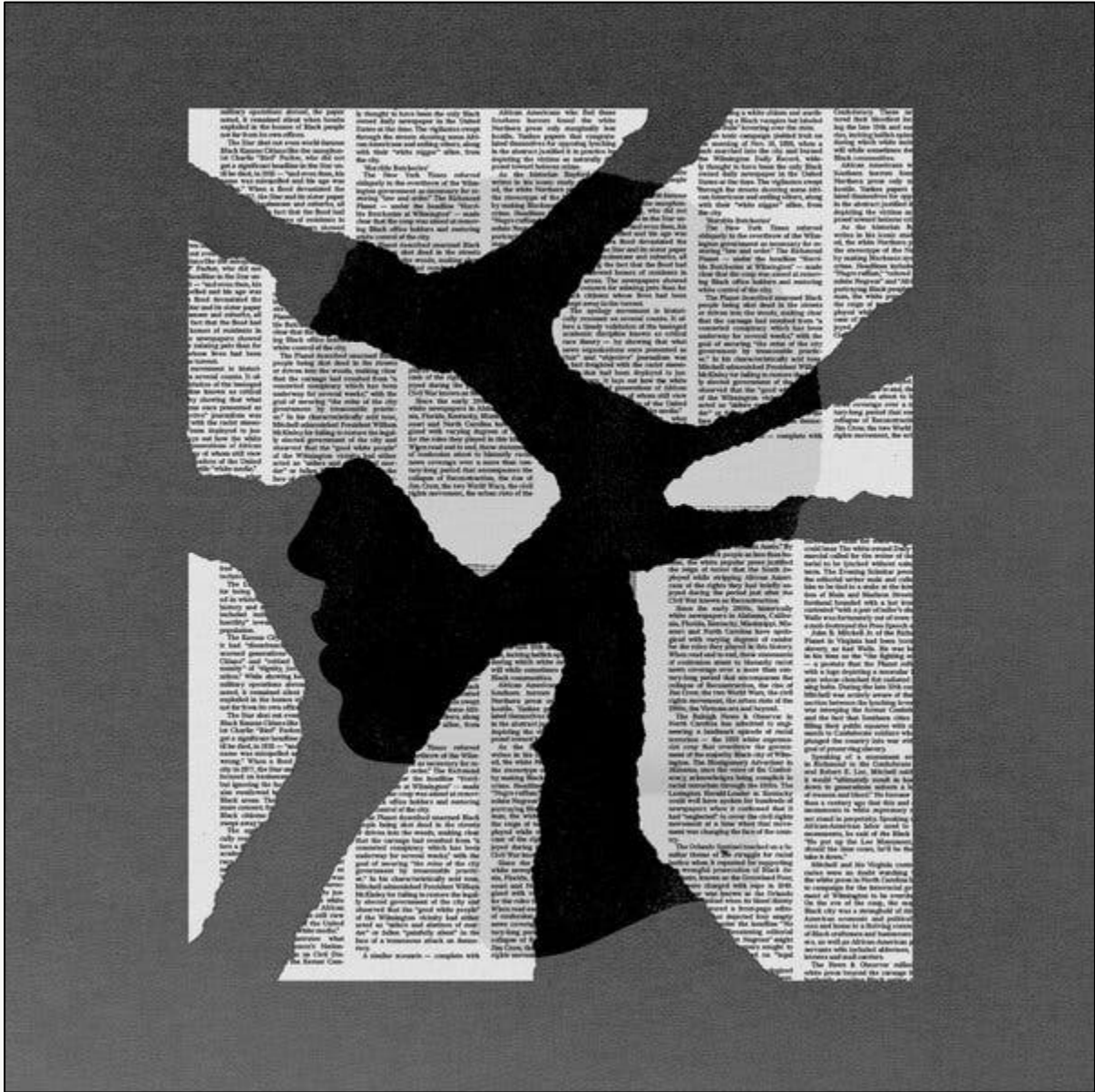


OPINION

How the White Press Wrote Off Black America



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Newspapers that championed white supremacy throughout the pre-civil rights South paved the way for lynching by declaring African Americans nonpersons. They embraced the language once used at slave auctions by denying Black citizens the courtesy titles Mr. and Mrs. and referring to them in news stories as “the negro,” “the negress” or “the nigger.”

They depicted Black men as congenital rapists, setting the stage for them to be hanged, shot or burned alive in public squares all over the former Confederacy. These newspapers entered their bloodiest incarnations during the late 19th and early 20th

centuries, inciting hellish episodes of violence during which white mobs murdered at will while sometimes destroying entire Black communities.

African Americans who fled these Southern horrors found the white Northern press only marginally less hostile. Yankee papers that congratulated themselves for opposing lynching in the abstract justified it in practice by depicting the victims as naturally disposed toward heinous crime.

