“TOO LONG HAVE OTHERS SPOKEN FOR US”
Black Nashville in Print:
A Case Study of African American Journalism in Nashville Today

by Allie Diffendal
1. Historical Context

"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us.” These fourteen words formed the opening editorial statement from the nation’s first African American newspaper, Freedoms Journal, in 1827 (Alexandre). Putting pen to paper and ink to press, the editors gave a “voice to the voiceless,” defined a collective community of “we,” and asserted the African American people’s right to speak for themselves. Since the founding issue of the African American press, each individual African American newspaper has begun much the same way—with the desires to establish community, voice the interests of that community, and advocate progress within it.

Black newspapers, Lovett states, “emerged as defensive and progressive tools to counter European American racism” (242). Indeed, the founding Freedoms Journal began as a means to aggressively fight slavery and advocate the rights of freed blacks (Alexandre). But, since its founding, the black press has also taken an offensive role, becoming a publisher of grievances, a political platform, and an educational instrument. As historians Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. state:

Negro newspapers of the twentieth century took up the cudgel in behalf of the underprivileged, [and]...became the medium through which the yearnings of the race were expressed, the platform from which the Negro leaders could speak, the coordinator
of mass action which Negroes felt compelled to take, and a major instrument by which
many Negroes were educated with respect to public affairs. (Lovett 242)
Thus, this dissident press might have begun as a defensive measure against American racism and
as a medium to express grievances, but, as this researcher’s work reveals, it persists along with
another significant motivating factor-- a community need for a sense of achievement
(Alexandre).

2. Overview of Research Topic

As history shows that the newspaper industry has provided a voice to an otherwise
voiceless community, this paper proposes to analyze one community’s voice in a particular city--
that of Black Nashville. Put simply, if the newspaper industry is the voice of a community, then
what is the community of Black Nashville saying? What are its historical speech patterns? And,
how do members of today’s black press perceive their role in the Nashville community?

Specifically, this paper will analyze the voice of one particular black-owned Nashville
publication, the *Tennessee Tribune*. It will discuss the publication’s purpose, as outlined by the
newspaper’s Associate Publisher, and article content, as analyzed from a sampling of archival
issues.

3. Literature Review: Nashville’s Former African American Publications

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any true canon of literature on the subject of
African American journalism in Nashville. While there certainly is a wide range of literature
simply listing the names of both former and current African American publications in Nashville,
this researcher has not found any previous research dedicated to the analysis of those
publications’ content. In fact, the best source on Nashville’s former black publications comes
from Dr. Lovett’s *The African American History of Nashville Tennessee* in a chapter not even
dedicated to black journalism but to “Racial Accommodationism and Protest” (234-253).

While Lovett provides a comprehensive list of Nashville’s past black newspapers, an
analysis of those publications is largely absent, with the exception of an in-depth look at what
Lovett deems “Nashville’s best Negro newspaper”-- *The Nashville Globe* of 1905 to 1960 (243). The *Globe*, like many African American newspapers, published its first issue in reaction to a racial cause-- in this case, the promotion of a boycott against a Jim Crow streetcar law (Lovett 244). Throughout its fifty-five years of existence, the *Globe* provided Black Nashville with a voice.

The *Globe* promoted black pride, protested against unfair practices of Jim Crow, blasted racial violence, supported the Republican party, endorsed local businesses, extolled middle-class culture and society, preached self-help and higher morality, highlighted the achievements of the elite class, decried vice and corruption, promoted cleanliness, and pushed Negro home ownership. (Lovett 244)

The *Globe* fought against the racial indoctrination of Nashville’s white newspapers-- the promotion of the belief that certain attitudes toward blacks were acceptable, that violent brutality against Negroes was fictional, and that innate inferiority and not racism instigated black’s low socioeconomic status. “Without the *Globe*,” Lovett concluded, “local blacks surely would be at a disadvantage” (244).

Although the canon of literature on Nashville’s previous African American publications is largely nonexistent (with the exception of a few colorful stories about the startups of certain publications†), filling in that literature is not the main focus of this research, but a suggestion by the researcher for future analysis.

