

<http://stateofthemedias.org/2011/african-american/>

## African American Media: Evolving in the New Era

*By Emily Guskin, Paul Moore and Amy Mitchell of the Project for Excellence in Journalism.*

*The [ethnic media](#) play an important role by providing news in both foreign languages and in English about places and issues that are often absent from the mainstream media. This year, to provide greater depth, we are issuing reports on different groups at different times.*

*First, releasing the chapters on different ethnicities separately gives each individual ethnic medium a singular focus. Also, the timing fits more naturally with the release of data sets. This way, we can provide the reader with the most up-to-date information instead of the previous year's.*

*The first report, here, focuses on African American media.*

The African American media in 2010 mirrored the kinds of challenges and changes that mainstream news organizations also faced. Most African American media outlets either began or planned to upgrade their digital enterprises in an effort to reach new audiences. But beyond that, it was a mixed year for the sector.

- African American newspapers, now mostly weeklies, moved in different directions, but those innovating with new sections and coverage did increase their [circulation](#).
- Most of the major magazines had flat or reduced circulations, but the advertising picture was more promising. Some major publications had double-digit gains in [ad pages](#) after a difficult 2009, but one major publisher seemed at a crossroads.
- Online, the digital gap separating African Americans from other ethnic groups is closing and various publishers are looking to electronic tablets as the next frontier.
- In television, two of the largest cable channels geared to black audiences now air weekly news talk shows, a shift in the last year.
- In radio, the biggest African American-focused broadcaster saw its stock delisted on the Nasdaq exchange but managed to restructure and restore its stock price to a level that met the exchange's standards.

“Overall, it was a year in which people were trying to catch their breath... [trying to] move forward... try[ing] to survive and wait[ing] for the economy to rebound,” said media columnist Richard Prince.<sup>1</sup>

But some also think that with the experience of years of struggle, the African American press is remarkably resilient.<sup>2</sup> “The African American press will continue to have to reinvent itself to provide quality, relevant coverage during an era when readers want more information more quickly, and advertisers want a return on their investment more clearly defined,” said Neil Foote, a senior lecturer at the University of North Texas Mayborn School of Journalism. “Since general market media has been severely hit by declining ad dollars, black media has been hit even harder.”<sup>3</sup>

## Newspapers

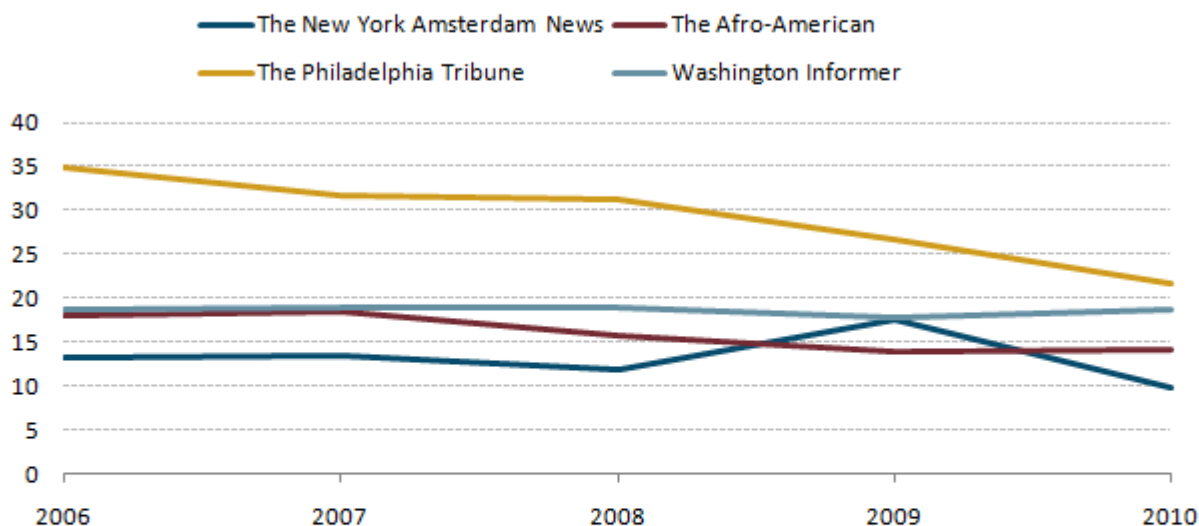
Slightly less than a third (30%) of African Americans report getting most of their national and international news from newspapers, according to a December 2010 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey, a number similar to Americans overall (31%). In addition, 86% of blacks receive most of their news from television and 35% who use the internet for news. (Two responses were allowed.)<sup>4</sup>

