



# **The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society**

## **African American Magazines**

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African American magazines are publications that represent African Americans' views, achievements, and cultural products within their community and throughout the world. For the purposes of this entry, African American magazines are defined as publications primarily established by and targeted to African Americans. The historical and cultural characteristics that have defined African American magazines are outlined in this entry, including their ownership and readership and the mission for some of the publications serving African Americans' interests and society.

## Early African American Magazines

African Americans are a marginalized and underrepresented community that has the struggle to be heard through the press. The historical developments are important to understanding African American magazines as an institution. These magazines were at the forefront of protests against racial discrimination since the earliest known African American-owned and published magazines. The first publications focused on the fight against African American slavery.

In 1838, the *Mirror of Liberty* was a leading magazine-type publication edited by, owned by, and aimed at African Americans. The magazine was published in New York by David Ruggles, a pioneering journalist and antislavery activist. Ruggles was a freeborn African American businessman who was credited with opening the first African American bookstore in the United States. He also actively assisted more than 600 fugitive slaves, including Frederick Douglass, who became a fellow activist. In 1858, Douglass progressed into a nationally recognized leader and incisive antislavery writer who published a magazine-style periodical, *Dou-glass' Monthly*.

African American magazines have an extensive history of serving as a significant source of information on politics and culture. Launched in 1900, *The Colored American Magazine* was the first American monthly publication that covered African American culture. The magazine was launched in Boston under the umbrella of the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, founded by Walter Wallace, Jesse W. Watkins, Harper S. Fortune, and Walter Alexander Johnson. The magazine initially focused on African American history, biographies of notable men and women, short stories, essays, and serialized novels. For the first 4 years, the magazine's most prolific African American contributor was Pauline E. Hopkins. She served as literary editor and editor of the women's section.

African American women were rarely owners of African American magazines or had editorial control of them from their start in the 19th century until the mid-20th century. The African American magazine, *Our Women and Children*, featured the work of women journalists covering juvenile literature and articles. However, Hopkins received acknowledgment on the masthead and published literary texts to argue for African American equality. *The Colored American Magazine* was specifically addressed to middle-class African American readership although a third or more of the magazine's readers were non-African Americans. One of these London-born patrons, John C. Freund, pressured Hopkins to silence her political and racial themes. Freund was an influential editor, but Hopkins resisted his prompting to control her outspokenness on racial matters. She did not compromise in her critique of racial oppression in her writings.

*The Colored American Magazine* documented a peak circulation of more than 17,000, but the magazine's financial circumstances were unstable throughout its 10-year history. The magazine was sold to Fred R. Moore, who was the son of an African American slave and a White father. Moore moved the magazine to New York with the assistance of African American civil rights leader Booker T. Washington.

Washington replaced Hopkins as editor and during its remaining 5 years, *The Colored American Magazine* gradually became less focused on political engagement. Washington shifted the focus away from racial injustices toward more positive coverage of African American achievements. The magazine received criticism for

its lack of activism and resistance to devoting itself to social problems. Furthermore, the magazine's publishing structure targeted audiences who were highly educated, and the publication was condemned for its lack of appeal to the masses.

## Activism of African American Magazines

African American community leaders challenged the conservative views expressed in *The Colored American Magazine*, and some launched magazines that would profoundly shape the thinking of their African American readers. In 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded the magazine *The Crisis*. In 1917, Asa Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen began publishing *The Messenger*. Randolph founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, and *The Messenger* became its official organ.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, best known as W. E. B. Du Bois, was one of the cofounders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University, and he emphasized African American activism through literature. Du Bois was the founding editor of *The Crisis* and editor of the first magazine for African American children and youth, *The Brownies' Book*, published from January 1920 to December 1921.

The mission of *The Messenger* was to strengthen African Americans' political and intellectual identity in the age of racial segregation. The magazine criticized the government for the high rate of lynching and violence in the South. By 1920, *The Messenger* was identified for radicalism, which resulted in backlash from the U.S. Justice Department. *The Messenger's* editorial office was raided, and the magazine's founders were arrested. However, the case was dismissed because the judge could not imagine the two young African American men were smart enough to write the publication themselves.

It was not long before readers began to recognize the political and intellectual work of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. Wallace Thurman, contributing editor to *The Messenger*, founded the African American literary magazine *Fire!!* He started the publication in New York City in 1926 with other notable African American novelists, journalists, and artists such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. After the first published issue, its quarters ironically burned down, and the magazine ended. *The Saturday Evening Quill* was another short-lived African American literary magazine that published from 1928 to 1930, and the third and final publication was the only issue available to the general public.

In 1942, Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., was established in Chicago, IL. The company grew into the largest African American-owned publishing firm in the United States. John Harold Johnson, the grandson of slaves from rural Arkansas City, founded Johnson Publishing Company, whose first publication was *Negro Digest*. Johnson attended a segregated elementary school in the South before his family moved to the South Side of Chicago. He attended DuSable High School where he first encountered the African American middle class and upcoming celebrities such as Nat King Cole and Redd Foxx. Johnson became the editor of the high school newspaper and class yearbook, and after graduation, he prepared a monthly digest of newspaper articles.

