling and Schoenbach (2012) found that news avoiders are typically young, low educated and not interested in politics. Woodstock (2014) argued that some news “resisters” regard journalism as not being factual or objective and feel a sense of powerlessness after consuming it (p. 835). Also, audiences believe reading public affairs news is more demanding and anxiety provoking, whereas soft news has lower cognitive costs, which may explain why people ultimately spend more time with entertainment content (Baum, 2002; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Webster, 2014). While these explanations may also apply to black news avoiders, there are additional reasons why African Americans do not engage with hard news in the black press.

African Americans may choose to avoid hard news in the black press because they do not want to be confronted with the reality of race relations in America. Black press outlets can highlight black suffering in a way that can be detrimental to some consumers. The reproduction of violence on black bodies can be traumatic, causing readers to intentionally avoid it. Alexander (1994) stated, “storytelling works to create collective counter-memory of trauma as those stories also terrorize” (p. 88). Eyerman noted that trauma does not have to be experienced firsthand and that “slavery is traumatic for those who share a common fate, not necessarily a common experience” (2001, p. 15). Similarly, seeing or reading about violence upon black bodies can be unpleasant for African Americans who may not have undergone the same experience but who believe such events could also happen to them in the future. As a result, they may choose to consume entertainment news instead in an effort to escape from psychologically taxing content.

Some scholars have noted that entertainment content often contains information about social and political issues (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Webster, 2014). Baum (2002) termed

this unintentional acquisition of knowledge “incidental learning.” He explained, “Incidental learning is merely an extreme form of passive learning, whereby the individual actively seeks one variety of information, say entertainment, and is unwittingly exposed to and accepts information of another sort entirely (e.g., political news)” (p. 96). Incidental learning typically occurs among people who otherwise would not have chosen to be exposed to political news at all. Given that about a third of the population completely avoids news and very few are “news junkies,” incidental learning is then occurring among a sizeable audience (Baum, 2002; Webster, 2014).

Some scholars are challenging alarmist responses to the increase of entertainment in today’s media landscape. Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) argued that different media regimes have existed over the years and that we are presently undergoing a regime change. Conceptions of journalism have evolved over time in response to new technologies, market expansions or societal ideologies, which have resulted in various media regimes. The scholars stated, “our own understanding of what belongs in a newspaper is historically specific” (p. 31). There is little evidence that past media regimes, which focused less on entertainment and more on hard news, were better at serving democratic ideals. As digital media affects the current institutional standards in journalism and lines between hard news and entertainment are blurred, sociopolitical content can be consumed in many different ways. Williams and Delli Carpini posited that “the media regime in place for the latter half of the twentieth century has been dismantled and the contours of a new regime have yet to be formed” (2011, p. 283). As a result, entertainment content is not inherently problematic as scholars can only speculate how American democracy will be affected by this shift.

Legitimacy

Entertainment-focused black press websites are troubling traditional conceptions of journalistic legitimacy. Legacy print publications seemingly hold a social influence that outweighs that of online-only publications and discourse. Castells (2007) noted that although “media are not the holders of power, they constitute by and large the space where power is decided” (p. 242). Many industry professionals do not regard online black press outlets with the same legitimacy that is given to legacy print publications. The lack of respect from publicists results in digital journalists’ decreased access to media events and celebrity interviews even when they have more readers than print outlets.

Digital-first black press sites are moving away from traditional journalistic practices and formalities. Steele (2014) stated that “there is a shift away from elite notions of knowledge, definitive ‘correctness’ in writing, and notions of traditionally conceived privacy that reflect the community-building priorities of orality more than the hierarchical priorities of literacy” (p. 42). The ability to communicate in an informal manner is certainly something that was not condoned in the traditional black press given the expectation for print publications to contain edited copy in order to be considered legitimate. The digital space then allows for another way to conceptualize legitimacy as the unedited voices of the black community provide a sense of authenticity that is conceptualized differently than before.

Entertainment as Problematic

For at least the past decade, the journalism industry has been attempting to find a more lucrative business model. All news outlets are under some type of financial duress as publishers seek a way to remain profitable in the digital age. But historically, many of the economic

challenges that affected the mainstream press were “felt more acutely in the black press” (Squires, 2009, p. 70). Some advertisers undervalue the black press by either ignoring the black consumer market, not considering African Americans to be revenue generators or by contending that they can reach black audiences through mainstream outlets (Squires, 2009; Sylvie, 2001). In his research on the challenges black journalists encounter, Wilson (1991) found that “big White national advertisers have generally been unwilling to invest in the Black press to help it out of its economic dilemma” (p. 167). Unfortunately, even when advertisers work with the black press, some set a quota for how much they spend on “ethnic media” or pay black press outlets at a lower rate than mainstream publications for the same number of readers (Harvard Business School, 2017).

The financial constraints of the black press are also correlated with the economic hardships of its consumers. The black community has remained disenfranchised over the years as evidenced by consistently high unemployment rates and low home ownership rates (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). During the early years of the black press, the meager incomes and low literacy rates of most African Americans resulted in many black papers not lasting more than a year (Penn, 1891; Squires, 2009). Additionally Penn (1891) posited that although journalists believe it is their duty to use the press as a means to advocate for the race, some readers do not fully understand the value of the black press and choose not to financially support it. As such, historically, many black press papers were short lived due to limited resources.

The lack of corporate resources combined with personal wealth disparities in the black community creates an unstable business structure. It constrains in-depth reporting, only allows for small editorial staffs and affects the black press’ independence (Phillips & Witschge, 2012; Squires, 2012). Sylvie (2001) noted that research on black businesses has found financial capital

to be the biggest barrier to success. Black publications find it difficult to sell subscriptions or single issues to a community with low incomes and high unemployment. As a result, the publishers do not widely place black publications on newsstands due to the high distribution costs. The financial limitations of the black press then make keeping up with technological advancements and investing in new media applications even more challenging (Wilson et al., 2013). It also limits black press outlets' ability to provide in-depth reporting and long-form articles (Wilson, 2014).

Entertainment content is less expensive to produce and is more attractive to advertisers. As the media industry becomes more competitive, there is increased pressure for news outlets to produce content that will have high market penetration (Boczkowski, 2010). Webster (2014) found that many of today's media companies use media metrics to observe user preferences and adjust content accordingly. For example, James T. Hamilton (2004) noted that in an effort to attract more people, news outlets cater to the preferences of audiences that are less interested in hard news as opposed to further appealing to news junkies. News producers then intentionally target 18 to 34 year olds who are more interested in soft news content. This tension between market forces and the preference of content producers exists in all media, but it is exacerbated online. Web metrics reveal that audiences most often click on stories that do not address public affairs and as a result, journalists provide more of this content (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). Page views are used to decide what articles are published and where they are placed and advertisers pay more for placements by entertainment content as opposed to hard news (J. T. Hamilton, 2004; Webster, 2014). As such, the economic implications for what is published influences the amount of entertainment content on black press outlets.

Both mainstream and black press journalists are increasingly producing entertainment content for consumers, but this practice has a different impact on the black community. Akil (2007) interviewed SeeingBlack.com publisher Esther Ivereem who argued that entertainment content should also have a social purpose. Her assertion points to the commonly held ideology that the black press exists in order to be an advocate for African Americans (Pride & Wilson, 1997; Wilson, 2014). Similar to mainstream journalists' self-imposed mandate to fulfill the watchdog role for society, maintaining the integrity of advocacy is a priority among many black press publishers. Some scholars are concerned with the decrease in politically aware Americans due to increased soft news consumption (Prior, 2005). While a lack of political knowledge is also problematic among African Americans, a lack of knowledge about culturally specific social issues may be an additional reason for alarm. In line with the concept of linked fate, African Americans' individual ignorance regarding racial issues can possibly have negative communal consequences (Dawson, 1994).

Ownership

The National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) was founded in 1940 as the National Negro Publishers Association (Pride & Wilson, 1997). The organization currently has a membership that represents 205 black press newspapers that collectively reach over 20 million readers weekly (Ford, McFall, & Dabney, 2019). The NNPA has established membership criteria, which has maintained that full members need to have at least 51 percent black ownership (D. R. Leavell, personal communication, April 13, 2018). Yet many black press editors and readers are broadening their definition of black press outlets in the new media age and prioritizing black management and content over ownership.

In Greenwell's (2012) research she found that when analyzing black news websites The Root, The Griot and Loop 21, it was difficult to determine which were black targeted and which were black owned. But even when ownership is evident, how readers engage with content on black-targeted sites versus black-owned sites may not differ. In their analysis of comments made on the traditional black press publication *Essence* magazine's website, Brock, Kvasny and Hales (2010) noted that commenters did not question the implications of Time Inc.'s ownership of the black women's magazine and its possible influence on the site's discourse. Over the last few years, more mainstream news outlets are beginning to produce content for black audiences such as ESPN's The Undefeated (founded in 2014) and NBC's NBC BLK (founded in 2015). The success of these websites calls into question the significance of ownership as it relates to determining whether a publication is part of the black press.

The Sustainability of the Black Press

The crowded news landscape online can be a reason for concern in the black press. As the media industry becomes more competitive with the exponential increase of digital news sites, metrics are becoming a new value for evaluating journalism (Boczkowski, 2010). With print publications, advertisers previously assumed that all subscribers saw their ad, but clicks online now allow advertisers to know exactly how many people are paying attention to those advertisements (Usher, 2014). As a result of mainstream news outlets competing for page views, Boczkowski (2010) found that there is a homogenization of news occurring on the Internet. Although there are more news sources available online, the same stories are reproduced across the various sites. Boczkowski's (2010) research argues that hard news content is duplicated more than soft news in mainstream news outlets but in the black press entertainment content is also

homogenized. This competition calls into question the ability for newcomers to the black press space to be successful. There is the possibility that multiple black press outlets will cannibalize each other to the detriment of the larger institution.

The survival of the black press is significant given what it represents to the black community. Some scholars have viewed the black press as one of the most important and successful black institutions (Frazier, 1957; Johnson, 1934). The success of the black press can serve as evidence of a thriving black community that is able to financially support and maintain one of its cultural institutions. Penn (1891) asserted, “If, then, a race possess [sic] any number of these magazines, which are well contributed to and sustained by its own people, it becomes a self-evident fact that they are growing in literary merit” (p. 117). Similarly, *The Chicago Defender*’s second editor John H. Sengstacke “said he was focused on ensuring that the newspaper, like Provident Hospital [which was black owned and operated], survive as African American-founded institutions that serve the people and provide living examples of achievement and independence” (Michaeli, 2016, p. 478). Along with other cultural institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the black church and barbershops, the black press represents a separate institutional existence from mainstream media and discourse and holds unique significance (Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Holt, 1995).

The black press can easily be correlated with HBCUs as they are both institutions that were formed out of necessity, due to segregation, but whose future is now in question. As mainstream news outlets are increasingly covering issues of concern to African Americans, which was a goal of black press outlets, they are lessening the need for black press outlets. HBCUs face a similar paradox as many African Americans are now being admitted to Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) HBCUs are struggling financially. The first HBCUs

were founded for freed blacks in the North before the Civil War. Clement and Lidsky (2011) stated,

Despite their age, history, and mission—or perhaps because of it—many HBCUs are economically fragile institutions, and the number of failing HBCUs could increase significantly over the next 15 or 20 years. We are in danger of losing an important part of our national history and culture. (p. 150)

This sense of loss would be similar to when many black high schools were forced to close due to integration. In Fairclough's (2007) research on school integration he stated, "There is an almost universal conviction that the closure of so many black high schools damaged the fabric of black communities" (p. 412). Losing HBCUs and black press outlets would mean losing representations of black identity that serve as evidence of black achievement despite adversity. Losing them would have ramifications on the black community and also on America's cultural past and future.

Although its role may be evolving, there is yet a continued need for the black press (Muhammad, 2003). The tenets initially seen in the traditional black press, such as promoting racial uplift and fighting racial discrimination, are still present (Greenwell, 2012). Owens (1996) found that the black press in fact thrives during times of oppression. He discovered that social and economic instability lends itself to more activity among the black press. While the civil rights movement ended nearly 50 years ago, Black Lives Matter is evidence of the cyclical and ever-present nature of racial injustice in the US. At an NNPA meeting in 1979 one publisher commented, "As long as there is racism in America, there will be a black press. I guess that assures us of life eternal" (Wolseley, 1990, p. 390). Due to the continued presence of racial inequality in society and among mainstream press outlets, the black press will continue to be

needed and relevant regardless of inclusion elsewhere. The black press will always be best able to tell the African-American community's stories, both on and offline.

Research Questions

The foregoing review of the history and functions of the black press, as well as the challenges now posed by entertainment content online, raise a number of questions. To address these inquiries, I investigated African Americans' black press consumption practices as well as the shift in the black press production practices. This dissertation is primarily concerned with the following research questions:

1. Are journalists' and readers' expectations regarding advocacy and entertainment in the black press shifting in the new media age?

While black press newspapers were founded with the intention of advocating on behalf of African Americans, on the Web not all black press outlets contain or highlight such content. The high proliferation of entertainment content among black-targeted sites is in direct opposition to the amount of hard news stories and may be intentional. According to The Nielsen Company's (2015) report "Increasingly Affluent, Educated and Diverse: African-American Consumers: The Untold Story," African Americans are more likely than whites to engage in entertainment consumption practices online. Black press publishers may be producing entertainment content to best cater to their readers' interests. However, entertainment in the black press can also serve as a means of escapism from other traumatic coverage of African Americans in the news. Social movements like Black Lives Matter need to be covered yet they can also precipitate a simultaneous need to consume less emotionally charged content. Alexander's (1994) analysis of the Rodney King beating video emphasized the affect that news coverage of racial injustices can

have on African Americans. She stated, “black viewers are taking in evidence that provides ground for collective identification with trauma” (p. 90). Although it is important for African Americans to remember and be aware of black suffering, it is also important to have alternative representations of black life, which entertainment content provides. This research question helps me investigate to what degree journalists and consumers expect the black press to be a site for advocacy content given the increased presence of soft news and entertainment content on black press websites.

2. How do financial resources and ownership affect how entertainment is currently operating in the black press?

While financial resources are constrained among all news publications, the impact on the black press, a business already handicapped by institutional racism (as evidenced by disproportional advertising revenue between mainstream and black press outlets), is more significant. In a recap of what *Ebony* magazine’s former CEO, Linda Johnson Rice, shared during her visit to Harvard Business School, lecturer Steve Rogers recalled,

Linda also became aware of the fact that advertisers were paying her a rate that’s significantly less than what they were paying white media companies for the same number of viewers. It was sort of what we call in the black community, she was experiencing the black tax. (Harvard Business School, 2017)

The added obstacle of race on top of journalism’s already precarious financial state puts the black press in an even more disadvantaged position. Black press editors may be encouraged to produce entertainment as a means to gain additional readers and subsequently attract more

advertisers. The lack of financial resources can threaten the black press' advocacy role as business interests may supersede the medium's original goals.

Black press ownership may shift to nonblack-owned companies as a result of monetary constraints. Notably, black press ownership is more diversified online as compared to print. As a result, new understandings of the black press have already begun to emerge in the digital age. In her research, Harris-Lacewell (2004) expanded on previous definitions of the black press asserting, "To the extent that African Americans perceive a media source (television show, radio station, novel, magazine, movie, or Internet website) to be something that 'belongs' to black people, it can be considered a black media space" (p. 10). This conceptualization allows room for scholars to analyze the cultural significance of spaces that are not black owned yet influential in the black community, such as Black Twitter (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). This dissertation further investigates the concept of ownership as it relates to the platforms on which black news content resides. Black-targeted content provided by nonblack-owned companies, such as The Root (which is owned by Univision), BET (owned by Viacom) and Huffington Post Black Voices (which is owned by Verizon Communications), broadens discussions on what qualifies an outlet as being part of the black press. I am also interested in the effect of nonblack ownership on the content of black press outlets. If mainstream-owned black press outlets produce more entertainment than hard news content it calls into question the priorities of nonblack owners.

3. How do the numerous black-targeted outlets online affect competition and the survival of the black press?

The profitability of entertainment content creates increased competition among mainstream press outlets (Boczkowski, 2010) but the black press diverges from the mainstream media

regarding how competition operates. Schudson (2011) acknowledged that survival of mainstream news organizations in the current digital media environment relies on cooperation between outlets and noted that journalists feel a sense of “common public obligation” (p. 214). However, C. W. Anderson (2013) found that many for-profit news organizations do not collaborate because they believe it will negatively impact their bottom line. Competition looks different in the black press as outlets are more motivated to work together. Black press journalists are compelled to cross-promote content due to a continuous need to demonstrate the sustainability of the black press. Additionally, a linked fate philosophy (Dawson, 1994) reinforces the concept that black press outlets all share in the success of any one individual outlet. As a result, black press publications may compete more with mainstream outlets producing black-targeted content than with other black press outlets.

The sustainability of the mainstream press came into question with The Great Recession, but questions concerning the sustainability of the black press began much earlier. The traditional black press began to lose circulation in the 1960s due to integration efforts (Owens, 1996; Wolseley, 1990). Many black journalists left the black press to work for mainstream news outlets after the release of the 1968 Kerner Commission report, which recommended that mainstream media hire black reporters (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). Black journalists were enticed by the higher salaries and higher circulations offered at mainstream outlets, resulting in a less vibrant black press (Greenwell, 2012). Another result of integration is that some African Americans now believe they no longer need the black press due to a sense of personal achievement or progress (Owens, 1996). With the increase in mainstream outlets covering the black community and the diversity of black-targeted outlets online, the black press

has become decentralized. This question helps determine if the longevity of the black press has been jeopardized or solidified by integration and inclusion efforts.

The proliferation of entertainment content online has been regarded as detrimental to mainstream news outlets, yet what is categorized as entertainment is nebulous when analyzing black press content. Interviews with black celebrities about social issues affecting African Americans and coverage of a film or television show that foregrounds race blurs the line between entertainment and advocacy content. Also, African-American entertainers may be more comfortable speaking with black press journalists and therefore more willing to share information about their black lived experience, which they may be less inclined to share with mainstream press outlets. Their insight then extends beyond entertainment content as it enters into conversation with larger societal discourse concerning race. Entertainment in the black press can then serve political and educational purposes as well. Entertainment ultimately extends the reach of black press outlets as it evidences a diversity of content that targets the various needs of the black audience.

Yet entertainment may be harmful to the black community when it is produced purely for financial gain and when it compromises hard news content. Financially constrained black press outlets and nonblack-owned black press publications may prioritize monetary profits over political content. Hard news content is less popular among news audiences but producing it demonstrates an investment in the well being of the black community. Additionally, black press entertainment outlets that advance gossip and only produce positive coverage of celebrities may do a greater disservice to their readers. Publishing content that is not fact-checked and supporting or ignoring the behavior of controversial celebrities can lessen the effectiveness of the black

press. Similarly, competition between black press and mainstream outlets that primarily produce entertainment content can endanger the sustainability of the institution.

Given the multiple interpretations that surface when analyzing entertainment within the black press, further investigation into how journalists and readers understand advocacy, financial resources, ownership and competition will elucidate how the digital media environment is affecting the black press. The shifting role of the black press can have implications for how African Americans participate in the public sphere and how they engage with American society. The black press has traditionally aimed to educate and inform the black community but as entertainment proliferates online, it has the potential to either hinder or advance African-American sociopolitical discourse.

Chapter Three: Methodology

To address the aforementioned research questions, I used three methods. First, I interviewed black press journalists to understand the intentions of the producers of black press content. Second, I conducted focus groups to understand how consumers perceive their interactions with the black press. Third, I supplemented and contextualized data from the focus groups and journalist interviews with data from comScore (a web analytics platform). Each method is described in detail below. The use of multiple methods compensated for the limitations of any one approach and gave me a more complete picture of how the black press is being produced and consumed. I coded my data using MAXQDA software and employed grounded theory to identify the themes that emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Outlets that were included ranged in size and were chosen in an attempt to be representative of the black press space. While national, high-traffic outlets—such as magazines and media conglomerate subsidiaries—were prominent, smaller independent and local outlets were also included. If an outlet was not available online, it fell outside of the scope of this research.

Interviews with Journalists

I initially addressed my research questions via interviews with journalists who work for black press publications in print and online. Interview subjects were selected based on the following criteria: sizeable publication audience and up-to-date, news-related content that clearly emphasized African Americans. Only journalists in decision-making positions were interviewed as they are more responsible for their publication's content and are more equipped to speak to the overall vision for the outlet. I used the interviews to further examine how journalists understand

the interests of their audience and what they perceive as the goals of the black press. I also inquired about their opinion of entertainment content, advocacy, the financial pressures they face, how they engage with readers and how competition affects their content.

A total of 30 black press journalists were interviewed for this research (see Table 1, p. 56). After completing 30 interviews I observed that I was hearing mostly confirming evidence as opposed to new concepts and therefore concluded that I had reached saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Small, 2009). While national outlets were my main focus, in order to get a more nuanced understanding of the black press in the new media age, I also included some local newspapers and defunct outlets. Most online-only entities were digital-first outlets that were founded within the last 20 years, whereas those that also had a print magazine or newspaper component represented the perspective of legacy black press outlets with some having been in existence for over 100 years. A total of 17 journalists from online-only outlets were interviewed, six from magazines, four from black press newspapers and three from defunct outlets. The online-only outlets range from hard news-focused websites (such as The Root and The Grio) to entertainment-focused websites (such as Bossip and The YBF). They also target a variety of segments within the black audience such as millennials (Blavity), Generation X (EUR Web) and the LGBTQ community (The G-Listed). In order to thoroughly answer my research questions, it was also important that I include outlets that were both black owned and nonblack owned so six of the non-defunct outlets were not black owned at the time of the interview (such as The Undeafated and *Vibe*). Although some publications also had print entities, all outlets had a digital presence. Therefore in Table 1 and in the Outlet Descriptions section below, each outlet is referred to by its website address for consistency.

Journalists were contacted via email and all journalists who responded to my request for an interview were included in this study. I focused my outreach on larger black press outlets (according to comScore data) as I thought them to be most influential in the space. However I also included a few outlets that were not measurable by comScore in order to avoid secondary marginalization within my data collection and because I thought they would add unique perspectives. In fact, journalists from defunct outlets were able to offer firsthand insight about the sustainability of the black press and journalists from smaller local outlets were able to speak directly to variance in competition. Interviews were conducted via phone between August 2016 and June 2018 and ranged from 25 minutes to over two hours. The average interview was an hour long and all interviewees agreed to be recorded and identified. The length of the interview depended on how thorough the journalist was in their responses or how much time they were able to set aside for the interview. Some interviews took place in two parts in order to accommodate the journalist's schedule.

Titles used in this dissertation align with how the interview subjects self identified or correspond with what was published on their respective platforms at the time of the interview. Titles are therefore not consistent across outlets. For example, Richard Prince is the founder and sole editor and writer for Journal-isms but is credited as editor and Taryn Finley is the only editor of Huffington Post Black Voices without any management above her within the Black Voices vertical. Both may otherwise be considered the editor-in-chief of their outlets, but I used the titles as provided. Although some journalists are no longer at their listed outlet or have since received promotions, the titles I used correspond with the position they held at the time of the interview.

Table 1: Journalist Interview Subjects, Outlets and Ownership

	Outlet	Interview Subject	Title	Type	Black Owned?
1	Africana.com	Gary Dauphin	Former Editor-in-Chief	Online-only (defunct)	N*
2	AmsterdamNews.com	Elinor Tatum	Publisher/ Editor-in-Chief	Newspaper	Y
3	BlackDoctor.org	Reginald Ware	CEO	Online-only	Y
4	BlackEnterprise.com	Shelly Jones Jennings	VP, Director of Digital	Magazine	Y
5	Blavity.com	Zahara Hill	Deputy Editor	Online-only	Y
6	Bossip.com	Janeé Bolden	Deputy Editor	Online-only	Y
7	ChicagoCrusader.com	Dorothy R. Leavell	Editor/ Publisher	Newspaper	Y
8	EbonyJet.com	Kyra Kyles	Editor-in-Chief/ SVP of Digital Content	Magazine/ Online-only	Y
9	EmergeNewsOnline.com	Flo Purnell	Former Managing Editor	Magazine (defunct)	N*
10	Essence.com	Anslem Samuel Rocque	Digital Content Director	Magazine	Y*
11	Essence.com	Ingrid Sturgis	Former Editor-in-Chief of Essence.com	Magazine	Y*
12	EURWeb.com	Lee Bailey	Founder/ Publisher	Online-only	Y
13	ForHarriet.com	Kimberly N. Foster	Editor-in-Chief/ Publisher	Online-only	Y
14	HelloBeautiful.com	Leigh Davenport	Editorial Director	Online-only	Y
15	HipHopWired.com	Alvin Blanco	Deputy Editor	Online-only	Y
16	HuffingtonPost.com Black-Voices	Taryn Finley	Editor	Online-only	N*
17	Journal-isms.com	Richard Prince	Editor	Online-only	Y
18	LASentinel.net	Danny Bakewell, Jr.	Executive Editor	Newspaper	Y
19	Loop21.com	Darrell Williams	Founder/ Publisher	Online-only (defunct)	Y

20	MadameNoire.com	Brande Victorian	Managing Editor	Online-only	Y
21	PhillyTrib.com	Nicki Mayo	Digital Editor	Newspaper	Y
22	QCityMetro.com	Glenn Burkins	Founder/ Publisher	Online-only	Y
23	TheCrisisMagazine.com	Lottie Joiner	Interim Editor-in-Chief	Magazine	Y
24	TheGListed.com	Waddie Grant	Founding Editor	Online-only	Y
25	TheGrio.com	David A. Wilson	Co-Founder/ Former Executive Editor	Online-only	Y*
26	TheRoot.com	Danielle C. Belton	Managing Editor	Online-only	N
27	TheUndefeated.com	Kevin Merida	Editor-in-Chief	Online-only	N
28	TheYBF.com	Natasha Eubanks	Founder/ Editor-in-Chief	Online-only	Y
29	VerySmartBrothas.com	Damon Young	Co-Founder/ Editor-in-Chief	Online-only	N*
30	Vibe.com	Datwon Thomas	Editor-in-Chief	Magazine/ Online-only	N*

*Indicates current ownership, but outlet was under different ownership during some part of its history. Please see Outlet Descriptions on page 66 for details about shifts in ownership.

