

# Book Review: Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century by Fred Carroll

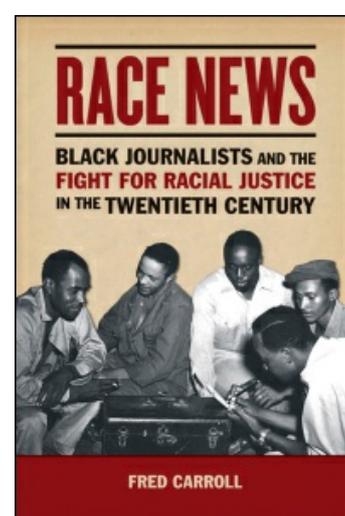
*In Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century, Fred Carroll traces the history of black journalism in the USA from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1980s, focusing on the porous boundaries between 'commercial' and 'alternative' outlets. This is a well-researched, readable and comprehensive account that will offer valuable insights to those interested in African American history, journalism and civil rights activism, finds Max Lewontin.*

**Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century.** Fred Carroll. University of Illinois Press. 2017.

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Amid a contentious dispute with their newspaper's publisher, a group of journalists prepares to strike. Tensions flare as the publisher threatens firings amid rumours of union organisation and slashes vacation time in the wake of an ill-fated effort to counter a decline in subscriptions. The publisher blasts the burgeoning union as 'an outlaw dues-collecting organisation'. After reaching an agreement with the newspaper guild, two local doctors agree to buy the paper, re-hiring five full-time workers fired in the unionisation effort.

This could very nearly be a [description](#) of recent turmoil at the *Los Angeles Times*, which was [purchased](#) in January by billionaire surgeon-turned-biotech-executive Patrick Soon-Shiong from parent company Tronc. Instead, it details the situation of black journalists at the independently owned *New York Amsterdam News* in 1935. As Fred Carroll describes in his lively, engaging book, *Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century*, the successful unionisation effort at the *Amsterdam News* sparked a wave of union contracts at six other black newspapers, including the widely read *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender*.



In *Race News*, [Carroll, a lecturer at Kennesaw State University](#), traces the history of black journalism from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1980s, focusing on the porous boundaries between what he terms the 'commercial' and 'alternative' black press. With white-owned newspapers offering coverage mired in racial stereotypes while almost universally excluding black reporters from their newsrooms until the late 1960s/early 1970s, black journalism came to reflect a range of political viewpoints. The tone taken by newspapers across the country was similarly varied, though many papers boasted a modernist, literary sensibility informed by the variety of writers, poets and scholars—drawn by the opportunity for steady work—published in black newspapers alongside full-time reporters and editors.

While some black journalists moved between the two forms as the alternative press came to shape commercial publishing in the wake of the [New Negro Movement](#) of the 1920s and 1930s, Carroll argues that the former was defined by its 'capitalistic outlook and racial autonomy'. As a result, commercial publishers' core mission of ending racial discrimination became part of an 'objective presentation of current events' designed to appeal to the broadest possible group of readers (4). The alternative press, by contrast, was more idiosyncratic, embracing anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism as well as communist and Marxist critiques of capitalism in news stories and editorials. Alternative papers also more directly intervened in political movements, including their notable resurgence during the [Black Power movement](#) of the 1960s and 1970s (5).



Image Credit: John Sengstacke, part owner and general manager of the *Chicago Defender*, Chicago, Illinois, 1942 ([Jack Delano Public Domain](#))

Carroll is a former journalist, and *Race News* offers a particularly strong examination of how black journalists approached the idea of ‘objectivity’ and accusations of ‘bias’—often framed by white critics as a desire to foment revolution—in their reporting. Journalist Marvel Cooke, who moved from working for W.E.B. Du Bois at the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis* to positions at the *Amsterdam News* in the late 1920s, Harlem-based weekly the *People’s Voice* at the start of the 1940s and white-owned leftist newspaper *The Daily Compass*, around a decade later, defined her view on objectivity succinctly. ‘You should never project your opinions in a news story, and I never did that,’ she told an interviewer in the 1980s, describing her reporting on a Bronx ‘slave market’ where day-labouring black women waited to be hired as domestics at low hourly wages for wealthy white women. ‘But I might have emphasized some part of a story that somebody else might not have emphasized, the work conditions or something like that’ (2).