4. **Research Focus: Nashville’s African American Publications Today**

This paper will focus on providing an analysis of African American journalism in Nashville today, a subject previously missing from research literature; it will analyze the subjects of a leading black-owned Nashville publication (the *Tennessee Tribune*); and it will attempt to

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† Lovett goes into great detail about the startup of one of Nashville’s major newspapers, *Tennessee Star*, a newspaper “with the largest circulation in black Nashville.” Besides a story about a beating of the Newspaper’s editor by “white thugs” upset about an article regarding a political campaign, however, the chapter lacks any description of the paper’s typical content (243).
not only identify writing trends within articles on the African American community, but discuss general trends within the African American journalism community as identified by African American individuals within Nashville’s journalism industry.

As an analysis of the African American journalism in Nashville is largely missing in literature today, this researcher will focus on the following questions: What is the role of the black press in the Nashville community? How is the African American community portrayed in Nashville’s black newspapers today? And, more specifically, what types of stories does the African American press cover?

5. Research Methodology

In order to answer these questions, this researcher has gathered data from a handful of today’s African American journalists in Nashville -- in the form of a 2008 Vanderbilt University panel discussion of three African American journalists and a follow-up interview (conducted by this researcher) with one of the panelists, Tennessee Tribune Associate Publisher Steven Benson. In order to gauge whether or not the African American press has changed its coverage of Nashville’s black community, this researcher will compare an interview detailing the experiences of Nashville’s first African American reporter (Robert Churchwell of the Nashville Banner) and that reporter’s earlier articles with the three panelists’ discussions of black media today, the comments of the Tennessee Tribune’s Steven Benson, and a sampling of Tennessee Tribune articles. For a more detailed look at Nashville’s black newspapers today, the paper will analyze the article content of the Tennessee Tribune during two randomly selected years-- 1999 and 2008. Throughout this content analysis, Lovett’s book will provide a historical base.

6. Past Coverage of Nashville’s African American Community

At an 1892 Negro Newspaper Association meeting, George L. Knox said, “If we desire good things said of us, if we desire praise where praise is due, we must accept it from our own papers, otherwise we may be held up in an unfair and unjust light” (Lovett 106). That sentiment--the desire to cover the African American community in order to show its progress-- can be seen
from the beginning of African American journalism in Nashville. Around the turn of the 20th century, the African American business community initiated an expansion program; The business program proved so successful that in the December 24, 1909 issue of the Globe, an African American journalist noted that ‘Negroes of Nashville [are] catching the Progressive spirit’” (Lovett 106).

One main news outlet, the Nashville Banner, caught that spirit as well, as it began documenting the African American community’s progress in order to obtain a new reader demographic. In the late 1940s, the Nashville Banner published a slip page on Wednesdays called “Happenings among Colored People,” which was taken out of the papers delivered to the white community. Although the southern daily covered “black” news, African American journalists were not writing the articles until 1950, with the Banner’s hiring of Robert Churchwell (“Interview”).

Churchwell’s job at the Nashville Banner was quite simple: “Write Negro news. Write progressive Negro news,” Churchwell’s editor told him on his first day. Not only was Churchwell to write Negro news, but he was to “show how Negroes [were] doing well in the Negro community”-- and that’s exactly what he did. During the 1960s, Churchwell covered the civil rights movement and African American society in Nashville (“Interview”). In 1951, the Banner (and Churchwell in particular) started an annual report on the “activities in the Negro community,” which was published in three sections, on education, business, and civic community (Churchwell, “Negro”). One such report, published on December 26, 1957, was entitled “Negro Civic Clubs Leaders, Contribute to City Progress.” But these annual reports were not the only articles Churchwell wrote with the words “progress,” “change,” or the like in its headline. A December 10, 1959 article found in the archives was entitled “Prosperity, Change Mark Year in Negro Community,” while a December 19, 1961 Banner article boldly stated in its headline “1961 Was Year of Negro ‘Progress and Newness.’”

Indeed, in searching through the Churchwell’s Banner clippings, one may find it a difficult task to discover an article without a positive word of change in its headline. Notably, these articles not only gave a voice to Nashville’s African American community, but it gave that
community a face-- many faces, as it published profiles of important community leaders next to the explanation of their yearly accomplishments (“1961,” “Negro,” “Prosperity”). The study of Churchwell’s articles show that the first African American journalist hired to a southern daily continued the black press tradition of prioritizing positivity in the coverage of the African American community.