Focus Groups

In order to better understand black press consumption practices, I organized focus groups with black press readers. Readers informed my research by providing their views on the current role of the black press and by sharing their consumption habits of black press content both in print and online formats. Analyzing the audience response to the black press helped me determine if what black press journalists think they are conveying is what readers are actually receiving. Focus groups also allowed me to interview readers who may not be tech savvy and provided a space for interlocutors to interact with each other and engage more with the questions.

Given that they are not professional journalists, hearing each other's responses aided participants in thinking more critically about their own perspectives of the black press and created a means to establish both consensus and dissent. At the beginning of each session I told participants that there were not any right or wrong answers to the discussion questions and instructed them to speak directly to each other not just to me as the facilitator. Attendees were also informed that their names would be withheld from publication as a way to ensure privacy and encourage transparency. These assurances enabled the sessions to be more generative as attendees were able to speak freely and participate in a conversation as opposed to a one-on-one dialogue.

I held four focus group sessions with a total of 30 participants between April and June 2018. Two groups were held in Chicago, Illinois and two groups were held in Los Angeles, California. The two different locations allowed me to diversify my participants given that regional differences may affect perceptions of the black press. Los Angeles and Chicago are the second and third largest media markets in the country, respectively, which provided participants with greater media awareness for this research. I required that participants read news content from at least two black-targeted online or print publications on a monthly basis in order to qualify for the study. The Chicago focus groups took place in the Northwestern University Health Communications offices in downtown Chicago. The Los Angeles groups were held at the University of Southern California's main campus, which is near downtown Los Angeles, and Grace United Methodist Church Los Angeles, which is near Ladera Heights, a prominent black neighborhood in LA. I chose centrally located spaces in an effort to make attendance more convenient for participants. I recruited participants by emailing information about the study or posting about it in the Facebook groups of local African-American activist groups (such as

National Urban League and Black Lives Matter chapters), community organizations (such as Youth Empowerment Performance Project and Los Angeles Community Action Network), Black Greek Letter Organizations alumni chapters (such as National Pan Hellenic Council Alumni local chapters) and sizeable predominately black churches (such as Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church and West Angeles Church of God in Christ). The breadth of my recruitment was intentional in an effort to diversify participants by age, social class and educational background. This outreach resulted in three focus groups with eight participants each and one group with six participants (which was the first group held in Chicago). Session sizes were kept small in order to allow time and space for attendees to share their opinions in depth (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Each session was two hours long and attendees were compensated with \$50 in cash for their participation.

Adult black press consumers between 18 and 57 (media target ages) were recruited for the study. I separated the groups based on age (Generation Y (millennials) and Generation X) so that I could examine any generational differences in consumption patterns. Millennials were defined as those born between 1981 and 2000 making them between 18 and 37 at the time of the focus groups. My recruitment yielded participants between 21 and 37 with an average age of 31 for the Chicago session and an average age of 25 for the Los Angeles session. Groups for Generation X were designed for those born between 1961 and 1980 making them between 38 and 57 at the time of the focus groups. Attendees for these groups were in fact between 38 and 55 with an average age of 45 for the Chicago session and 49 for the Los Angeles session. Consumers' generational gap was an important point of comparison as it affected how readers perceived and consumed black press publications.

While both men and women were recruited for the focus groups, there were more women participants than men. Both millennial groups were composed entirely of women while the Chicago group for Generation X had two men and the Los Angeles group had three. These gender demographics are consistent with what black press editors stated regarding the readers of their publications. Given their access to the web metrics for their sites, many editors noted that women were the main audience for their outlet even when they were not intentionally targeted.

In addition to facilitating the sessions via my questioning route, I distributed two handouts to the participants. The first handout listed 42 popular black press outlets and asked participants to note how often they read each one (the options were often, rarely and never). Three spaces were left at the end of each handout for participants to write in any black press outlet that they read but was not included on the list. This handout was completed near the beginning of each session as a means to set the parameters of the discussion around tangible outlets that attendees considered part of the black press. The second handout listed six questions related to the black press and asked participants to circle the option that most closely aligned with their beliefs (with options of always, sometimes, rarely or never). The questions asked about perceptions of legitimacy, entertainment, advocacy and ownership. Participants were instructed to only circle one answer in an effort to encourage them to take a stance on their beliefs about each topic. Each question was then discussed among the group giving everyone an opportunity to explain their answers. After discussion, some chose to change their answers once they had more information upon which to base their opinion. Given that participants who chose different answers would at times agree with each other's reasoning, I was more interested in the logic behind their choices as opposed to the answers themselves.

Web Metrics

While the focus groups provided rich insights into individuals' black press consumption practices, they lack generalizability. To get a better sense of the extent to which black press outlets are consumed, I incorporated comScore data on website traffic to observe which black press sites are attracting the most unique visitors and generating the most engagement. comScore is a platform that measures digital audiences and is one of the premier providers of web measurement and analytics. It uses person-level measurement to track Internet activity and combines that information with census-based data to provide estimates of audience size (comScore, 2017). For US-based metrics, comScore uses a panel of about one million people for desktop data and roughly 80,000 people for mobile data (C. Bryan, personal communication, March 5, 2019). Panelists are required to provide demographic data (such as age, gender and race) for themselves and members of their household and for multi-user devices comScore determines the user through unique user fingerprints and session markers, such as an email address (comScore, 2019a; comScore, 2019b). During my research timeframe (April to June 2018), African Americans comprised 22.1 percent of comScore's panelists on desktop at home and 14.6 percent of panelists on desktop at work. According to comScore's enumeration target, which calculates the total number of Internet users for a target demo, the black audience was overrepresented as African-American home and work desktop targets were 11.4 and 10.2 percent, respectively (comScore, 2018). The black audience was overrepresented on mobile as well; in June 2018 African Americans made up 15.1 percent of Android panelists, 13.7 percent of iPhone panelists and 12.3 percent of iPad panelists with enumeration targets of 14.9, 11.5 and 11.0 percent, respectively (Android tablet estimates are based on census-only methodology) (comScore, 2018; comScore, 2019b). For various analyses in this dissertation I used desktop and

mobile metrics information specifically from the unique visitors, percentage composition of unique visitors, total minutes and percentage composition minutes categories. The number of unique visitors reflects how many different individuals visited a website and does not include repeat visits and the percentage composition of unique visitors metric provides the size of the black audience as a percentage of a site's total audience. The total minutes is the total number of minutes visitors spend at a website and the percentage composition of minutes is all of the minutes the black audience spent on a site as percentage of the total minutes spent by the site's total audience (comScore, 2019a). Using this data helped me see what news sites readers visit and how much they engage with them; it also allowed me to observe how mobile phone usage is preferred in African Americans' consumption behavior. comScore data also provided a broader sense of the black press content that African Americans consume at large and helped contextualize the data I received from journalists and focus group participants.

I used comScore to specifically examine the top 36 black press websites (see Table 2, p. 65). I determined these sites by beginning with a list of top "black-oriented websites" as compiled by The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, a nonprofit that promotes diversity in the field of journalism (Prince, 2016). This list was also used for Pew Research Center's State of the News Media 2016 African-American News Media: Fact Sheet. In addition to the sites on this list, I also included websites that my journalist interviewees and focus group participants revealed as outlets they consider part of the black press. Lastly, I added news and entertainment outlets where the black audience over-indexed according to comScore. While I initially compiled nearly 100 sites, my final list was limited to outlets that met the minimum reporting standards to be measured by comScore. For desktop, comScore requires that a website attracts at least 31 panelists monthly or a combined 51 panelists for three-month averages (comScore, 2019a). At

least six panelists are required for an outlet's monthly mobile metrics to be measurable, which includes data from iPhones, Android phones, iPads and Android tablets (comScore, 2019b).

The unique visitor numbers included in this dissertation are primarily from desktop-only comScore data collected between April and June 2018 from US-based users. These months corresponded with the last of my interviews with journalists and encompass the months when all four of my focus groups took place. Therefore the numbers used for tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9 are the three-month averages during this timeframe and since comScore only provides monthly mobile metrics, June 2018 data was used for tables 7 and 8. Analyzing data from this time period allows me to best connect the information that I received from my interlocutors with the consumption practices of the larger black community. Some sites (such as *Rolling Out* and *The Final Call*) were not measurable on a monthly basis and only had desktop metrics available for a three-month timeframe. Therefore using this average allowed me to include more outlets and provided more accurate numbers as random number fluctuations can occur due to certain stories trending or slow news cycles.

For this dissertation I specifically used numbers for the black audience traffic to black press websites as opposed to or in addition to total audience numbers in order to get a better sense of how well these outlets were reaching their target audience. I also separated the black audience demographic by age (18-34 and 35-54 (comScore preset ranges)), in order to compare Generation Y and Generation X consumption patterns (see Table 3, p. 102 and Table 4, p. 103). Data regarding the total audiences of top black press sites is included in chapter five of this dissertation (see Table 5, p. 145 and Table 6, p. 146) when discussing the effect of the white gaze on the black press. Additionally, given that African Americans over-index in mobile usage, with 83 percent penetration compared with 76 percent for the rest of the population (The Nielsen

Company, 2015), I also analyzed mobile website and app data to further examine the differences between total audience and black audience traffic (see Table 7, p. 150 and Table 8, p. 151). Lastly, I observed which mainstream and black press sites African Americans visit most and compared that with the black audience composition of black press outlets (see Table 9, p. 166).

comScore's methodology for reporting percentages informed by demographics are designed to provide the most accurate data and therefore sometimes vary from the numbers that would result if one were to calculate the percentages manually. For tables 5, 7 and 9 comScore calculates the composition percentage of the black audience by dividing the number of black unique visitors by the total known unique visitors as opposed to the total unique visitors. In some cases, the total known unique visitors is lower than the total unique visitors because a site has census-only data for one of the devices (i.e. Android or iPhone) or has census-only data for less than 50 percent of its total unique visitors. Since census-only data does not contain demographic information, which is provided by the person panel, it is subtracted from the total unique visitors resulting in the number of total known unique visitors. If census-only data comprises more than 50 percent of the unique visitors then percentage composition unique visitor numbers are not provided. Using this method provided a more accurate percentage of black unique visitors for each site. comScore calculates the percentage total minutes in the same manner but requires more panelists to report this information. Whereas comScore's minimum reporting standards for demographic data on desktop is one panelist for unique visitor metrics, it is 31 panelists for total minutes metrics (C. Bryan, personal communication, March 28, 2019). As a result, I was only able to analyze 29 websites for Table 6, which analyzes total minutes on desktop. comScore's minimum reporting standards for demographic data on mobile is one panelist for unique visitors

and six panelists for all other metrics, therefore only 34 sites included black audience metrics for tables 7 and 8, which analyze unique visitors and total minutes on mobile (C. Bryan, personal communication, April 3, 2019). I manually calculated the percentage composition minutes for Table 8 because comScore did not offer this metric for mobile data in 2018. As such, census-only data was not subtracted from the total audience for my analysis of how much audiences engage with the black press via mobile.

Table 2: Top Black Press Websites

Rank	Media	Total Unique Visitors (000)
	Total Internet: Race: Black/African-American	24,850
1	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	290
2	THEROOT.COM	230
3	ESSENCE.COM	182
4	MADAMENOIRE.COM	125
5	BET.COM	123
6	MTONEWS.COM	115
7	BOSSIP.COM	97
8	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	96
9	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	84
10	XXLMAG.COM	79
11	THEGRIO.COM	71
12	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	64
13	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	59
14	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	51
15	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	51
16	NEWSONE.COM	41
17	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	39
18	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	38
19	BLAVITY.COM	37
20	THESHADEROOM.COM	37

21	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	34
22	VIBE.COM	33
23	EBONYJET.COM	29
24	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	25
25	THEYBF.COM	22
26	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	17
27	EURWEB.COM	14
28	AFROPUNK.COM	11
29	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	11
30	THESOURCE.COM	9
31	BLACKNEWS.COM	8
32	ROLLINGOUT.COM	8
33	NBCNEWS.COM BLK	7
34	FINALCALL.COM	5
35	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	4
36	PHILLYTRIB.COM	3

Outlet Descriptions (as defined by the outlet website and/or the interview subject)

Africana.com was founded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah in 1999 and covered African-American culture and politics. The online-only outlet was sold to Time Warner, owner of AOL, in 2000 and ended when AOL Black Voices was launched in 2005.

AmsterdamNews.com is New York's oldest black press newspaper. The paper was started in 1909 and is still published weekly. *The New York Amsterdam News*' mission is to tell the stories of the African-American community.

BlackDoctor.org was started by Reginald Ware, who is one of the original founders of *Heart & Soul* magazine. The website began in 2005 and provides health news that is culturally relevant to the African-American community.

BlackEnterprise.com is the digital counterpart to *Black Enterprise* magazine, which was founded in 1970. It provides business and technology content and encourages African Americans to sustain wealth through generations.

Blavity.com is named after the concept of black gravity, which refers to the idea of an elevation of young black thought. The platform is geared toward black millennials and aims to “uplift the community through empowering news cycles.” Founded in 2014, Blavity, Inc. also houses Afrotech, which caters to African Americans in tech, 21Ninety, which focuses on black women and lifestyle, and Shadow and Act, which covers African Americans and the entertainment industry.

Bossip.com is a website for black celebrity gossip that produces articles on pop culture and social issues from a black perspective. Founded in 2006, the site is the flagship property of Moguldum Media Group and uses a voice that is comedic and “real.”

ChicagoCrusader.com is the digital arm of *The Chicago Crusader* newspaper, which was founded in 1940. The paper aims to “inspire and inform” local African Americans via news and commentary. *The Chicago Crusader* is part of The Crusader Newspaper Group, which also includes *The Gary Crusader*, based in Indiana.

EbonyJet.com is the digital platform for *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, which were founded in 1946 and 1951, respectively, by Johnson Publishing Company. The magazines were sold to Clear View Group, an African-American investment group, in 2016. *Ebony*’s mission is to be the voice for black people globally by covering entertainment, hot topics and news. Since 2014 *Jet* has been online-only and is now designed for millennials who are interested in entertainment, news, fashion and beauty.

EmergenceNewsOnline.com was the online presence for *Emergence* magazine, which provided news and commentary on issues affecting the African-American community. Initially founded by Time Inc. in 1989, *Emergence* was sold to BET in 1992 and folded in 2000 when Viacom bought BET and started the more lifestyle-focused *Savoy Magazine*.

Essence.com is the web extension of *Essence* magazine, which was created in 1970 and designed exclusively for African-American women. Time Inc. acquired 49 percent of the magazine in 2000, obtained full ownership in 2005 and in 2018 the magazine returned to black ownership. *Essence* is seen as a source for African-American news, entertainment and community.

EURWeb.com began in 1997 as the digital arm of the infotainment program RadioScope and caters to the 35 plus audience. The Electronic Urban Report provides entertainment, political and opinion-related content.

ForHarriet.com was founded in 2010 as a digital community for black women. It endeavors to be a space for relevant discourse on topics such as entertainment, beauty and politics through storytelling and journalism.

HelloBeautiful.com caters to millennial women by providing coverage of entertainment, fashion and social issues. The site is owned by iOne Digital (formerly Interactive One), which was launched in 2008 by Radio One, Inc.

HipHopWired.com covers hip-hop music, culture and style and is designed for anyone who appreciates the genre—including fans, artists and industry executives. It is part of Moguldom Media Group and was started in 2009.

HuffingtonPost.com/BlackVoices aims to “elevate and amplify” stories that matter to the black community. Originally AOL Black Voices (founded in 2005), Huffington Post acquired AOL in 2011 and Black Voices became one of its verticals. The website provides entertainment and cultural news and targets the entire African diaspora in an effort to “speak to all black experiences.”

Journal-isms.com was founded by Richard Prince in 2002. The website covers diversity issues in the news business and appeared as a column on *The Root* from 2010 to 2018. Prince has facilitated and covered many events regarding the black press over the years.

LASentinel.net is the digital counterpart to *The Los Angeles Sentinel* newspaper. The paper was founded in 1933 and is still published weekly. *The Sentinel* provides news “from an African-American perspective” to the greater Los Angeles community.

Loop21.com was available online from 2008 to 2012. The site aimed to cover news stories from a “black analytical perspective.” According to founder Darrell Williams, it shut down due to a flawed business model and an inability to differentiate its content.

MadameNoire.com was launched in 2010 by Moguldom Media Group. It is a lifestyle site for educated black women and provides entertainment, health, relationship, parenting and career content.

PhillyTrib.com is the oldest black press newspaper still in publication and aims to tell stories through the black lens. *The Philadelphia Tribune* was founded in 1884 and primarily targets African Americans in the Philadelphia area but is starting to broaden its scope with its digital presence.

QCityMetro.com is a local news website in Charlotte, North Carolina. The digital-first outlet was launched in 2008 and aims to provide news and information for the city’s African-American community.

TheCrisisMagazine.com is the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The magazine was founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1910 to address issues of civil rights and social injustice. *The Crisis* is currently published quarterly and launched its website in 2017.

TheGListed.com aims to “give an empowering voice” to black LGBTQ people. Founded in 2011 as The G-List Society, the name was changed to The G-Listed in 2016. The G-Listed provides an alternative to typical A-List celebrity coverage and the G is in reference to the founder’s last name, Grant. The site offers coverage of black pop culture and LGBTQ culture nationwide.

TheGrio.com was founded by David A. Wilson, Daniel Woolsey and Barion L. Grant as a division of NBC in 2009. The digital-first outlet serves as a space for stories that “reflect and affect African Americans” and covers news topics ranging from breaking news and politics to entertainment. It was fully bought by the founders in 2014 and then by Entertainment Studios LLC, a company owned by black entertainer Byron Allen, in 2016.

TheRoot.com is an African-American news website that covers the black community. It was created by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Donald E. Graham in 2008 and owned by Graham Holdings Company (then owners of *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post*). It was sold to Univision Communications in 2015 and in 2016 Univision bought Gizmodo Media Group and added The Root to its subsidiaries.

TheUndeclared.com is a digital-first outlet that addresses the intersection of race, sports and culture. It is a vertical of ESPN and was launched in 2016. The platform targets African Americans via sections related to HBCUs, faith and culture.

TheYBF.com is for the young, black and fabulous and was founded in 2005 with the goal of putting “black Hollywood on a pedestal.” The site was one of the first outlets covering black celebrity gossip and targets black millennial women.

VerySmartBrothas.com is a digital magazine that was founded by Damon Young and Panama Jackson in 2008. It became a vertical of The Root, which is owned by Univision, in 2017. It provides coverage of race and culture using a humorous and irreverent tone.

Vibe.com was founded by producer Quincy Jones in 1993 as a magazine that focuses on hip-hop and R&B. After declaring bankruptcy the outlet started publishing bi-monthly in 2009 and in 2014 transitioned to online only. It became a subsidiary of Billboard Media Group in 2016.

Terminology

Although the black press has been in existence for nearly 200 years, its moniker may no longer accurately describe how it is operating in the 21st century. Given that the term black press conjures historical conceptualizations of black-owned newspapers and magazines, the term black media is commonly used by journalists and readers to describe digital outlets that are predominantly managed and operated by African Americans and that target a black audience. Yet, there are affordances and limitations to a shift in terminology. The word media inherently lessens the emphasis on traditional journalism practices and simultaneously allows for a greater variety of outlets. While some black-targeted websites primarily produce hard news content, resembling traditional black press publications, others choose to focus on specific aspects of black life from entertainment to lifestyle. Given that the majority of black press publications also have a digital presence, the term black media then serves as an umbrella naming mechanism for black-targeted content both in print and online.

As traditional journalistic rules loosen and the culture of legitimacy evolves in the digital age, the term black media allows for all black-targeted outlets to demonstrate cohesion. While black press may aptly categorize black-targeted newspapers and magazines, black media

broadens and contemporizes understandings of the medium. The word press can be viewed as an antiquated term since it connotes the physical process of printing ink on paper. Given that the word media encompasses both print and digital entities, it offers a more literal term for a medium that ultimately seeks to be more inclusive than exclusive.

Although the majority of the journalists I interviewed ultimately agreed that their outlet was part of the black press, a few expressed an initial uncertainty about their inclusion. Historical perceptions of the medium influenced their hesitancy to readily be categorized among legacy publications that are often situated in discussions of abolition and civil rights. Some also made clear distinctions between legacy print publications and digital media outlets as it relates to content expectations and upholding journalistic principles. Yet, many journalists used the terms black press and black media interchangeably signifying a fluidity in terminology.

While many digital-first outlets self identified as part of the black press, it is worth noting that the NNPA, the official black press organization, only recognizes members of their organization as black press outlets. Of the 30 journalists I interviewed only four were members of the group and all four were legacy black press newspaper outlets. Although online-only outlets are allowed to be Class B members of the NNPA, none of my interviewees from online-only outlets had any official affiliation with the organization. The NNPA uses the term black-oriented to describe outlets that fall outside of the organization's criteria for a black press outlet. Yet the word oriented was not used by any of my other interlocutors and seemed somewhat vague in its scope.

Given the varying terminology, during some of my interviews and focus groups I began using the term black press but then switched to the term black-targeted outlets to forgo any confusion about what outlets I was referencing. I initially believed that black-targeted news

outlets was the ideal way to categorize these outlets. This terminology acknowledged that publications were intentionally targeting the African-American audience and differentiated outlets that provided news articles from sites that highlighted black consumer products, museums, professional organizations and other services. However, given journalists' and readers' different interpretations of what qualifies as news, I dropped that word from the description. Black-targeted entertainment and hard news outlets may be the best fitting and accurate terminology, but it is extremely long and ultimately is not the language that consumers and producers use to describe the black press in the new media age. Therefore, for ease of understanding I use black press throughout this dissertation to mean any hard news or entertainment outlet in print or online that is targeting African Americans.

I also used varied terminology to connote other similar concepts. I was purposefully flexible with the words I used to describe news and entertainment content. I use the terms news, hard news, public affairs, advocacy and political content interchangeably as well as treat entertainment, soft news, sensationalism, nonpublic affairs and gossip content as synonyms. I also use digital-first to refer to websites that never had a print entity and online-only to reference all outlets that are not currently available in print. Black press newspapers and magazines that were initially available in print are described as legacy, traditional and print outlets. Additionally, the terms publications, outlets and websites are used to signify the collective black press. Publications is understood to mean any news outlet that publishes content in print or online and since all of my journalist interviewees also had online presence, websites was also an accurate description. Due to the limited up-to-date research in the black press space and the lack of unified definitions among journalism studies scholars, I chose to encompass all of the terms that appeared relevant to my research.

Researcher's Reflexivity

My dissertation research is informed by my time working as a black press journalist. I was the editorial assistant for *Jet* magazine for nearly two years and in that time I assisted with the publication's redesign and contributed to the final print issue. I subsequently worked for *Ebony* magazine as editorial assistant for a few months before leaving for graduate school. As such, I was very familiar with the inner workings of each outlet and used my experience to get access to black press journalists for this research. I mentioned my previous work experience in my outreach emails and used my professional network to gain contact information for journalists I had difficulty reaching. I believe my knowledge of the black press space both enhanced and limited my data collection and analysis. Overall, my background made journalists more willing to speak with me and less guarded in their responses. Yet, one journalist was initially wary in speaking with me as she primarily saw me as a researcher and wanted to limit the possibility of any negative content regarding the black press. During the interviews, some journalists were short in their responses as they assumed that I already knew the answers to my questions. They also did not explain certain terms or concepts as they presumed that I was familiar with what they were sharing, either due to my identity as a former journalist, as an African-American woman, or both. My analysis was then possibly limited by my inherent understanding of some concepts due to my lived experience whereas someone with an outer-group experience may have been compelled to provide additional explanation.

Given that I am phenotypically an African-American woman, I believe focus group participants were more comfortable speaking freely during the sessions. I especially felt this to be the case when conducting the millennial sessions as all of the participants were black women

and around my age. At times these discussions felt more like a conversation among girlfriends as opposed to research. Generation X participants also spoke candidly and often discussed their frustrations with black community dynamics. My age may have been a detriment in Generation X sessions as participants may not have seen me as an authoritative figure, making my efforts to keep the conversation on topic more difficult. Yet, I ultimately believe that I received more authentic responses from focus group participants because they saw me as part of their community and therefore trusted me as a researcher.

Chapter Four: The Benefits of Entertainment

Entertainment content is included in black press outlets online and in print. Both consumers and journalists believe it is an integral component to covering the black community. Just as hard news and opinion content is commonly found in mainstream news publications, given the sizeable entertainment industry in the US, entertainment then becomes an inherent part of the larger news landscape. Many readers noted that they read black press publications out of a need to keep up with all of black culture. They then expect black press outlets to be comprehensive in their content providing both soft and hard news relevant to the black community.

While mainstream journalists may view entertainment as less important to their audience as compared to hard news content, black press journalists have consistently viewed it as essential given its many positive functions in the black community. Entertainment is another space for African Americans to be represented as validated as relevant contributors to the industry. It serves as a means to view examples of black success both by those inside and outside of the community. It is also a place where black consumers can turn when they are inundated with hard news content that can be physiologically difficult to process on a continuous basis. Entertainment then provides some relief and an opportunity to consume lighter and often more positive news content about African Americans. Yet, even when coverage may not be positive, entertainment still serves as an opportunity for black readers to learn from others' experiences, which are often connected to larger societal or community issues. Additionally, given the constant intersection of entertainment with politics, it becomes nearly impossible to completely omit it from any news outlet, regardless of the outlet's primary type of content.

Entertainment-focused websites evidence the diversity of the black community.