The chapters focusing on how black reporters and editors defined their own journalistic norms are among the most engaging. As Carroll notes, black journalists moved from a direct embrace of radical politics, with reporters such as Cooke joining the Communist Party during the 1930s and 1940s, to a newer generation that continued to challenge the status quo without directly advocating radical causes. He argues this shift particularly impacted coverage of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. Northern reporters and southern editors alike offered praise for and closely chronicled the non-violent protests of Martin Luther King. By the mid-1960s, commercial papers such as the *Afro-American* were critiquing the idea of an anti-colonial Black Power movement, defining ‘black power’ to include electoral campaigning while rejecting calls for armed self-defence as leading to ‘violence without restraint’ (169).

In addition to financial struggles in the wake of newer publications such as the glossy magazine *Ebony* (1945-) and competition with white reporters who began covering the ‘race beat’ from the 1950s, Carroll argues persuasively that anti-communist fervour and increased surveillance in the years following World War II also diminished the embrace of radical positions by commercial papers. The journalists who advocated for them found themselves on the out: Cooke, for example, was fired as the *People’s Voice*, once known as ‘the *Daily Worker* of Lenox Avenue’, began pursuing a ‘non-sectarian’ editorial policy. After declining to answer questions in testimony before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Senate subcommittee in 1953, she did not work in journalism again (123).

This focus on how the alternative press shaped commercial papers such as the *Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Afro-American* beginning in the years after World War I particularly complements a growing body of [scholarship](#) on black internationalism and black radicalism. In 1938, Carroll notes, Trinidad-born writer and organiser George Padmore became the *Defender's* European correspondent, where he covered Ethiopia's ongoing [colonial conflict](#) with Italy. Barred from entering the USA, Padmore wrote from London, where he was part of a literary community of Caribbean-born radical writers and activists that included C.L.R. James and Amy Ashwood Garvey, Marcus Garvey's first wife. That would seem to make him an unlikely fit for the *Defender*, where founding publisher Robert Abbott made Garvey a target of vehement criticism in the 1920s, even hiring a detective agency to dig up damaging information on his [Black Star Line](#) (52). However, a decade later, despite some divisions among *Defender* executives about communist influence on the paper, Carroll notes that 'the expression of political progressivism was just one more column or article to sell to its readers' (77).

In the final chapter, Carroll examines how white newspapers covered racial issues, with particular attention on how their institutionalised racism shaped workplace conditions for black reporters. A report by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (known as the Kerner Commission) castigating the white press for inaccurate coverage of racial uprisings in the 1960s led white editors to cautiously hire more black reporters, but without focusing on diversifying newsroom leadership (190). The book's epilogue bolsters this section by arguing that black media outlets have remained critical into the twenty-first century. However, echoing recent media and communications [scholarship](#), Carroll notes that with the emergence of international movements borne out of social media activism, such as Black Lives Matter, media outlets have come to cover activist movements without directly shaping them (212).

One slight critique is the book's broad, roughly chronological structure can occasionally become overwhelming, as an array of journalists and newspapers are introduced and then briefly mentioned in later chapters. The book offers an especially compelling introduction to less well-chronicled female journalists such as Cooke, *Defender* Washington bureau chief Ethel Payne and *California Eagle* publisher Charlotta Bass, though some sections left this reader hoping for further detail. In the early 1970s, for example, Carroll notes that the Black Panther Party's *Black Panther* newspaper described its mission by characterising its reporters and editors as 'lumpen proletarian brothers and sisters' (172). The Marxist term *lumpenproletariat* has often been seen as pejorative, [notably linked](#) with the idea of an economic 'underclass' and cultural explanations for poverty, which became a staple of journalistic writing and scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. It would be intriguing to see further research on to what extent this early use, [coined](#) by Black Panther Party member Bobby Seale, shaped the use of 'underclass' by white journalists.

*Race News* offers a well-researched account of how black journalism evolved to encompass elements of activism, sensationalism, racial uplift and radical politics during the twentieth century. While the *Chicago Defender* and influential figures such as Ida B. Wells, Du Bois and Hubert Harrison have been the subjects of other works, Carroll offers new insight in examining the ties between 'alternative' and 'commercial' outlets. *Race News* will also be of value as a comprehensive, readable introduction for those more broadly interested in African American history, journalism history and civil rights activism.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*