

## NEWS MAKERS One eye on the media

# Bylines in Black Ink

BY RENEE GEARHART LEVY

**I**N 1948, WHEN ROBERT Johnson began his journalism career with the *Atlanta Daily World* (then the only daily newspaper in the country serving a black audience), he wasn't allowed to drink from a public water fountain.

He wasn't allowed a room in a hotel or to try on clothing before making a purchase. He wasn't allowed to attend performances of entertainers such as Marian Anderson without sitting in a segregated balcony. For Johnson and other blacks living in the South, total segregation was the way of life. That was America then.

"Today, more than any other time in this country, blacks are legally free," says Johnson, "and this freedom is due in large part to the black press.

"The black press, more than any other press, fought through its pages to make America's creed and its practice one and the same, to make one class of people—all first class, all governed by the same constitution."

Johnson, who received a master's degree in journalism from SU in 1952, is a 40-year veteran of the black press. He is today executive editor and associate publisher of *Jet*, a news-magazine that boasts a weekly circulation of 850,000. It is one of the most well established among the roughly 100 consumer magazines and 300

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newspapers that serve black society.

The first black publication, *Freedom's Journal*, was established in 1827 by free blacks John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish as a means to protest injustices against their race. "We wish to plead our own cause," they wrote in their first editorial. "Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations."

Many blacks, Johnson says, feel that little has changed in the way the mainstream press addresses their issues since Cornish's and Russwurm's time. "There is a lot of coverage of activities involving

black people today," Johnson says. "But the coverage I see in the majority press is not the kind that I think is good in terms of informing, educating, and entertaining black people. Most of the stories and reportage of black activities tend to dwell on the negative, and there is a lot of it that is completely negative."

Black media are rushing to fill the void.

**T**HERE ARE MANY black publications, though few are circulated widely, and fewer still are known outside the black community.

The exceptions include those

magazines published by the Johnson Publishing Co., until recently the largest black-owned corporation in the United States. Founded in 1942 by publisher and CEO John H. Johnson (no relation to Robert), the company produces magazines that provide a news conduit for black happenings nationwide. Although black publications had existed for more than a century, before Johnson there had never been a national medium for black news.

John Johnson, who holds an honorary doctorate of humane letters from SU, had discovered an untapped market. The demand for his magazines moved Johnson on to the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. His company currently publishes *Ebony*, an institution among black magazines, originally designed to be a black version of the oversized *Life*; *Jet*, a digest-sized weekly newsmagazine; and *Ebony Man*, a *Gentleman's Quarterly* for the black male.

Other leading black magazines include *Essence*, a women's magazine (of which John Johnson is part owner); *Black Enterprise*, a business magazine; and *American Visions*, a scholarly endeavor with historical emphasis published with support from the Smithsonian Institution.

Black newspapers can be found in nearly any city with a strong black community. Because of financial constraints, most are published on a weekly or bimonthly basis. Among the biggest are the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and New York City's *Amsterdam News*.



Robert Johnson (left) is executive editor and associate publisher, and Malcolm West managing editor, of *Jet*, a news-digest magazine serving black readers.

**W**HATEVER THE format, black publications provide a medium for black news reported from a black perspective, a reason many black journalists choose employment with the black press.

"I turned to *Essence* because it was a black publication and it would be a forum for my voice," says Barbara Brandon, a former Syracuse student who is a fashion and beauty writer for the magazine. "I had some points I wanted to get across and that I wanted to reach a black audience." Brandon feels *Essence* "addresses issues specific to black women alone."

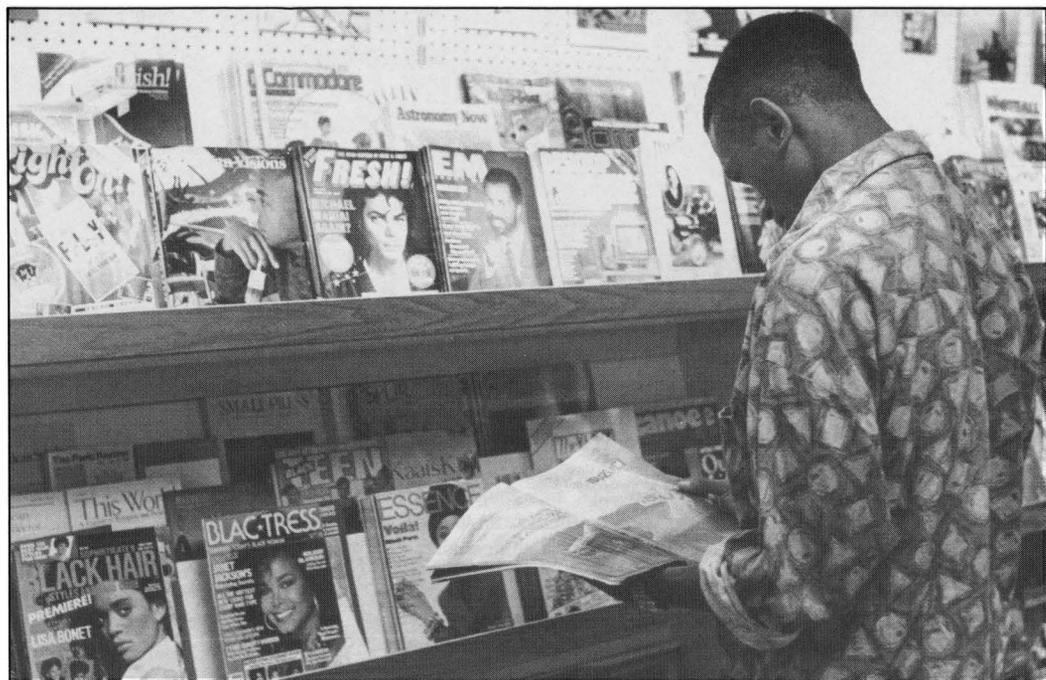
Similar was Malcolm West's reasoning for seeking employment with Johnson Publishing. West, who received his master's degree in journalism from SU in 1974, joined *Jet* magazine that same year and is currently managing editor.