Whereas the previously nominal amount of legacy black press outlets created an implicit need for them to address all topics relevant to African Americans, currently, digital-first outlets are less concerned with being the sole source of news for the black audience. Many online-only outlets are able to primarily focus on providing entertainment content due to the numerous spaces that African Americans can now turn to for news. This speaks to the breadth of interests of African-American readers and reinforces the idea that the African-American audience is not a monolith. Consumers choose which entertainment sites to read by identifying content that they feel speaks to their interests. At times readers are able to determine outlets' legitimacy through the colloquial language that is used in stories and headlines. While Generation X (those between 38 and 57) consumers stated a stronger preference for institutional legitimacy (Lowrey, 2011), which is held by legacy outlets that have well-established reputations, digital-first entertainment websites are yet a prominent component of their black press news diet (see Table 4, p. 103). Entertainment in the black press serves as a means for Generation X to relate to Generation Y (those between 18 and 37) and Generation Z (those 17 years old and younger) and helps create greater understanding between the groups.

Comprehensive Coverage

Black press outlets often provide both entertainment and hard news content. This allows them to encompass the many facets of African-American life and culture. Shouldering the responsibility of serving the black community, many outlets perform this duty through their inclusion of any topic that affects African Americans—whether it is related to social issues or entertainment. But due to the many black press spaces online, not every outlet needs to serve

both functions. The dispersal of content among various outlets still provides the black audience with both types of content. Glenn Burkins of Q City Metro said,

At the end of the day, [our] function is to better inform our community. Some of us are informing that community about events and entertainment and nightlife. Some of us are informing that community about politics and school boards and city government. But I think we're all part of the same mosaic. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

The collective black press then includes many outlets that each serve a different function, with entertainment-focused outlets being a key component. One reader stated, "I like to be up on everything that is going on politically but I also like to be really on top of what's going on in the culture too. So, I need a balance." As such, having both entertainment- and hard news- focused outlets allows consumers to put together their own news diet.

Both readers and journalists have a desire for both types of content. Some readers stated that they gravitate toward hard news or entertainment based on their mood. While this practice may result in the consumption of both types of content, it may not necessarily be consumed in equal amounts. One reader expressed a desire for consumers to have more intention when balancing entertainment with hard news. She explained,

Over-consuming all the negative things on the news can be depressing, while over-consuming entertainment news can make you feel blissful or ignorant of whatever else is going on in the world, so I think that a good balance of both is where we should be heading.

Too much of one type of content over the other can be problematic regardless if someone is over-consuming entertainment or hard news. Janeé Bolden of Bossip expressed a similar

intentionality in balancing content in her role as managing editor. Bossip primarily produces entertainment content but hard news is yet an important component of their coverage. She said,

We'll go through cycles and I'll start to feel like, "Okay, it's really celebrity heavy," and that's when I'll have to remind people [my staff] again, "We're missing this," or, "We're missing that." I think my role is really always to call attention to stories that we might be missing. (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

Bolden's awareness of content distribution is emblematic of entertainment sites' participation in the larger black press landscape. Her choice to deliberately instruct Bossip writers to cover stories that are outside of entertainment speaks to a need to offer readers comprehensive coverage of issues that are important to the black community.

Not every black press site has an equal amount of hard news and entertainment content, but many have both types of content present to some degree. Entertainment sites have some hard news and hard news sites still cover some entertainment stories. One consumer expressed that he liked when outlets both educate and entertain him. While he may visit a site primarily for entertainment content he appreciates that he is exposed to hard news content as well. Leigh Davenport of Hello Beautiful shared,

I think most African-American sites if it's really big, will touch on anything that's affecting our community. You're not going to have a Trayvon Martin story and not see it touched upon, even from sites that usually only talk about hip-hop. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

When Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American male, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic male neighborhood watch captain, the incident received national attention. As the case became the catalyst for the Black Lives Matter Movement, both hard

news- and entertainment-focused black press sites covered the story. Because of their desire to serve the black community holistically, many black press outlets cover any large story that is relevant to African Americans, regardless of the subject matter. Entertainment is then not at the expense of hard news content, but it more often serves as an addition to it.

Representation

Entertainment is another space where black bodies need to be included and represented. Black celebrities are representative of the creative and extraordinary abilities of African Americans in fields such as film, music and sports. Depicting black talent then becomes a means for black press outlets to inspire their readers and promote the uplift of black culture. This becomes even more necessary given that black celebrities are often excluded from mainstream news coverage. Kimberly N. Foster of For Harriet asserted, “Focusing on black entertainers and black creative work and black artistry is political too. These are people who aren’t going to be covered as thoroughly if at all in the mainstream. And that is a service to black people” (personal communication, August 10, 2016). The black press’ entertainment coverage is then pushing against societal norms as it creates opportunities for black celebrities and consumers to see positive images of blackness.

The lack of coverage of African Americans in mainstream media was the impetus for the founding of many black press outlets. This gap in coverage was true for the historical black press and continues to be the case for digital-first outlets. Natasha Eubanks, who founded The YBF in 2005 shared,

I would say that the mission, why I originally started, was to put black Hollywood on a pedestal ... They [Mainstream media] were only talking about white Hollywood ... So, I

just assumed there was a niche audience that was being left out because I'm a black girl [and] I love celebrity gossip, so clearly I can't be the only one. (personal communication, February 6, 2018)

Just as mainstream media's hard news content lacks coverage of African Americans, their entertainment coverage also focuses on white celebrities. Mainstream outlets may cover prominent black celebrities, but there are many less famous entertainers and other up-and-coming artists who are not represented. Black press outlets often follow the careers of black entertainers and give them a platform before mainstream news outlets acknowledge them. Some are never covered by mainstream and others receive only minimal coverage in outlets outside of the black press.

Entertainment in the black press is also meeting the needs of black celebrities as members of the black community. Celebrities are served by black press coverage as entertainers' careers thrive from exposure. Having a news outlet cover their work is both validating and necessary in order for them to reach higher levels of success. Some journalists shared that if it were not for the black press many black entertainers' projects—such as predominately black-cast films and hip-hop music albums—would not receive any coverage. This is because black press outlets cover lesser-known artists and participate in media junkets that mainstream outlets do not attend. The black press is essential in black celebrities' career trajectories as mainstream outlets are not able to provide the same context in their stories. While an African-American celebrity may receive mainstream coverage once they participate in or create a project that is hailed by white audiences, they are often viewed as newcomers to the space, whereas black press readers are already familiar with their work.

Entertainment coverage in the black press can have larger social implications. Lottie Joiner shared how the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine was instrumental during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance was one of the most significant cultural movements in the United States as it pushed black creatives into national prominence. During that time, the magazine covered black artists and gave now well-known writers, such as Langston Hughes, their first opportunity to publish their work (Johnson & Johnson, 1979). Entertainment coverage can also extend beyond the industry when celebrities capitalize on it to create social influence. The black press covers the business ventures that black celebrities pursue in addition to entertainment, such as opening restaurants or starting fashion lines. This coverage also includes when celebrities give back to the black community, as evidenced through LeBron James' funding the I Promise School, which is a public school for at-risk students, Kanye West's Donda's House, which is a nonprofit that supports artists and Tom Joyner's foundation, which provides scholarships for students to attend Historically Black College Universities. Representation of these efforts in the black press reflects the importance of communal uplift. Celebrities' commitment to the black community reinforces the idea of linked fate (Dawson, 1994) in that the entertainers' success influences the success of other African Americans.

Even when celebrities' actions do not directly affect African Americans, simply seeing images of black success allows readers to use the concept of linked fate to identify with them. Given that African Americans have historically been excluded from many industries, entertainment is one of the few spaces where African Americans have been able to make substantial financial gains. Black celebrities serve as inspiration to others in the black community as prominent representations of success. Hence, readers are invested in the careers of black celebrities and want to see them thrive. This sentiment can even be seen in how African

American celebrities support each other. At the 2018 Emmy Awards, Issa Rae, creator and star of HBO's *Insecure*, told a reporter that she was "rooting for everyone black" to win. My interlocutors echoed this desire and editors shared that entertainment news is important in the black press because in comparison to mainstream journalists, black press journalists are invested in the success of black entertainers.

Political Relevance

Some black entertainers use their platforms to make political statements. In the past, singer Nina Simone performed "Mississippi Goddam" about racial injustice in the South and consequentially got banned from the radio in some Southern states (Feldstein, 2013). Playwright Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was viewed as a revolutionary text that inspired Black Power activists and Sam Cooke's song "A Change is Gonna Come" was the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement (Raymond, 2015; Welch, 2007). Other singers and actors, such as Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis, Jr., Lena Horne and Sidney Poitier, were also known for their active engagement with the Civil Rights Movement (Raymond, 2015). Following in their footsteps, black entertainers today are continuing to fight for social change. The black press covers these events and is able to offer deeper insight into the cultural significance of celebrities' actions. For example, when football player Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem to protest police killings of African-American men, *The Crisis*' Lottie Joiner explained how the magazine covered the story in the context of other black athletes who have protested. They connected Kaepernick to athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos who raised their fists to signify Black Power when the national anthem played during their medal ceremony at the 1968

Olympics. Black consumers are interested in the politics of black celebrities and how they are manifested. Kyra Kyles of *Ebony* shared,

I think there was a time when we could just do, black celebrities ... But now I think people want to see black celebrities, but how do they relate to the culture? What are they doing? Like Colin Kaepernick. We don't want to just see a story about a football player that's doing well. There's a football player that's doing well that's trying to help other black people or call attention to an issue that black people need assistance with. John Legend is a great performer, but he's a performer who's bringing up *Underground* and the story of Black Wall Street. I don't think people just want black celebrities for celebrity's sake. (personal communication, October 18, 2016)

Whereas entertainment stories could previously just function as a space for readers to be entertained, black consumers now want more culturally relevant content. R&B singer John Legend's previous TV series *Underground*—a historical drama about slaves escaping via the Underground Railroad—and his forthcoming series *Black Wall Street*—which is about one of the wealthiest black communities in the US that was then burned down in a 1921 race riot—demonstrate how the artist is using entertainment to make political statements. By telling stories about the history of black America, he is calling attention to events that have systemically been ignored or underrepresented.

When mainstream media publishes stories about black celebrities' actions, they can be misinterpreted or only given cursory coverage. Some consumers shared how singer Beyoncé's headlining performance at the 2018 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival was not fully understood by mainstream media. The black press was able to cover the event and detail when she was paying tribute to African-American culture by singing the black national anthem, "Lift

Every Voice and Sing,” and integrating Black Greek Letter Organization stepping and HBCU drumlines and dance lines into her performance. Acknowledging the cultural significance of what she was doing was an important element when reporting on the first black woman to ever headline the nearly 20-year-old festival. Many black press outlets described her performance as “unapologetically black,” which highlights the political significance of a performance that celebrated black culture at an event that was predominately white.

Outside of intentional efforts to demonstrate their politics, black celebrities sometimes engage with politics when they are interviewed about their opinion on social issues. Although not every celebrity is politically conscious, mainstream news journalists turn to black celebrities for their insight due to their prominence in society. His or her opinion is thought to be representative of the larger black community but this is not always the case. For example when rapper Lil’ Wayne did an interview on ABC News’ *Nightline*, he shared that he did not feel connected to the Black Lives Matter movement. While the black press did not initiate the story, they yet reported on how the black community reacted to his statement.

Even when the majority of the black community may disagree with the politics of a celebrity, black press editors still believe it is important to cover them. A minority of the black community may still feel represented by the entertainer and others may want to know about a controversial position so they can form or strengthen their own opinion on the issue. Covering black celebrities’ unpopular political thoughts also creates a dialogue among black press readers to help establish consensus. For example, many in the African-American community do not share rapper Kanye West’s views on slavery and his support for Donald Trump. One consumer lamented, “Then you got Kanye saying ‘slavery is a choice.’ These people, with these voices are hurting our community. You’ve got to be careful, you’re hurting us.” This critique of West’s

beliefs becomes part of a conversation among black press readers that is useful in determining and then advancing what is in the best interest of the black community.

When black press outlets interview black celebrities, they are more likely to be candid and forthcoming. The trust that black readers have in the black press extends to celebrities, as they may be more willing to share details about their lived experiences and express their thoughts on social issues because they trust that they will not be misinterpreted. Natasha Eubanks of The YBF shared how actor Nate Parker's interviews with mainstream media about a previous rape allegation were used against him. While Parker was promoting his 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which was about the Nat Turner slave rebellion, he was asked about a 2001 trial where he was acquitted of rape. Many mainstream media outlets then demonized him for his response to the incident, which led to protests of the film. According to Eubanks, the black press was one of the few places that humanized his story. In light of the public controversy, Parker remained silent on the issue until he agreed to an interview with *Ebony*. In the interview he addressed his earlier comments regarding the trial and explained his growing understanding of social issues surrounding race and gender. Eubanks said, "We ... as black people. Inherently, we want him to win. We're going to look at it in more of an objective point of view" (personal communication, February 6, 2018). Similar to other black press outlets, *Ebony* had followed Parker's career and was aware of his investment in uplifting the black community, as such the magazine was able to contextualize this part of Parker's life and give him space to clarify his position (Danielle, 2016).

Entertainment can also become political in the black press when journalists cover stories about racism in the industry. For example, in 1914 the Los Angeles-based black press newspaper *The California Eagle* loudly opposed the film *The Birth of a Nation* due to its racist depictions of

African Americans (Ford et al., 2019). Other topics the black press would have covered historically include when black entertainers refused to perform to segregated audiences or when they discovered that their royalty payments from mainstream record labels were unfairly low. Contemporaneously, black press journalists call attention to nonblack entertainers who do something racist or culturally insensitive, such as wearing blackface or using the n-word. This intersection can also be evidenced in coverage regarding the lack of diversity in the entertainment industry. For example, the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag that gained national attention in 2015 was created by BroadwayBlack.com's managing editor April Reign. She tweeted it in response to that year's Academy Award nominations in which all of the people in the director, leading and supporting actor and actress categories were white. The resulting social movement was then a reflection of many black press journalists' and consumers' desire to promote equal representation for black celebrities. Entertainment in the black press works to address the inequalities that African-American celebrities experience and to hold nonblack celebrities accountable when their actions negatively affect the black community.

Emotional Reprieve

Not all entertainment in the black press is politically relevant. Sometimes stories share mainstream media's goal, which is to provide content that appeals to consumers' appetite for celebrity. While this is to the chagrin of many mainstream journalists, since entertainment is seen as a deterrent from hard news consumption, black press journalists understand the need for both. Janeé Bolden of Bossip noted that for black consumers, entertainment content provides "somewhere to go to not have to deal with the psychological affects of what is going on in the

world” (personal communication, September 1, 2016). Black press consumers are able to find emotional reprieve when they read entertainment stories that are absent of political content.

Research has shown that some people intentionally avoid hard news. These consumers are typically not interested in politics, feel powerless when they watch the news, believe it is not factual or do not want to invest the high cognitive effort needed to digest it. While some black press consumers share these sentiments, there are additional reasons why they choose to avoid hard news or why they intentionally consume entertainment content. Given the media’s high production of content that involves violence against black bodies and the current racially charged political environment, consuming hard news for black consumers can be a traumatic experience. One reader said,

Even though you may not have been directly impacted by the trauma, seeing it, you’re still going through it, you’re feeling it, you’re having all those effects of the trauma. And I just think just looking at the reality of what’s going on in our country, just internationally, it can be very depressing, so these entertainment and gossip sites, oh yeah, that shit is interesting at times. Cause it’s like, I need, not necessarily distraction, but I need something to get my mind off what’s really happening, and how I’m really feeling.

Linked fate is again causing black consumers to identify with what is happening to other African Americans. Some then react to hard news by suppressing their emotions or choosing to distract themselves with entertainment content instead.

Some black press readers consume more entertainment as a means to balance emotionally triggering content. When violent images of black bodies are shown in hard news content, readers feel personally affected. Another participant shared,

Just the other day I saw somebody was lynched, or hanging off of a bridge. That's not something that leaves when you think about news ... So it was just seeing all that stuff over entertainment is kinda hard. I mean, I know we should be more engaged and more involved with that kinda stuff, but it's hard to see ... So that's why sometimes I'd just rather look at something entertaining than something hard and gory. 'Cause it just messes with my mind.

Entertainment then serves as a form of self-preservation for black consumers. Even when they are conscious about their choices and understand their civic need to read hard news stories, they still read entertainment in an effort to prioritize their mental health.

Many women participants voiced a need to consume entertainment as an act of self-care. They used this language to describe when they take time for themselves to do things that bring them joy. Entertainment content was seen as a way to relax or take a break from the everyday hardships of life. A Generation X consumer explained,

I like to have some uplift. We already get some lived experiences that are hard, okay? And we see this every day. But you also want to see, even if it's in not your own city, or other parts of the country, or [the] world, some positive stories about black people doing something positive. In whatever industry that is in, you know, or community. So, [with] entertainment usually, there's some levity.

In this case, entertainment serves as a space for positive news coverage of African Americans. Consuming content that is uplifting then compensates for emotional weight of hard news.

Some black press consumers read entertainment as a preventative measure. They believe that if they do not read it they will end up depressed. Only consuming hard news content then becomes problematic because left unchecked, it can negatively affect one's psyche. Others'

entertainment consumption is reactionary. When they notice that they are getting stressed or upset about hard news content they turn to entertainment. One consumer said,

I gravitate toward the light and fluffy now because everybody is so riled up about what is going on in the world, and I just can't focus on it all day because if I do, I'll be running down Slauson [Avenue] screaming.

In response to how toxic the current political environment is for people of color, some black press consumers read entertainment stories to manage their emotional reaction to hard news. Since the psychological effects of hard news are exacerbated in the African-American community, there is a greater need for the emotional reprieve that entertainment content provides.

Educational Purposes

Entertainment consumption requires lower cognition than hard news but it can still be used as an educational tool. Readers can learn from celebrities' life experiences and be influenced by the consequences of their actions. Sometimes black press outlets make these connections for readers and other times they simply present the content. But even when the larger takeaway is not directly stated, entertainment content always has the potential to positively affect the lives of consumers. Reginald Ware of Black Doctor explained,

You never know what might be something that may touch a person and inspire a person to do something. Even some of these articles that just deal with a person going to jail or something. Maybe a person may read it and say, "You know what, I won't do that because I don't want to go to jail." I mean, you just never know where the nugget of good is going to come from. (personal communication, May 1, 2018)

Black press journalists see additional value in publishing entertainment because it can serve as a cautionary tale for their readers. Conversely, stories that detail a celebrity’s career trajectory can be useful in teaching readers about the hard work and resilience that it takes to be successful. Celebrities’ positive experiences can inspire others to pursue their goals and negative experiences can be teachable moments for readers to learn what experiences they should avoid.

When entertainment stories involve something negative about a black celebrity, readers see it as an opportunity to positively influence personal or communal behaviors. The celebrity becomes a relatable and high profile example of issues that are occurring within the larger black community. Consumers who are interested in advancing themselves and the community can then use entertainment as a way to identify areas where there is room for improvement. One reader said,

I do think even in the pop culture stories, we can still learn something about what could be done better ... I think shedding a light on bad behavior can cause people to not only look at that person differently, but maybe evaluate their own actions or the actions of their friends or colleagues even or whatever, and say, “You know, this is wrong.” So I do think that celebrity salacious kind of angle can bring about a change or more advocating for certain issues.

Entertainment can serve as a check on morality and encourage readers to change their personal lives or help the black community work toward shifting the culture. For example, stories about black celebrities who have been arrested for domestic violence—such as singer Chris Brown, rapper Fabolous and football player Ray Rice—generate discussions on how black men are hurting black women. These seemingly salacious stories then bring attention to larger issues in the black community that need to be addressed.

Some black press outlets directly connect entertainment content with relatable content for consumers. Readers appreciate when black press outlets use entertainment to segue into issues that are important in the black community. Outlets cover the entertainment story and then share other relevant information for readers. For example, when tennis player Serena Williams had complications after she gave birth to her daughter, a lot of black press outlets expanded on the story by discussing the greater health risks for black women during childbirth. This strategy can also be used when covering the quotidian entertainment stories. One reader explained, “They’ll do, ‘Who just got married?’ Then they’ll turn around and say things that happen between marriages and how to keep your marriage going. It’s both the fluff and then the substance.” Connecting celebrity marriage announcements with general marriage advice allows readers to directly apply celebrities’ experiences to their own lives. Black press journalists are able to extrapolate from entertainment stories in order to increase interest in certain topics. Entertainment is then leveraged to attract readers to information that has greater depth and practical application.

Some black celebrities create entertainment content explicitly for educational purposes. Consumers used rapper and singer Childish Gambino’s “This is America” music video to exemplify their engagement with entertainment content. As Gambino intended, in the video viewers are drawn to the spectacle of children dancing even though there are scenes of violence against black bodies happening concurrently. Consumers related to the video’s message in that at times they find themselves distracted by entertainment, when they should be paying more attention to the racial injustices that are taking place across the country. Entertainment content was then ironically used as a means to critique entertainment consumption. The black press’ coverage of Gambino’s viral video caused readers to think more critically about where they

invest their time. Whether it is employed actively or passively, entertainment enables both celebrities and journalists to teach and consumers to learn about social behaviors.

Diversity of Content

Given the varied nature of interests among those in the black community, there is a need for as many representations of blackness as possible. Different outlets target various communities within the larger black audience. Entertainment websites are reaching the segment of the black community that is interested in that particular content. Huffington Post Black Voices' Taryn Finley stated,

It's important in all sectors of the media that our voices are heard, even if it's like the messy gossipy stuff. We should be able to occupy space in the hard news field as well as the more guilty-pleasure I.G. [Instagram] timeline headline kind of thing. (personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Black press journalists welcome the existence of multiple outlets for representations of black culture and thought. The diversity of outlets allows for readers to consume content that caters to their personal interests. Some digital news outlets are able to focus on entertainment because not every black person wants to solely consume hard news content. African-American film enthusiasts, music lovers and sports fans are able to read content that is specifically targeted toward them. Brande Victorian of Madame Noire said,

Not all black people are the same. And there's so many communities that don't get spoken to, I mean the whole thing of blerds, you know, black nerds, and that whole thing, black people who are into comics. You know, we all just kind of assume we're all the same and we all like the same things, and we don't. The trend also in media is definitely

niche sites, so there's so much room in that regard for more and more niche sites, especially to black people. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Black press entertainment sites currently exist for some consumers' interests, such as comic books, but there are still many more areas that can be explored. Entertainment sites help to differentiate black press content and are an acknowledgement of the numerous audiences within the black community.

While legacy publications such as *Ebony* may have needed to cover all aspects of black life when it was founded in 1945, given the few media outlets catering to African Americans at the time, the breadth of black press outlets online allows for more depth in content. This provides more editorial freedom for journalists to write extensively about topics that interest them and for consumers to not be limited to general coverage from one publication. Natasha Eubanks of The YBF stated, "I appreciate that the more black media means the more avenues you can cover without one or two publications having to do everything for every damn body because that's the quickest way to fail" (personal communication, February 6, 2018). Being generalists is no longer in the best business interest of black press outlets. Though they might touch on multiple topics, few outlets aim to have comprehensive coverage on numerous subject matters. Trying to please every segment of the black audience is futile as interests in the community are too varied. Instead, each black press outlet is able to thoroughly cover a specific topic and offer consumers a space that is tailored to their personal interests. Entertainment sites are able to focus on what they do well while allowing hard news sites do the same.

Legitimacy

As the black press continues to expand its presence in the digital space, conceptions of legitimacy have shifted. Traditional print publications, such as *Black Enterprise* magazine and *The Philadelphia Tribune* newspaper, are considered by journalists and readers to have institutional legitimacy (Lowrey, 2011) due to their history of black ownership, publishing of positive, black-targeted content and adherence to professional journalism standards. But online-only outlets such as Bossip and The Shade Room—which use African American Standard English (AASE) (Spears, 2015)—and Very Smart Brothas—which uses profanity—are redefining what black press producers and consumers consider legitimate. Readers still want black press content to be edited and free from typos, but some want the outlets' word choices to reflect a connection to the black community. Entertainment-focused sites are more explicitly creating spaces for readers to interact with less traditional content that they still consider part of the black press.

Many consumers use institutional legitimacy to determine if an outlet is part of the black press. Readers explained how their familiarity with *Essence*, *Jet* and other black press publications allowed them to consider the outlets legitimate. Participants talked about their parents or grandparents having subscriptions to black press newspapers and magazines. Consumers' knowledge of the long history of the publications was used as evidence of their continued legitimacy in the black press space. Readers associated decades of publishing with credibility and consistency in professional journalism practices. But while legacy black press publications retain a sense of legitimacy, partially due to the longevity of their print format, having a digital presence is now considered essential for anyone in the black press space.

Prominent legacy black press publications have online counterparts that compete with digital-first outlets but they are targeting different audiences. One consumer stated,

What's also interesting to me about the current black press and the news media is the way that things are written. *Jet, Ebony, Essence* [were] written in more of a professional [tone] and [were] accessible to a middle- and upper-class community. Whereas you find something that comes across your timeline and it's written in Ebonics, but it's so on point. And it's so well researched that it means that now it's not just accessible to a certain class of people.

Many of these relatively new online outlets are signaling their legitimacy to the black community through language instead of through commitment to Associated Press Style newswriting. By using AASE they are able to reach African Americans who were previously overlooked by legacy black press outlets, which targeted a primarily middle-class audience.

As the diversity of outlets allows for various content online, it also makes room for different voices. Digital black press journalists are able to communicate with their readers in a tone that feels authentic to them. While many legacy black press outlets still adhere to Standard American English (SAE) (Spears, 2015), digital-first spaces are more casual in their speech, using language that appeals to different segments of the black community. Taryn Finley of Huffington Post Black Voices shared,

You have a lot more people letting their voices shine through in a very authentic [way] and ... they're not apologizing for being loud, for being hood, for being country, for being you know whatever. For being proper, for whatever, there's room for all of this to exist on these platforms that are giving black people voices, because we understand that we are not a monolith. (personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Since there are variations in black speech and interests offline, online outlets are able to create content that is designed to reach those different audiences in the black community. Colloquial language is not replacing traditional reporting but rather adding another option for how readers want to receive their news. Just as African Americans are able to code switch between AASE and SAE when speaking in formal and informal offline spaces (e.g., when at work versus when at home) (DeBose, 1992), they are now able to do so online as well (Brock, 2012).

