

Fred Carroll. *Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century.* History of Communication Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 278 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08303-7.

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Published on Jhistory (April, 2019)

Commissioned by Robert A. Rabe

Race News opens with Marvel Cooke picketing during an eleven-week lockout by the *New York Amsterdam News* that ended with union recognition and her decision to join the Communist Party. She soon left the *News* to work for a series of progressive newspapers, and after the collapse of the Popular Front, was subpoenaed by the Senate during the McCarthy era and ultimately blacklisted. Cooke's story is followed by that of Ethel Payne, who served as Washington bureau chief for the *Chicago Defender* after World War II. Although Payne believed that "Black journalists have a responsibility to be advocates," her activism was more narrowly focused on civil rights and integration and her journalism more attuned to mainstream conventions (p. 2).

This intriguing book proceeds to offer a sweeping overview of black journalism from 1910 (with the founding of *The Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender*) through the 1970s, when growing numbers of black journalists found themselves working in mainstream newsrooms officially committed to integration, though often falling short in practice. Author Fred Carroll, a lecturer at Kenesaw State University, sets out to explore the intersections between journalism and advocacy, radicalism and reform, and black journalists' thorny relationship with an often-repressive federal gov-

ernment and hostile white press. Despite this broad canvas, *Race News* is built on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, drawing on several archival collections, including material associated with the Associated Negro Press (ANP), *Baltimore African-American*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*, as well as writers from the mainstream press and more radical figures, such as Hubert Harrison.

Carroll's overarching theme is the interplay between the commercial and alternative black press, which he suggests became increasingly interwoven in the decades between the world wars before separating in the 1950s under the pressure of the Cold War. It is, I think, possible to overplay the separation between the commercial and alternative press, and hence changes in the boundaries between them. Indeed, Carroll recognizes this, noting that "profits and protest went together" for the commercial press and many writers straddled the commercial-radical divide (p. 4). Newspapers like the *New Orleans Tribune* or the *Richmond Planet* operated as businesses, to be sure (and successful ones at that), but the conditions in which they were produced and read compelled substantial advocacy. The ANP news service predominantly served more commercially oriented publishers, and indeed for many years

its proprietor Claude Barnett combined his journalistic and public relations efforts—including press releases (and for a time sponsored content that publishers would be paid for running) with the news packets. While some radicals wrote for the ANP, Barnett also funneled money to black newspapers to publish Republican Party campaign material at advertising space rates until the Republicans decided to economize and served on the board of the Tuskegee Institute. He gave space to activists and radicals at least in part because they could provide coverage of Africa and civil rights struggles on the cheap, coverage that could provide unique, relevant information to subscribing newspapers without requiring international travel or salaries the ANP could not afford.

The first chapter of *Race News* situates the rise of a modern, commercial press in the rapid urbanization of the African American population in the early 1900s, with particular focus on the *Chicago Defender* and the *Crisis* magazine, which does not fit the thesis nearly as well. “These editors condemned lynchings, denounced segregation, and defended citizenship rights with audacious militancy.... Circulations surged as new competitors intensified the pursuit of news” (p. 15). The *Chicago Defender*, with its brash design, sensationalist headlines, and vigorous advocacy, exemplifies this commercial approach. Such papers—and there were many such papers—combined traditional race advocacy with yellow journalism to build large circulations. Earlier publishers had also drawn inspiration from the mass circulation press; the *Richmond Planet* featured screaming headlines, prominently played a first-person narrative of its editor’s effort to avert a lynching, and published a regular column, “Reign of Lawlessness.” However, beginning in the 1880s urbanization offered new opportunities for advertising and consumption, cultural and social activities, and the establishment of local and national businesses that provided a vibrant ecosystem in which black newspapers could thrive.

Chapter 2 explores the Harlem Renaissance and related efforts to chart new paths in journalism, culture, and politics. The “New Negro” movement Carroll discusses began well before World War I (Harrison, for example, had long since been fired from the post office for his activism and had already passed through the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World by 1920), but Carroll argues that it became prominent in the post-war years. Many radicals wrote for both alternative and mainstream publications, as blacks grappled with the reality that World War I had not established democracy in America, the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent, and *de facto* segregation and discrimination could not be escaped simply by fleeing the South for northern cities.