Johnson conceived of the *Negro Digest* as similar to the *Reader's Digest*, an American general-interest family magazine, but with the aim of covering positive stories about African American communities. Initially, Johnson faced obstacles acquiring financial backing for his first magazine project. Bank lenders decided that a magazine aimed at an African American audience would not be successful.

Johnson's mother believed in his vision. She used her furniture as collateral for a \$500 loan. He used the funds to solicit contributions, with permission, from his employer's mailing list. He later teamed up with a dis-

tributor to market the magazine in urban center newsstands. In 6 months, the magazine started publishing nearly 50,000 copies per month. One of the most well-known columns was titled “If I Were a Negro” and asked mainly White citizens for a resolution to unsolved African American problems. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s response to the column doubled copies overnight. The *Negro Digest* was later renamed *Black World* to reflect the African diaspora and reached more than 100,000.

In 1945, Johnson published *Ebony* magazine, which was geared to a middle-class African American readership. The publication matched *Life* magazine for the quality of the photography and words. Advertisements with African American models were used to address the African American consumer and represent positive images of their cultural lifestyle. The issues focused on African American life and achievements, and the initial publication sold out 25,000 copies. The magazine gradually expanded the editorial to focus on issues of race. Professional historians were employed as staff to accurately document and contribute to such topics as discrimination and segregation.

In the 1950s, *Tan Confessions*, *Hue*, *Cooper Romance*, and *Jet* were published. *Jet*, a small weekly news and entertainment digest, became nationally famous in 1955 with its shocking and graphic coverage of the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy who was brutally murdered in Mississippi for whistling at a White woman. *Jet* grew to reach a circulation of roughly 900,000. In 1982, Johnson Publishing launched a weekly nationally syndicated television show, *Ebony/Jet Showcase*. Johnson’s later publications were *African American Stars*, *Black Stars*, *Duke*, *Ebony Man: EM*, *Ebony South Africa*, *E Style*, and *Ebony Jr.* for children.

In the 1970s, specialty magazines successfully reached a growing young urban market. African American entrepreneur Earl G. Graves Sr. founded the *Black Enterprise* as a business and investment resource that has grown to approximately 3.7 million African American readers. Similarly, *Essence* is a long-standing magazine targeting African American women with a readership of 8.5 million. Gordon Parks, the first nationally recognized African American filmmaker, served as its editorial director during the initial years of its circulation at approximately 50,000 copies per month. Edward Lewis, Clarence O. Smith, Cecil Hollingsworth, and Jonathan Blount founded the magazine for and about upscale African American women. The founders recognized that African American women were an ignored demographic and capitalized on a virtually untouched market of readers. Subsequently, *Essence*’s diverse images empowered Black women who did not see themselves in White magazines and media. Furthermore, the *Essence Festival* brings together voices of influence during the magazine’s annual event.

## Mainstream African American Magazines

In 2000, *O, The Oprah Magazine* was founded by African American multimedia mogul Oprah Winfrey and Hearst Communication. Winfrey is involved in the editorial and advertising content. She appears on the cover of each issue, and the first shared cover featured First Lady Michelle Obama. Initial paid circulation of the monthly magazine, intended for women of all races, was over 2.7 million copies. In 2002, the magazine launched a South African edition, which had an average readership of 300,000. In 2018, the magazine claimed to have the most diverse audience of any major women’s magazine, with just over half of its readers White, about a third Black, and the rest members of other races.

In 2014, *O, The Oprah Magazine* released its first digital edition. During the same year, *Jet* and *Sister 2 Sister* switched to a digital-only format. Jamie Foster Brown of *Sister 2 Sister*, the first nationally known African American female gossip columnist, ceased publication of the women’s entertainment magazine after over 25 years of operation.

Digital technology has assisted in maintaining magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*. It also has led to publishing

companies such as MadameNoire, the international online magazine geared toward the lifestyles of African American women. In 2015, MadameNoire had over 7 million visitors monthly, making it the leading website oriented to African Americans ahead of [BET.com](#), [Bossip.com](#), and The Root.

Digital publications were not an option for earlier African American magazines such as *Sepia*, *The Cricket: Black Music in Evolution*, *Black Sports Magazine*, *Black Film Review*, *Black Issues Book Review*, and *Emerge*. Wilmer C. Ames launched the Washington-based news magazine, *Emerge*, for the educated African American middle class. Ames initiated a circulation goal of 150,000, but the magazine later ceased publication when it was losing money.

Several magazines, including *Black Enterprise* and *Essence*, survived into the 21st century and served the African American market. *The Crisis* magazine has been in continual print since its initial publication in 2010. *Ebony* was the first African American-oriented magazine in the United States to attain national circulation. Johnson maintained that the success was a result of the positive image of African Americans. This form of representation has propelled African American magazine pioneers to illustrate and defend freedom of speech and expression in shared ideas, interests, and values.

**See also** [African American Characters on Television and in the Movies](#); [African American Newspapers](#); [African American Radio Programming](#); [African American Television Programming](#); [Representation](#)

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