Many consumers expect that they will only read positive coverage of African Americans in black press outlets. Regardless of the topic, readers expect that the black press will depict African Americans fairly and favorably. These factors are then often used as conduits for determining whether or not an outlet is legitimate. While these heuristics may have been used to accurately assess print publications in the past, they do not always translate to the digital space. One consumer shared that she would like to see more variation in how stories are covered in the black press. She stated,

Seeing black stories and black people presented in a positive way but also nuanced, not pigeonholed into one respectable sort of package, using all of the slang and the things that speak to me ... is what I gravitate towards.

Online outlets are moving away from “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham, 1993) and toward more informal language. Legacy black press publications typically contained positive imagery that showed African Americans adhering to mainstream culture’s values. The journalists also modeled this themselves in their writing as they used correct grammar and wrote in a professional tone. Entertainment sites are shifting what is now also accepted as legitimate as readers appreciate when they cover the fullness of black life and write in an engaging and accessible language.

Some readers want to feel like they are having a conversation with black press journalists. They are aware of language choices that black press outlets use and employ them as heuristics to assure that someone in their community is telling the story. One participant explained,

It's the way in which certain things are worded in context. You can kind of tell the difference. It's the way certain things are phrased opposed to what I would think a counterpart would say. If you follow Bossip, they always write something that's like outlandish and pretty crazy opposed to if I'm looking at ABC 7.

AASE helps consumers make distinctions between black press and mainstream news outlets. When readers are able to identify an article as black press, they feel more represented by the content and perspective. The participant continued,

Like I was talking about Bossip earlier. It might be a crazy headline, and you would still probably click it because it's like you feel that sort of representation, or you feel some type of connection to it. I don't feel connected to E.com. I don't feel connected to *Marie Claire*.

Consumers are able to better connect with black press content as opposed to mainstream outlets due to the type of language they use.

Journalists agree that word choice makes a difference in how content is received. Some black press journalists intentionally use language that makes it unmistakable that someone black wrote it. Janeé Bolden of Bossip explained, "We're trying to show the audience that it's a 'we,' you know? You know we're speaking, we're part of the community. It's an us-we thing" (personal communication, September 1, 2016). Black press journalists want readers to know that they can relate to them and their interests. When discussing Bossip Finley stated, "The headlines

that they create, only black people can do that. I really can't imagine a white writer sitting down at their computer thinking of the headlines that Bossip seems to churn out" (personal communication, March 26, 2018).

The black press outlets that use AASE are unique, which enables their stories to attract attention in a competitive news landscape. As such, some mainstream entertainment outlets have co-opted the terms that black press sites use to target the black audience. Since mainstream sites have more financial resources and reach than most black press outlets, so when they appropriate AASE it is at the expense of black press outlets. Bolden lamented,

Because of the popularity of the black media, you see terms like "lit," and "swag," get used to death. Like "bling" just got killed, like you know it's like the black media creates terms, and the white media comes and starts using them, and then it's not cool anymore, like "on fleek," we're not using on fleek anymore. (personal communication, September 1, 2016)

When mainstream media uses AASE the terms lose their legitimacy. Black press journalists then have to come up with new terminology that will resonate with their audience. So both what is said and who says it are important factors when readers are determining outlets' authenticity. Anslem Samuel Rocque of *Essence* stated, "Tone I think is really important because you could have someone that is of color, but not really speaking directly to the African-American audience" (personal communication, August 5, 2016). The language that black journalists who are working for mainstream outlets choose to use also signifies to whom they are speaking.

Profanity is another way black press outlets are embracing the informality of digital journalism. Whereas legacy print publications have traditionally refrained from using curse

words in their stories, digital-first spaces allow for more flexibility and opportunity. Damon Young of Very Smart Brothas explained,

I've been able to build a brand and build a platform online in a way that I wouldn't have been able to in print, with some of the stuff that I say and some of the language I use and some of the topics that I talk about. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

By adhering to traditional journalism norms, print intentionally or unintentionally inhibited outlets from free expression. While some readers are more attracted to digital media's more casual format, one Generation X participant shared that he views profanity in the black press as unprofessional and resented that it limits the ability to share articles with kids. Yet the presence of informal language in black press outlets resonates more deeply with some segments of the black audience and is often considered a proxy for determining outlets' legitimacy.

Bridging Generations

Black press entertainment content is consumed across generations. While Generation X consumers may have been accustomed to more hard news content in the past, they have acclimated to the current news environment. They are interested in entertainment both as a personal preference and as a means to stay connected to what millennials and Generation Z readers are interested in. One Generation X participant shared that even when she disagrees with what is being published on entertainment websites, she still sees value in the content. She shared,

I think it's important for us to be able to express our fullness of who we are, even if it's ratchet. And I think that some of it is generational. Some of the stuff makes my skin crawl, when I'm on Instagram, and I'm seeing what young girls are wearing and how folks idolize Cardi B, for example. She's a really good example. However, if you really

look at the fullness of her story, she has really had to work very hard to get where she is, even though I may think it's ratchet. Being able to access her story, a person my age, helps me understand why somebody Cardi B's age would respect her for where she is.

Entertainment allows for a range of black experiences to be represented and can expose people to what others in the black community are discussing. It can help generations relate to each other's interests by providing a space where they can have a deeper understanding of certain celebrities' careers, the popularity of various films and movies and current trends in fashion and language. Generation X consumers expressed that entertainment allows them to stay up-to-date and gives them a way to relate to their kids, nieces and nephews or students.

There is in fact not much distinction between the black press sites that Generation X and Generation Y readers consume (see Table 3, p. 102 and Table 4, p. 103). Prominent entertainment-focused sites such as World Star Hip Hop, BET, Media Take Out News, *XXL Magazine* and Bossip are in the top 10 visited sites in both groups. Surprisingly some of the sites that cater their content toward millennials are actually more popular among Generation X consumers. For example, Blavity is number ten with Generation X but number 27 among millennials. Also, although over half of my millennial focus group participants said that they read The Shade Room regularly, it is number 28 among their demographic but up at number 15 among Generation X. Generation X consumers also read the popular entertainment site Love B. Scott significantly more than millennials with it ranking number eight in their demographic and number 22 among Generation Y readers. These rankings debunk perceptions of entertainment being more popular among millennials than older generations. Generation X and Y's shared interest in entertainment content allows consumers to be informed about interests that span generations in the black community.

Table 3: Top Black Press Websites (Generation Y)

Rank	Media	Total Unique Visitors (000)
	Total Internet: Age (18 - 34) AND Race (Black/African-American)	7,843
1	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	154
2	THEROOT.COM	102
3	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	53
4	ESSENCE.COM	48
5	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	45
6	THEGRIO.COM	45
7	BET.COM	44
8	MTONEWS.COM	39
9	XXLMAG.COM	37
10	BOSSIP.COM	29
11	MADAMENOIRE.COM	25
12	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	21
13	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	21
14	THEYBF.COM	14
15	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	14
16	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	13
17	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	13
18	VIBE.COM	12
19	EBONYJET.COM	10
20	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	8
21	AFROPUNK.COM	8
22	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	5
23	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	4
24	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	4
25	EURWEB.COM	4
26	NEWSONE.COM	3
27	BLAVITY.COM	3
28	THESHADEROOM.COM	2
29	THESOURCE.COM	2
30	BLACKNEWS.COM	2

31	ROLLINGOUT.COM	1
32	PHILLYTRIB.COM	1
33	NBCNEWS.COM BLK	1
34	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	1
35	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	0
36	FINALCALL.COM	0

Table 4: Top Black Press Websites (Generation X)

Rank	Media	Total Unique Visitors (000)
	Total Internet: Age (35 - 54) AND Race (Black/African-American)	6,554
1	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	101
2	ESSENCE.COM	101
3	THEROOT.COM	71
4	MADAMENOIRE.COM	53
5	MTONEWS.COM	49
6	BET.COM	46
7	XXLMAG.COM	35
8	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	34
9	BOSSIP.COM	33
10	BLAVITY.COM	28
11	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	22
12	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	19
13	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	18
14	VIBE.COM	16
15	THESHADEROOM.COM	16
16	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	15
17	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	15
18	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	15
19	HUFFPOST.COM BLACK VOICES	14
20	NEWSONE.COM	12
21	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	11
22	EBONYJET.COM	8
23	THEGRIO.COM	6
24	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	6

25	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	6
26	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	6
27	THEYBF.COM	6
28	THESOURCE.COM	5
29	ROLLINGOUT.COM	5
30	EURWEB.COM	4
31	BLACKNEWS.COM	3
32	FINALCALL.COM	2
33	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	2
34	NBCNEWS.COM BLK	2
35	AFROPUNK.COM	1
36	PHILLYTRIB.COM	0

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlighted how entertainment content in the black press is serving a positive function in the community. As part of the larger black press landscape it aids in providing holistic coverage of African Americans. In addition to entertainment-focused websites, hard news sites also incorporate entertainment as a means to cover the breadth of interests of African-American readers. Entertainment is helping to increase representation of African Americans who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream media coverage. It is also a space that continues to intersect with politics as black celebrities use their platforms to advance social issues and as African Americans are continuously discriminated against in the industry. Entertainment content can also be a space for African Americans to practice self-care as they need reprieve from the psychological trauma caused by hard news coverage. Even when entertainment is not positive it becomes a space where black readers can learn about behaviors to avoid and emulate. Since the community is not a monolith, entertainment caters to the segment of the black audience that is interested in such content. Also, given their prominence in the black press space, entertainment-focused outlets have precipitated a shift in how consumers are

determining the legitimacy of outlets. Millennial consumers see entertainment-focused sites that use colloquial language as more relatable and Generation X consumers are using entertainment as a way to remain current and to stay connected to Generations Y and Z.

Chapter Five: The Perils of Entertainment

While journalists were generally more inclusive than exclusive in their definitions of the black press, not all entertainment content was viewed as part of the institution. A few interlocutors were adamant in excluding any outlets with purely gossip content and sites that were run by bloggers as opposed to trained journalists. They made the distinction between entertainment and gossip publications based on whether the outlet was following journalistic principles (such as fact-checking and copy editing) as opposed to solely posting content based on rumors. Consumers also excluded outlets that seem to only be looking for high traffic by producing stories for click bait and sites that consistently publish information from non-credible sources from their conception of the black press.

A few journalists excluded any outlet that predominately focused on entertainment content, even if it was factual, as those publications were thought to not be telling the full story of the black community. These journalists privileged hard news and advocacy content over what they considered one-dimensional entertainment content. Some consumers shared this concern and expressed a need for balance between hard news and entertainment content in their news diets. Both Generation X and Y consumers were also concerned with the consumption habits of Generation Z. They worried that younger consumers were less media literate and would not be able to distinguish between factual and gossip content.

Despite the desire by both journalists and consumers to have more hard news content in black press publications, many acknowledged the financial constraints prohibiting this from happening. Journalists and readers noted that a lot of African-American consumers are not financially supporting hard news, instead choosing to click on entertainment stories. The metrics

that entertainment content garners are then used to elicit advertising revenue. Also, due to the poor financial health of the black community and systemic discrimination by predominately white advertising companies, black press outlets often cannot afford to publish investigative pieces. Entertainment then becomes a more financially sound alternative in that it is less labor intensive to produce and yields a greater return on investment.

The lack of financial resources in the black press at times causes owners to sell their publications to nonblack owners. While journalists and readers prefer for black press outlets to continue publishing as opposed to folding, they recognize the sacrifices in content that sometimes coincide with ownership shifts. A few journalists who previously worked for white-owned black press outlets expressed the owners' tendency to publish more entertainment content and avoid any hard news topic that may be controversial and possibly compromise their white readership. The white gaze on the black press then becomes problematic in that it limits the advocacy content of the black press and puts the interests of the black community secondary to monetary interests. Consumers also worried that if nonblack audiences were only viewing the entertainment content present on black press outlets that they would then have a skewed and inaccurate perception of the black community. All of the black press editors in this research agreed that they were targeting African Americans but, according to comScore metrics, the nonblack audience is in fact larger than the black audience for most black press outlets online (see Table 5, p. 145). While African Americans comprise more of the black press' mobile audience (see Table 7, p. 150), the unintended magnitude of the white gaze has further implications for the prevalence of entertainment in the black press.

Incomplete Coverage

Most black press journalists included entertainment-focused outlets in their conception of the black press but there were a few who omitted them. These journalists were mostly NNPA members who adhered to the organization's requirements for membership. While many journalists who worked at digital-first publications believed that outlets should self-identify as part of the black press, the NNPA as an organization has defined specific membership criteria. The NNPA excludes entertainment-focused outlets because they do not believe they represent the spectrum of news that black press outlets need to cover. Dorothy R. Leavell of *The Chicago Crusader* and chairman of the NNPA explained,

I have some good friends who their primary concern is entertainment, and I don't consider that as a newspaper. What a newspaper is, is more than just one-sided; and whether it be entertainment or something else that would just have one issue that they dealt with, I wouldn't consider that part of the black press necessarily; and it has not so much to do with the content as the limitations of what they would do. (personal communication, April 13, 2018)

As only one topic of interest to the black community, entertainment is only telling part of African Americans' story. Focusing on entertainment limits an outlet's ability to cover hard news and therefore cannot be considered part of the black press. Danny Bakewell, Jr. of *The Los Angeles Sentinel* said,

They're an entertainment publication. They may tell black stories, they may tell about black artists, but I don't necessarily consider them to be part of the black press. If you're only telling part of the story, then are you really part of the black press? (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

NNPA journalists believe that in order to be considered black press publications, outlets need to cover multiple areas of interest to the black community. Legacy black press outlets have hard news sections, such as education and health, in addition to entertainment content, with coverage of topics such as sports and the arts. The distinction is that their entertainment content is not at the expense of hard news. By sacrificing hard news content in favor of disproportional entertainment content, entertainment-focused outlets are providing incomplete coverage of the black community.

Gossip Content

Definitions of journalism are expanding online but entertainment outlets that publish rumors and do not fact-check their content are not considered part of the black press. Consumers are embracing informality online but while they are more lax in their expectations for word choice, they still want the content they are reading to be factually accurate. Some black press journalists also did not consider outlets that produce gossip as part of the black press. Both consumers and journalists maintain an expectation that entertainment sites will follow the fundamental journalistic principle of checking sources. Brande Victorian of Madame Noire said,

I think if it's just strictly gossip. Say like a Media Take Out, I don't consider that press, I consider that straight rumor mill, gossip, tabloidish. But just reporting on entertainment, you're certainly still part of the press, I just think it's important that your sources are verified, and proven it's true. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Using journalistic practices to cover entertainment is differentiated from producing stories that are just based on hearsay or an unverified source. Alvin Blanco of Hip Hop Wired, which is

owned by Moguldom, explained the difference between gossip and entertainment content.

When asked if there are any outlets that he would omit from his definition of the black press he said,

I would exclude sites that are purely gossip. Because even at Moguldom here we have Bossip, but Bossip won't make anything up. There's always the underlying journalistic principles to it. Versus a site like Media Take Out, which I've seen them just blatantly make stuff up. (personal communication, September 19, 2016)

Publishing unsubstantiated content discredits an outlet and although the content may still be entertainment, it cannot be considered news. Writing stories based on gossip also has ramifications beyond a particular outlet's reputation. When outlets consistently publish rumors it affects the entire black press. Victorian said that as a result of past inaccuracies, some celebrities refuse to speak with other black press outlets moving forward.

Some consumers stated that they are unable to distinguish between entertainment news and gossip. This is because the lines between the two are getting blurred as some previously gossip-focused sites transition to writing more entertainment-based yet fact-checked articles. Other outlets consciously produce both gossip and entertainment news. One participant stated,

I would say even with Shade Room, how Shade Room started it was just very gossip-filled celebrity drama-filled and I remember for a long point of time they wouldn't check their resources. They'll post something for shock value. So it's interesting. I mean, it's funny cause now yes they do articles and they have a website that has legitimate information out there but nobody ever clicks on the website, you just see a caption and run with it. So, that's also interesting too.

Consumers noted how some gossip sites produce content primarily for click bait purposes.

Even if the site also has fact-checked content, it is not always highlighted. Also, some stories that appear as click bait will actually lead to accurate news articles. Another participant said,

I think the gossip sites are very quick to get something out, and it's just like you said.

They just need one person to say they heard something, and they run with it. Which is entertaining at some points, but that's not really what I'm looking for. Especially if it's not true at the end of the day.

Gossip sites value publishing content quickly and put less priority on verifying their content.

While consumers are entertained by gossip content they ultimately still want it to be factual.

Another group of Generation X and Y consumers believed that they were able to distinguish gossip from entertainment content but did not trust that Generation Z had the same media literacy skills. One participant explained,

Hey, I'm not saying that there's not a place for entertainment news. I think that yes, that the reality is that there's a category and a demand for all types of information. Which one of those could be entertainment news. I'm saying that they take it too far, especially with this president we have right now, to make it too hard for young people to discern the difference between hard news, commentating that's called news, entertainment news.

Due to the presence of "fake news," or content that is inaccurate or misleading but still published and circulated in today's news economy, it has gotten more difficult to separate entertainment from hard news from opinion. However, the concern about Generation Z may be unfounded, as they have grown up with both types of news content they may understand that the onus is on them to make distinctions between types of content. Recent research has found that people over 65 were responsible for sharing the most fake news during the 2016 US presidential election

(Guess, Nnagler, & Tucker, 2019). This suggests that media literacy is more problematic for Baby Boomers (currently between 55 and 73 years old) and the Silent Generation (currently between 74 and 91 years old) than for younger generations. Some Generation X consumers may also not expect to see as much entertainment or gossip because they are more accustomed to news outlets traditionally producing primarily hard news content.

Some Generation X consumers said that they intentionally do not consume gossip content. They felt that many gossip sites produce content that they consider inappropriate for younger generations and viewed the stories as negative and lacking substance. One shared, “I don’t read pure gossip. It’s got to have content. Something I can apply to life, or discuss with somebody.” Gossip then does not meet some consumers’ expectations for news content and can be more problematic when consumers cannot distinguish it from fact-checked articles. When black press outlets do not include verifiable sources or identify larger social applications for the gossip stories they publish, it is not seen as beneficial for the black community.

Advocacy

De Felice’s (1969) research on defining the black press concluded that in order to be considered a black press publication the paper or magazine must “... serve, speak and fight for the black minority.” It must fight for “equality for the Negro in the present white society” (as cited in Wolseley, 1990, p. 4). I interpreted this description as a requirement for advocacy content as many scholars have described the black press as an advocacy press. As such, I was sure to ask both journalists and consumers if they believed advocacy was a necessary component of the black press, even on sites that primarily focused on entertainment. My interlocutors then responded according to their various understandings of advocacy. Some understood advocacy as

political activism and therefore viewed it in opposition to entertainment content, others saw it as providing positive news and uplift about the black community while another group simply saw representation and the mere existence of black press content as a form of advocacy.

Some journalists and consumers viewed entertainment content more critically when they juxtaposed it with their advocacy expectations. Those who interpreted advocacy as political activism thought entertainment was an issue when it jeopardized the black press' focus on advocacy content. Some of my interlocutors positioned politically significant content at the center of the black press' existence and prioritized its presence over entertainment. Gary Dauphin formerly of *Africana* said, "I think it's [advocacy is] critical just because without it, there's no ethical or formal anchor to structure what you're doing, why you're doing it" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). Under this framework, entertainment functions as a distraction for black press readers who should be focusing more on hard news content. Consumers who understood advocacy to mean positive coverage of African Americans were concerned when that lens was applied to black celebrities. They argued that supporting entertainers and ignoring their downfalls is sometimes less in the interest of the black community than reporting on their missteps. My interlocutors who were not wary of entertainment content believed that all black press outlets were advocating for the black community since they provided additional representation of African Americans. As such, I find that advocacy in the black press is fraught as it can be both advanced and threatened by the proliferation of entertainment.

Since advocacy manifests in many ways, its inclusion on black press sites is still generally accepted as a requirement. Although I asked black press journalists the criteria needed to be a black press outlet, many editors only stated the requirement to advocate after they were

asked directly. This may indicate that a site is not excluded if advocacy is not present or that they simply assumed that all black press sites advocate on behalf of African Americans. Flo Purnell, formerly of *Emerge* said, “The subject matter that we deal with kind of segues into advocating. I don’t know that there are very many publications online or in print that do not advocate for African Americans” (personal communication, March 12, 2018). This perspective supports the understanding that advocacy is an inherent part of any black press outlet regardless of content.

Some journalists believed that they owed it to readers to fight for their interests and felt a responsibility to do so given their simple existence as a black press outlet. When discussing if advocacy was a necessary component of the black press, Hip Hop Wired’s Alvin Blanco said, “You owe it to the people. Just like if you have respect for what you’re covering and the people that are reading it, the readership then supports you... It’s something that’ll happen naturally” (personal communication, September 19, 2016). Since black press outlets were designed to serve the black audience, it should take little effort for them to produce advocacy content on behalf of African Americans. Consumers also held the expectation that the black press would advocate on their behalf. One participant stated,

I just feel like, if you really mean me some good and you want to represent yourself as the black press, not just the press, you decided that you want to be the black press, then you for damn sure gotta advocate for black people. And you don’t get to be the black press and not advocate for black people.

Identifying as a black press outlet means accepting the responsibility to provide coverage that advocates for African Americans. As the buyers and readers of black press content, consumers hold outlets accountable for publishing content that is of service to the black community.

Some journalists and consumers did not believe advocacy needed to be present at all.

These interlocutors interpreted advocacy as being politically motivated. While this may be one role of the black press, it is not the only role. For example, Kyra Kyles of *Ebony* explained,

[If] you are covering black weddings, you don't have to advocate—you are showing people a reflection of themselves and they appreciate that. They may not necessarily need you to do Black Lives Matter and community affairs. It is just about depicting black life in an equitable manner the way that all other life is depicted. (personal communication, October 18, 2016)

Kyles' emphasis on the importance of covering non-political aspects of black life is reflective of the value of representation. This is especially necessary in contrast to the lack of positive images of African Americans in mainstream media. After discussion within the focus groups, many came to the same conclusion that all black press outlets are advocating; by representing different interests they are serving the various needs of the black audience. One participant said,

In a way, just being out there, representing black. Because they're media, by definition, they're using their voice. Just doing that is almost political, even if they're talking about how you do your nails. And especially when they start talking about, how do you do your hair, and what kind of earrings you put on, and where should you buy your clothes. Like even these get super political, because of the treatment that's reserved strictly for our community. So I feel like it's hard to say when does advocating start or stop.

Whether a black press outlet is focused on hard news, lifestyle or entertainment topics, they are yet advocating because they are representing a perspective that is often muted by mainstream news. This is especially true when covering seemingly innocuous but yet politically relevant topics, such as black hairstyles. The city of New York's recent ban of discrimination based on

African Americans' hairstyles speaks to the very literal politicization of everyday black life (Bellafonte, 2019). Given the absence of even lifestyle content concerning African Americans from mainstream discourse, entering any minority-focused content into the media landscape can be a form of advocacy. If all black press coverage can be framed as political, it becomes difficult to determine what is advocacy and what is not. Using this perspective, sites that are primarily publishing entertainment content and not foregrounding hard news can be viewed as yet advocating for the black community.

While many journalists supported entertainment in the black press, they did not want it to come at the expense of hard news or coverage of larger issues that affect African Americans. Dauphin included entertainment in his conceptions of the black press, yet he was wary of the broader implications of its inclusion. He said, "It [Entertainment] flows in ways that I think are agnostic about some other concerns ... I'm just skeptical about what that really ends up doing if you're thinking about the health of the community" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). Primarily producing and consuming entertainment may come at the expense of content that more explicitly addresses political issues in the black community. Sacrificing hard news can have negative implications for the long-term advancement of African Americans. He continued, "I just don't know if that stuff [entertainment] is of any real value just because it's not oppositional. To your question about advocacy, at a certain point, it has to position you maybe oppositionally" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). Whereas entertainment has the ability to exist in isolation from politics, advocacy content, when defined as hard news, necessitates political engagement. Advocacy would then require journalists to cover topics that may be unpopular with those outside of the black community. Some consumers thought that the black press did a better job including advocacy coverage in the past as compared to current coverage. One Generation X

participant stated, “I know for sure we had better people out there putting out Black Power more back in the ‘80s and early ‘90s than it is now.” The black press’ historical coverage of politically significant topics is in stark contrast to the prominence of entertainment in today’s black press.

Those who viewed advocacy as providing positive coverage of the black community thought it could in fact be more harmful than beneficial. This is especially true when covering entertainers who have done something controversial. If an outlet is more concerned with protecting the image of a black celebrity in an effort to only speak positively about African Americans, it can be doing a disservice to the rest of the community. One reader said,

There are other publications, and I guess more on the entertainment side, that kind of focus on presenting a very polished version of like, for instance, let’s just go with the R. Kelly example, right. Oh, he makes great music, and he’s had all this commercial success, or you know, kind of like accolades, let’s not focus on what everybody knew was going on kind of behind the scenes. So I think some of those publications can advocate and be detrimental in that way.

R. Kelly is a popular R&B singer and his music is beloved in the black community. Yet when he faced accusations of domestic and sexual abuse against women, some black press outlets may have been inclined to defend his actions. Advocating in this instance would then be more detrimental than advantageous to the black community. While some black press outlets may not want to speak negatively about any African American, given the history of mainstream outlets demonizing black bodies, their intention to yet advocate on behalf of controversial black celebrities is troublesome.

Journalists and readers agreed that advocacy can be manifested in myriad ways. It is both an expected role of the black press and a potentially endangered concept. Though black press outlets advocate with any content that they publish, there are yet fewer publications focused on publishing hard news. Also entertainment-focused publications can distort advocacy when operating as spokespersons for black celebrities as opposed to their readers. I argue that entertainment puts advocacy content at risk when it subverts hard news and elevates celebrities over the interests of the larger black community.

Financial Resources

Entertainment can also be perilous when it is produced as a result of the black press' limited financial resources. While the entire field of journalism is under monetary constraints, black press outlets have even fewer resources. Due to the wealth gap between blacks and whites, African-American consumers are not as financially able to support the black press via subscriptions. Additionally, advertisers do not value the black audience the same as the white audience and therefore do not invest equally in the black press. This lack of resources limits the black press' ability to produce a lot of hard news content, which is expensive and time consuming, and lends itself to an increase in economically friendly entertainment content. While this strategy is financially savvy, it may compromise the historical mission of some legacy black press publications. Although digital media allows for a lower barrier for entry, given that one does not need the financial resources required to print and distribute a publication, the increased competition online causes journalists to place a greater emphasis on media metrics. When journalists are more concerned with the popularity of individual stories, entertainment takes

precedence over advocacy content. As a result, entertainment can be less of an intention and more of a symptom of the severe financial constraints facing the black press.

