

## Understanding the Complexities of the Black Press in Chicago during the Interwar Years: The Influence and History of the *Chicago Defender*

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### ABSTRACT

The Black press in Chicago after World War I became a builder of community and a platform for social change. Led by the *Chicago Defender* in the 1920s, the Black press pushed for the advancement of Black rights, acted as a racial watchdog, and contributed to a Black cultural revival in Chicago. The *Chicago Defender* published Black news that white papers—which often only covered incidents of Black violence—wouldn't. These positive stories helped the *Chicago Defender* redefine what it meant to be Black, giving Black communities in Chicago, and beyond, a space of their own. However, issues of the *Chicago Defender* during the interwar period predominately featured sensationalized race-associated violence as their front-page stories—even if the paper covered positive news inside. I conducted an independent review of these issues to determine the extent of the front-page sensationalism and found the prevalence of yellow journalism tactics to appeal to readers. The paper also reflected the elitist views of its editors, and it published advertisements promoting white beauty standards in its women's pages. In analyzing the *Chicago Defender's* influence on Chicago and its role in the formation of the Black press, it is important to holistically consider its history—good and bad.

Keywords: Black press, Chicago Defender, journalism, 1920s–1930s, Chicago, racial bias

### Introduction

Since its birth with *Freedom's Journal* in the mid-nineteenth century, the Black press has grown and evolved through many different iterations. There is no singular, standardized form of Black journalism. This article seeks to investigate how the Black press emerged as an entity unique from white journalism and to what extent it held influence over social movements after World War I. Is the Black press primarily a medium for journalism that was created by and for Black people? Is it a platform of social change and advocacy? Is it a strengthener of Black communities? Is it white journalism in blackface created only for elites? Together these questions highlight the different schools of thought among researchers on how to analyze the Black press.

This article grapples with how to define the Black press in the context of the strong Black journalism scene in Chicago during the interwar years. Through an analysis of the *Chicago Defender*, I argue that the Black press in Chicago cannot be understood through a singular focus and instead emerges as a comprehensive, complex force that ultimately forged a platform for Black people that otherwise would not exist. The *Chicago Defender* in the interwar period was an instigator for social change, a builder of Black communities, a watchdog for racial injustices, and a creator of accessible stories about Black culture. However, it also featured sensationalized

stories of race violence, reflected the class biases of its editors, and peddled white beauty cultural norms through whitewashed advertisements, undermining its celebration of Black culture and likely influencing the self-images of its Black readers in negative ways. Understanding these characteristics holistically is necessary for analyzing the history of the *Chicago Defender* and grasping the complexity of Black journalism in the 1920s and 1930s. Because the *Chicago Defender* was one of the largest Black newspapers in that time period—rivaled only by the *Pittsburgh Courier*—this article focuses on the influences of Black journalism in Chicago.

### **The *Chicago Defender* and the Black Press in the 1920s and 1930s**

The *Chicago Defender* ran its first issue in 1905. It was founded by Robert Abbott, who would go on to become one of America's first Black millionaires (Muhammad 2003, 14). During the first half of the interwar period, until about 1935, the *Chicago Defender* was the most circulated Black newspaper in the United States. At its peak in 1929, the paper was circulating about 200,000 copies weekly, but it experienced a large drop in numbers following the stock market crash (Black Press Research Collective 2014). After the Great Depression, the *Pittsburgh Courier* took off as the leading Black newspaper in the country in terms of circulation, but that didn't lessen the reach of the *Chicago Defender*. The *Chicago Defender* is still operating as of 2023, though it ended production of its print paper in 2019 (Davey and Eligon 2019).

It is not a surprise that Chicago—which became a prominent site for Black migration and community—housed one of the most influential Black newspapers. The Black population in Chicago increased steadily into the early twentieth century (Krieling 1977, 134), growing from 2 percent in 1910 to 7 percent by 1930, a 250 percent increase (Grossman, Keating, and Reiff 2004, 237). Chicago offered jobs and an escape from economic hardships (Grossman 1989, 14). Furthermore, the northern city offered the promise of community and an escape from the lynchings and racial violence of the South (Grossman 1989, 16).

