



ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY®

301 RHODE ISLAND AVENUE, NW | SUITE 1508 | WASHINGTON, DC 20001
202.238.5910 | ASALH.ORG

2027 BLACK HISTORY THEME EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FROM BLACK PRINT CULTURE TO DIGITAL BLACKNESS

The 2027 Black History 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 Americans have long used print media—newspapers, magazines, books, and pamphlets—to tell their own stories. In 1827 the *Freedom’s Journal* became the first Black-owned US newspaper, declaring “We want to plead our own case.” 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. Associations created their own serial publications as well: the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, founded in 1910 under the editorship of W. E. B. Du Bois, combined essays, art, and reporting to shape intellectual and cultural debates. Then, in 1916, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, founder of ASALH, established the *Journal of Negro History* (now the *Journal of African American History*) to publish scholarly research on African American life and history and the *Negro History Bulletin* (now the *Black History Bulletin*) to support educators in teaching Black history, filling a gap in historical narratives and making this knowledge accessible. For the public, publications such as *Negro Digest*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* helped to define modern Black identity, showcasing the beauty, achievements, and aspirations of African Americans.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Black Americans published their work to ensure that their stories and philosophies could circulate without the distortions of white-owned publishing companies. Black churches, fraternal organizations, and mutual aid societies often operated their own presses, using them to circulate religious tracts, educational materials, and political essays. The Harlem Renaissance writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay published works with small presses and in literary journals and anthologies that celebrated Black life and intellect. This continued into the twentieth century with institutions like Third World Press, founded in 1967 by Haki Madhubuti in Chicago.

In the late twentieth century, the rise of the internet reshaped how Black Americans created and shared media. Websites, blogs, and digital forums gave Black people new spaces to be creative, engage with activist work, and tell their stories outside the gatekeeping of traditional publishing, as well as new avenues for economic opportunity. 1999 saw the launch of BlackPlanet, one of the first large-scale social networking sites designed specifically for African Americans. It served as an early digital gathering place for peer-to-peer communication, community building, cultural exchange, and activism. Independent blogs and websites like *The Root*, *BlackPast*, and *Very Smart Brothas* created digital spaces for journalism, advocacy, cultural critique, and storytelling, continuing the tradition of the Black press in an

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online environment. Through hashtags and social media, Black Americans have amplified their voices, mobilized people, and challenged dominant narratives. However, despite offering unprecedented visibility to Black creators, social media 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, whether in print or digital, is part of the long history of American culture embracing Black creativity while marginalizing its creators.

Like print publishing, digital publishing carries risks. 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" describes 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 Safiya Noble and Joy Buolamwini have discussed.

Despite these challenges, the legacy of Black print culture persists in the digital age. Just as Freedom's Journal provided a space for 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 Black-created podcasts, YouTube channels, apps, and digital collectives committed to self-representation.

As we move further into the age of artificial intelligence and digital platforms, the charge 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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