Within that 30%, African American papers compete with other print outlets, both mainstream and niche. There is no firm count of how many African American newspapers survive. [Allied Media Corp.](#), an ethnic marketing firm, lists 250 newspapers, though some may be defunct. The largest industry group is the [National Newspaper Publishers Association](#), also known as the Black Press of America, which counts 200 black-owned newspapers as its membership. None of the African American newspapers print daily editions any more. Most are weeklies, and at least one publishes three times a week. A few are using the web actively, particularly to reach younger readers.

In 2010, the fortunes of these papers varied. Some produced growth in circulation by launching targeted zoned editions designed to fill in what they perceived as diminished coverage from mainstream press whose newsrooms were shrinking. Other papers suffered circulation declines, at least in part in comparison to circulation spikes a year earlier associated with President Obama’s inauguration and the death of Michael Jackson. And in one city, the owner of one paper bought his former rival publication and now operates both.

## Circulation Trends Vary at Four Large African American Newspapers

Average Circulation in Thousands



**Source:** For Amsterdam News, Philadelphia Tribune and Afro-American, Audit Bureau of Circulations. For Washington Informer, Circulation Verification Council.

**Note:** For ABC papers, average for six months ending September 30. For Washington Informer, data are average for Q3. Washington Informer is a free newspaper, the other three are paid. The Philadelphia Tribune circulates on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. The Afro-American has editions in Baltimore, Washington and Prince George's County, MD. This chart combines the three days of the Philadelphia Tribune and both editions of the Afro-American.

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2011 STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

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But some argue the numbers alone do not tell the full story.

Many who operate these newspapers see themselves as a voice for their communities. "Our circulation may not be the strongest, but people are reading us, and people care what we say," said Elinor Tatum, the publisher and editor-in-chief of the New York Amsterdam News.<sup>5</sup>

And like many of those in the ethnic press, they see a vital role, too, in covering news missing in the mainstream media. "It's news you can't really get anyplace else," said Jake Oliver, the editor of the Afro American.<sup>6</sup>

But a continuing challenge, African American publishers argue, is persuading major advertisers that African American newspapers are a place to reach black Americans. Danny Bakewell Sr., who publishes two papers in Los Angeles and is the chairman of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, was frustrated that the

NBC television network, for instance, did not use African American papers to advertise two shows on the network that featured black stars, *Undercovers* and *The Event*. “The real issue is advertising.... It really is a function of getting black newspapers in front of major advertisers and trying to create a meaningful partnership with them,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly some African American newspapers saw gains in 2010.

[The Washington Informer](#), a free weekly newspaper that serves the Washington, D.C., metro region, enjoyed third-quarter circulation growth of 5.4%, to 18,695, up from 17,739 in 2009.

One reason may be that the *Informer* has put an emphasis on creating partnerships with other ethnic news media. It now shares coverage with a local Spanish-language newspaper, [Washington Hispanic](#), on such issues as health care and financial literacy.

“African Americans and Hispanics need to find a way to bridge whatever communication gaps there are. Whenever we can work with *Washington Hispanic*, we do,” said the *Informer*’s advertising and marketing manager, Ron Burke.<sup>8</sup>

The *Informer* also has a twice-a-week show on DCTV cable access, which examines many of the issues covered in its newspaper.<sup>9</sup>

Another paper that had circulation gains in 2010 is the [Afro American](#), which also serves the Washington market and is the oldest black newspaper in the city.