Chapter 3 explores the incorporation of radical critiques of colonialism and racial exploitation into the commercial press, in part facilitated by larger budgets and page counts that allowed more diverse voices and a more expansive approach to news coverage. Many publishers opened their pages to voices in the Communist Party milieu during the Popular Front era, voices that seemed more willing to discuss the especially harsh impact of the Great Depression on African American communities and the New Deal’s accommodation to segregation and discrimination. Communist journalist Ben Burns, who could pass as black, became an editor at the *Chicago Defender* and, later, *Ebony*. Radicals, including George Padmore, *People’s World* editor John Pittman (using a pseudonym for his work on the *Defender*), and Richard Wright, wrote for mainstream black newspapers; the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*’s relatively conservative publisher, P. B. Young, said he viewed Communism “as just one of the factors in a growing world-wide ideal to improve the conditions of the under-privileged,” even as he criticized the radicalism of competitors’ opinion pages (p. 75). Carroll argues that an expanded emphasis on reporting at home and abroad increased the space for radical analysis and encouraged readers “to see

themselves as part of a freedom movement that transcended national borders” (p. 84).

During World War II publishers were once again pressured to curtail their criticism in the name of national unity, though they continued to criticize segregation (including in the army) and colonialism. Chapter 4 examines the often-strained relationship between the black press and the government, and the substantial effort to cover African American troops in the field. By this time, Carroll argues, the alternative black press had merged into an increasingly commercial black press. However, this convergence proved short-lived, as publishers purged radical, and even progressive, writers during the postwar red scare, continuing to advocate for racial equality but in the language of American and democratic values. Indeed, many condemned militant and even not-so-militant activists, inspiring a new wave of radical newspapers. Chapter 5 discusses the newsroom purges and publishers’ efforts to scale back their aspirations in the face of declining circulations and the encroachment of white newspapers into their traditional domain. However, many remained open to reports of independence struggles in Africa and of the new nations that emerged—reports sometimes written by radicals who tailored their writing to the new conditions. In chapter 6, Carroll turns his attention to the revival of more radical publications and the Black Power movement in the 1960s. Publications such as the *Atlanta Inquirer*, *Black Panther*, *Freedomways*, and *Muhammad Speaks* challenged gradualist approaches and called for far-reaching social change even as mainstream publishers continued to retrench and attempted to redirect the civil rights movement’s energy into local political and economic development campaigns.

As the 1970s began, Carroll concludes, the African American press faced an uncertain future. The social turmoil that fueled the alternative press was receding, while the commercial press struggled to maintain their niche and sustain

themselves economically. The final chapter explores the integration of mainstream newsrooms and the contradictions intrinsic to this process. Although many black journalists found jobs, they continued to face not only discrimination but also entrenched news routines and values that interfered with their ability to provide the journalism their communities needed. Activist reporters were marginalized, and a journalistic workforce that reflected the country’s population remained aspirational at best.

A brief epilogue considers the persistence of racial bias and inadequate coverage in the digital age, the deepening crisis facing surviving black publications, and the emergence of new voices on digital platforms. However, substantial obstacles remain. “The economic collapse of journalism ... leaves many writers writing for free or [for] minimal pay.” Earlier generations faced similar challenges, Carroll notes, concluding *Race News* with these words, “Black journalists’ fight for racial justice marches on” (p. 212).

Race News is a welcome addition to the rapidly growing literature on the black press, inviting us to explore the shifting intersections between activists and commercial publishers in a new light. Its sweeping scope and substantial bibliography point to many avenues for new research. But even as Carroll invites us to rethink the ways we have conceptualized the history of the black press in the twentieth century, I believe we would find similar intersections were we to push our focus back to the origins of the black press in the 1800s. Although the issue is addressed at several points, the work could also have benefited from more attention to the material constraints under which the black press operated. It is, nonetheless, a worthy addition to the literature, well written and richly contextualized. It should appeal not only to historians of the black press but also to those interested in twentieth-century American journalism history more generally.

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Citation: Jon Bekken. Review of Carroll, Fred. *Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2019.

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