7. The Role of Black Media in Nashville: Then and Now

In a panel discussion held on February 20, 2008 entitled “The Role of Blacks in the Media: Yesterday and Today,” three prominent African American members of Nashville media spoke on the historical and contemporary challenges faced by black journalists. All three panelists confirmed the need for African American publications in order “to record our history to a better degree than majority media might have pages or inches to do,” said Steven Benson of the Tennessee Tribune. “We need to continue to record what’s in and of our community and what our children need to read about and our children’s children need to read about,” Benson added (“The Role”). Dwight Lewis of The Tennessean mirrored the editorial of the first African American newspaper (as aforementioned) by stating, “We don’t tell our stories enough...We’ve got to tell our own stories, and we’re waiting for somebody else to tell our stories” (“The Role”). Lelan Statom of Channel 5 agreed, adding that coverage of Nashville’s African American community still has room to improve (“The Role”).

Despite the holes in coverage of the African community, Benson asserted, “There has been, there is, and there will continue to be a need for the black press to continue to do exactly what we’re doing”—that is, producing “positive-oriented” coverage of the African American community. In a telling anecdote, Benson noted that the consumption of news from African American newspapers is not wholly a race-based phenomenon. Six or seven years ago, Benson received a call at his Tennessee Tribune office from “a white Gentleman” asking “Where’s my newspaper?” The Tribune had not been distributed to the coin boxes in front of Nashville’s TPAC yet and the man was deeply concerned, Benson said. “So I knew then that what we were presenting was a product that interested people-- that moved beyond color; they wanted to read
what we were presenting-- not about who shot who and what fire there was yesterday, but about positive news and information, as it relates to the African American community” (“The Role”).

8. **Case Study of the Tennessee Tribune: Interviews**

In order to better understand the state of the African American press in Nashville today, this section will discuss the results of two interviews with the Associate Publisher and Entertainment Editor of Nashville’s leading black-owned publication, the *Tennessee Tribune*. In the interviews, each interviewee was asked the research questions posed in section four of this paper. The next section will then analyze the interviewee’s answers in relation to the article content of two randomly-selected years of the newspaper’s publication.

Asked his take on the role of the black press in Nashville, *Tennessee Tribune* Associate Publisher Steven Benson replied: “The role of the black press in the Nashville black community is as it has always been and that is to record the wealth and the depth of the African American community that isn’t traditionally provided by majority media-- by mainstream media....There’s so much that happens within segments of a community that really no one publication or no one media outlet can provide as good a picture-- as complete a recording-- of the events and the people of that segment that a more-targeted vehicle can provide, and the black press does that for the black community” (“Interview”). Benson believes the African American community is particularly equipped to explain the events within it. “No one media outlet can provide as good a picture as a media outlet in and of that particular segment--and that’s what the African American black press does for their individual communities across the United States-- and that’s what the *Tennessee Tribune* provides for the African American community in Nashville” (“Interview”).

(Tennessee Tribune) Entertainment Editor Janice Malone agrees with Benson’s assessment that niche publications allow a particular in-depth focus largely absent from the mainstream media: “There are a lot of stories maybe we would be interested in that *The Tennessean* maybe would not be interested in simply because-- maybe-- [they’re] just too small...That’s why you
still need the black press to focus in on a lot of the topics that mainstream media doesn’t have the time or the room for” (“Interview”).

In covering the African American community, Steven Benson said, the *Tennessean Tribune* portrays community members “as accurately as we can.” Benson noted the publication’s coverage of a heterogenous community: “It’s not one homogenous group of people... It’s from the college president to the college janitor. It’s from the vice president of a national or regional corporation to the small business owner. It’s varied-- and that’s the picture that’s portrayed in our *Tennessee Tribune* newspaper and I’m confident other African American publications across the United States” (“Interview”).

Asked to elaborate about the types of stories the *Tennessee Tribune* covers, Benson said the publication places great emphasis on “what’s good” for the African American community. “The stories involve what’s good for employment for the African American community, what’s good for educational development in the African American community, what’s good for housing development in the African American community-- all those segments that so often occur without the input of the African American community.” Benson views the *Tennessee Tribune*’s articulation of the African American viewpoint in relation to the historical absence of the community’s voice in the press: “Far too often, the African American community has not had a voice in business, in politics, in development, in how a community broadens and progresses. So often that voice is left unheard. And the African American press, the black press, our *Tennessee Tribune* does our best to provide a voice for that segment...that is often relegated to not having a voice” (“Interview”).