"To me [black publications] are like coming home," West says. "Nobody's going to understand you like you'll be understood at home. Nobody's going to understand you like your own folks. . . . I feel oftentimes that white journalists can't look at things from our perspective."

"It is important to realize that news is written from different perspectives," says Harvard sociologist Charles V. Willie, former vice president of student affairs at SU.

"I know that journalists subscribe to the doctrine of objectivity," he explains. "Nevertheless, what is chosen for emphasis is not a function of bias so much as it is a function of perspective. If one is in a dominant position of power, he often doesn't realize the significance of some news that people who are subdominant may recognize. . . . The need for [the black press] is the need to have in the public domain information from a subdominant perspective."

"The white press makes more of an effort to cover black affairs . . . but because of the nature of the audience for the white press, it can only do so much," says Dr. Carolyn Stroman, director of Howard University's Communications Research Center and holder of master's and doctoral degrees from Syracuse. "Black publications fill that void and will always fill that void."



Other publications targeted at a black audience primarily include *Essence*, *Black Teen*, *EM*, *Fresh!*, *Blac-tress*, and *American Visions*, among many.

**N**OT EVERY OBSERVER agrees. Roland Wolsley, former chairman of the magazine department at SU's Newhouse School of Public Communications and author of the book *The Black Press U.S.A.*, feels the priorities of many of the publications have changed, causing the decline of the minority press.

Black publications are "more money-centered than they used to be," according to Wolsley. "There is less pleading for the civil rights of black people. . . . The old crusading spirit seems to have been put on the back shelf—an unfortunate situation because there are deeds to be done to improve the condition of the black people. . . . But social conscience doesn't earn money."

Wolsley says he is astonished at how many publications have disappeared since his book was published in 1971 (he is currently revising it). Although the number of publications in existence is approximately the same, there has been tremendous turnaround. Wolsley cites declining reader interest and lack of finances on the part of publishers as primary obstacles.

Publishing is an expensive business; distribution costs and gaining advertising support are among the biggest problems. Just

ask Ragan Henry, Philadelphia attorney, media magnate, and Syracuse University trustee, who attempted to start a national black newspaper, the *National Leader*, in 1982. Rising publication costs forced the paper to close three years later.

"We simply didn't have enough resources to continue the project through to its end," Henry says, "which would have been a strong readership scattered throughout the country. . . . If you've got the readers, you can get the advertisers."

Lack of advertising support is the most common reason for publication failure, particularly black publications.

"If you don't get the sales, the magazines don't stay out," says 1984 SU graduate Richard Spears, a freelance sales executive for *Black Elegance* and *Black Collegian* magazines and a former sales representative for the now defunct *Modern Black Men*. "The general media market today still doesn't recognize the upscale black male—or female, for that matter."

**E**ven the most successful of publishers, John H. Johnson, has had failed publications. Among them: *Black World*, *Tan*, *Black Stars*, *Hue*, and *Ebony Jr.*

But rising circulations for the major black publications project a healthy black press in 1987. Advertising statistics indicate that *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines reach 60 percent of all black American adults; *Essence* reaches more than 50 percent of black women over age 18. Statistics aren't tabulated on nonblacks who read the publications—still an untapped and unknown market.

"The black press is not necessarily a press that's for black people," adds Willie. "It is about black people and things that concern their way of life, but it really should be for the society at large. . . . People who read only the national press oftentimes are unaware of the sources of change that could correct inadequacies within the society at large."

Change is a large part of what the black press is all about, according to *Jet*'s Robert Johnson. "Following the traditions of the first black newspaper, the black press has been fighting to break down barriers," he says. "It has been the one organ to give a sense of somebody-ness to black people. And that's been its role: a lawyer, in the sense of advocacy; a minister, in terms of inspiration; a teacher, in terms of educating; and a vehicle for entertainment."