

## From Black Print Culture to Digital Blackness 2027 Black History Month Theme Executive Summary

The 2027 Black History Month theme, From Black Print Culture to Digital Blackness, explores the duality of print and digital technologies as tools of empowerment and as instruments that can reinforce systemic racial biases. Black print culture has evolved from street-corner papers to independent bookmaking to global digital networks. As artificial intelligence and other technologies evolve, studying the intersection of print media, race, and the digital world becomes increasingly vital. Black print culture has been a powerful tool for self-representation, community building, and resistance, and this legacy continues in the digital era.

Black Americans have long used print media—newspapers, magazines, books, and pamphlets—to speak for themselves. In 1827 the *Freedom's Journal* became the first Black-owned U.S. newspaper, declaring “We want to plead our own case”. Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany later founded *The North Star* in 1847 as an abolitionist newspaper. By 1852 the African Methodist Episcopal Church was publishing *The Christian Recorder*, covering not only church news but also politics and efforts to reunite families after slavery. Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* (founded in 1905) and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (1910) informed readers about civil rights struggles, economic opportunities, and racial injustices that mainstream papers ignored. *The Defender* was instrumental in encouraging folks to participate in the Great Migration, using its pages to urge Southern Blacks to move north in search of better opportunities.

Magazines and journals also played critical roles. *The Crisis*, founded in 1910 as the official publication of the NAACP under the editorship of W.E.B. DuBois, combined essays, art, and reporting to shape intellectual and cultural debates. In 1916, Dr. Carter G. Woodson established the *Journal of Negro History* (JNH, now the *Journal of African American History* (JAAH)) to publish scholarly research on African American life and history, and the *Negro History Bulletin* (NHB, now the *Black History Bulletin*), to support educators in teaching Black history, to filling a gap in historical narratives and making this knowledge accessible. Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* helped define modern Black identity, showcasing the beauty, achievements, and aspirations of African Americans. John H. Johnson launched *Ebony* magazine in 1945 and its sister publication *Jet* in 1951, offering “compelling stories and vivid photographs” of Black life when mainstream media largely ignored Black audiences.

By the mid-19th century, Black Americans were not only writing but also engaging in bookmaking. Black churches, fraternal organizations, and mutual aid societies often operated their own presses, using them to circulate religious tracts, educational materials, and political essays (i.e., David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829)). The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s marked another milestone. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay published works that celebrated Black life while challenging racism. Small presses, literary journals, and anthologies allowed their voices to circulate widely. Print culture here was inseparable

from cultural production: it was the lifeblood of a movement that asserted the value of Black art and intellect. This legacy continued into the 20th century with institutions like Third World Press, founded in 1967 by Haki Madhubuti in Chicago. Third World Press became a leading independent Black publishing house, elevating the works of authors central to the Black Arts Movement and beyond. By controlling their own means of production, Black publishers ensured that their stories and philosophies could circulate without the distortions of white-owned publishing companies. By the late 20th century, the rise of the internet reshaped how African Americans created and shared media. Early websites, blogs, and digital forums gave Black users new spaces to tell their stories outside the gatekeeping of traditional publishing. A groundbreaking moment came with the launch of BlackPlanet in 1999. Founded by Omar Wasow, BlackPlanet was one of the first large-scale social networking sites designed specifically for African Americans. It served as an early digital gathering place for community building, cultural exchange, and activism. Years before Facebook and Twitter, BlackPlanet demonstrated how digital media could extend the legacies of Black print culture into a new technological frontier.

Technology such as smartphones, the internet, and social media have opened expansive avenues for Black creativity, activism, storytelling, and economic opportunity. Independent blogs and websites like *The Root* and *VerySmartBrothas* created digital spaces for journalism, advocacy, cultural critique, and storytelling, continuing the tradition of the Black press in an online environment. Moreover, platforms such as Twitter/X, TikTok, Instagram has allowed movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and spaces like Black Twitter to be established. Through hashtags and social media Black Americans have amplified their voices, built communities, mobilize individuals, and challenged dominant narratives. Through digital storytelling and marketing, Black creators have crafted counter-narratives and extended their reach, highlighting that race and digital culture are deeply intertwined.

Yet, just as in print, digital media has carried risks alongside opportunities. From the digital divide to facial recognition systems that misidentify Black faces to search engines that reinforce stereotypes, digital technologies often mirror the inequities of the analog world. Ruha Benjamin's concept of the "New Jim Code" highlights one of the avenues for this perpetuation, describing how supposedly objective technologies replicate historical inequities under the guise of progress. Algorithms and digital infrastructures often embed racial bias, masquerading as neutral while enabling discriminatory practices as scholars Saifya Noble and Joy Buolamwini have written about. These systemic issues demonstrate that digital spaces, while seemingly democratizing, can and often do deepen existing inequalities.

Social media, despite offering unprecedented visibility to Black creators, has also facilitated cultural appropriation: non-Black users regularly adopt Black aesthetics and expressions via phenomena such as Blackfishing or Digital Blackface, often for entertainment or social gain without acknowledging their origins. This appropriation echoes a long historical pattern that was seen in print culture as well: from Joel Chandler Harris adapting enslaved people's anecdotes into "Uncle Remus Stories" to Elvis Presley popularizing and being given credit for music created by Black artists (i.e., such as

"Hound Dog" by Big Mama Thornton and "That's All Right" by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup), American culture has repeatedly embraced Black creativity while marginalizing its creators. The Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance saw white audiences consuming Black art (i.e., the segregated Cotton Club), while continuing to stigmatize Black Americans themselves, demonstrating a simultaneous love and disdain for Blackness that characterizes much of American popular culture.

Despite these challenges, the legacy of Black print culture persists in the digital age. Just as *Freedom's Journal* provided a space for the Black voices to be seen and heard, today's digital platforms allow Black creators to assert their presence in global conversations. The independent spirit of presses like Third World Press resonates in Black-led and created podcasts, YouTube channels, apps, and digital collectives committed to self-representation (i.e., KevOnStage Studios, FanBase, Black Girls Code, #CiteBlackWomen Collective, All Def Digital, For Harriet, etc.).

The trajectory from Black print culture to digital Blackness reveals a story of resilience and innovation. Whether in the form of newspapers smuggled to enslaved people, books published by independent presses, or hashtags that galvanize millions, African Americans have continually found ways to harness media for liberation.

As we move further into the age of artificial intelligence and digital platforms, the challenge will be to protect Black cultural ownership, demand accountability from tech industries, and envision digital futures that center Black agency. The journey of Black media—from print to digital—is not just about communication; it is about survival, dignity, and the ongoing fight for justice.

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**1919:** *Associated Negro Press* – A Chicago-based news service founded by Claude Barnett. ANP was the first national wire service for Black newspapers, supplying news and features to hundreds of Black papers across the U.S. and abroad.

To truly understand the Digital Age, we must recognize how Blackness is continuously shaped and contested within it.

Understanding Black print culture's legacy is therefore essential to interpreting digital Blackness today – it reminds us that each generation must reclaim new technologies to advance Black agency, even as forces of appropriation and discrimination persist.

Yet, there is resistance and progress. Black tech users and scholars are increasingly speaking out against digital inequity and cultural appropriation, and their calls for accountability have sparked broader conversations around ownership, recognition, and respect. While non-Black cooptation of Black identity and culture remains prevalent, it no longer goes unchallenged, and debates about the line between appreciation and theft have prompted both platform moderation and public discourse.