

The Amsterdam News at 100: A Legacy to Keep

In this age of the Internet, some people are writing the demise of the newspaper as a form of communication. A number of papers across the country have gone under or have merged to survive. There have been cutbacks in newsrooms as well as in some coverage of the news.

Yet there is something reassuring about being able to read full-length stories and news analyses that go beyond the surface to actually explain the background of an ongoing newsworthy topic. News ought to provide information and insight on important issues. All too often, “the news” online is part propaganda, part self-indulgence – provided by nameless individuals whose existence is wrapped up in their blogs.

Because many people – whose lives do not revolve around a computer - turn to newspapers for information, they remain a major communications outlet, particularly for those not connected to technology. Many of the best – those that have survived for generations - have loyal readers who would not think of starting their day without “the paper.”

A Century of Publishing

The Amsterdam News was founded in Harlem in December 1909 - 100 years ago - the city’s oldest black-owned newspaper - and it has been one of the nation’s leading African American newspapers since its inception. The same year that *The Amsterdam News* began publishing the NAACP was founded, partly in response to lynchings and race riots across the country. Its first meeting took place in the United Charities Building, where my organization, the Community Service Society, is located.

The year 1909 also saw the beginning of the large West Indian migration to the United States, one of the mass migrations to this country in the early years of the 20th century. Many of the immigrants from the West Indies settled in New York City, including my grandfather, Thomas Sylvester Jones, who was born in Barbados. Trained as a teacher and schoolmaster, he worked for a time as a newspaper reporter before emigrating in 1910.

The Amsterdam News published columns by [W. E. B. Du Bois](#), [Roy Wilkins](#), [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.](#), and [Malcolm X](#). In the 1950s and 1960s, it chronicled events of the civil rights movement such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Riders bus-burning incident, and numerous riots. The paper was the first to focus attention on Malcolm X, and in 1958 published his column "God's Angry Man."

While *The Amsterdam News* has covered many important national stories, it also serves as a central conduit for news in the neighborhoods, a sort of billboard on issues affecting New York’s black community.

The paper’s long time editor and publisher, Wilbert Tatum, was a prominent spokesman on racial and political issues in New York City and nationally. Under his leadership, *The Amsterdam News* covered issues of concern to black New Yorkers that the rest of the media often ignored.

The paper does not shrink when it comes to politics and elections. Tatum’s continual drumbeat against Ed Koch helped to turn the 1989 Democratic primary toward the city’s first black mayor, David Dinkins.

The paper’s power to mold public opinion and move voters was again on display last week. While the mainstream dailies were lined up for Michael Bloomberg in the mayoral race – figuring that he was a shoo-in – *The Amsterdam News* made no secret of its stand for Comptroller Bill Thompson’s candidacy. And

when the votes were counted on election night, the “experts” were dumbfounded and the pollsters were exposed as Thompson’s numbers exceeded all expectations.

Focus on Problems

Over the years, *The Amsterdam News* has continued to focus on the disparities in health care for black New Yorkers, the warehousing of inexperienced teachers in predominantly black public schools, and the shocking rates of joblessness especially among black men. These were hardly popular themes at City Hall or in Albany.

When the paper chronicled the huge imbalance in unemployment between white and black New Yorkers, especially men, in the current recession, other news outlets started to pick up on this story. Recessions in the United States have usually meant higher rates of unemployment for people of color. But the gap between white and black has been extraordinary this time, fueled by big job losses in manufacturing, construction, and the retail and automobile industries, job sectors where many black men found employment.

The unemployment rate for blacks rose to 15.7 percent in the third quarter of this year, the highest of any racial or ethnic group. The true jobless rate for black men is probably three times the official rate. *The Amsterdam News* ensures that this sort of story – and its analysis that goes beyond official numbers - is reported. We look forward to the paper continuing its historic mission of shedding light and affecting positive change on the black experience in New York City.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: www.cssny.org.

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