Digital media enables more people to create new black press outlets, but there are also downsides to being independent. As compared to print, the lower production costs online allows for more journalists and non-journalists to enter the black press resulting in an increase in the amount of perspectives and identities represented online. Very Smart Brothas' Damon Young said,

In print you have to have a publisher, you have to have distribution, you need, I mean there are so many factors that you need in order to be a print entity. And TV's the same thing. But you still need stuff to get edited, you still need stuff to get cut ... whereas with digital media, you don't need as much. Now the larger magazines and larger newspapers, of course you need editors, you need sales teams, you need marketing, you need social media people. But again, it's easier to be a singular force online than it is anywhere else.

(personal communication, August 12, 2016)

Whereas starting a print publication required that someone have the ability to finance physical distribution, sales and business operations, digital outlets require less initial capital. Given the entrepreneurial nature of online outlets, founders of digital publications benefit from having flexibility in their work style. As a result, while men have traditionally founded black print publications, women are at the helm of many digital black press outlets.

There are yet limitations to what digital-first outlets can contribute to the black press landscape. Many are under resourced and have extremely small staffs (some only having one person officially on staff), which limits the quantity and quality of content that is produced.

Some digital black press founders and editors even have additional jobs as a means to

supplement their income. Also, without the large budgets of print publications, many digital black press outlets cannot afford to invest in components such as original photography and marketing endeavors to promote their content. Kimberly N. Foster of For Harriet shared, “You can run leaner operations [online]. It just allows you a lot more flexibility but it also means that you have to work harder to grow a brand just because the online space is so crowded at this point” (personal communication, August 10, 2016). Establishing brand awareness is more difficult for low-resourced black press outlets and innovation efforts are constrained. Additionally, online publications require consumers to have Internet access and be tech savvy, which is expensive and alienates a segment of the black audience.

The monetary constraints facing African-American consumers affect the black press’ ability to be financially lucrative. Historically and currently African Americans have gotten paid less than whites and have higher unemployment rates (Daly, Hobijn, & Pedtke, 2017). After the Great Recession, the wealth gap between blacks and whites increased so the wealth of white households is now 10 times higher than blacks (Bialik, 2018). As a result of low individual and generational wealth in the black community, readers’ ability to support the black press is limited. One participant stated,

You have to just look around across the board with African Americans in the United States, not black people, but just African Americans specifically, then you wonder like, damn, do they even have the extra money or extra finances to even support these businesses, ‘cause they’re just ... struggling. And ... they’re just trying to make ends meet. They might not have that extra money to have the *Ebony* magazine come to the house.

Given other monetary concerns that many African Americans face, the decision of whether or not to support the black press may be more related to their finances than their interests. This affects outlets that rely on the subscription model and newsstand sales as African Americans have less discretionary income to allocate to purchasing publications.

Black press outlets are also affected by the lack of resources distributed to African Americans throughout different markets in the US. As part of the journalism industry, black press outlets are not as financially endowed as their mainstream counterparts. Glenn Burkins of Q City Metro, which is based in Charlotte, North Carolina explained,

It's the same with the black press that it is with anything else. We don't have the same resources when it comes to housing. We don't have the same resources when it comes to sending our kids to college. We don't have the same resources for anything. So likewise, we don't have the same resources when it comes to media. I mean, that should be apparent ... We don't own CBS, NBC, and there's nothing here that rivals *The Charlotte Observer* or Huffington Post. Of course, we don't have the same resources. We are as hampered in media as we are in any other field of endeavor in the US. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Just as African Americans' finances are limited in areas such as education and housing, the same discrepancies are present in the media space. African Americans do not own many large media companies so black press outlets do not have the same resources that are available to outlets operating with larger budgets.

In comparison to mainstream media, the black press is even more impacted by society's reduced economic investment in journalism in the digital age. David A. Wilson of The Grio stated, "None of us have the resources that our counterparts in traditional media, in mainstream

media have” (personal communication, March 19, 2018). This disadvantage is present even when a mainstream media company owns the black press outlet. Wilson, who founded The Grio and worked at the outlet when it was owned by NBC, continued,

You know we just don’t have it [economic resources]. I mean, you can look at any black media outlet across the board; none have white resources. Look at BET for example, if you want to look at them as a black outlet. They’re in Viacom; they don’t have the same resources as VH1. They don’t have the same resources as MTV. They don’t have the same resources as the other Viacom platforms. (personal communication, March 19, 2018)

Although a larger media company owns BET, it is still marginalized as a black press outlet. Fewer resources are allocated to it as compared to other properties under the same organization. So while mainstream outlets are struggling to be financially viable in the new media age, the burden is exponentially increased at black press outlets.

Some of the disparity between black press and mainstream revenue can be rationalized by the smaller size of the black population. A smaller audience correlates with smaller publications and smaller budgets. Blavity’s Zahara Hill explained,

We’re a smaller percentage of the population, so we’re naturally going to reach a smaller number of people, which means less money, because we’re not going to have the same amount of readership. Mainstream publications also benefit from black readership as well, whereas there’s a couple white people, but not as many nonblack people are going to be reading it [black press] probably. And so a smaller amount of readership, of course, leads to less money, which means less resources. (personal communication, April 8, 2018)

African Americans only make up 13 percent of the US population so black press readership numbers are often lower than mainstream publications that target whites, who comprise 72 percent of the population (US Census Bureau, 2017). Since advertisers acknowledge that mainstream publications attract both white and black audiences (see Table 9, p. 166), but have an inaccurate belief that black press outlets predominately reach African Americans (see Table 5, p. 145), the black press is given less money. Also, black press editors' own misperception of who visits their websites can affect their ability to attract advertisers. But even when the audience numbers are comparable to mainstream media, black press outlets are still undervalued.

Advertisers do not value black consumers the same as white consumers. Although African Americans account for a large proportion of sales among many popular brands (The Nielsen Company, 2018), some advertisers choose not to invest in the black press. Natasha Eubanks of The YBF lamented,

We usually have great content. It's usually better than mainstream media, to be honest, but it doesn't matter. How good your content is should matter, but it's secondary to who you're talking to, who you're giving that content to. A lot of brands and a lot of advertisers don't see the value in spending money on campaigns that are targeted and geared for the black audience ... We could have more hits, we could have more page views, we could have more this, more that, than XYZ media that's mainstream, but this particular brand over here would rather give their money to them. (personal communication, February 6, 2018)

Some black press outlets may in fact have more readers than some mainstream outlets but advertisers still preference mainstream for their ad placements. Due to the lack of diversity at

advertising agencies, many companies do not understand why they should advertise in the black press. Datwon Thomas of *Vibe* said,

I think there are executives in high positions that won't even think about turning to a black audience because they don't know. They just don't know. Once again, they don't know what an HBCU is. So, they're not gonna think that an education budget for whatever project that they're doing with Scholastic or whatever could benefit black people. (personal communication, May 23, 2018)

When nonblack executives are unable to connect their products with groups outside of their own it limits the black press' revenue streams. They are not aware of black cultural interests so they do not think to advertise in outlets that are targeting African Americans. The lack of cultural awareness at advertising agencies ultimately translates to fewer ad dollars for the black press.

However, awareness does not always result in investment. Even when African Americans are large consumers of certain products, advertisers still do not place ads in publications that are directly targeting them. *The Los Angeles Sentinel's* Danny Bakewell, Jr. shared,

Even when we're a business' core audience we don't always rise to the top of the food chain. I have fought with advertising companies to place ads for Tyler Perry movies. When the majority of the viewership is African American. I fought with *Blackish* to advertise in *The Sentinel*, and we're a prop on the set in the show. It's not Tyler Perry, it's not the producers of *Blackish* that I was necessarily fighting with ... It's the folks at ABC, it's the folks at ... Lionsgate. They hire a white PR firm, or advertising firm to do the buy and they don't understand the importance of it. (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

Black press outlets have to advocate for themselves in order to get companies to advertise with them. Even when a product is designed for black consumers or produced by a black creator, the advertising agencies are still white-run. Black press outlets are put in a position where they have to educate and inform advertisers about the significance of advertising to African Americans, which is a function that mainstream outlets do not have to employ. Black press publications spend time convincing advertisers that there is value in targeting the black audience whereas those same advertisers may be routinely offering ads to mainstream outlets without solicitation.

Some companies do not advertise in the black press because they believe they are already reaching the black audience through mainstream publications. Black consumers typically read mainstream outlets in addition to the black press. As such, the black audience encounters ads in mainstream outlets but they do not have the same resonance as ads that are in the black press. Dorothy R. Leavell of *The Chicago Crusader* said,

There are those corporations who feel that they don't have to advertise to our audience because they are reaching it by one of the mainstream newspapers. So, that really is unfortunate because I know for a fact, if they would do a study, and they put out a story or put an ad in the mainstream press and put one in the black newspaper, and asked the people, "Which one do you think is speaking to you?" I bet you the black press would win it hands down. The ones that see the ad in the black press, they know that the company is speaking to them. They don't necessarily get that same connotation in the mainstream press. (personal communication, April 13, 2018)

When companies put their advertisement in the black press, African-American readers feel that they are being directly targeted, which makes them more likely to support the brand. In addition,

companies that design ads depicting images of African Americans demonstrate more intentionality in their targeting and increase the likelihood that black consumers will be responsive to their placement.

Editors lamented that a lot of advertisers only designate a small amount of money to black media spaces. A certain percentage of their overall advertising budget is allocated to minority or ethnic media, which forces all black press outlets to compete for limited dollars. Sometimes this is done as a corporate responsibility and other times it is to demonstrate that the company is not racist or to make amends for corporate actions or policies that negatively affected the black community. Either way, when the financial stability of a company shifts, this money does as well. Gary Dauphin, formerly of Africana, explained,

June is Black Music Month and a lot of those things are not tied to any goals for the advertiser. There is just goodwill money that comes from a different part of their organization, and that money, because it's not tied to a sales call, it's the first to disappear if the organization is under financial duress. It's the first thing they need to cut back ...

The black advertising space is much more arbitrary, and so these [black press] organizations are just under a set of stresses that their non-ethnic counterparts are not.

(personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Companies may reduce or eliminate the funding allocated for black media when their finances become more limited. Since goodwill advertising money for the black press is less secure than traditional advertising revenue for mainstream media, the black press is subject to more financial instability.

In response to inconsistent and unreliable advertising revenue coupled with the financial struggles of the African-American community, some black press outlets increase their

entertainment coverage as a business strategy. When reflecting on his time as managing editor at *Jet* magazine, Ansem Samuel Rocque recalled that the magazine was producing a lot of celebrity content. Yet when they put a hard news story on the cover it harkened back to the content that was historically produced in the publication. He said, “There’s a legacy stamp of it, all right, this is what we do, but we still evolve to do more business, but we haven’t forgotten who we are” (personal communication, August 5, 2016). The business interests of the magazine were then best served by publishing entertainment content regularly and hard news just served as a means to retain integrity among readers. Glenn Burkins of Q City Metro explained decisions to publish more entertainment on his website. He shared,

What stories are important are not necessarily the stories that are best read. And the stories that are best read are not necessarily the stories that are the most important. But those stories are necessary in order to grow the business. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Black press editors recognize the importance of hard news stories but are also aware that publishing popular content is a financial necessity. The decision to produce entertainment is not always made out of a desire to best serve the black community but rather out of a need for economic growth. Danielle C. Belton of *The Root* stated,

There are some stories that are very important, like issues around voter ID, issues around housing and education, and those stories aren’t sexy, they aren’t exciting to people. People don’t necessarily want to click on them, because they sometimes make them feel bad or stress them out even more. People feel like they’re already pressed enough, but the information is important. Getting that information to our community is important, so we have to still make it a priority. I feel like some sites might not write about those things as

much as they should, because they know that it's not going to get the same response as a post about the Kardashians. (personal communication, August 22, 2016)

Hard news stories in the black press are critical but consumers often avoid them and choose to read more entertainment stories. Given their ability to use metrics and view what stories are being clicked on online, black press outlets may produce more of what is popular as opposed to what is necessary for the community. Regardless of what stories are being read editors can use their total unique visitor numbers to solicit advertisers. As such, publishing stories on entertainment becomes more advantageous for black press editors when they are seeking to achieve monetary goals.

Some consumers viewed the heavy presence of entertainment in black press outlets as a compromise of publications' integrity. Instead of maintaining a focus on hard news, some legacy black press outlets are enticed by the financial return that entertainment provides. One reader stated,

Because they're worried about money and staying alive. They're kind of watering it down to whatever audience I can get. So a lot of entertainment stuff gets ... the articles tend to be more watered down, not as much substance. They're trying to get a broader audience for the money.

Consumers accept outlets that are designed to be entertainment-focused but when legacy outlets shift their content more toward entertainment they can jeopardize their legitimacy. Readers want consistency from outlets that have traditionally produced hard news and recognize when these publications are trying to appeal to a different audience. I find that consumers are critical of increased entertainment content but they also understand the financial incentives for producing it

given that black consumers do not always financially support the black press. Another consumer said,

I feel like sometimes majority of the black press is centered around, I wouldn't say one sided, but it's almost liberal, and it's also kind of gossip drama feel. And I just feel like, I don't know maybe they are doing that for the ad revenue, you know they want you to click the website 'cause they got to get paid, 'cause we ain't paying for it.

Since black readers know that they are not paying for content, they are cognizant that black press outlets are making money from advertisements instead. Entertainment content draws more attention, which allows for more advertising, but when a multitude of black press outlets are following this strategy, it has negative implications regarding how the entire medium is perceived.

Many black press journalists said they would in fact produce more hard news content if they had the economic means to do so. Leigh Davenport of Hello Beautiful said, "most of us are not resourced enough to investigate and find stories, and do long-form journalism because the budget is just not there" (personal communication, August 12, 2016). The lack of resources affects the amount of time journalists have to research hard news stories and prohibits the hiring of additional journalists. The overall amount of content that the black press produces is then reduced and there is less original reporting. Some black press outlets rely on mainstream publications for hard news stories that concern African Americans and simply redistribute that content. But mainstream outlets are not covering the breadth of the black community and do not always cover the black community accurately. Black press editors prefer to report hard news stories firsthand but some simply do not have the capacity to do so. Entertainment operates as a

consolation for black press outlets that would publish more investigative journalism pieces if they had the means.

Ultimately, when black press outlets are unable to maintain financial viability, some are sold to mainstream media companies, which can have adverse consequences for the black community. Editors and consumers want outlets to be black owned but would rather the publication continue publishing than have to fold. One consumer shared,

Being only black owned, like in a perfect world yes, that would be beautiful if we really had the money there. But ... for these organizations and these press outlets to really create revenue, they kind of have to go outside the black culture ... It's sad that we have to do that with the sacrifice of a little bit of our safe space in order for that outlet to survive.

You know? And I think that's what really sucks. It's like we would love to support black-owned everything, but it's so small ... So it's sad.

Black press outlets are often able to be more profitable when nonblack companies own them because larger media organizations have additional resources. But releasing ownership of an outlet comes with additional sacrifices. Black readers may not feel like it is fully their space anymore as it becomes more visible to white audiences and black editors may not have as much control of the publication's content. Waddie Grant of The G-Listed agreed,

I would love to see black media to be sustainable within black America or black culture, where we really take ownership of our black press and support it financially so that we don't have to worry about falling under here, falling under there, or have to be bought out by a white company. When I see some of these black media companies bought out by white companies, usually, the content suffers along with it. (personal communication, February 3, 2018)

Black press outlets do not idealize selling to mainstream companies but are sometimes forced to do so in order for their publication to survive. When this happens, the outlet's content may become less political and more entertainment focused. I argue that entertainment is not always produced freely, as it may be a manifestation of an outlet's efforts to be more financially lucrative or result as a consequence of selling to mainstream outlets. The black press' financial limitations then have a direct correlation with the prevalence of entertainment content, which becomes more apparent when mainstream companies control the outlets.

Ownership

When black press outlets are not black owned both journalists and consumers are unsure of the publications' priorities. Nonblack owners may produce more entertainment content because they prioritize monetary interests over a social responsibility to the black community. Also, nonblack media professionals may not understand the issues that are important to the black community and may be more concerned with retaining their white readership than informing and empowering their black readers. While outlets such as The Root (owned by Univision), BET (owned by Viacom) and The Undeclared (owned by ESPN) have black managers and editors, the final decision of what gets published may still lie with a nonblack executive. Black journalists may see value in hard news stories but entertainment is typically less controversial and therefore preferred by the leadership at mainstream companies. Ownership then influences the amount of entertainment content that is published in black press outlets.

Most of my interlocutors viewed publications that were owned by mainstream companies as part of the black press, as long as they were black managed. Black editors are thought to have

more control of the narratives that are being produced and to be more connected to the interests of their target audience. Danielle C. Belton of The Root explained,

What's important, I think, is having African Americans in places of influence and power. So even if you're not technically a black-owned publication, it makes sense if everyone from the management down should be reflective of the community. You wouldn't necessarily want someone who didn't understand the community to be in charge of an African-American website or newspaper. (personal communication, August 22, 2016)

Nonblack owners are able to provide financial support but they are unable to relate to the black community to the same extent that a black editor can. Consumers and journalists include nonblack-owned outlets as part of the black press because they know that the people assigning and editing the articles mirror the black community. However, when the top leadership is not black the concern is that there may be a gap in cultural understanding. A participant shared,

If it's a predominantly white ... there's certain people you still have to go through, certain hoops and things that you still have to jump through just to be able to get them to want to understand what you're trying to say ... You may not get it, but I know that the audience will get it. So it's like you're fighting for something that you shouldn't have to be fighting for if you are working for an outlet that is owned by a white person, versus black. They're more understanding, we come from the same, similar background.

Black journalists should not have to explain the value of writing a story that is inherently important or relevant to the black community. When there is white ownership, there is a possibility that stories that have significance in the black community will not resonate with nonblack owners and therefore be omitted or given fewer resources.

Even when outlets are black managed, nonblack owners may have ultimate control of the content. Mainstream-owned black press outlets may censor hard news content while black-owned companies have more editorial freedom. This is especially true when the topic is socially contentious. Darrell Williams, who founded Loop 21, stated,

Where ownership does matter is when you get to these highly controversial issues and how issues get covered. Then I think ownership matters ... It's when you get to those critical moments where there's controversy, and decisions have to be made, it matters ... Control as someone black in those critical moments is really important. (personal communication, February 12, 2018)

Politically sensitive content necessitates that a black person is in control of the decision-making. Black managers and editors at mainstream outlets may have to abdicate the final call on whether or not to publish content to someone who is not black. Nonblack-owned companies may restrict hard news content or decide to cover it differently. David A. Wilson, one of the founders of The Griot, which has been under both white and black ownership, stated,

And at the end of the day, there's moments which you're gonna need to speak truth to power. And speak from an authentically black perspective. And even if you have a black man as the editor ... when it comes to that final call ... it goes all the way to the owner. I don't care who the managing editor is. Those days happen, and they happen actually more often than most people realize. Whoever's making that final decision, if they're not black, there's gonna be a moment where there's gonna be a decision that needs to be made. Often times they're not going to err on the side of the interests, sometimes, in truth, the unbridled truth that we need to hear. (personal communication, March 19, 2018)

Despite the presence of black editors, nonblack owners often have more control over content. When a topic is contentious, they may decide not to take a strong stance. Given the frequency of nonblack owners making decisions on editorial content, there should be some wariness about how their ownership affects the black press' content. Wilson used the compromises that were made when The Grio was covering the Trayvon Martin shooting, which was the impetus for the Black Lives Matter movement, as an example. He noted that NBC executives, which owned The Grio at the time, did not want to publish content that could negatively affect the lawsuit that George Zimmerman, Martin's assailant, had filed against them. NBC's concern for their company superseded their interest in thoroughly covering a story that was important to the black community. Mainstream outlets' timidity to publish politically charged content is in stark contrast to black-owned companies. Brande Victorian of Madame Noire said,

Our company is a start-up company and it's black owned. We just have a lot more freedom to talk about things that other sites, you know who are all run by mega media companies, just can't touch, they can't talk about. There's really not much we would shy away from discussing. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Black-owned outlets are able to publish freely and without internal constraints. As such, many outlets foreground perspectives that resonate with African Americans even when those articles may be seen as provocative to those outside of the black community.

Monetary interests typically cloud the editorial judgments of nonblack owners resulting in the heavy production of entertainment content. Some editors who currently work at legacy black press newspapers and others who previously worked for black-owned outlets that were then bought by mainstream companies shared that when a company is not black owned,

sometimes monetary priorities outweigh the desire to serve the black community. Gary Dauphin, formerly of *Africana*, recalls that when AOL bought the site, the company was more interested in covering movies and music instead of politics. Political content was especially subject to censorship given that it could alienate AOL's nonblack readers. Entertainment attracts both white and black audiences but politics may appeal to the black audience and simultaneously repel the white audience. He explained, "Politics is a sorting mechanism that eliminates white crossover audiences ... and so, these nonblack owners are not interested in stuff that will scare off millions of white people" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). Whereas entertainment can operate neutrally, politics can cause outlets to lose readership. Entertainment is a risk-averse way for nonblack-owned companies to ensure that they are monetizing black press content to its fullest capacity.

Some journalists and consumers were uncertain about the intentions of black press outlets that were owned by mainstream companies. Mainstream companies may not be seeking to harm the black community but they may be more interested in profiting from or exploiting African Americans as opposed to supporting them. *The Philadelphia Tribune's* Nicki Mayo said,

Ownership determines who gets to tell the story and when we have our entities, the strong companies get bought out or heavily financially influenced by companies you need to start doing research on, well, what's the motive of said company? They're all going to have profit motive, I get that, but if they have a long-standing history of being questionable in their coverage of African Americans or their treatment of those things that impact the Pan-African diaspora then you should be a little worried. (personal communication, April 18, 2018)

If the outlet is not black owned, people want to know the history of the company and its previous relationship with the African-American community. Has it published anything in the past that has negatively affected African Americans? In addition to their investment in the black press, what are their other investments? Knowing the intentions of a company helps to contextualize the content they produce. Nonblack owners' motives may not be malicious toward the black community but they can still influence how stories are written and received. Mainstream companies may be looking at the black press as a way to expand their audience. When they reach saturation with their mainstream target audience they look for additional sources of revenue. According to The Undefeated's editor-in-chief, Kevin Merida, the website was created as a way for ESPN to intentionally capitalize on the fact that African-American men over-indexed on the brand's products. In addition to expanding its audience ESPN also hoped The Undefeated would help increase African Americans' brand loyalty. Mainstream publications may not have ulterior motives for publishing black press content but whereas consumers are comfortable assuming that black-owned outlets are most concerned with serving the black community, that belief does not extend to nonblack-owned outlets.

Some African Americans intentionally patronize outlets that are black owned because they want to financially support the black community and subvert the monetary interests of nonblack owners. Consumers do not abstain from reading black press outlets if they are not black owned, but they are motivated to buy black-owned publications because they want them to succeed. One participant explained,

To me it's more important where my money is going. I would like my money to go back into the black community, because then I feel like that money will continually, hopefully cycle into the black community. And the black wealth disparity is humongous. So I think

that as much as we can do and be cognizant of it, and as much as we can do to try to close the gap, I would like to do that. So I'd rather my money go to something that's black owned than not.

In an effort to help address the financial instability facing African Americans, readers want their dollars to circulate within the black community. Investing in black-owned businesses is seen as a social responsibility to aid in the uplift of the entire race. These communal efforts can also be directed at shifting ownership of some black press outlets back to African Americans. One participant suggested,

There can be improvement when it comes to the way that the press is advocating for us, but there can also be improvement in the way that we support our black outlets and black resources and things like that. I think we can point the finger, but we also need to look at what we as a community can do better to perhaps get some of these publications back into black ownership, and put our money into it so that they have the ability to do those things. Or so that they're not so stressed for sizzle headlines, and can give us the real. [So] they have the money to be able to write what they wanna write without the salacious headlines to get as many clicks as possible.

Just as consumers can hold an outlet accountable for its content they can also hold themselves accountable to do what they can to facilitate the outcome they desire. If African Americans supported black-owned outlets, it could directly affect what is published. These outlets would not have to publish as much entertainment and click bait stories and instead be able to focus more on socially important hard news stories.

African-American consumers scrutinize the content of nonblack-owned publications more than black-owned outlets. Many of my interlocutors stated that they read content from

nonblack-owned outlets through a different lens. When readers disagree with an article, the ownership of the outlet becomes more salient. One participant explained,

It depends ... how ratchet it is. That plays a big part in it being black owned versus white owned. I feel if it was white owned, it may take it to the highest power they can. You know, push that envelope, as much as they can versus spouting out what the facts are or the truths. So they may embellish more.

White owners may produce more entertainment content that exploits the black community.

While the same topic may be covered by black-owned publications, how it is covered can be more problematic when it comes from nonblack sources. Consumers understand why black press outlets sell to mainstream companies, but they want the content to remain the same. One participant said, “If you have to sell out ... then you’ve just got to do what you’ve got to do. Just make sure that that content is what you could still produce, no matter who’s paying for it.”

Dauphin believes that politics can act as the “north star” to follow when determining what to publish. When nonblack-owned outlets focus on entertainment, the overall goal can get lost.

Mainstream-owned black press companies do not necessarily follow the same ethical framework employed by black-owned outlets.

Some black press outlets will continue to publish even when it is not profitable. Black owners are more likely to view the larger goals of the outlet as more important than the economics. Dorothy R. Leavell of *The Chicago Crusader* and chairman of the NNPA stated,

We’ve had a few papers that have gone out of business. But by and large, the people who publish a black newspaper still are publishing those newspapers in spite of the lack of financial resources. To grow is difficult for us to continue to publish ... But it’s because the black press was founded for something very different than the mainstream press...

