

Excerpt: The Black Press: Past and Present

Larry Muhammad

The following is a selection from Larry Muhammad's piece "The Black Press: Past and Present", as published in Nieman Reports fall 2003. The full article, which represents Muhammad's viewpoints on the history of the Black press, can be found [here](#).

"[The U.S. Black press] began in 1827 when John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish started Freedom's Journal in New York. By the Civil War, 40 black newspapers were being published. And, during the 1920's and 30's, when major papers virtually ignored black America, the glory days of the black press began.

Back then, major papers usually wouldn't even run African-American obituaries. Black papers became the primary means of group expression and main community service outlet, reporting on job opportunities and retailers that didn't discriminate, and covering charity events in uplifting society pages with big pictures of smiling, dignified black people enjoying each other's company. Politics, sports, money and social issues were reported from the perspective of black readers. The careers of Lena Horne, Little Richard, Paul Robeson, and many other entertainment greats were promoted in their early stages before major media took notice, and editorial writers crusaded for open housing, quality schools, voting rights, fair employment, and equal accommodations—demands that later formed the civil rights agenda. There were bylined stories from America's leading black activists and intellectuals—Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Langston Hughes in *The Chicago Defender* and W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Marcus Garvey, and Elijah Muhammad in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Black publishers grew rich and powerful. Robert S. Abbott started the *Defender* with \$13.75 and became one of America's first black millionaires. By 1929, the *Defender* circulation was 230,000 a week, but the *Pittsburgh Courier* was biggest, topping 300,000 with 15 editions across the country. In 1932, *Courier* publisher Robert L. Vann, Abbott and others steered black voters en masse to the Democratic Party, breaking traditional ties to the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln and helping to elect Franklin D. Roosevelt President. Gunnar Myrdal's landmark 1944 study, "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy," said the strongest, most influential institution among blacks was its crusading press. It set the stage for—and helped engineer—monumental change from school desegregation in 1954 to the voting rights bill of 1957, the marches, sit-ins and civil rights legislation of 1964."