As the historian Rayford Logan writes in his iconic study of this period, the white Northern press cemented the stereotype of the Negro barbarian by making Blackness synonymous with crime. Headlines included phrases like “Negro ruffian,” “colored cannibal,” “dissolute Negress” and “African Annie.” By portraying Black people as less than human, the white popular press justified the reign of terror that the South deployed, while stripping African Americans of the rights they had briefly enjoyed during the period just after the Civil War known as Reconstruction.

Since the early 2000s, historically white newspapers in Alabama, California, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and North Carolina have apologized with varying degrees of candor for the roles they played in this history. When read end to end, these statements of confession attest to blatantly racist news coverage over a more than century-long period that encompasses the collapse of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow, the two world wars, the civil rights movement, the urban riots of the 1960s, the Vietnam era and beyond.

The Raleigh News & Observer in North Carolina has admitted to engineering a landmark episode of racial terrorism — the 1898 white supremacist coup that overthrew the government of the majority-Black city of Wilmington. The Montgomery Advertiser in Alabama, once the voice of the Confederacy, acknowledges being complicit in racial terrorism through the 1950s. The Lexington Herald-Leader in Kentucky could well have spoken for hundreds of newspapers when it confessed that it had “neglected” to cover the civil rights movement at a time when that movement was changing the face of the country.

The Orlando Sentinel touched on a familiar theme of the struggle for racial justice when it repented for supporting the wrongful prosecution of Black defendants, known as the Groveland Four, who were charged with rape in 1949. The paper was known as The Orlando Morning Sentinel when its bloodthirsty coverage featured a front-page editorial cartoon that depicted four empty electric chairs under the headline “No Compromise!” A threatening editorial warned that “innocent Negroes” might suffer if civil rights lawyers sought to free the defendants based on “legal technicalities.”

The Los Angeles Times apologized for being “an institution deeply rooted in white supremacy” for most of its history and admitted to a record that included indifference and “outright hostility” toward the city’s nonwhite population.

The Kansas City Star confessed that it had “disenfranchised, ignored and scorned generations of Black Kansas Citizens” and “robbed an entire community” of “dignity, justice and recognition.” While showing keen interest in military operations abroad, the paper noted, it remained silent when bombs exploded in the homes of Black people not far from its own offices.

The Star shut out even world-famous Black Kansas Citians like the saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker, who did not get a significant headline in The Star until he died, in 1955 — “and even then, his name was misspelled and his age was wrong.” When a flood devastated the city in 1977, The Star and its sister paper focused on businesses and suburbs, all but ignoring the fact that the flood had also swallowed homes of residents in Black areas. The newspapers showed more concern for missing pets than for Black citizens whose lives had been swept away in the torrent.

The apology movement is historically resonant on several counts. It offers a timely validation of the besieged academic discipline known as critical race theory — by showing that what news organizations once presented as “fair” and “objective” journalism was in fact freighted with the racist stereotypes that had been deployed to justify slavery. It lays out how the white press alienated generations of African Americans — many of whom still view the leading news outlets of the United States as part of a hostile “white media.”

The movement illustrates what President Lyndon Johnson’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders — also known as the Kerner Commission — was talking about in 1968 when it criticized the press for writing and reporting “from the standpoint of a white man’s world.” It also vindicates the hundreds of African American men and women who established anti-racist newspapers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and engaged in open combat with the white press over how Black life would be represented.

The ‘Threadbare’ Lie

The white press in the South dictated how anti-Black atrocities were viewed all over the country by portraying even the most grotesque exercises of violence as necessary to protect a besieged white community. White news organizations elsewhere rubber-stamped this lie. The editors of small, struggling Black publications often risked their lives to refute what they rightly saw as white supremacist propaganda masquerading as news.

Ida B. Wells of the fiery Memphis weekly known as The Free Speech was the best known of these Black press paladins. Her investigations showed that mobs regularly lynched innocent victims as part of a terror tactic that was intended to keep the Black community on its knees. Her most explosive finding was that the Black men who were charged with raping white women were often involved in consensual relationships with them.

Her editorial calling the common rape charge a “threadbare lie” conveyed more truth than the white aristocracy could bear. The white-owned Daily Commercial called for the writer of the editorial to be lynched without using the term. The Evening Scimitar presumed the editorial writer male and called for him to be tied to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Streets, his forehead branded with a hot iron and castrated “with a pair of tailor’s shears.” Ms. Wells was fortunately out of town when a mob destroyed the Free Speech office.