The mainstream press, their whole thing was to make money. If that had been the case with the black press, we would no longer be in existence. (personal communication, April 13, 2018)

Even when black-owned outlets have struggled financially, many have continued to publish in service of their mission to educate and inform the black community. Dauphin agreed that mainstream outlets are not as invested in prioritizing social responsibility over profit. He said, “Black ownership is going to put certain things at risk, in service of the goal; whereas nonblack ownership is not going to risk anything” (personal communication, March 2, 2018). As a result, when mainstream companies no longer see a black press outlet as financially lucrative they may choose to abandon their investment.

A few of my interlocutors believed that in order to be considered a black press outlet, black ownership was mandatory. Some viewed the black press as a black business and most black businesses, such as restaurants, beauty products and clothing lines, get designated as such primarily due to their black ownership. Editors who worked for traditional black press outlets adhered to the NNPA’s requirements for membership, which state that outlets need to be at least 51 percent black owned in order to be part of the black press. Outlets such as Huffington Post Black Voices and NBC Blk were not considered part of the black press because the black audience is a subsidiary interest and not at the core of their business. Black ownership minimizes questionable content choices and does not intentionally invite nonblack readers’ critiques. One reader said,

It’s almost kind of like a safe space ... If the media outlet of the outlet you’re looking at is owned by a black person and all the people the majority of their writers are black, and

the content is black, it's kind of like, when you go through the comments section ...

it's like a safe space.

African-American readers feel more comfortable interacting with content published on black-owned outlets because there is less likelihood that those outside of the black community will troll them. I find that nonblack-owned outlets are more inviting of the white gaze, which results in increased entertainment content and compromised hard news coverage.

The White Gaze

Digital media makes black press content easily accessible to those outside of the black community. When the black press was only in print, consumers needed to buy a subscription or publically purchase a copy of the magazine or newspaper from a newsstand. The web presence of black press outlets now makes it easier for people who may have never made the effort or monetary investment required to read black press outlets to have access to their content. A lower barrier for access benefits African Americans who want as many options to consume black press outlets as possible, but it also invites nonblack readers to consume the content as well. Given that many early black press newspapers were abolitionist publications, they were intentionally targeting blacks and whites but in the new media age white readers are not the primary target audience of black press publications. The white gaze on the black press and its heavily produced entertainment content is contentious as it invites the possibility of misinterpretation and adversarial engagement.

My interlocutors expressed concern that if mainstream audiences only viewed the black press' entertainment content, they may have a limited view of African Americans. When nonblack people engage with the black press they may only be visiting one outlet. The black

press at large offers a diversity of outlets, but only consuming one type of content can be detrimental. One participant said,

I feel like sometimes we can look one-sided. And then you have people from these other class groups and also different race groups, they click these *Ebony* websites and they think, oh wow, all black women think this way. Which just is like, no.

Mainstream audiences may read one entertainment outlet and assume that it is a reflection of the entire black community. They are then left with a distorted view of African Americans. This is especially problematic when the content that is being viewed is not flattering to the black community. Another participant shared,

I like variety, and outlets like World Star present too much of one view of what we look like. I think we know that's not the only representation and so we can go on there for that entertainment but other people, other demographics, don't understand that. And if that's their sole representation...

Some entertainment and gossip-focused outlets do not offer multiple representations of blackness. When mainstream audiences read black press stories they are not able to contextualize them the same way that black audiences are able to. African-American readers may consume entertainment as part of their news diet but nonblack audiences may consume it in isolation. Entertainment in the black press can operate as the mainstream audiences' sole source of information about African Americans, which may result in inaccurate perceptions.

In the black press, there is a tension between protecting content from nonblack audiences and wanting to better inform mainstream audiences about the black community. The black press primarily aims to provide stories for African Americans, but it is also interested in correcting and counterbalancing mainstream stereotypes of African Americans. Nonblack consumers can read

black press content as a means to learn more about the community and to get the black perspective on certain topics. When discussing mainstream consumption of the black press one participant stated,

That's really difficult too because when you do want to feel like something is for us and then it's picked up on or it's consumed by or invaded by nonblack people in your comments section, it's so hard. You do get so protective over it but it's also like, isn't that we want?

Black consumers feel as if the content in the black press is designed for them and resent when nonblack readers insert their opinions in the comments sections. Yet, consumers also recognize that nonblack audiences learning about black culture may in fact be achieving the goals of the black press. Many black press editors are aware that nonblack readers consume their content but do not know to what extent. Anslem Samuel Rocque of *Essence* shared, "You can see traffic, [but] you don't really always get a full transparency of who is viewing that content. Sometimes it might not be your core audience" (personal communication, August 5, 2016). Depending on what analytics platform they are using to view their site's metrics, black press editors may not be able to determine if their content is mostly being viewed by black or nonblack audiences.

While mainstream readers who have a genuine interest in the black press are welcome, the medium also attracts people who are antagonistic toward African Americans. Bigger platforms may precipitate an increase in trolling because of their greater visibility. Nicki Mayo of *The Philadelphia Tribune* shared,

We're seeing America's underbelly in our comment section. We see the N word on the regular, a lot of obscenities of course, curses and stuff as well, and on one hand I'll say I think we're being targeted, but on the other hand I think nah, with the presence of just

Google or whatever, people don't even realize they're coming to a black press anything. (personal communication, April 18, 2018)

The comments sections of black press outlets offer insight about who is reading the publication. When users use racist terms and profanity it evidences that the mainstream audience is part of the readership. Given the various sources that are included in search engine results, some nonblack readers may not initially be aware that they are reading content from a black press outlet. But whether the white gaze on black press outlets is intentional or unintentional, the implications of content should be further evaluated when it is available for outside consumption.

Black press editors should not change their content solely because of the white gaze. Censoring content for the benefit of nonblack readers is an unfair expectation as black readers' interests should be prioritized. One consumer said, "I don't think the censorship is just on us. I think it's because we live in this particular system to where we are now having to take up that slack, to be overly positive." The many negative representations of blackness in mainstream media increase the stakes when the black press publishes entertainment content that may not uplift the black community. Yet, the onus of only producing positive content in response to mainstream may be heavy and detrimental to the black community. One reader shared,

It's important for us to, as African Americans in the African Diaspora, to embrace all of our stories, and we have not been able to do that because the white mainstream media presents us in a certain way. The onus is on us to always be positive, but that's not a full expression of who we are.

Offering a variety of content is tantamount to solely publishing positive news stories in the black press as it is a more accurate representation of the black community. Black press editors should be aware of the white gaze on gossip and entertainment stories and publish content accordingly.

Black press editors can choose to reduce entertainment content production for the benefit of both black and nonblack readers. Moderating content that is susceptible to misperception outside of the black community, may ultimately best serve black press outlets' interests.

Many of the top-ranked black press sites among black readers are also popular among the mainstream audience, which makes the white gaze less hypothetical and more tangible. Surprisingly, the black audience makes up less than half of most black press websites' traffic via desktop meaning that there are more nonblack readers of black press outlets than black readers (see Table 5, p. 145). In fact, when analyzing unique visitor numbers, the nonblack audience for black press outlets averages 72 percent of unique visitors, which is nearly three times larger than the black audience alone. Also the nonblack audience spent more time on black press websites than the black audience with a total audience average of four million total minutes monthly, which is 63 percent of the black press' total minutes, compared to the black audience averaging one and a half million total minutes, or 37 percent (see Table 6, p. 146). This excludes total minute metrics from Black News, Black Sports Online, *The Final Call*, The Jasmine Brand, NBC Blk, *The Philadelphia Tribune* and *Rolling Out*, which did not meet comScore's minimum reporting standards. Therefore, more nonblack readers visit black press websites than black readers and they spend more time engaging with the sites' content.

I also find that entertainment-focused outlets still attract a lot of traffic among mainstream audiences and nonblack-owned outlets are significantly more visited among the nonblack audience. For example, Huffington Post Black Voices is number 14 among the black audience (see Table 2, p. 65) but number four among the total audience. Similarly The Undefeated (owned by ESPN) is number 17 among African Americans but ranks eight when the total audience is accounted for. Additionally, *Vibe* (owned by Billboard) moves up from 22 to 14

and NBC Blk jumps from 30 to 16. The increased popularity of nonblack-owned outlets among the total audience evidences that mainstream readers are making up a significantly larger portion of these outlets' traffic. In fact, the black audience was underrepresented on each of the aforementioned sites with the exception of *Vibe*. While African Americans account for 11 percent of Internet users, only four percent of NBC Blk's audience was black followed by Huffington Post Black Voices with six percent and The Undeclared with eight percent. The black audience was also underrepresented in their engagement with some mainstream-owned outlets. African Americans comprise eight percent of total minutes spent online but only made up four percent of BET's engagement and six percent of Huffington Post Black Voices'. Although nonblack-owned outlets may be targeting African Americans their content is reaching significantly more people outside of the black community.

Table 5: Top Black Press Websites (Total Unique Visitors vs. Black Unique Visitors)

Rank	Media	Total Unique Visitors (000)	Black Unique Visitors (000)	Black Audience Composition
	Total Internet	219,402	24,850	11%
1	THEROOT.COM	1,376	230	17%
2	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	1,002	290	29%
3	BET.COM	824	123	15%
4	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	812	51	6%
5	MADAMENOIRE.COM	591	125	21%
6	ESSENCE.COM	514	182	35%
7	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	482	96	20%
8	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	466	39	8%
9	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	424	84	20%
10	XXLMAG.COM	378	79	21%
11	THEGRIO.COM	297	71	24%

12	BOSSIP.COM	275	97	35%
13	MTONEWS.COM	270	115	43%
14	VIBE.COM	214	33	15%
15	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	199	64	32%
16	NBCNEWS.COM BLK	172	7	4%
17	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	169	38	23%
18	NEWSONE.COM	167	41	24%
19	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	165	59	36%
20	EBONYJET.COM	163	29	18%
21	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	139	34	25%
22	BLAVITY.COM	135	37	27%
23	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	131	51	39%
24	AFROPUNK.COM	69	11	16%
25	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	68	17	25%
26	THESHADEROOM.COM	54	37	68%
27	EURWEB.COM	47	14	31%
28	THEYBF.COM	41	22	54%
29	ROLLINGOUT.COM	39	8	21%
30	THESOURCE.COM	39	9	22%
31	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	38	11	29%
32	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	37	25	67%
33	PHILLYTRIB.COM	23	3	13%
34	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	22	4	19%
35	BLACKNEWS.COM	18	8	45%
36	FINALCALL.COM	13	5	42%

Table 6: Top Black Press Websites (Total Minutes vs. Black Total Minutes)

Rank	Media	Total Minutes (MM)	Black Total Minutes (MM)	Black Audience Engagement
	Total Internet	338,136	26,592	8%
1	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	59.479	16.636	28%
2	BET.COM	56.218	2.409	4%
3	BOSSIP.COM	11.922	7.664	64%
4	MTONEWS.COM	10.150	5.915	58%
5	THEROOT.COM	7.718	1.795	23%
6	ESSENCE.COM	3.796	2.294	60%

7	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	3.189	1.660	52%
8	MADAMENOIRE.COM	2.251	0.927	41%
9	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	1.843	0.106	6%
10	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	1.189	0.114	10%
11	XXLMAG.COM	1.019	0.399	39%
12	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	0.921	0.363	40%
13	THEYBF.COM	0.900	0.688	76%
14	THEGRIO.COM	0.840	0.250	30%
15	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	0.703	0.138	20%
16	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	0.694	0.432	62%
17	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	0.693	0.145	21%
18	NEWSONE.COM	0.681	0.213	31%
19	EBONYJET.COM	0.515	0.127	25%
20	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	0.430	0.238	55%
21	VIBE.COM	0.412	0.055	13%
22	THESHADEROOM.COM	0.380	0.339	89%
23	BLAVITY.COM	0.284	0.152	53%
24	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	0.254	0.097	38%
25	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	0.241	0.063	26%
26	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	0.207	0.087	42%
27	AFROPUNK.COM	0.077	0.010	13%
28	EURWEB.COM	0.071	0.021	30%
29	THESOURCE.COM	0.051	0.011	22%

Traffic to black press websites via desktop is insightful but as more nonwhites access news via mobile devices (Fedeli & Matsa, 2018) the unique visitor and total minutes demographics of these outlets shift based on platform. The Nielsen Company's (2015) report stated, "Passionate about being connected, Blacks adopt digital formats at a higher rate than the general population" (p. 23). African Americans in fact over index in their usage of new technologies, spending 13 percent more time on computers and 15 percent more time using smartphones as compared to the total population (Nielsen, 2015). But when accessing news content, whites use computers thirteen percent more than nonwhites. Nonwhite consumers are more likely to get their news from a mobile device with 61 percent preferring smartphones or

tablets compared to 56 percent of whites (Fedeli & Matsa, 2018). Some of my focus group participants stated a preference for accessing black press content via their smartphones because it is easier to read content when traveling or commuting. They also appreciated the ease of sharing links and many millennial participants mentioned that they often access black press content through social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, which they primarily access via their phones.

Given African Americans' higher usage of mobile phones over desktop computers, the percentage of nonblacks accessing black press content is significantly lower when comparing unique visitors via mobile (see Table 7, p. 150). Since comScore only provides monthly metrics for mobile I used June 2018 data as opposed to the three-month average of April to June 2018 used for the desktop data. While I was able to include *The Final Call* in desktop data due to the size of their three-month average visitors, their mobile metrics were too small to be measured. Conversely, while some sites were not measurable via desktop, their mobile visitor numbers allowed their inclusion, these sites were Afro.com (the digital counterpart to *The Afro-American* newspaper, which serves the black community in Washington, DC, Baltimore and Prince George's County), AmsterdamNews.com, BlackAndMarriedWithKids.com, ChicagoDefender.com, ShadowandAct.com, UrbanIntellectuals.com, xoNecole.com and YourBlackWorld.net. The numerous outlets that became measurable due to their mobile metrics evidence consumers' greater engagement with some black press publications via phone as opposed to via computer.

Via desktop, the total audience for black press outlets is significantly larger than the black audience numbers but the disparity was not as significant when comparing mobile metrics. According to the data in Table 7, the total unique visitors for the black audience increases on

mobile versus desktop by one and a half million or six percent while the total audience unique visitors decreases by nearly 18 million or eight percent. The overall mobile traffic for black press outlets was higher than desktop traffic (e.g., many sites attracted millions of unique visitors via mobile vs. ten to hundreds of thousands via desktop). Consequentially, African Americans make up a significantly larger percentage of mobile visitors to black press websites as opposed to desktop visitors. Most sites have black readers comprising over half of their unique visitors (with an average of 56 percent) as opposed to them averaging only about a quarter (28 percent) of the outlets' visitors via desktop. Also, black consumers spend more time on black press websites via mobile than via desktop, with an average of over four million total minutes monthly, which is a 187 percent increase (see Table 8, p. 151). The nonblack audience total minutes lessened via mobile with an average of three million total minutes, which is a 31 percent decrease. The black audience comprised an average of 56 percent of black press outlets' total minutes on mobile compared with 44 percent for the nonblack audience. So while the nonblack audience visited black press sites more and spent more time with them via desktop the black audience visited and engaged with the sites more on mobile. Some publications, however, garnered too few black visitors on mobile for their black audience to be measured by comScore, those sites were Afro.com, AmsterdamNews.com, BlackAndMarriedWithKids.com, ChicagoDefender.com, HipHopLately.com, HipHopWired.com, NBCBlk.com and TheYBF.com. Huffington Post Black Voices had the lowest black audience numbers on mobile by a large margin with 0.5 percent composition and one percent engagement, given that The Undefeated was the next lowest with 30 percent black readership and 25 percent black engagement. Consequently, the low black readership of and engagement with mainstream-owned black press outlets was even more exacerbated via mobile than desktop.

Given that nonblack-owned outlets are less inclined to produce hard news stories, entertainment becomes the dominant type of black press content that mainstream audiences consume. These consumption practices can distort and undermine the black press' intention to positively influence mainstream audiences' perception of African Americans. Also, since black press outlets have a majority nonblack readership via desktop, there is a warranted reason for concern regarding the prevalence of entertainment content.

**Table 7: Top Black Press Mobile Websites and Apps
(Total Unique Visitors vs. Black Unique Visitors)**

Rank	Media	Total Unique Visitors (000)	Black Unique Visitors (000)	Black Audience Composition
	Total Internet (Mobile Web & App)	201,549	26,381	13%
1	BET.COM	10,899	4,350	40%
2	THEROOT.COM	9,415	2,980	32%
3	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	3,308	1,379	42%
4	ESSENCE.COM	3,254	1,981	61%
5	XXLMAG.COM	2,996	1,083	37%
6	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	2,704	1,723	64%
7	MADAMENOIRE.COM	2,255	1,245	55%
8	BOSSIP.COM	2,073	1,104	53%
9	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	1,642	489	30%
10	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	1,611	885	55%
11	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	1,276	6	0.5%
12	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	1,232	580	47%
13	THEGRIO.COM	1,226	464	38%
14	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	1,086	468	43%
15	MTONEWS.COM	1,016	726	72%
16	NEWSONE.COM	716	418	58%
17	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	585	346	59%
18	VIBE.COM	579	181	33%
19	THESHADEROOM.COM	553	337	61%

20	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	542	318	59%
21	AFROPUNK.COM	510	327	64%
22	EBONYJET.COM	442	227	62%
23	HIPHOPWIRED.COM	430	N/A	N/A
24	BLAVITY.COM	407	287	74%
25	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	392	145	37%
26	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	364	265	75%
27	ROLLINGOUT.COM	348	310	89%
28	NBCNEWS.COM BLK	339	N/A	N/A
29	THESOURCE.COM	294	220	75%
30	THEYBF.COM	249	N/A	N/A
31	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	222	150	67%
32	YOURBLACKWORLD.NET	120	90	75%
33	URBANINTELLECTUALS.COM	77	50	65%
34	XONECOLE.COM	77	55	72%
35	HIPHOPLATELY.COM	74	N/A	N/A
36	CHICAGODEFENDER.COM	66	N/A	N/A
37	BLACKANDMARRIED WITHKIDS.COM	59	N/A	N/A
38	PHILLYTRIB.COM	47	20	43%
39	SHADOWANDACT.COM	46	32	70%
40	EURWEB.COM	33	27	81%
41	AMSTERDAMNEWS.COM	25	N/A	N/A
42	AFRO.COM	11	N/A	N/A

**Table 8: Top Black Press Mobile Websites and Apps
(Total Minutes vs. Black Total Minutes)**

Rank	Media	Total Minutes (MM)	Black Total Minutes (MM)	Black Audience Engagement
	Total Internet (Mobile Web & App)	1,189,571	172,866	15%
1	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	99.517	69.982	70%
2	BET.COM	30.692	11.392	37%
3	THEROOT.COM	25.288	13.034	52%
4	BOSSIP.COM	21.244	12.934	61%
5	MTONEWS.COM	8.484	5.107	60%
6	ESSENCE.COM	8.305	5.943	72%

7	XXLMAG.COM	7.911	2.316	29%
8	BLACKDOCTOR.ORG	6.127	4.979	81%
9	MADAMENOIRE.COM	5.546	3.235	58%
10	THEUNDEFEATED.COM	4.630	1.177	25%
11	ATLANTABLACKSTAR.COM	4.465	3.269	73%
12	THEGRIO.COM	2.983	1.571	53%
13	HUFFPOST.COM BLACKVOICES	2.618	0.026	1%
14	BLACKAMERICAWEB.COM	2.596	1.666	64%
15	CASSIUSLIFE.COM	2.292	1.056	46%
16	HELLOBEAUTIFUL.COM	2.057	0.631	31%
17	BLACKSPORTSONLINE.COM	1.880	1.486	79%
18	NEWSONE.COM	1.499	1.152	77%
19	THEJASMINEBRAND.COM	1.301	0.739	57%
20	BLAVITY.COM	1.257	0.924	74%
21	VIBE.COM	1.217	0.219	18%
22	EBONYJET.COM	1.089	0.631	58%
23	THESHADEROOM.COM	0.685	0.252	37%
24	BLACKENTERPRISE.COM	0.525	0.324	62%
25	ROLLINGOUT.COM	0.447	0.373	83%
26	AFROPUNK.COM	0.391	0.295	75%
27	THESOURCE.COM	0.220	0.141	64%
28	YOURBLACKWORLD.NET	0.137	0.123	90%
29	URBANINTELLECTUALS.COM	0.134	0.110	82%
30	LOVEBSCOTT.COM	0.126	0.048	38%
31	XONECOLE.COM	0.077	0.067	87%
32	PHILLYTRIB.COM	0.029	0.007	24%
33	SHADOWANDACT.COM	0.012	0.005	42%
34	EURWEB.COM	0.012	0.006	50%

Chapter Summary

This chapter acknowledged the adverse implications of entertainment in the black press. Some of my interlocutors did not consider entertainment-focused outlets as part of the black press because those publications only provide one type of content. Others excluded gossip from black press definitions due to its unverified sources and long distance from professional journalism practices. When entertainment outlets were seen as part of the black press, it was

sometimes positioned in contradistinction to advocacy content. Advocacy has historically been an essential component of the black press but readers and editors are conceptualizing it in myriad ways. Those who did not believe that advocacy was still a requirement, saw entertainment-focused outlets in the black press as yet advocating for African Americans by providing additional forms of representation. However, when advocacy was understood as political activism and hard news coverage, some believed it was being endangered by the increase of entertainment content.

The motives behind entertainment in the black press need to be considered when examining the medium. Black press outlets do not have the same financial resources as mainstream outlets due to black consumers' lower economic status and discrimination in the advertising industry. As a result, black press editors are more inclined to publish entertainment as a monetary necessity and are limited in their ability to produce investigative journalism. Some black press outlets may eventually need to sell to mainstream media companies in order to avoid folding. These nonblack-owned companies' investment in the black press is more financially motivated and less concerned with what is in the best interest in the black community. In order to maintain their nonblack crossover readership, these companies produce more entertainment content than the potentially divisive political content. The white gaze on black press content is significantly higher when the company is not black owned but all black press outlets have a large amount of nonblack readers. When entertainment is foregrounded by black- and nonblack-owned black press outlets, mainstream audiences can view African Americans one-dimensionally and black press editors may omit content that is vital for the health of the black community. As such, I find that the high production of entertainment in the black press can have troubling

consequences when it is published due to financial necessity instead of editorial preference and consumed by a majority mainstream audience as opposed to its target black audience.

Chapter Six: A Reimagined Black Press

The new media age is encouraging black press editors and readers to reconsider the essential tenets of the black press. Entertainment in the black press is serving the needs of producers and consumers of content as it offers additional representation of African Americans. Financial constraints and an emphasis on profit encourage the production of entertainment over hard news but when consumed in conjunction with hard news content entertainment contributes to holistic coverage of the black community. Although most journalists were unsure if readers fully understood the role of the black press, this research has shown that they do, in fact, share a common understanding of the current black press landscape. Both groups recognize the advantages and limitations of entertainment content and are invested in the continuous success of the black press.

The expansion of previous definitions of the black press has allowed for more outlets to be included. Entertainment-focused outlets and nonblack-owned companies are contributing to the diversity of the black press. Mainstream outlets' increased coverage of issues of concern to the African-American community has also influenced how entertainment operates in the black press. After the Kerner Commission report was released in 1968 more black journalists began working for mainstream outlets and the current social climate makes it difficult for mainstream outlets to completely ignore race-related stories. Additionally, given that the black press is now decentralized, in that there are numerous outlets targeting the black community as opposed to the few national black press outlets that dominated the medium in print, there is a strong shift toward intersectional inclusivity. Secondary marginalization is minimized as niche outlets are able to direct content to underrepresented groups that were previously excluded from coverage in the

black press. The numerous changes the black press has undergone in the 21st century demonstrate how the institution has united and persisted over the years. Regardless of format, and in spite of financial limitations, black press outlets have been able to sustain for nearly 200 years. Both journalists and readers agree that in order to maintain its relevance, the black press needs to more directly target Generation Z (those 17 years old and younger). Many outlets are already pursuing this goal with their social media presence, but there is certainly room for continued growth in this space. While the introduction of digital technology has shifted how the black press reaches its audience, its purpose has remained consistent.

As entertainment content proliferates across all of digital media, it is yet serving the original goals of the black press. It is providing representation of black entertainers that has yet to be paralleled by mainstream outlets and is a necessary alternative for African-American consumers who are inundated with negative coverage of blackness. Although at times entertainment can be problematic—when it limits hard news content and becomes the dominant representation of black life for those outside of the community—it is ultimately helping to financially support and diversify the black press. A diverse black press is able to better represent the many segments of the black audience and better facilitate a robust black public sphere. The black press' initiation and reflection of communal discourse contributes to democratic ideals, as it is emblematic of the black community's active participation in American society.

Reader-Journalist Agreement

Black press editors believe the black community has a special relationship with black press outlets. Comments sections allow readers to share their opinion on articles and to hold black press editors accountable when they disagree with coverage. Similarly, editors are able to

gain further insight into what their readers want and expect from their content. Leigh Davenport of Hello Beautiful shared,

It's definitely a relationship. I think if you're running a healthy site, you know those things. You're in that conversation with your readers. And you're not ever just putting out content to them. You're making sure that you're hearing them and they're hearing you. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

Dialogue between consumers and editors is a two-way conversation that allows both to reach a common understanding regarding what a particular outlet aims to achieve. Zahara Hill described Blavity's relationship with readers as "mutually beneficial and respectful" (personal communication, April 8, 2018). This interactive format encourages and facilitates a dynamic that benefits both parties as journalists can better tailor content to their audience and consumers can influence the type of content that they want to read.