Chicago was a node for Black journalism and the Black press during the interwar years. Not only was the *Chicago Defender* one of the strongest Black newspapers in the country, but there were other newspapers and organizations that made Chicago a very unique place for Black journalism. The first Black newspaper in Chicago was the *Aspirant*, which was founded in 1874 (Krieling 1977, 133). Though it lasted for less than a year, it paved the way for more Black newspapers to emerge. Only a few years later, Ferdinand Barnett helped establish the *Conservator* in 1878. The *Conservator* had a strong focus on politics and an emphasis on strengthening Black political consciousness (Krieling 1977, 133). It eventually, though, was not able to sustain itself monetarily, and it was skewed largely to advance the political ambitions of its editors (Ottley 1955, 86). As the *Chicago Defender* grew in influence, it also played a role in bringing more Black people, and news organizations, to the city. The Associated Negro Press (ANP), for example, was founded in 1919 in Chicago as the first national news service for African Americans. It was modeled after the Associated Press and helped spread Black news across the country (Horne 2017, 24). The establishment of the ANP gave a sense of permanence and legitimacy to the Black press, especially from the perspective of the white media establishment.

The interwar period was a unique time for the Black press. The original growth in Black periodicals and newspaper circulation occurred in the mid to late nineteenth century around the antebellum period. However, it was not until the 1920s that these papers were really able to take off. The 1920s and 1930s were the glory days of the Black press (Muhammad 2003, 14).

The Black press is often referred to as a collective instigator for social change (McFadden 1999; Muhammad 2003, 13; Washburn 2006, 141). This is not necessarily unique to Black journalism, but it is fair to say that Black newspapers have anticipated civil rights movements at a fairly unmatched level throughout the history of journalism. In its early years, the *Chicago Defender*, for example, encouraged and was in large part responsible for the mass movement of Black people from the South to the north (DeSantis 1998, 503; Grossman 1989, 83; Henri 1975, 92–93). This mass movement of Black people has since become known as the Great Migration (DeSantis 1998, 474). The power of this newspaper—housed in Chicago and seemingly distant from the problems Black Americans were facing in the deep South—was truly a marvel.

The *Chicago Defender* offered something that was lacking for many of its readers—a community and a dream. Even though it was seemingly impossible, the newspaper was able to reach far outside of the bustling Windy City to places as removed as Mississippi (DeSantis 1997, 65; Grossman 1989, 80). From its early years of publication, there was a strong demand for the *Chicago Defender* beyond Chicago, and that demand helped it serve the social movements it would later influence. The paper did start to lose some of its previous influence following 1930 due to the economic hit of the Great Depression, Abbott's personal health problems, and the rise in competition from the *Pittsburgh Courier* (Black Press Research Collective 2014; Washburn 2006, 126). After the Great Depression began, Abbott, the *Defender's* founder, reversed his position on the movement of Black Americans north due to worsening economic conditions. He asked that Black people stay in the South, but his pleas were largely ignored due to his loss of influence (Washburn 2006, 125–26).

While the *Chicago Defender* started losing its influence after 1930, the decade prior was one of its most prosperous. This was concurrent with the success of Black newspapers across the country at that time. The 1920s was a time of true growth in the Black press's power and influence across the country (Washburn 2006, 112; Muhammad 2003, 14). But, as the Black press prospered during this time period, its success was not reflective of the experiences of Black people across the United States after World War I. There had been a lot of hope that conditions would be better for Black people following the war, but that was not the case. Black soldiers who had been on the battlefield among brothers who gave their lives fighting America's battles returned to widespread racism on the home front. For Black Americans at the time, there was a lot of unemployment, housing discrimination, and racial violence that threatened their livelihoods. In the midst of this, though, there was a mass call for change—a call that Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* answered.

### **The Role of the *Chicago Defender* in Diversifying the Coverage of Black America**

The *Chicago Defender* became well renowned for its editorial page. Its editors were not afraid to publish controversial opinions that pushed the advancement of their race. The Black press did not concern itself over worries about bias in the news. It was proudly biased toward furthering and defending the rights of Black people (Ottley 1955, 104). In this sense, Black newspapers operated as a vessel for social movements to push for the change America so desperately needed (California Newsreel 1998).