John Mitchell Jr. of The Richmond Planet, a Virginia weekly, had been born into slavery, as had Ms. Wells. He was known in his time as the “the fighting editor” — a

posture that The Planet reflected with a logo depicting a muscular Black arm whose clenched fist radiated lightning bolts. During the late 19th century, Mr. Mitchell was acutely aware of the connection between the lynching fever that was sweeping the former Confederacy and the fact that Southern cities were filling their public squares with monuments to Confederate soldiers who had plunged the country into war with the goal of preserving slavery.

Speaking of a monument erected in Richmond to the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, Mr. Mitchell said that it would “ultimately result in handing down to generations unborn a legacy of treason and blood.” He foresaw more than a century ago that this and other monuments to white supremacy might not stand in perpetuity. Speaking of the African American labor used to erect monuments, he said of the Black man, “He put up the Lee Monument, and should the time come, he’ll be there to take it down.”

Mr. Mitchell and his Virginia contemporaries were no doubt watching when the white press in North Carolina began to campaign for the interracial government of Wilmington to be overthrown. On the eve of the coup, the majority-Black city was a stronghold of African American economic and political success and home to a thriving community of Black craftsmen and businesses owners, as well as African American public servants who included aldermen, magistrates and mail carriers.

The News & Observer rallied the white press beyond the carnage by relentlessly equating Black voting rights with corruption, anti-whiteness and, inevitably, the rape of white women. The paper ran infamous editorial cartoons like the ones depicting a giant Black foot crushing a white citizen and another showing a Black vampire bat labeled “Negro Rule” hovering over the state.

This toxic campaign yielded fruit on the morning of Nov. 10, 1898, when a mob marched into the city and burned the offices of The Wilmington Daily Record, widely thought to have been the only Black-owned daily newspaper in the United States at the time. The vigilantes swept through the streets shooting some African Americans and exiling others, along with their “white nigger” allies, from the city.

‘Horrible Butcheries’

The New York Times referred obliquely to the overthrow of the Wilmington government as necessary for restoring “law and order.” The Richmond Planet — under the headline “Horrible Butcheries at Wilmington” — made clear that the coup was aimed at removing Black officeholders and restoring white control of the city.

The Planet described unarmed Black people being shot dead in the streets or driven into the woods, making clear that the carnage had resulted from “a concerted conspiracy which has been underway for several weeks,” with the goal of securing “the reins of the city government by treasonable practices.” In his characteristically acid tone, Mr. Mitchell admonished President William McKinley for failing to restore the legally elected government of the city and observed that the “good white people” of the Wilmington vicinity had either acted as “aiders and abettors of murder” or fallen “painfully silent” in the face of a treasonous attack on democracy.

A similar scenario — complete with distorted news accounts — played out two decades later after the massacre of Black sharecroppers in Elaine, Ark. The sharecroppers had angered their white landlords by banding together to demand a fair price for the crop. After a shootout instigated by whites, as the historian David Levering Lewis has written, “enraged white planters and farmers chased down Black men and women in the high cotton of Phillips County in a frenzy lasting seven days, until the count of the dead approached 200.”

It was widely — and falsely — reported in the white press that the sharecroppers had intended to kill every white person they could and take control of the county. The African American press pointed out soon after the bloodletting that the sharecroppers had been slaughtered for contesting a form of slavery under which white overlords swindled them out of their earnings.

The white Southern press degraded African Americans in a variety of everyday ways. One of the humiliations that continued into the 1950s involved denying Black adults the courtesy titles Mr. and Mrs., and referring to them by first name only, at a time when African Americans could be beaten or even lynched for addressing white people in this fashion. By identifying married Black women by their first names, instead of as Mrs., white newspapers denied the legitimacy of African American marriage and reinforced a racist slander that labeled women of color morally “loose.” Jim Crow society used this defamation to justify the rapacious conduct of white men who targeted Black women for sexual assault.

Black newspapers like *The Baltimore Afro-American*, *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier* served as a haven against white press hostility, while incubating and advancing the early civil rights movement.

At a time when African Americans had to commit crimes to appear in the white press, *The Defender* and its sister papers filled their society pages with scenes of the Black middle class succeeding at business, convening civic organizations or taking their leisure at tony vacation spots. In other words, the Black press was a century ahead of the news media generally in discovering the African American middle class as a marketable subject of journalism.

Black news organizations started to wither as segregation eased and the white press became interested in the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, it would take decades for that interest to extend beyond stories about crime. The Kerner Commission underscored this problem when it admonished the news media to “publish newspapers and produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of the Negro, both as a Negro and as part of the community.”

News organizations that were not moved to address this problem when the business represented a license to print money have come to see things differently since the business model began its collapse. The apology movement represents a belated understanding that these organizations need every kind of reader to survive. The challenge is that the gap news providers are eager to close is vast and was generations in the making.