Regardless of their like-minded intentions, sometimes miscommunication can occur between readers and journalists. Readers critique black press outlets for their content when it does not meet their expectations. Journalists of hard news sites shared that readers may respond to entertainment articles asking why the outlet is not covering a hard news topic instead. Conversely, entertainment-focused outlets have readers who do not want editors to insert hard news into their content because they want to have a complete escape from such content while visiting their site. But many of these disagreements have more to do with where readers are encountering the content as opposed to the content itself. When readers are expecting a certain type of content on a site they are upset when it covers topics that do not align with their primary mission. Anslem Samuel Rocque of *Essence* shared,

I've seen things where Brand A can do a story on X, Y, Z, and it'd be totally fine and accepted, but then Brand B does the exact same thing, it could even be the exact same article let's say, and it will be treated differently. (personal communication, August 5, 2016)

Even when the exact same story is posted on two different outlets black readers' responses will vary. Hence, when entertainment sites cover hard news and when hard news sites cover entertainment some readers are disappointed. Davenport explained that readers usually enjoy when hard news topics are incorporated on her lifestyle site, but there are times when they express their frustration with it. She said,

They love when we talk about the issues and they tell us that. I think that they appreciate it. But sometimes, they're like, "Look, I didn't come here for this. I came here to escape. I came here for my beauty tips." But if they wanted that, they would go to The Root. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

While readers may be interested in the outlier content that is produced on a site, they want to consume it on their own terms. The diversity of outlets allows them to control what type of content they consume and when. If they want entertainment they can go to an entertainment-focused site and if they want hard news there are outlets that are designed to primarily cover those stories. The integration of both entertainment and hard news on the same site can then cause dissention.

Differences of opinion between readers and editors can also come into play when producing content about African Americans that is not positive. Some readers only want to see positive coverage in black press outlets without exception. When describing what he expects from black press content, one consumer said,

Always be positive. You're going to see stuff, but it's enough negative stuff about us anyway through the other news and things. What we got to do, I believe, is show a better side. I'd rather just see it. They always show positive black man doing something. We ain't all in jail. We're not on drugs and everything, so I think that's our job, to start showing more of that.

Since mainstream outlets publish a lot of negative coverage about African Americans, some consumers want the black press to always act as a foil to that content. However, lines are blurred when black leaders or celebrities do something controversial. Black press editors seek to cover the entertainment industry and provide their readers with news about black celebrities, yet when their coverage includes entertainers' illegal behavior there is some dissention. For example, many black press outlets covered the sexual assault trial and subsequent conviction of comedian Bill Cosby and the sexual abuse and statutory rape accusations against R&B singer R. Kelly to the chagrin of some consumers. While the information is legitimate, consumers viewed it as troublesome given mainstream society's history of mischaracterizing or overly demonizing black men. The black press is then supposed to provide a safe space for all African Americans unconditionally. Damon Young of Very Smart Brothas explained,

You will find readers who think that if you are in black media then your job is to be a cheerleader for black celebrities, black politicians, all black people who, you know, have some type of name. You know, you're not supposed to be critical, you're not supposed to, I don't know, be anything other than overwhelmingly positive. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

Consumers in my focus groups debated these expectations expressing a fundamental desire for the black press to act in the best interest of the black community. Whether this goal can only be

achieved by solely producing positive stories or whether other members of the black community are served by including controversial coverage was somewhat contentious. In the aforementioned cases of Bill Cosby and R. Kelly, declining to cover the stories or maintaining the innocence of both men would then marginalize the interests of black women, who were among their victims.

Journalists held that when they cover a story that may be perceived as negative or controversial by consumers they are in fact advocating for the black community. When recalling an opinion piece that he published championing rapper Jay-Z's support of gay marriage over President Barack Obama's efforts, Waddie Grant of The G-Listed was unsure how it would be received. He said, "I just had to trust my instinct in knowing that if I'm doing this for the betterment of black culture, go for it" (personal communication, February 3, 2018). Whether a story is challenging an African-American leader or covering a crime perpetuated by a black person, the article should always be done in the best interest of the black community. When describing reader response to a story he published about a shooting in Charlotte, Glenn Burkins of Q City Metro said,

Somebody might say, "Well, he wasn't advocating for us." Well, in my mind, I was advocating for us because the message is you should be mad at the people who are bringing this negative coverage to us, not the people who are reporting it. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Instead of readers accusing black press editors of doing a disservice to the black community by covering negative news stories about African Americans, they should be holding the perpetrator of the incident accountable.

Black editors see it as incumbent upon them to inform African Americans about news that affects them, whether it is positive or negative. Black press coverage of a negative incident is still going to operate in contradistinction to mainstream coverage, as it will offer a more balanced perspective. One consumer explained the type of content she expected from black press outlets:

Reporting out, like, with the black community, and the greater good of that community in mind. So it doesn't mean you're changing the facts, but maybe you know, you might present the things differently. You might talk about people with more compassion because you know where they're coming from. You might make them more human when you're presenting portraits of them. And you might not silence certain news. As much as some horrible stuff happens that nobody ever talks about ... [there are] all these victories that nobody talks about except the black outlets.

Black press outlets cover both positive and negative stories about African Americans through a more compassionate lens. They also offer more equitable representations of blackness by providing a larger percentage of positive news stories about African Americans in comparison to mainstream publications. It is important for black press outlets to take control of the narrative regardless of the type of content because mainstream outlets can distort the story. Another consumer shared, "I also feel like if we aren't talking about the negative issues, somebody else will, and they could misconstrue the whole story. So it's important for both aspects." Even if black press outlets do not cover a controversial story it will still be covered by the mainstream news, which may be more troubling. Mainstream outlets may stereotype or only highlight the negative aspects of an African American's background whereas black press editors endeavor to contextualize the incident within the fullness of the person's life.

Many black press journalists believe their readers hold them to a higher standard when compared with nonblack audiences' expectations of mainstream outlets. *Black Enterprise's* Shelly Jones Jennings said, "They want you to stand up and be their voice. I think we're held definitely different than mainstream. General market, they don't put that kind of pressure on their outlets" (personal communication, August 30, 2016). Black readers want black press editors to accurately reflect their opinion on issues and will hold them accountable if they do not meet their expectations. African-American consumers are deeply invested in black press content because it is often one of the few places where they can see themselves represented. Conversely, white readers may engage with mainstream content from a more detached perspective. Given the plethora of representations of whiteness in America there is less at stake when mainstream media misses the mark. Conceptions of linked fate cause African-American readers to personalize black press content whereas white readers can more easily separate mainstream media coverage from their private lives. The unique relationship that black press readers and editors share cannot be replicated between mainstream outlets and black audiences. When mainstream publications choose to cover topics relating to African Americans they fundamentally have a different impact.

Competition with Mainstream

The increased amount of mainstream outlets targeting the African-American audience in the new media age creates more room for competition. NBC Blk and The Undefeated, owned by NBC and ESPN respectively, emerged over the course of the last four years with content created specifically for black consumers. While these outlets are commonly considered part of the black press, other mainstream outlets are increasingly covering issues relating to the black community. Mainstream's investment in content concerning African Americans can be seen as evidence of

black culture becoming more infused with mainstream culture, but additional coverage of topics previously only found in the black press creates another form of competition for black press outlets. However, many mainstream outlets still do not cover the black community accurately. They may attempt to provide similar coverage but their lack of cultural understanding of topics ranging from the criminalization of black bodies to black hair care is reflected in their content. Yet, given the larger reach of mainstream publications, they may attract more attention and overshadow black press coverage. Anslem Samuel Rocque of *Essence* shared,

We've seen it repeatedly where mainstream brands, some mainstream brands, put their toe in the AA space and it's a bad step and they're roasted for it. So, there are some things that only the black press can really cover authentically and put it in context that will be accepted from the black audience. (personal communication, August 5, 2016)

African-American readers are highly vocal when mainstream outlets do not cover the black community correctly. Some may use their social media platforms to express their frustration or comment directly on the outlet's website. The black audience will not warmly receive content on some culturally specific topics when mainstream media publishes it. But even when covering the same topic, black consumers receive mainstream content differently from content in the black press.

Consumers prefer to read content from a black journalist, especially if they disagree with the perspective. Who is writing the article can at times matter more than what is written. Readers look for clues, such as an image of the journalist, at the beginning or end of the article to inform how they receive the content. One reader said,

It's important that it's our narrative because there's so many culture vultures and a lot of cultural appropriation that goes on, that when you do see it told by somebody white, you

immediately get offended. Opposed to, if somebody black said it, you might not ...

It's just all about who's saying it [and] how it's getting said. I'm not going to be as mad at a black person for talking about black stuff as I would be if it was a white person telling me about my experience, because that's going to make me feel some type of way.

Black readers perceive some mainstream outlets as stealing aspects of black culture for their benefit. When a nonblack journalist covers topics that are strongly connected to black culture, it can be offensive to black readers because it comes off as whitesplaining (Korn, 2016). When a white journalist describes a black culture phenomenon, black consumers may believe the journalist is attempting to explain to them something that is part of their black lived experience. Given the reluctance of black consumers to accept culturally specific content written by nonblack publications, mainstream outlets are primarily creating content for nonblack readers. Mainstream's competition with black press outlets may be minimal due to their different target audience, yet their increased coverage of the black community still provides reason for concern.

I find that black audiences in fact consume mainstream news outlets more than black press outlets (see Table 9, p. 166). This affirms Squires' (2002) argument that African Americans often use the black press as a supplement to mainstream news. For example, while World Star Hip Hop is the most visited black press site among the black audience (see Table 2, p. 65), it ranks 45 among all the news outlets that African Americans visit. Also, Huffington Post Black Voices is included in the HuffPost News Network, which is ranked first, but would not be on the list if ranked separately with only 51,000 unique visitors from the black audience (see Table 5, p. 145). Although African Americans visit mainstream outlets more than the black press they are underrepresented on many of these websites. The black audience only over indexes on three of the 50 most popular news and entertainment outlets online. In addition to World Star

Hip Hop's 29 percent black audience, African Americans make up 17 percent of WeatherBug's audience and 30 percent of Celebrizone's audience compared to only comprising 11 percent of the total Internet. Additionally, when observing all of the websites that African Americans visit online black press outlets were not among the top 300 sites. The most-visited sites were similar to those most frequented by mainstream audiences including Google, MSN, YouTube, Facebook and Amazon. This suggests that the black audience does not differ much from the nonblack audience's usage of the Internet for news consumption.

The perils of entertainment in the black press are then mitigated due to the black audience's consumption of mainstream news outlets. African Americans are able to read hard news via mainstream websites and then read black press outlets for entertainment content. Yet mainstream outlets are not targeting the black audience, as evidenced by African Americans' underrepresentation on nearly all of the top news sites. Conversely, the most over-indexed sites among news and entertainment outlets are primarily black press sites, including: The Shade Room with African Americans comprising 68 percent of its audience, followed by The Jasmine Brand with a 67 percent black audience, The YBF with 54 percent, Black News with 45 percent, Media Take Out News with 43 percent and *The Final Call* with 42 percent. Although they are not the most frequented, these sites demonstrate the black press' targeting of the black audience. They also demonstrate African Americans' sustained preference for entertainment as four out of six of them focus on celebrity content. I argue that mainstream outlets can be viewed as competition since African Americans read them more than the black press, yet the low percentage of their audience that is comprised by African Americans suggests that their content is received differently.

Table 9: Top Mainstream and Black Press Websites*
(Black Unique Visitors vs. Total Unique Visitors)

Rank	Media	Black Unique Visitors (000)	Total Unique Visitors (000)	Black Audience Composition
	Total Internet: Race: Black/African-American	24,850	219,402	11%
1	YAHOO-HUFFPOST NEWS NETWORK	3,266	52,857	6%
2	MSN NEWS	2,342	26,892	9%
3	CNN NETWORK	2,171	35,092	6%
4	USA TODAY NETWORK	2,084	33,480	6%
5	CBS NEWS	1,385	25,534	5%
6	NBC NEWS DIGITAL	1,320	24,584	5%
7	NEW YORK TIMES DIGITAL	1,295	25,515	5%
8	YAHOO-HUFFPOST ENTERTAINMENT NETWORK	1,266	23,087	6%
9	WASHINGTONPOST.COM	1,156	19,634	6%
10	TRONC	1,091	19,440	6%
11	HEARST NEWSPAPERS	1,064	17,860	6%
12	WEATHER COMPANY, THE	1,061	25,726	4%
13	BBC SITES	861	13,382	6%
14	FOX NEWS DIGITAL NETWORK	817	20,562	4%
15	ABC NEWS DIGITAL	761	12,116	6%
16	INSIDER INC.	755	14,491	5%
17	BUZZFEED.COM	660	11,412	6%
18	USNEWS	659	10,880	6%
19	PEOPLE/ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY NETWORK	649	9,779	7%
20	NYPOST NETWORK	616	12,460	5%
21	THE GUARDIAN	607	10,858	6%
22	TMZ	584	5,989	10%
23	MAIL ONLINE / DAILY MAIL	575	9,826	6%
24	TIME	570	9,419	6%
25	TRIBUNE MEDIA	569	7,609	8%

26	ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT/ TV GUIDE NETWORK	554	8,183	7%
27	ADVANCE LOCAL	502	9,075	6%
28	NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SITES	483	5,831	8%
29	WEATHERBUG PROPERTY	480	2,826	17%
30	ATLANTIC MEDIA	465	7,978	6%
31	NEWSWEEK MEDIA GROUP	437	6,280	7%
32	GRAHAM HOLDINGS	406	6,873	6%
33	CELEBRIZONE	399	1,347	30%
34	NPR	395	9,570	4%
35	NEW YORK MEDIA	369	6,993	5%
36	THEHILL.COM	361	5,527	7%
37	TEGNA	344	6,103	6%
38	DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA	337	8,257	4%
39	INDEPENDENT & EVENING STANDARD (ESI MEDIA)	332	5,610	6%
40	RAYCOM MEDIA SITES	331	4,193	8%
41	SINCLAIR BROADCAST GROUP	322	5,127	6%
42	GATEHOUSE DIGITAL	316	6,852	5%
43	VARIETY MEDIA	305	5,082	6%
44	EXPRESS.CO.UK	293	5,535	5%
45	WORLDSTARHIPHOP.COM	290	1,002	29%
46	AMERICAN MEDIA INC.	274	4,450	6%
47	HEARST TELEVISION	265	4,185	6%
48	LEGACY.COM	255	6,432	4%
49	VOX.COM	252	4,506	6%
50	FOX NEWS ENTERTAINMENT	246	7,325	3%

*This list was compiled using comScore's News/Information and Entertainment News categories coupled with my manually composed list of black press websites. While the site Libreape.com initially appeared among the top 50 sites, it was removed from this list because it is in fact a redirect domain used for pop-up ads.

The current social climate is encouraging readership of content concerning African Americans but black and nonblack audiences may turn to mainstream outlets instead of the black press. Racial tensions in the US, as evidenced by the Black Lives Matter movement and the rise of white nationalism, have caused the public to pay more attention to the black community and to seek perspectives outside of their own. Damon Young of Very Smart Broths explained,

I think the social climate may make certain people seek out black voices but I don't know if they seek out the black press. They may be seeking out the black voices who write for *The Times*, or write for *The Post* or write for *The Atlantic*, instead of actually going to *Ebony*, or The Griot, or The Root or whatever. (personal communication, August 12, 2016)

Readers may be attracted to content that is produced by black journalists but published on mainstream platforms. In 1968 The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders found that the race coverage present in mainstream news publications was not objective and was in need of the perspective of black journalists in order to be more accurate and democratic. As such, the commission advocated for more black reporters and editors to be added to mainstream newsrooms across the country and noted that it was also imperative for African Americans to be in positions of “significant responsibility” (1968, p. 385). As a result, the black press suffered a “talent drain” as mainstream news outlets often hired the best journalists from these publications. Mainstream coverage of African Americans may have improved over the last 50 years but it yet negatively affects the black press by poaching producers of black press content.

Even with black journalists, mainstream outlets are still constricted in their ability to reach the black audience. Thousands of black journalists have now integrated mainstream news outlets, but many are still not in positions of power and influence (Newkirk, 2000). The American Society of Newspaper Editors adopted Goal 2000 in 1978, which aimed to increase the

employment of minorities in journalism and make the percentage of nonwhites in newsrooms proportionate to the country's population by the year 2000. However, the goal was reevaluated in 1998 and ultimately pushed back to 2025; as the minority population in the US continues to increase, the possibility of reaching the new goal remains improbable (Mellinger, 2013). The number of black journalists at mainstream outlets actually decreased by 40 percent between 1997 and 2014 as compared to a 34 percent decrease among white journalists (M. Anderson, 2014). In 2015, African Americans comprised less than five percent of newsroom employees at mainstream outlets whereas they have consistently made up around 13 percent of the US population in recent years (ASNE, 2015; US Census Bureau, 2017). But even in moderation there can be advantages to the presence of African Americans at mainstream publications. Lottie Joiner of *The Crisis* explained,

We need them in those places because a lot of people who pick up *The New York Times* may never pick up *The Crisis*. A lot of people who read *The Atlantic*, may never pick up *Essence* or *Ebony* or *Black Enterprise*. So, I think their voices are needed in those outlets. (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

Some black and nonblack consumers will never read a black press outlet but they may be exposed to content concerning African Americans via the mainstream publications they read. Accessing content about African Americans in mainstream publications is better than not reading it at all—but there are limitations to what is covered by these outlets.

The black press allows journalists to have more editorial freedom in their articles whereas black journalists at mainstream publications have more restrictions from their management. Black reporters at mainstream outlets can challenge racial stereotypes from the inside as opposed to from the periphery. This seat at the table, however, does not guarantee that black journalists

are able to produce the culturally informed content that they desire (Entman, 1990). Dorothy R. Leavell of *The Chicago Crusader* said, “often the mainstream press also has not always given them [black journalists] the liberty to write about what they want to write about and have the opinion that they have about [it]” (personal communication, April 13, 2018). Whether black journalists want to write about entertainment or hard news, most are not given the same freedom in mainstream publications as in the black press. Also, because it is difficult to research if racist content has been prevented from being published, it is challenging to measure the effect that black journalists have had in mainstream newsrooms. They have, however still been able to be effective in the black press. Flo Purnell discussed how *Emerge* magazine published a good amount of content from black journalists who worked for mainstream outlets. She said,

It was mainly because a lot of our writers were from mainstream organizations ... A significant portion of our award-winning, high-profile stories were written by people who were on the staff of *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, [and] *Miami Herald*. What we ended up doing was running stories from these highly skilled, very knowledgeable reporters, who had pitched a story to their own newspaper and their own newspaper found no value in it. (personal communication, March 12, 2018)

When black journalists are unable to get their stories published by their mainstream employer, black press outlets offer an alternative. Black press editors can recognize the value of stories that mainstream outlets overlook. Additionally, as opposed to mainstream publications, which only occasionally cover stories relating to African Americans, black press outlets have more latitude because their entire publications or websites are dedicated to the black community. It is also worth noting that when black journalists publish stories in the black press they will typically have a different angle. This is largely due to mainstream’s inability to fully understand black

culture. Kyra Kyles of *Ebony* lamented, “I want to see them [mainstream outlets] do better at covering black people, but they aren’t doing it yet. I think there are some times they do things as we do, but I still think we do it differently, from a different framework ... I don’t think they do it well enough yet for it to be a concern” (personal communication, October 18, 2016). Since mainstream outlets cannot fully capture the black perspective they cannot compete with the content in the black press on the same level.

Mainstream outlets are the black press’ competition when it comes to advertising dollars, resources, reach and access to celebrities, but they can also be allies. As addressed in chapter five, mainstream news outlets receive more advertising revenue than black press outlets. Advertisers value the mainstream audience over black consumers and may think they can incidentally reach the black audience through mainstream outlets that have black journalists writing about the African-American community. The combination of increased advertising dollars along with larger readerships provides mainstream outlets with additional resources for marketing their content. As a result, mainstream coverage of African Americans often gets more amplified than black press content, even though it may be flawed and less comprehensive. Natasha Eubanks of The YBF explained why additional exposure is needed in order to grow the black press audience. She said, “You have to be linked off to, you have to be credited, you have to be mentioned by other sites. I don’t know anybody that became a large site without ever being mentioned by someone else” (personal communication, February 6, 2018). While amplification can occur informally among mainstream news outlets, some black press outlets have established content sharing deals to formerly work with mainstream media. According to Darrell Williams, Loop 21 had relationships with The Huffington Post and *The New York Times*, Kyra Kyles stated that *Ebony* has collaborated with Mic, Lottie Joiner said *The Crisis* has published social justice

content from Slate, The Nation and *The New York Times* and Leigh Davenport shared that Hello Beautiful previously gave content to AOL before they began their own coverage of black celebrities. Black press journalists can benefit from mainstream's inability to accurately cover the black community by offering their content as a supplement. Black press editors use their collaborations with mainstream outlets to gain further exposure and attract more readers to their respective publications.

Nonblack readers may also be encouraged to seek out the black press when they encounter mainstream-produced content concerning African Americans. Mainstream audiences can develop an interest in black culture and want more content from a black perspective or they may want an alternate opinion than what is present in mainstream outlets. Lee Bailey of EUR Web stated,

If they [mainstream outlets] are serving more black content, that makes our job a little harder, to a certain extent. But, at the same time, it grows the overall audience...If you were a mainstream outlet ...and you're doing stories on black celebs, say, that you weren't normally doing, well, your audience is being educated and made aware of black celebs, or black issues that they wouldn't normally be aware of. And, maybe at a certain point, from a consciousness point of view, they will seek out more information because, again, as a white outlet, there's only so many black stories that you're going to do. Otherwise, you're no longer a white outlet ... But that audience potentially, if they're liking what they're seeing on that site, they might want to seek out more of those kinds of stories. So, in that sense, I think it's a good thing. (personal communication, August 11, 2016)

Since mainstream content is reaching a different audience, their readers' piqued interest in the black community can increase traffic to black press outlets. This dynamic then makes

mainstream outlets' increased coverage of African Americans less akin to competition and more comparable to partnership. Nonblack audience's interest in content concerning African Americans has the potential to be beneficial for all involved parties as it demonstrates the relevance of black culture and thought in American society.

Competition in the Black Press

Black press outlets compete for readers in order to attract advertisers but they ultimately prioritize collaboration. As noted in chapter five, given the scarcity of advertising revenue available to black press outlets, many compete for this limited funding, whether directly or indirectly. Yet, while there is monetary incentive for competition, many black press editors in fact support each other; numerous black press outlets intentionally link to each other or create partnerships. For example, Very Smart Brothas and Love B. Scott previously had monthly columns in *Ebony* magazine and for eight years Journal-isms had a tab on The Root's website, which included stories originally published on Journal-isms and republished on The Root. Nicki Mayo of *The Philadelphia Tribune* shared that she frequently asks other black press editors for a "link out," which entails sending an email with a link to a story and asking them to share it, and they do the same. Kyra Kyles noted that *Ebony* has linked to content from The Undefeated and Blavity and Lottie Joiner of *The Crisis* said the outlet has published content from The Root. Brande Victorian of Madame Noire shared,

I think there's a way to be friendly, we can work together on things, but your strategy for your site I don't think is going to be hindered by doing a partnership with someone on something. You know showing solidarity with other black female sites, or anything like that. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Black press editors do not believe that they are losing anything by supporting other outlets.

Conversely showing solidarity helps everyone to be more successful.

There is a familial sense among black press outlets that helps to motivate and encourage black press editors. Many have worked together at other publications and developed friendships. Taryn Finley of Huffington Post Black Voices described the camaraderie among black press journalists. She said,

It's love and we all have a shared experience of the struggle of ... getting our news updated [and] to the top of the interwebs. Or even sharing joyous moments of being surrounded by black people among our newsroom or among our team. That's just like a really beautiful thing. When we all come together, it's really dope. We also have partnerships with a lot of these outlets. I think about Refinery29 Unbothered. We have a relationship where we encourage each other and draw traffic to each other's Instagram pages. Yeah, it's definitely some friendly competition there. (personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Black press editors can relate to both the frustration of each other's financial limitations and the joy in publishing content that directly speaks to their audience. Black press editors watch what each other cover and frequently republish content they think will resonate with their readers, regardless if a link out was requested. I find that black press editors rely on each other for both content and moral support. Danielle C. Belton of The Root stated, "We all need each other. Yes. We need each other's support. We need each other's competition ... We make each other better" (personal communication, August 22, 2016). When black press editors support each other it helps strengthen the black press as a whole.

Many black press journalists subscribe to the idea of collective success in that the more other black press outlets do well, the better for each of their individual outlets. Damon Young of Very Smart Brothas shared,

I hope that Undefeated is successful because that proves to the people who are writing the checks that, “Hey, you can have a site that is targeted towards black people, you can put a ton of money behind it, and it can be a profitable endeavor.” So it’s funny, although on paper it doesn’t seem like I should feel this way, I want all black sites to succeed.

Because, and for selfish reasons, because their success will bode well for us. (personal communication, August 12, 2016).

Black press editors want black-targeted outlets outside of their own to resonate with audiences. The success of any black press outlet benefits them individually because it proves the profitability of the black press space. Editors can use other outlets to exemplify how black press content is not only wanted by producers but desired by consumers as well. Advertisers may then be more likely to invest in other black press outlets because they can tangibly see that there is a market for the content.

Sometimes individual success in the black press is valued less than group advancement. For example, Danny Bakewell, Sr. formerly served as executive editor of *The Los Angeles Sentinel* and the chairman of NNPA. Danny Bakewell, Jr., who currently leads the newspaper, recalled how his father had to negotiate with advertisers on behalf of smaller black press outlets. He said,

There was a time when advertisers would say, “We want to buy in these five papers. We want to buy with Los Angeles, New York, five big markets.” He wouldn’t take the dollars unless they bought across the board. Unless they bought into all the papers ...

We're in Los Angeles, we're historically one of the largest bigger papers [so] we're always going to get a national buy just because they want to be in LA. But there's a lot of smaller African-American papers that need to be included in it. That's the whole concept of NNPA. It's bringing the group together ... Like in anything in our community, we can't get divided. We have to stay together. (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

Bakewell Sr.'s insistence that advertisers also purchase placements in smaller publications as opposed to solely in larger outlets demonstrated his interest in the long-term success of the black press. Sacrificing the personal gain of one or a few outlets in favor of collective success is evidence of the black press' communal nature.