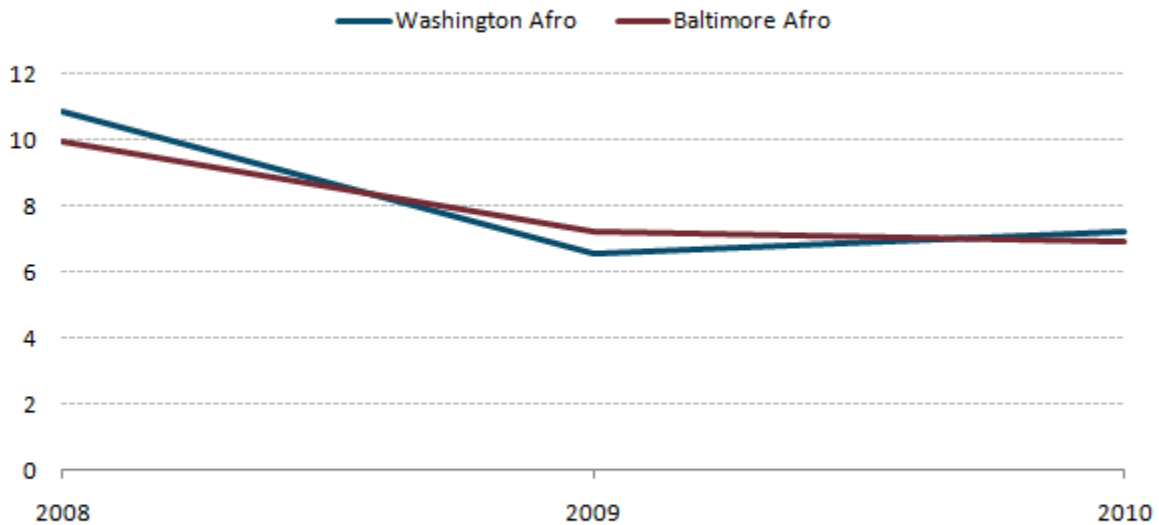
The key for the *Afro* is that it launched a new targeted edition in nearby Prince George’s County, Md., in May 2010. The Prince George’s County edition carries some of the same content as the D.C. edition of the paper, but its Page One coverage is tailored to the suburban community.

Largely as a result of local expansion, the *Afro American*’s Washington edition showed a circulation increase in 2010, up 9.4% compared with the same period in 2009.

The circulation of the Baltimore edition of the *Afro American*, by contrast, declined 4.4%, to an average of 6,923 for the six months ending September 30, 2010, down from 7,244 for the same period in 2009. The paper is planning to launch a suburban edition in surrounding Baltimore County in 2011 to try to duplicate the results in Washington.

## Baltimore Afro American Decreases Circulation While Washington Afro American Increases

Total Average Paid Circulation in Thousands for the Six Month Period Ending Sept. 30



Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

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2011 STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

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Baltimore County has grown in the last decade, which could help the Afro American's effort. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, African Americans made up about a quarter (25.3%) of Baltimore County's population in 2009, which was 5.2 percentage points higher than in 2000, a growth of almost 50,000 people. At the same time, the median household income also grew in Baltimore County to \$63,348, up 25% from \$50,667 in 2000.<sup>10</sup> "The massive migrations out of the inner city over the last 10 years have created pockets...of black communities [where they weren't before]," Oliver said.<sup>11</sup>

But even with the expansion, the Afro had a challenging year, particularly in advertising revenue. "The first quarter was devastating for us," Oliver said. "Come March everything stopped cold. We always do O.K. during Black History Month [February], but there was nothing. No advertising on any level." He attributed the decrease to the overall economic conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Advertising picked up in midsummer. Much of the spending came from national advertisers and local political campaigns. "I'm optimistic, but...disappointed that it's not happening at a faster pace," Oliver said.<sup>13</sup>

One area of intense focus for the Afro is its web-based offerings. It sends out a series of e-mail blasts each day, a weekly wrap-up and toward the end of 2010, a special sports e-mail feed that covers local NBA and NFL teams, games played by historically black colleges, and high school sports. The Afro also tweets live sports coverage at [@AfroNewsLive](#). And it is working on an iPhone app to work in conjunction with its e-mail blasts.

The newspaper's biggest online project in 2010, Oliver said, was putting the paper's [archives online](#), which were posted released in January 2011.<sup>14</sup>

The paper worked in partnership with Google to scan a large percentage of the newspaper's past editions, dating as far back as the early 1900s. Oliver hopes that people can use the online archive, not only for research but also to just explore.