As a weekly paper, the *Chicago Defender* became a “racial watchdog” over the injustices that occurred daily (Drake and Cayton 1945, 401). It did not shy away from covering lynchings and white mobs, often prominently featuring such stories on its front pages. “Nine Ex-Soldiers Lynched in South” was the main headline for the January 3, 1920 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, and the lack of press coverage and absence of arrests were featured near the lead of the piece.

White newspapers barely published articles about Black lynchings (California Newsreel 1998). When they did, unfounded accusations of Black men raping white women were often used to justify these lynchings (Krieling 1977, 134). All too often, stories of lynchings went untold, but the work of Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* helped to call attention to the horrors of racial violence against Black people. This in turn led to calls for justice and sparked grassroots protest movements among Black populations in the city to resist and to fight for racial equality.

Among all the lynchings and race riots, a different movement was brewing that would help define how Black papers approached news coverage. At the beginning of the interwar period, the Harlem Renaissance and a new self-definition of Blackness began to emerge. The end of World War I brought a rebirth in Black culture and the development of the “New Negro”—a progressive racial consciousness (Wilson 2005, 9). During the 1920s, there was a real push for a cultural revival, and this push was felt by the newspapers as well. At a time in which Black culture was truly reemerging and strengthening, Black newspapers offered not only a source of Black news, but also a source of Black community. This would prove critical to creating the reader demand that would bring these Black newspapers into their greatest era yet.

There was no dearth of white-led newspapers and journalists at the time. These newspapers, however, truly ignored the crux of Black experiences and thus did not have a strong Black readership. People read newspapers that cover news about them, and a lot of newspapers at the time left Black people off their pages. This meant that without Black newspapers, Black news would have just gone uncovered. Papers like the *Chicago Defender* were able to fulfill the need among Black populations for news that was about them. It was so rare for this to happen that the *Chicago Defender* was able to grow a strong readership across the nation. Black people in Mississippi should not have had to turn to a Chicago newspaper to get their weekly news, but that was practically all they had.

Furthermore, it would be wrong to say that white newspapers completely lacked any coverage of Black people. That is far from the truth. White newspapers did talk about Black people, but did so primarily through negative stories, though there were a few exceptions with sports coverage (Washburn 2006, 122–23). When negative stories were the only ones being circulated, that furthered the society-driven association between Blackness and violence. The Black press was essential in spreading positive stories that helped to decentralize those narratives within the white media (Robinson 2018, 8).

It was common practice in white newspapers during the same era that whenever race-based violence was written about, the articles would include the word “negro” in parentheses after the name to clarify the race of the person involved (California Newsreel 1998). Only Black people were identified by race, thereby setting white as the default. To push back against this, Abbott and the *Chicago Defender* started putting the word “white” in parentheses next to the names of any white people involved in the paper’s violence-based headlines. For example, in the March 2, 1929 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, one of the articles on the front page was about a white night watchman who shot and killed a weaponless Black woman. “After deliberating all night, the jury last Saturday here, brought in a verdict of not guilty in the case of Douglass Davis (white), who was charged with the killing Jan. 15 of Lane Hale in Shuqualak,” the article said. This editorial choice was a direct response to and reversal of the practices of white newspapers. It reset Blackness as the default and emphasized the connections between whiteness and mass racial violence. When the only things they were given by white newspapers were biased stories about violence in Black communities, Black people turned to the Black press for support—and they found it (Washburn 2006, 122).

The stewardship of telling the Black stories largely ignored by its white counterparts was part of a prominent role played by the Black press, which acted as a parallel entity to white journalism. Both did essentially the same work, but the white press covered white stories and the Black press covered Black stories. In this sense, many Black newspapers viewed themselves as tools for reconceptualizing Blackness in a positive way (Robinson 2018, 8). So, for many Black newspaper publishers, that was the niche they sought to fill.

Vernon Jarrett, who once was a reporter for the *Chicago Defender*, said in 1999, “We didn’t exist in other papers. We were neither born, we didn’t get married, we didn’t die, we didn’t fight in any wars, we never participated in anything of scientific achievement. We were truly invisible unless we committed a crime” (as quoted in Washburn 2006, 123). So often throughout history white America has dehumanized Black people. If Black people are not real people with a full range of emotions and experiences, then it is easier for white Americans to justify cruelty and heinous acts of racial violence. In deciding to portray a narrative of Black violence, white newspapers in the interwar period further contributed to that messaging. Those stories that Jarrett talked about—of birth and marriage and death—are incredibly important to tell, no matter how trivial each one may seem.