Many of my interlocutors believed the more black press outlets the merrier. They stated the need for variety within the black press concerning different types of content and perspectives. More black press outlets also means more opportunities for black journalists to find employment. As opposed to viewing the black press landscape as constricted, they believe that there is space for everyone. This is because black press outlets are serving different segments of the black audience and catering to consumers' varied interests. Joiner explained,

I think we have different audiences. Just because you get *Ebony* does not mean you don't also want *Black Enterprise*. Just because you get *Essence* does not mean you don't want another African-American publication. I think we all offer something different. (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

Black press consumers read multiple outlets so reading one does not eliminate the possibility that they will read another. While more outlets may not heighten competition, it can become problematic when seeking a unified African-American perspective.

Decentralization

Nationally circulated legacy black press publications such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines were the primary sources that African Americans turned to for content about the black community from when they first began publishing (in 1945, 1951 and 1970, respectively) through the 1990s. But in the new media age there are many additional outlets that circulate African-American thought and discourse. Multiple traditional black print outlets ascribed to strategic essentialism (Bell, 2004), which advanced the interests of middle-class African Americans above others in the community. This approach provided abridged objectives and served the group's need to present a unified stance on social issues. Currently, given the numerous outlets that African-American consumers turn to for information, there is not one dominant perspective that prevails on many social issues. The black press has become decentralized, which has affected the amplification of community goals. One Generation X focus group participant explained the downsides of decentralization. She said,

We are used to having black people having a voice or a leader or a couple of leaders that we follow. *Essence* was the voice, *Ebony* was the voice, and now what we're doing is we're trying to find the balance. You're decentralized; how do you then present a united front or a united voice on certain issues?

Fewer black press outlets allowed for black consumers to look to legacy publications as leaders of the community. Without a commonly referenced leader of the black press in the 21st century, African Americans may not be as effective when advocating against social inequalities.

But decentralization is not inherently detrimental to the black community. When there were only a few leading black press outlets there was a false impression of unity. Historically, many African-American identities and perspectives were excluded from black press coverage.

This created secondary marginalization (Cohen, 1999) where certain groups within the black community were further discounted. Taryn Finley of Huffington Post Black Voices shared,

There was a time, not too, too long ago, when our [women's] stories were almost absent from black press. I'm not talking about *Essence* or *Ebony* because those are magazines with a predominantly black-woman-targeted demographic. I'm talking about black press sites who ... I don't know if [they] got caught up in the same or similar pushing out of marginalized people in communities as mainstream does. I don't think that any one publication has done it perfectly. I think that we all have a lot to work on, especially when it comes to incorporating the black people who are oftentimes voiceless in mainstream period, which are the LGBTQ, the disabled, the black veterans, all of these intersectional identities that we have. (personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Some legacy outlets overlooked women and LGBTQ people and instead foregrounded advocating for heterosexual black men. Legacy black press publications were then similar to mainstream outlets that selectively covered the black community. *The Philadelphia Tribune's* Nicki Mayo noted that *Ebony* often published content about the same leaders and did not include many newcomers. Similarly Waddie Grant of The G-Listed stated that he began his website to focus on the black LGBTQ community because other black press outlets' definition of advocacy was too narrow. He shared,

The reason why I've done [my website] is because when I read, whether it's black, LGBTQ, or nonblack or LGBTQ, when they mention black gay/lesbian people, it's usually the same 10, 20 names, half of them are deceased ... So I said, no, I'm more tuned in to what's going on in the community. (personal communication, February 3, 2018)

Grant's personal knowledge of the black LGBTQ community better equips him to cover the demographic. Decentralization of the black press then allows for more black identities to be represented and preferences intersectional inclusivity over strategic essentialism.

Decentralization also makes it more difficult to obstruct or significantly limit black thought. One consumer said, "You don't want to be able to cut it off at the head and the whole thing dies. You want there to be voices out there. So, I think it is like that now." Given the numerous black press outlets in the new media age, the failure or of any singular black press outlet will not ultimately cause the cessation of the medium or black communal discourse.

Legacy publications have since adapted to the digital space but some readers find them less relevant and choose not to read them. Among the top 36 black press websites consumed by African Americans, many traditional print outlets are not even in the top 20: *Black Enterprise* is 21, *Ebony/Jet* is number 23 and *The Philadelphia Tribune* is 36 (see Table 2, p. 65). Other long-publishing black press newspapers such as *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, *The Chicago Defender* and *The New York Amsterdam News* had audiences that were too small to be measured by comScore. While traditional publications have not maintained their dominant status, digital outlets have not yet replaced them. Gary Dauphin, formerly of *Africana*, said,

I think a lot of these black ... like *The Amsterdam News*, a lot of these were quasi-national institutions. People knew about them who didn't necessarily live in those localities because they were dealing with the big issues of the day, and then obviously *Ebony* and *Jet*. I just don't think, from a standpoint of institutions, there's nothing out there. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Black press outlets that had national recognition and readerships were previously regarded as institutions in the black community. Currently, however, there is not a singular black press outlet

online that is viewed as an institution. Numerous focus group participants were not aware that many of the black press outlets I listed even existed and there was not a single outlet that all of my interlocutors read. Decentralization can then impede the creation of a preeminent black press publication, even if it aimed to be inclusive and representative of the diversity of the black community.

A national black press outlet online may advance community goals but it may not be in the best interest of the medium. When discussing the potential of creating one black press outlet instead of the nearly 200 local publications currently under the NNPA, Danny Bakewell, Jr. of *The Los Angeles Sentinel* noted that, sometimes, black press editors need to put the interests of the larger black press above individual interests. He said,

You have to do what's in the best interest of everyone, not just what's in the best interest for you. I think we could raise the dollars to do it if we wanted to, but I don't think that would be good for the greater black press. (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

Instead of adding to the black press landscape, a national black press outlet would potentially cannibalize local and small black press outlets. This would then work against the black press as a collective because it reduces the number of publications available to consumers that are able to provide extensive coverage of their communities and individual interests. A variety of outlets ensures that there is constant dialogue within the community, which ultimately contributes to the health of the black public sphere at large.

The Digital Black Public Sphere

While traditional understandings of the black public sphere have positioned it as operating in physical spaces, the current digital landscape requires that a virtual sphere be

considered as an extension or revival of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). The multiplicity of black press outlets online serves the purpose of providing additional spaces for agency within the black community. As a reflector and enabler of the black public sphere, the black press' adaptation to the new media age evidences the continued existence and growth of black communal discourse. The digital black public sphere works in conjunction with the physical public sphere as African-American ideologies are no longer confined to churches, barbershops and print publications. One consumer shared,

To me, that's the brilliance of black publications and black online news media, is that news can get around much quicker, and there's more conversations ... A lot of people are not in the community centers or in the churches where a lot of the conversation happens. We don't all work in totally black places where we talk about stuff on our breaks. We don't do that anymore. Now a lot of that conversation is online and, to me, that's the brilliance of the decentralization of the black press.

The digital black press offers an alternative space for African Americans to converse as some people do not have access to black community spaces and others move away from them. As The Great Migration prompted African Americans to leave the South and the Civil Rights Movement resulted in more integrated spaces, fewer African Americans have access to community dialogue that is physically situated. The digital presence of black press outlets facilitates access to the black public sphere that may have otherwise been foreclosed or constrained.

The digital black press also creates opportunities for more alternative ideologies to be shared among the black community. Some African Americans may feel more comfortable participating in the public sphere digitally. The ability to be anonymous online removes some boundaries and promotes open discussion, giving users more confidence to voice dissent in

contexts that usually encourage conformity (Cubbage, 2014). But there are disadvantages to anonymity as well as people may share “hasty opinions” instead of engaging in thoughtful and purposeful discourse (Papacharissi, 2002). The quintessential black public sphere, however, should in fact allow space for debate and dissent as a means to enhance discussion or to deepen previously held opinions. Less popular ideologies can aid in affirming and strengthening dominant perspectives or they can provide a more nuanced understanding of complex social issues.

Black press publications have traditionally operated as integral contributors to the black public sphere and they are continuing to fulfill this role online. Black press newspapers historically served as spaces for readers to interact with others in the black community. Gary Dauphin, formerly of *Africana*, stated,

The black press, their traditional relationship to the community was as forums for conversations, forums for celebration, forums for entrepreneurial activity, classifieds, all the things that a functioning newspaper does in a community in terms of suturing this together, giving people a way to talk to each other and think about stuff. (personal communication, March 2, 2018)

Outside of communal conversations that took place in physical locations, the black press served as a means for African Americans to further discuss group activities. The relational dynamic between black press readers and journalists still exists, but now it is also available digitally. Black press editors feel charged to amplify discussions that are happening in the black community online and offline. Danielle C. Belton of *The Root* said,

We should be elevating whatever dialogue is going on within the community, what they want to talk about, whether it’s social justice or reality TV shows. If that’s what they

want to talk about, we should be discussing it. It's very community focused.

(personal communication, August 16, 2016)

The black press helps to circulate African Americans' conversations whether they are focused on entertainment or politics. Black press outlets reflect whatever the community is interested in discussing without respect to subject matter. I find that black press producers' and consumers' continued engagement with the black public sphere helps black communal discourse to persist regardless of the format.

Resourcefulness and Survival

Most news outlets are still searching for a viable economic model in the 21st century but the black press is accustomed to operating under financial constraints. The Great Recession caused all of news media to adjust their revenue streams and the black press was affected by advertisers' and consumers' limited budgets. However, given the historical challenges that black press editors have faced over the years, they have a more optimistic perspective. Danny Bakewell, Jr. of *The Los Angeles Sentinel* explained,

So we're not feeling it the way other papers, that big media outlets are. The *LA Times* or other big media, you hear about them laying off 200 employees. We never had 200 employees. We never in some cases had 20. So, like I said, our reality is just different.

We all know how to get by on a shoestring budget. That's the reality of ... that's also part of our story as a people. (personal communication, May 15, 2018)

Since larger mainstream outlets have more people on staff, they also have more to lose whereas black press outlets started with and have maintained smaller operations. As such they are accustomed to working with smaller budgets just as African Americans have collectively

adjusted to the black community's lower household wealth. Outside of expectations of profitability, many black press editors view the medium's ability to simply endure over the years as an accomplishment. Glenn Burkins of Q City Metro said, "Just the fact that we have survived speaks volumes because it's a cutthroat business" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). Many mainstream news outlets have folded since 2008, so any black press outlet that is able to remain in business is considered successful.

Black press editors have found creative ways to continue publishing despite their limited financial means. Dorothy R. Leavell of *The Chicago Crusader* said, "What is so great about us is that we have always had to be innovative" (personal communication, May 3, 2018). Black press outlets have continued to create relevant content that resonates with their audience and use their resources wisely. Datwon Thomas of *Vibe* discussed the resilience of black press outlets over time. He said, "The black press, the thing that they do well is they stay in the fight" (personal communication, May 23, 2018). Given the constant challenges that black media faces economically, their ability to survive even during times of monetary hardships is noteworthy.

One of the reasons black press outlets are able to survive is due to the persistence of racial injustice in America. Even outside of racially centered social movements, issues of discrimination and prejudice are ever present. *The Crisis'* Lottie Joiner stated,

As long as there is injustice, black press is needed. And I don't see injustice going away. As long as there is racism and discrimination and white supremacy ... I think the black press is always going to be needed. Because America is not a perfect place. (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

Given that racism was pervading the United States even prior to the country's founding (the slave trade began in the 16th century and America was not founded until 1776), it is not likely to

disappear in the near future. African Americans have been affected by all of American history and are important actors in the country's narrative. Kevin Merida of *The Undeclared* shared,

In every period of history there's lots that's going on with us and about us. And so there's no difference in this climate. There's certainly a lot to write about and cover and to reflect on and offer commentary for. (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

The black press will continue to have significant content due to the many sociopolitical issues that concern African Americans. There are numerous stories about the black community that go untold so there is ample material for black press editors to create germane and influential content.

Black press outlets also maintain relevance because it is still imperative that African Americans tell their own stories. The editors of *Freedom's Journal* created the first black press newspaper in 1827 for exactly that reason; they said, "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us" (Dates, 1993, p. 372). Their mission is just as relevant today as it was nearly 200 years ago. Mainstream news media coverage of the black community is increasing but nonblack journalists are unable to consistently provide equitable and well-informed content. Janeé Bolden of *Bossip* said, "I think until we're in a society that's a truly race-blind society, there's always going to be a need for us to promote our own culture" (personal communication, September 1, 2016). Given that racial dynamics remain a salient component of American society, it is incumbent upon black press editors to provide content by and for African Americans. Just as with the Civil Rights Movement, present-day racial issues are becoming a prominent component of the national public sphere. As such, it is more likely that mainstream news outlets will have

content concerning the black community, yet the black press should be readers' premier resource for such content. Nicki Mayo of *The Philadelphia Tribune* said,

Everyone is trying to tell our story, so yes this is a perfect time for us. But it should be us telling our stories, first. And you can't stop other people from telling your stories, but you can definitely make sure that you are at the forefront of it. That you are a leader of it.

That yours is considered the go-to. (personal communication, April 18, 2018)

It is imperative that black press outlets control the narrative and lead discussions that are important to the black community. Black press editors want to ensure that their content is elevated above mainstream's and that they are seen as an authoritative source for topics concerning African Americans.

Some editors believe the current social climate is giving the black press more influence than before and causing the medium to re-examine its goals. The increase of black press outlets online and the high circulation of news content via social media have heightened the black press' exposure. Darrell Williams of Loop21 shared, "I think that probably more than any time, black press has an impact on the overall public perception. That's a huge thing" (personal communication, February 12, 2018). The black press is increasingly part of national conversations about African Americans. As content from black press outlets begins influencing those outside of the black community, editors are being forced to think critically about their outlets' mission and objectives. Gary Dauphin, formerly of *Africana*, said, "The community is always under duress, so there's always a need, so this [social climate] is extra, and I think that that will have an unintended consequence in really clarifying goals, needs" (personal communication, March 2, 2018). The black press is always needed given that African Americans

have consistently faced discrimination, but the present sociopolitical climate increases the stakes. As a result, black press editors are more intentional about finding ways to remain relevant.

One way for black press outlets to ensure their survival is through platform expansion. The comScore metrics provided in Table 8 (p. 151) show the black audience's increased engagement with the black press via mobile. In order to capitalize on this trend black press outlets can create mobile apps to accompany their websites. Of the 42 outlets with total audience mobile web and app data, only 14 had apps that were measurable and only two of the 34 with black audience data were measurable. In addition to the 14 with measurable apps three other outlets had apps but did not meet the minimum reporting standards. This means that 25 of the 42 black press websites that attract a sizeable mobile audience do not currently offer mobile apps. This is significant because Nelson and Lei (2018) found that audiences spend more time reading news content from apps than from mobile websites and desktops. As such, if black press outlets provide apps to complement their websites, they can potentially increase access to their stories via mobile and incentivize readers to interact with content for longer periods of time.

Another strategy for continued relevance is engaging the Generation Z audience. Leavell discussed *The Chicago Crusader's* intention to add coverage of high school sports to their publication as a way to attract younger readers. Black press outlets can also gain readership through social media engagement. Focus group participants suggested that the black press enlarge its presence on social media, particularly on Snapchat, as a way to reach teens where they already are. Black press editors also saw social media as a way for the black press to meet the needs of their audience. Kimberly N. Foster of For Harriet said,

Black people disproportionately are using Instagram. Black people are disproportionately accessing their information via smartphone. Black people disproportionately make up the user bases of Twitter and Facebook. So these are where black people are, black content consumers are, and so that's where black media needs to be. (personal communication, August 10, 2016)

Since African Americans comprise a large number of social media users, and younger audiences are more likely to use these platforms, the black press can continue to grow by being active in these spaces.

Black press editors also saw increasing the number of young people working for black press outlets as a way to secure the institution's survival. Bakewell, Jr. noted that *The Los Angeles Sentinel* currently has a young staff and Kyra Kyles of *Ebony* spoke of ways the black press can enhance their recruiting methods to allow more students or recent graduates to afford to enter the industry. She said, "I think using some of our resources, crowdfunding, getting scholarships, getting funding from foundations; we could do a better job of getting more people into the field in a manner that doesn't break them financially" (personal communication, October 18, 2016). Given the low wages that the black press is able to provide in comparison to mainstream news outlets it is difficult to attract young journalists. However, the journalism school to black press outlet pipeline is in fact being addressed by some higher education institutions. Ingrid Sturgis, who formerly worked for *Essence*, is currently an associate professor at Howard University, which is a prominent HBCU. She stated,

We're getting more demand here at Howard for our students to work for the black press, and some of our students have graduated to work at some of these places, and they help them with new tools, new ways of looking at things. So I don't know, maybe in like five

to ten years we'll see the impact of that, but I think it's just really starting to take off.

(personal communication, April 12, 2018)

As more students are going to work for black press outlets, they bring with them knowledge of how to appeal to their generation. The effect of Generation Z's participation in the black press is not yet evident but it could certainly prove fruitful in years to come.

The black press' long history coupled with its continued efforts to serve its audience, demonstrates the medium's ability to endure regardless of, or because of, social factors. Increased mainstream coverage of the black community and severe financial limitations have not eliminated the need for the black press. As such, I argue that the black press will always be relevant as it serves an important function in American society that cannot be duplicated by other spaces. As long as black press editors stay committed to targeting the black audience—the one criteria that has remained consistent since the black press' inception—they will be needed resources in the media landscape, whether they focus on hard news or entertainment content.

Limitations and Future Research

The comScore data used for this dissertation created some limitations. A few outlets that were previously popular in print and some contemporary well-known websites that were mentioned by my interlocutors were not available for analysis via comScore's platform. These included sites such as AwesomelyLuvvie.com, BallerAlert.com, *Los Angeles Wave* newspaper, *Upscale Magazine*, *Uptown Magazine* and 21Ninety.com. Other black-targeted spaces such as Buzz Feed's Coco Butter and Refinery 29's Unbothered have their own social media presence but are not designated as separate entities from their mainstream websites, which would have skewed my data had I included them. Also, I used comScore's "Black/African American" target

audience category, which allows for analytics to be restricted to only black consumers' online behavior. However, since this category does not differentiate between African Americans and others in the African diaspora—such as the sizeable Nigerian, Haitian, Caribbean and black British communities living in America who may not identify as African American—it may not be an accurate representation of African-American interests. This was especially problematic when trying to discern the top news sites (mainstream and black press) that African Americans visit given that the list of sites where the black audience over indexed included global websites situated in countries corresponding with the aforementioned communities. Yet another limitation was the inability to account for difference among African Americans and not conceptualize the race as a monolith. Political affiliation, education level, ethnic background and other factors are certainly important characteristics that can alter understandings of the black audience. I did not take these differences into account in this research but further analysis of these demographics can provide additional insight into black press consumption practices.

Black consumers' engagement with the black press on social media is also largely absent from this dissertation. In their research on young adults' Twitter adoption and usage, Hargattai and Litt (2011) found that African Americans are more likely to use the social media platform than other racial groups. They stated, "The relationship of site adoption with being African American seems to be due to the fact that members of this group are more likely to be interested in entertainment and celebrity news than Whites" (pp. 835-836). As such, there is a strong correlation between entertainment, the black press and social media. Some of my focus group participants shared that they primarily viewed black press content through social media platforms and some journalists acknowledged the high level of reader engagement via Twitter and Facebook. While I was interested in how black press outlets were utilizing social media to reach

their target audience, I was not able to fully investigate this angle. comScore provided source/loss data for websites, which determines what sites users were visiting before coming to a particular site (e.g., Facebook or Google) and where they went afterward, but these metrics were not available for many of my sites of inquiry. Also when data was available it was predominately from Facebook and only a few had Twitter metrics available, but since Generation Z is more present on Instagram and Snapchat (M. Anderson & Jiang, 2018), metrics for these spaces may prove more relevant. Having social media data can help illuminate the intentionality of black press consumers as accessing an outlet through social media can represent an incidental interest in the content as opposed to a direct and intentional visit to the site. It can also speak to how well each outlet is engaging with younger readers, as Generation Z tends to be more present in social media spaces.

The black press has never been static but in the new media age change may be occurring more frequently than in the past. When I started my research in 2016, some outlets were measurable by comScore, but when I concluded my data collection in 2018 those same sites were too small to be measured. Those outlets include *The Chicago Defender*, Clutch Magazine (its website is now defunct), For Harriet (which is publishing content less frequently), Hip Hollywood, The Urban Daily (it is owned by iOne Digital which launched Cassius in May of 2017 and stopped updating TUD content later that year), Very Smart Brothas (which is now a subsidiary of The Root), xoNecole and Your Black World (which has not published content since December 2018). Over the course of my research there were many shifts regarding the roles of my interlocutors as well. For example, Lottie Joiner is no longer interim but now officially editor-in-chief at *The Crisis* and Danielle C. Belton went from managing editor to editor-in-chief of The Root. Conversely, Kyra Kyles is no longer with *Ebony* and Anslem

Samuel Rocque is no longer at *Essence*. Ownership shifts may have affected some of these personnel and metrics changes. Between 2016 and 2019 Johnson Publishing Company sold *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines to Clear View Group (an African-American investment group) and subsequently declared bankruptcy, black entertainer Byron Allen bought The Grio from its founders, Time Inc. sold *Essence* to black businessman Richelieu Dennis, black film producer Will Packer bought xoNecole from its founder Necole Kane and Univision re-launched The Root under its newly formed Gizmodo Media Group and added Very Smart Brothas as a vertical before selling Gizmodo to a private equity firm. There is also evidence of continued growth among black press outlets in the digital space. In 2019, Refinery29's Unbothered, which targets black millennial women and was previously only on social media, expanded and began distributing a newsletter. Also, before he passed away in 2016, former *Emerge* magazine editor-in-chief George Curry was raising money to re-launch the publication online. Similarly, in 2019, prominent activist Shaun King successfully re-launched Frederick Douglass' *The North Star* newspaper as an online-only news outlet that also includes nightly news broadcasts and podcasts; he hopes to eventually offer a mobile app as well. In his announcement of the paper's revival he stated,

Douglass and Delany knew then, as we know now, that in order to fight back against injustice, their stories had to not only be well told—with the color and dimension and nuance that was frequently missing elsewhere, they knew they needed a newspaper that represented the cause of liberation with urgency, clarity, heart, and soul. We need that right now. (King, 2018)

Despite the many black press outlets on and offline, there is a continued need for black press content. The same reasons that abolitionist newspapers were founded nearly 200 years ago

persist in the 21st century. This dissertation has aimed to build on historical black press scholarship and insert the black press into discourse about journalism's adaptation to the new media age. My research captures the black press in its current instantiation, but future research should continue to acknowledge the sustained existence of the black press and investigate how it is evolving.

Conclusion

The prevalence of entertainment content on black-targeted outlets alters the conceptualization of the black press as an advocacy organ. Journalists and readers who understand advocacy to be political activism see entertainment as a threat to African Americans' participation in American democracy. When black-owned and nonblack-owned outlets subvert hard news content in favor of entertainment it can limit the black community's knowledge of communal ideologies. Those who view advocacy as representation, however, value the addition of entertainment outlets, which provide multiple sources of engagement for the black audience. A decentralized black press is able to address the diversity of the black community and promote intersectional inclusivity in a manner that was previously constrained in legacy black press outlets. Nicki Mayo of *The Philadelphia Tribune* stated, "Those who have a digital-first black press platform, they said screw it. The whole damn thing is about to be black ... It wasn't about assimilation or trying to be like everyone else, it's openly, unapologetically black" (personal communication, April 18, 2018). Entertainment-focused black press websites exhibit an editorial freedom that expands understandings of legitimacy to include colloquial language and unapologetic depictions of blackness. Pushing against the professional journalism standards and respectability politics present in the traditional black press, 21st century black press outlets are

creating content that is less concerned with the white gaze and more interested in depicting the fullness of black life.

Entertainment is welcome as a complement to hard news content in the black press but can be problematic when it is produced solely for financial gain. Nonblack owners of black press outlets preference entertainment over political content to the detriment of the black community. Since the nonblack audience for black press outlets outnumbers the black audience online it is essential that African Americans are not perceived as one-dimensional and that there is balanced content across outlets. As mainstream news outlets increasingly cover African Americans, interest in black press content is growing among nonblack audiences, but black editors still need to control the narrative. Since black-owned outlets are less likely to promote monetary incentives over the sociopolitical health of the black community they are best positioned to reflect and promote the interests of African Americans.

As communication scholars continue to investigate how journalism is operating in the new media age, alternative news outlets such as the black press offer a more comprehensive understanding of the field. The black press evidences how minority communities are using digital media to increase representation and expand communal discourse. It also exemplifies a mutually beneficial reader-journalist relationship as opposed to the more contentious dynamic between mainstream journalists and consumers. This dissertation has challenged scholars' conceptions of entertainment news as fundamentally being against the interests of editors and the public (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Prior, 2005). The supply-and-demand gap between hard news and entertainment is minimal in the black press as most editors and consumers value entertainment. I argue that the public-service mission of journalism is not endangered in the black press as journalists are in fact fulfilling their mission by providing content that is

intentionally targeting the black audience. My work ultimately aligns with research that has argued for a broader understanding of the usefulness of entertainment (Baum, 2002; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Entertainment in the black press is providing culturally informed content for and about a population that is otherwise underrepresented. Also, the low barrier of access to the black press online is creating opportunities for those outside of the black community to learn and engage with topics concerning African Americans. The black press' large nonblack audience online demonstrates the unique function the medium provides for advancing American democracy.

Black press editors and readers are reimagining media content to first and foremost better meet the needs of the black community. Black press outlets are a tangible manifestation of African Americans' pursuit of equality in the US. As they produce content that is excluded from mainstream news and do so from a black perspective, black press editors serve an important role in maintaining a healthy democracy. The absence of hard news in the black press would silence political thought and limit African Americans' participation in American society. However, the presence of both hard news and entertainment-focused outlets provides well-rounded coverage of a diverse black community. Black readers' engagement with the black press signifies their interest in being informed citizens. As such, black press producers and consumers are both active agents in promoting civil engagement via their contribution to the black public sphere. The black press in the new media age is uplifting African Americans in myriad ways but advocacy remains an essential component, whether it is promoted through entertainment or hard news content. Producers' and consumers' understandings of the black press have expanded to reflect the current diversity of outlets; though it may operate differently in the 21st century, the black press' ability to adapt ensures the continued existence of a vital institution in the black community.

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