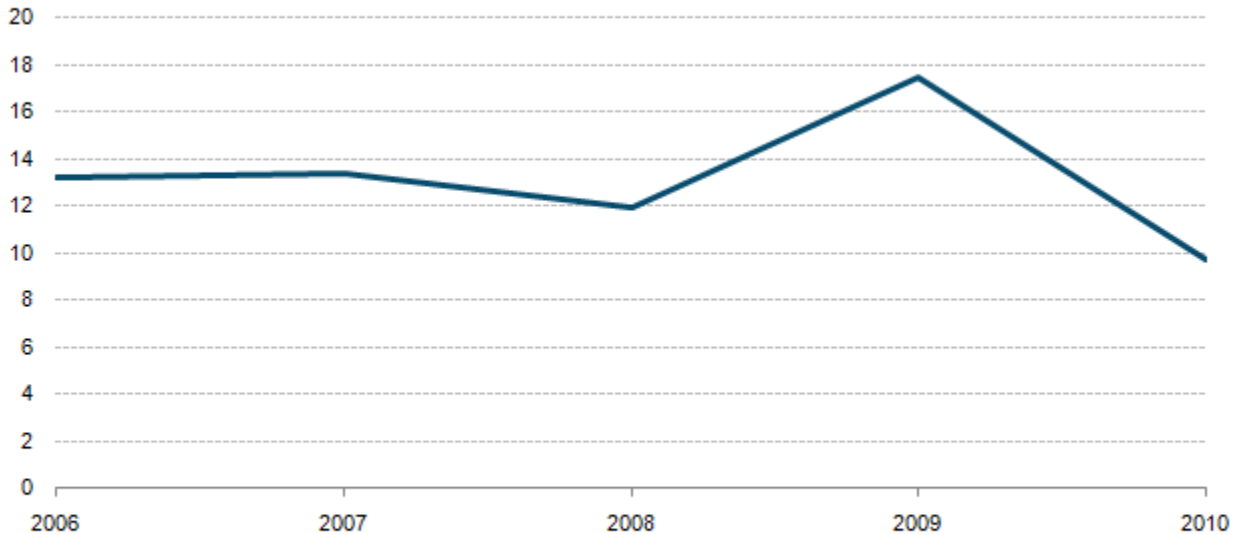
"The gift of a Google search capability makes it easy," Oliver said.<sup>15</sup>

The newspaper continues to monitor online readers to better understand its audience. The most popular stories on the site, according to audience data, tend to be those focused on black celebrities and sports figures. But Oliver says the newspaper's biggest obligation is still "to give them news, real news."<sup>16</sup>

One paper suffered a sharp drop in circulation in 2010. [The Amsterdam News](#), one of the largest businesses owned and operated by blacks in New York, suffered a drop in circulation of nearly one half from 2009 to 2010. For the six months ending September 30, 2010, the New York Amsterdam News had an average circulation of 9,750, a 44% decline from 17,477 for the same period in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

## New York Amsterdam News Drops 44% in Circulation

Total Average Paid Circulation in Thousands for the Six Month Period Ending Sept. 30



Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

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2011 STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

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That number maybe somewhat misleading. Publisher and editor-in-chief Tatum attributed the decrease to two “extremely significant events in the African American community” in 2009, the inauguration of Barack Obama and the death of Michael Jackson, that gave circulation figures an artificial rise.<sup>18</sup>

Souvenir copies of editions, according to Tatum, helped boost sales of the paper from an average of 11,958 in 2008 to more than 17,000 in 2009. With no similar events in 2010, Tatum said that she had expected the numbers to decline. But not all of the drop may be a onetime event. The 2010 figures are still lower than in 2008.

On the other side of the country, two competing papers came under the same ownership. The [Los Angeles Sentinel](#), Los Angeles’ oldest subscription-based African-American newspaper, bought the free [L.A. Watts Times](#) in June 2010.

The Watts Times, a tabloid-sized paper, was started after the August 1965 riots, originally focusing on just that community. In 1976, it became the L.A. Watts Times when it expanded its coverage to all of Los Angeles County.<sup>19</sup>

Publisher Danny Bakewell Sr. said he planned to keep the Sentinel and Watts Times as separate weekly publications.<sup>20</sup>

Bakewell said owning two newspapers gave him the ability to expand his audience, but he worries that the subscription model might become obsolete. “The fact that [The L.A. Watts Times is] a free paper gives us a broader capacity to deal with distribution,” Bakewell said, “The question is, what is the remaining life of a *paid* newspaper?”<sup>21</sup>

Circulation figures for the paid paper are no longer obtainable because the newspaper stopped subscribing to the audit service. Bakewell said the papers would be under a new auditing system soon.

To boost sales for the Los Angeles Sentinel, the Sentinel runs ads in the Watts Times, and the company distributes the free paper in more affluent areas. Bakewell also plans to increase the newspapers’ social media aspects. “We want to make sure we’re communicating on all of the different platforms,” Bakewell said, and he added, “We want to make sure we’re blogging, at least daily, even though our paper is weekly.”<sup>22</sup>