It was the cumulative effect of smaller stories on Black accomplishment and culture that truly helped combat the racist imagery of Black violence that white mass media publications propagated. Each individual story may not have seemed significant, but together they played an important role in crafting a narrative of what Blackness was. Bias in journalism is not only introduced in the words reporters use within stories; it is also introduced in the stories that newspapers choose to tell. In making it their goal to tell the stories of Black people, Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* were instrumental in combatting biases far too prevalent in white journalism.

The goal of elevating stories of Black culture and minimizing the extent to which it discussed Black violence was a challenge for the *Chicago Defender*. A newspaper’s job is to cover the news, so editors must make difficult decisions in terms of how to balance staying true to their mission while also producing solid journalism. The *Chicago Defender* received some pushback for the way it covered the Chicago race riots of 1919, for example. Critics called the paper out for “yellow journalism,” or using sensationalized and exaggerated headlines to catch the eye of readers to boost sales. Afterwards, Abbott committed to his readers that the paper would publish fewer articles on violence and focus instead on Black achievement (Washburn 2006, 125). It is tricky for Black newspapers to balance these conflicting demands and find ways to tell the stories of violence in Black communities without homogenizing the Black experience. Part of how the *Chicago Defender* attempted to strike this balance was by diversifying positive stories within the paper, but it still kept the eye-catching violence-related stories on its front pages. That tension of ensuring balanced content that does right by the communities it covers without ignoring stories of violence is something that the *Chicago Defender* struggled to overcome. In the next section, I conduct an independent review of front-page headlines in the *Chicago Defender* in order to better analyze how the paper balanced stories of violence with stories of Black achievement.

### **Analyzing the Prevalence of Violence in the *Chicago Defender's* Headlines**

In order to analyze the prominence of violence-associated headlines in the *Chicago Defender*, I conducted a review that found that the paper’s front page largely featured stories of racial violence. There was a stark difference between the sensationalized stories of violence on its front

pages and the more balanced community news stories told on the inside pages of the newspaper. This review analyzes the selection and diversity of front-page stories—notably, where readers get their first impressions.

To conduct this research, I reviewed microfiche issues of the *Chicago Defender* from January to June of 1920 and from January to June of 1929. These two years were chosen because 1920 was right after the Chicago race riots, and 1929 was right before the Great Depression. In selecting these dates, I found that news from those two major historical events did not heavily influence or take precedence on the front pages in the issues studied. I recorded the headlines for each above-the-fold story published in issues of the paper during the chosen time periods and coded each headline to reflect whether it was about violence or community-related news. Then, I compared the ratio of violent stories to community news in 1920 to the same ratio in 1929 to understand whether the paper had tried to diversify its front-page coverage over the ten-year period. There were 145 above-the-fold headlines from January to June in 1920, and 129 above-the-fold headlines from January to June of 1929. It is important to note that the *Chicago Defender* liked to use a lot of subheadings, or multiple headlines, for each story. Different headings for the same story were counted as the same headline for the purposes of this study.

Overall, the front pages of the *Chicago Defender* relied on sensational headlines and heavily emphasized stories of crime and violence both in 1920 and 1929. There was a small increase in non-violent stories published in 1929, but the change was minimal. This reflects that while Abbott did increase community-driven coverage within the paper over those ten years, minimizing the extent to which Black-associated violence appeared on its front pages was not a priority for the paper. Regardless of the good stories published on the inside, the front page is still where first impressions are made. The *Chicago Defender* therefore chose sales—driven up by sensationalism—over diversifying what it established as the “big news” headlines for each week.