Asked the types of stories Nashville’s African American press covered historically, Benson noted an emphasis on community progress: “The African American press historically, again, has covered accomplishments within the African American community-- who started a new business, who accomplished a greater position in a corporate entity or some other significant entity within the Nashville community, who has been rewarded something of note, who has accomplished something of note.” Benson added, “What the African American press, the black
press, cover [today] has branched out more as African Americans have ascended in our culture and have accomplished more-- than the black press covers more” (“Interview”).

In addition to discussing the progress of the African American community, Benson said, the Tennessee Tribune offers practical information for individuals of all colors to use in their everyday life. According to Benson, approximately twenty-five percent of the Tribune’s subscriptions are white subscribers. “The information that we provide, as do so many media owned and/or operated by people of color is really colorless information-- it’s about how you make your life better,” Benson asserts. (emphasis added) “And again,” Benson adds, “for generations that information just wasn’t talked about or provided to, or projected toward the African American community. So, we’re talking about things that everybody wants to know about, it’s just that it has a spotlight on the African American community” (“Interview”).

Tennessee Tribune Entertainment Editor Janice Malone seemingly agrees that the Tribune offers “colorless” information, noting her own intention to diversify the Entertainment section. “I don’t cover just black entertainment. I have covered [events] from the CMA fan fair to...hip hop concerts, church events, opera, symphony, TPAC... And I also cover other minority entertainment events” (“Interview”).

Because the content of the publication’s articles are seemingly universal in nature, Benson asserts, the publication’s readership is diverse in demographics. “There’s a hunger out there for information that makes people feel good and that they can use in their daily lives. Again, what do you do with disposable income? How do you find scholarships for your kids? Practical kinds of news and information that make you feel good and help you be productive-- that’s what we’re about-- and that knows really no boundaries... And that’s why we think we’re still here-- because we’re helping meet that need, that hunger that people have” (“Interview”).

9. Case Study of the Tennessee Tribune: Archival Research

An analysis of the Tennessee Tribune’s back issues is necessary in order to verify the commentary of each interviewee on the publication’s intended purpose and content. This section
will discuss the content of two years in the Tribune’s history (1999 and 2008) in relation to the viewpoints expressed by the Tribune’s Associate Publisher and Entertainment Editor.

In flipping through two years worth of the publication’s history, this researcher discovered the existence of three general themes in the publication’s content: 1. cultural pride and achievements, 2. community desires and grievances, and 3. practical information and positive advice.

Many times, these themes overlapped. For instance, a self-affirmative article entitled “You Are Greater Than You Realize” in February 1999 assured readers that they too had the “inner strength and tenacity” of their enslaved ancestors and the same capacity for greatness:

Their capacity to endure, thrive and prosper amidst a sadistic and brutal environment is a testament to their character. We are just as equipped to handle whatever life sends our way. No matter what trial, trauma or challenge you are facing today, the capacity and competence to triumph through it is already encoded in you. Your resilience is already assured. You will emerge stronger, wiser, and greater. We shall overcome. (Stanton)

Indeed, the theme of cultural pride weaves through each 1999 and 2008 issue. A January 1999 article entitled “I’ll Make Me A World in Tennessee: Honoring our Ancestors” reported on an event sponsored by the Nashville African American Arts Association documenting the “historical contributions of African Americans from Tennessee to the art world” (“I’ll Make”). In the February 4-10, 1999 issue, the Tribune published a list of “Nashville’s most affluent African Americans who have made invaluable contributions in the building of Nashville” as a tribute to their “remarkable accomplishment” (“List”).