From January to June 1920, only 5.6 percent of the headlines promoted positive stories of Black achievement or community growth. Those headlines included stories about how Mrs. Jack Johnson broke out as a movie actress, how a Black man was promoted to colonel of the ninth cavalry beating out a white major, and how new bishops were elected to the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Comparatively, from January to June in 1929, 8.5 percent of the *Chicago Defender's* headlines promoted positive stories about Blackness. This is a small increase, but not terribly substantial. Still, in 1929 more of the featured headlines were politically driven or editorialized, as opposed to just focusing on sensationalized stories of deaths, murders, and suicides. For example, there was an increase in politician/policy-driven headlines. In the March 23, 1929 issue, one of the main headlines read, “DuBois Shatters Stoddard's Cultural Theories in Debate.” The article is about how thousands crowded around to hear W.E.B. Du Bois speak on cultural equality. Black newspapers were, in part, a space for Black leaders and theorists to promote their work, so in publishing a story on the debate and prominently featuring Du Bois, the *Chicago Defender* helped spread awareness of his work.

Building this type of cultural awareness and foundational knowledge is critical. Though the article on Du Bois stood out among the violence-based headlines that the *Chicago Defender* tended to publish, over time more and more race leaders were featured in lead stories. From 1933 to 1938, six of the ten most prominent people featured on the front pages were race heroes and race leaders (Drake and Cayton 1945, 403). These people included Joe Louis, who held a world heavyweight title, Haile Selassie, an Ethiopian leader, Oscar DePriest, a Black congressman,

Jesse Binga, whose home was bombed by white people, Arthur Mitchell, who replaced Republican Oscar DePriest and who was the first African American Democrat to be elected to Congress, and Colonel John C. Robinson, who served in the Italo-Ethiopian war (Drake and Cayton 1945, 403).

Gaining awareness of these race leaders through 10-cent weekly newspapers offered a new possibility for Black people to learn about their communities and history, knowledge that was largely denied to them by the white establishment in media and education. To further this education and make the newspapers more accessible to communities, the *Chicago Defender* advertised a policy of “passing it along” that encouraged readers to hand their copy of the newspaper off to a neighbor once they were finished reading it (California Newsreel 1998). Readers also overcame literacy barriers by sharing the news via word of mouth. It became common for discussions of the news to take place in homes, barber shops, churches, and other community gathering places (Grossman 1989, 68). Educating and spreading the words of Black leaders was critical to building a base of Black Americans prepared to enter into the Civil Rights Movement and lead protests demanding freedoms.

There were also four obituaries of prominent African Americans featured above the fold during the January to June 1929 timeline studied. This is significant because the comparative white newspapers simply were not publishing non-violence-associated obituaries in their issues, least of all on their front pages. One of those obituaries was published in the June 1, 1929 edition of the *Chicago Defender* with a headline that read, “Mrs. Julius Rosenwald, Wife of Philanthropist, Dies: Death Takes Wife of Noted Friend of Men.” The article is an obituary for Augusta Nusbaum Rosenwald, who died due to an illness. Her death was not well covered in similar-sized white newspapers, and it definitely was not on their front pages. However, in the *Chicago Defender*, her death was the second most dominant headline on the page. This people-focused journalism, though it was more prominent on the inside pages of the *Chicago Defender*, truly set the paper apart.

While the few scattered articles that did promote Black livelihoods and achievements on the front page are significant, it is important to note that the majority of the headlines run by the *Chicago Defender* on its front pages were sensationalist and focused on violence or scandal. The paper published sensationalized headlines in red print, giving it a very signature look (Ottley 1955, 106). This was likely because sensationalism sells. Newspapers are a tricky business, and a lot of the earlier Black newspapers were not able to economically support themselves. A Black newspaper that goes bankrupt cannot serve the Black community, so the emphasis on sales was important to the survival of Black journalism.

### **Balancing Sensationalism: Coverage of the Black Community**

Though most of the front-page headlines were sensationalized stories about Black violence, Abbott did a good job balancing that violence out with stories of achievements within the newspaper itself. T. Ella Strother (1997) conducted a study on the Black image in the *Chicago Defender* from 1905 to 1975. She analyzed the distribution of different types of articles on the inside pages of newspapers during that time period. From 1920 to 1930, politics was the focus of 13 percent of the stories, while 23 percent were on sports, 11 percent concentrated on fine arts, and 8 percent focused on crime. From 1933 to 1939, politics was the topic of 15 percent of the stories, and 24 percent concentrated on sports, while the subject of fine arts jumped to 26 percent and crime dropped to 6 percent (Strother 1977, 139). Thus, according to Strother’s (1977) findings, even though stories about crime made up a significant percentage of the front-page

headlines, they were only a minor percentage of the total stories covered. Additionally, there was a large jump in arts-centered stories in the 1930s, which corresponds with the expansion of the children's, theater, and society sections in the paper during that period.

In 1920, all of the papers from January to June included an "All Around the Town" section, which featured personality-focused stories and included coverage of movie stars, new directors, award winners, and so forth. This section was not prominent in the 1929 papers from January to June. Instead, the "All Around the Town" section, which had often been only one or two pages each issue, was replaced by more sports, theater, and children's pages. Additionally, the pages devoted to African American achievements in sports have always been quite significant in number. The theater pages featured Black entertainers and accomplishments, and the children's pages offered a unique space as well. The children's pages were a place of advertisement for the Bud Billiken Club, a Chicago social club for Black youth, but more importantly they expanded the accessibility of the newspaper to the youth. Prior to the expansion of these pages, Black children were not represented in newspapers. The children's sections helped expand the interest in literacy to younger children early on in their development.

The Society pages, which were mainly women's pages, also expanded in 1929 to take up more space than they had in 1920. These pages gave women authors a place to be featured, and though the stories were mainly "soft" news, they were important to share. The 1929 Society pages published several human interest pieces on different women each week. These featured women all bore unique labels such as "educator," "worker," "hostess," "president," and "politician." In the February 9, 1929 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, for example, some of the main stories on the Society pages included: "Miss Elise Evans Held a Bridal Shower"; "Mrs. Grover Rutherford Hosted a Pre-Valentine Party at Her House"; "Mrs. Daisy E. Lampkin Worked On a Presidential Campaign"; and "Mrs. Lulu E. Lawson Was Honored for Her Service as Executive Secretary of the YWCA." This array of news stories was fairly consistent across the different Society pages, with each featuring different women and their respective accomplishments. Dedicating the space to honoring these accomplishments was very influential for readers of the paper and those who were featured.

### **Advertising and the Promotion of a White Beauty Ideal**

Though the *Chicago Defender* stands out in terms of its progressive content, it did run some problematic, white-washed advertisements on its pages. There were several advertisements in each issue for skin whitening from January to June of 1929. There were also several ads for straightening hair. Often, these beauty-based ads were featured more prominently on the Society pages, catering to women who already had a lot of societal beauty pressures on them. The ads also often framed women's beauty from the perspective of the male gaze. For example, the Society pages in the March 9, 1929 issue of the *Chicago Defender* featured an advertisement with the headline "Light Skin that Men Cannot Resist!" These pressures around beauty were present in the white newspapers and on pages aimed at white women as well, but it is important to note that no matter how effectively the *Chicago Defender* pushed against racial inequalities, other inequalities were present. It was rather hypocritical for a newspaper that prided itself on elevating the stories of Black culture and life to run ads that promoted a white beauty ideal. It was damaging for this newspaper—that had become a safe space for so many Black people—to include such anti-Black messaging on its pages. What does it say to readers if even the Black-owned newspaper endorses the spread of skin whitening advertisements? It is disheartening that a newspaper that accomplished so much good by uplifting Black culture would allow pockets of



its pages to include such harmful content. The good work of the *Chicago Defender* far outweighed the harm from these advertisements, but it is important to acknowledge the paper's shortcomings in this regard.

### **The *Chicago Defender* and the Strengthening of Black Community**

Another role the Black press has served is as the creator of community. This role went beyond being just a newspaper. The *Chicago Defender's* leaders also hosted community events, sponsored charities, and helped create common forums for discourse. During the interwar period, a unique phenomenon occurred: journalists suddenly became celebrities. They were viewed as community stars, and journalism grew into a very glamorous profession (California Newsreel 1998). With its glamorization came admiration from Black communities in Chicago for the newspapers and the journalists working on the ground. That admiration extended as well to the multitude of community events that were sponsored by Black newspapers during the period.

The community event the *Chicago Defender* is perhaps best known for is sponsoring the Bud Billiken Parade. Beyond the annual parade, the newspaper also was the lead contributor to the Bud Billiken Club. The Bud Billiken Club is an African American children's group that was started in 1921, with different foundations popping up across the country wherever the *Chicago Defender* was published (Higuchi 2005, 154). Additionally, Abbott spearheaded other charities through his newspaper business. From 1928 to 1944, he worked with Regal Theaters to give aid to Black families who were hurting from economic hardship during the Great Depression (Semmes 2011, 976). These charitable efforts are fairly unique to the *Chicago Defender* and are telling of Abbott's interpretation of what the Black press should be.