Throughout 1999 and 2008, the Tennessee Tribune documented the achievements and progress of Nashville’s African American community. The Tennessee Tribune’s orientation toward African American-focused content is most obviously evident in the discussion of community achievements. The year of 1999 featured black film festivals, history, and gospel, in

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2 Publishing lists of noted community members is seemingly a common occurrence in The Tribune’s issues. Another February 1999 issue published a list of “outstanding community and civil leaders of Middle Tennessee.”
addition to local African American political candidates and civil rights leaders visiting Nashville. In April 1999, the Tribune covered a conference of Nashville’s Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc. which addressed “issues of empowerment for African-American women” (“Conference”). April 1999 headlines included “Black Home Ownership on the Rise,” “Black Jobless Rates Fall,” and “Middle Tennessee’s 100 Black Men Inc., Holds Eight Annual Dinner Gala ‘Investing In The Future of Our Youth.’” One 1999 article, entitled, “African-American Owned Businesses Growing and Prospering in Tennessee,” began: “From the the cars we drive, to the buildings where our children attend school, to the snack foods we buy for lunch, more and more Tennesseans are enjoying an ever-growing list of products and series from the thousands of African-American owned companies located throughout the Volunteer state.” In 2008, articles indicating community achievement persisted, as evidenced by such Tribune headlines as “Surgeon Who Broke Color Barrier at Vanderbilt Named Distinguished Alumnus” and “TSU Freedom Riders Honored with ‘Family Reunion’” (Stuart).

This researcher discovered a multitude of 1999 and 2008 articles verifying the Tennessee Tribune’s intent of providing positive advice and practical information, as vocalized by Benson. To bring in the new year of 1999, the first issue featured an editorial by motivational speaker Michael Grant, entitled “An Improved Attitude: The Choice is Yours” (Grant). In March 1999, the Tribune published an article entitled “The State of the Black Family: Blacks Feel Better Off Financially Than They Did A Year Ago” (Shapiro, Oliver) and an article entitled “Blacks in Higher Education,” with a lead proclaiming “There’s some good news on the racial front” (Raspberry). In 1999, Tribune staff writers offered their readers fourteen ways to cut their risk of heart disease and stroke (Lucas), advised on healthy eating (“Healthy Eating”), and highlighted the “disproportionate impact the AIDS epidemic has on the African American population” (“AIDS”). In that same year, the Tribune discussed “smart savings strategies for colleges” (Mitchel) and seven parental suggestions on improving a child’s reading (Stewan), while in 2008, Tribune staff writers offered advice on making smooth career transitions (Young) and discussed ways African-American students found to fund college (NAPSM).
However, among its positive editorials and advice columns, the *Tribune* also publishes race-based grievances. In February 1999, William Reed, publisher of “Who’s Who In Black Corporate America,” wrote a piece entitled “Why Don’t We Control Images of Us? Hollywood Show Black in Bad Light, or Not at All” (Reed). In April 1999, Chevon Fuller, Chief of the New York State Attorney General’s Civil Rights Bureau wrote an article entitled “Service Redlining: The New Jim Crow?”, in which he discussed the practice of refusing to offer goods or services to residents of low income, minority neighborhoods. “The result,” Fuller wrote, “is disturbing and familiar: some retail establishments are creating demographic-based service policies which, like Jim Crow laws, enable them to do business only with white communities” (Fuller).

Thus, this researcher’s analysis of the *Tennessee Tribune*’s content throughout two years of its history verifies the assertions made by the publication’s Associate Publisher and Entertainment Editor regarding the *Tribune*’s content and coverage. That is, an analysis of issues from 1999 and 2008 reveal articles both positive and practical, congratulatory and diversified—all of which written harness the voice of a formerly silenced community.

10. **Summary of Analysis**

Through the analysis of African American journalists’ work in Nashville today and a literature review of such journalists’ work in Nashville’s past, this researcher has observed three reasons for the founding and persistence of African American news outlets: 1. to provide a defensive measure against racism, 2. to express community grievances and desires, and 3. to produce positive imagery of the African American community and its achievements.

While Nashville’s earliest publications dealt largely with the first two reasons, Churchwell’s articles indicate a significant concern with the third reason, and the *Tennessee Tribune* appears most concerned with the latter two reasons— which is also consistent with the panelists’ commentary on Nashville’s black press today. Each time period of African American publications, however, indicates a desire not only for a community voice, but for a positive one, a voice of progress. As Benson stated on the Vanderbilt panel, “[Readers are] ready for something positive, and forward thinking, and that’s what we try to produce” (“The Role”).
This statement seems to be indicative of a larger trend spanning throughout the history of African American journalism in Nashville. “Black Nashville’s leading men used their local printing and publishing companies to produce positive images about Negro life and progress in America,” Lovett said of Black Nashville’s past (245). This paper’s observations indicate that the same goal persists today.
Works Cited