Abbott's charitable work would seemingly counter the claim that the Black press in the interwar years was merely white journalism in blackface. The Black press was more than just a body of journalism, but instead sought to tackle and address the needs of the whole of Black communities. Much of the community service work that the *Chicago Defender* did went unpraised. There is very little scholarship on the charity work Abbott did in collaboration with Regal Theaters, and it is likely that there are other projects that have gone entirely unreported.

Many white newspapers would have ethical problems with the work that Abbott did with these different charities. In building community organizations and doing charitable work, the *Chicago Defender* would have overstepped the bounds to an impartial eye. But modern-day journalism it would seem is finally warming to the notion that no journalism is impartial, and some of the best journalism projects out there are ones in which the writer inserts themselves into the narrative. The *Chicago Defender* did not lose journalistic integrity in building those community partnerships, at least not by the ethical standards of Black journalism.

An overemphasis on impartial reporting, I would argue, is something that has held the white press back and prevented it from producing some of the emotionally charged reporting work that has come from some of the best journalists in the field. This is something that even from its founding the Black press never seemed to engrain in its mandate. Concerns over "fake news" or biased reporting—while of course prevalent in every publication—did not seem to make up the main reviews of Black readers of the *Chicago Defender*. Instead, the paper was simply a space to share and celebrate Black accomplishments and lift up Black voices to the masses.

### **The *Chicago Defender* and Class Issues**

Now, that is not to say that the *Chicago Defender* is a paper of the community that has been worshiped by all who have stumbled across it. The paper shared in the problems that many other Black newspapers across the country combatted during the interwar period. One main problem with the way that the Black press is structured is the issue of class. Abbott was not a poor man—in fact, he was a millionaire. He accumulated a lot of wealth through operating the *Chicago Defender*, and that kept him and his paper out of touch with the majority of Black America, which was at or under the poverty line. A newspaper run by elites cannot hope to appeal to and reach all audiences.

In some ways, the Black press reflects W.E.B. Du Bois's (1903) Talented Tenth theory. The Talented Tenth theory argues that in order to help Black people everywhere, an elite, top 10 percent of the Black population should be uplifted and elected to lead the rest (Du Bois 1903, 75). There are many problems with this theory. It assumes the unintelligence of the other 90 percent of Black people, and there is also no true way to ensure that that top 10 percent is really using their education and upper-class status to help everyone else. Abbott and the *Chicago Defender* in many ways do resemble the concept of the Talented Tenth. Abbott was a rich man who used his money to fund the newspaper, and that inherently made his newspaper out of touch in some ways with large portions of the Black population. However, it is tricky because without that money, the *Chicago Defender* would not have been able to print weekly issues and reach the truly impressive masses of Black people that it reached with its publication. The founding of almost every press has this inherent conflict between economics and the quality of its news. This is something that even today the journalism industry is struggling to grapple with.

### **Conclusion: The Complicated Legacy of the *Chicago Defender***

There are many different ways the Black press in Chicago during the interwar years can be interpreted. It was journalism for elites, but it also helped increase education for diverse Black populations. It was a center for building culture and community, but also for breaking down racism and advocating for social change. It expanded coverage of positive community news stories, but still published sensationalized front-page stories featuring violence. It was able to build a mass circulation across the country, but to do so it relied on advertisements that promoted white beauty ideals. It does Black journalism a disservice to try and understand the complexities of the Black press system through solely one lens or one purpose.

Chicago has always stood out as a central hub of organization for Black social movements across history. It is no coincidence that one of history's most prominent Black newspapers was born there. Chicago's centrality as a place of Black culture and community played out alongside the rise in influence of the *Chicago Defender*.

The *Chicago Defender* was a marvel of its time. No other paper was publishing its type of journalism. With its strong editorials and diversified coverage, the *Chicago Defender* gave Black people in Chicago and across the United States a paper that was truly their own. The community, autonomy, and seeds of demand for social justice spread by the Black press were a critical forerunner to the unprecedented change to come in the Civil Rights Movement.

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