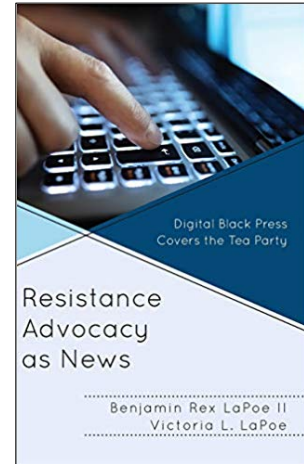


Benjamin Rex LaPoe II & Victoria L. LaPoe, **Resistance Advocacy as News: Digital Black Press Covers the Tea Party**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 158 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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“Can you hear it? Can you hear the somber notes, the feet shuffling, the solemn tones? Can you hear it? It’s a dirge, a funeral march; it’s the death of a movement.” On July 31, 2019, Kentucky Republican Senator Rand Paul lamented the end of the Tea Party as the Senate prepared to vote on the on a contentious budget bill. “Today’s vote will be the last nail in the coffin,” he declared. “The Tea Party is no more” (“Senator Rand Paul,” 2019). While news coverage on the Tea Party has waned over the last few years, whether the Tea Party as a movement and as a set of ideals and attitudes is really dead—never to be resuscitated—remains in dispute. Scholars continue to grapple with how the Tea Party came to be and how it was covered and framed by journalists of various stripes. Who “birthed” it, and who “killed” it?



Resistance Advocacy as News: Digital Black Press Covers the Tea Party, by Benjamin Rex LaPoe II and Victoria L. LaPoe, a formidable duo of media scholars at Ohio University, aims to make sense of it all, mainly by centering and exploring the racial element imbedded in the Tea Party narrative. They argue that, unlike “digital Black press” interpretations of the Tea Party, mainstream digital media seemed to miss, frame inappropriately, or ignore altogether the racial component and threats that the Tea Party posed to “Black solidarity.” The book maps out coverage of the Tea Party by both mainstream media outlets and Black press publications from February 2009 until October 2012, two weeks after the 2012 presidential election. The book also posits that an analysis of reportage around the Tea Party’s trajectory may help journalism and media scholars parse out how we arrived at postracialist claims in the Obama era, swiftly followed by Trump making “numerous explicit racial comments and appeals without being rejected” by some segments of the media and the public (p .vii).

To get to how the digital Black press covered the Tea Party, the authors employ a mixed method analysis, comparing over one thousand online articles from mostly legacy mainstream media publications to a comparable number of online articles published by the highest circulating Black newspapers. They deploy both textual and content analysis, and find that articles by Black publications used more “implicit racial frames” than mainstream articles, referenced President Obama’s race more often and covered him more positively, referred to the Tea Party’s racial composition more explicitly, and used less sources from the Tea Party than mainstream publications.

Several claims precede and underpin these findings. In order to be considered part of the “Black press,” the authors borrow three criteria from Roland E. Wolseley’s 1971 book *The Black Press, U.S.A.* First and foremost, it must be “owned and operated by African Americans.” Secondly, it must be “intended for an African-American audience.” Lastly, it must “champion causes for the African-American minority,” with

advocacy at its core (p.10). These presuppositions are partially drawn from the first African American newspaper that the book cites, *Freedom's Journal*, which, in the early half of the 19th century, primarily advocated against slavery. The authors then define the Black press's role, historically, and in the digital age, as a force to "counter the othering of the black community by mainstream media" working "tirelessly to humanize their readers, their voices, their communities, their issues, and their stories" (p. xiii).

Unlike mainstream, White-dominated press, the Black press "isn't as constricted by self-imposed strategic rituals of idolized objectivity, encompassing racial advocacy and educational responsibilities instead" (p. ix). It is this attribute that then "frees it to amplify black perspectives ignored or oversimplified in the mainstream press" (p. ix). It enabled Black publications to frame the Tea Party within "villain myth" the "inverse of the hero" personifying "fringe beliefs and values" (p. 45). Here, the authors do not use the word "myth" in the sense of a false belief but rather as a way that journalistic interpretive communities tell stories through certain frameworks, and draw from archetypal figures and ideas of social order. While earlier mainstream newspaper stories in 2009 attempted to "justify" the Tea Party's existence and rationale as simply antispending and antitax dissent, the Black press "painted the Tea Party as a villainous threat to the black political empowerment and black issues salient to their communities" (p. 66).

Meanwhile, mainstream journalists "cautiously debated and highlighted the possibility race may have been a key component in a mass of whites aggregating in fear of a black president" but "never conclusively stated it" (p. xiii). Then, the authors argue, mainstream coverage began to invoke the "scapegoat myth," by painting the Tea Party as "a hoard of thousands gathering to disrupt, threaten and intimidate" and not "a legitimate dissenting voice" (p.75). And finally, mainstream coverage captured Tea Party members within a "trickster myth" framework, which includes "traits displaying an unintelligent figure aiming to question social norms . . . a crude and lewd moralist" (p. 76). But still, even with these unfavorably framed myths, and even during the "birther movement," most mainstream media "ignored the racial undercurrents of the Tea Party's success in 2010" (p. 76). One salient example is a *Washington Post* headline at the time: "Tea Partiers More Wacky Mavericks than Extremist Threat" (p. 76).

While the book lays out a staggering amount of textual evidence for the claims highlighted above, it also, perhaps unintentionally, exposes the limits to the methods, definitions, and frameworks that it so heavily relies on. It seems impossible to analyze the digital Black press without constantly relying on or comparing it with digital mainstream media press, so that the authors spend equal time on both. Digital Black press becomes everything that mainstream media press isn't (and vice versa), which, while forming a solid dichotomy that helps to organize the book, may miss some nuances and gray areas that lie between the two (e.g., issues of "ownership," the political economy of the "Black press," and even defining "Blackness" may come into question here—would a Black publication with a White-owned "parent company" count here? What about publications that aren't exclusively "African American" and are more diasporic?)

Moreover, the book points out that one of the core weaknesses of mainstream media has always been that it has "never objectively or truthfully covered African Americans and issues related to race" (p. 14) but neglects to critically question the very notion of "objectivity" and "truth-telling" itself as a standard in journalism to strive for or emulate (if one wants to offer interventions toward making mainstream media more equitable) and the many conversations taking place in journalism studies questioning whether these

frameworks as pillars of "journalism" should remain untroubled. In her 2014 book *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press*, media scholar Sarah J. Jackson states,

The dominant news value of "objectivity" (problematic in that it ignores the subjectivity of other news value judgments and the real impact of newsmakers' standpoints) is often the reason, along with the modern embrace of multiculturalism, for attempts at including some differing perspectives in mainstream news, (p. 8)

which may harm the ways in which Black publics are covered.

The oversight above is just one example of moments in the book that are not in conversation with relevant literatures. Other examples include a claim that, at the time of the book's publication, "despite the black press's historical significance in helping shape civil rights victories, little scholarship examines the modern black press" (p. viii), or that "little or no research exists investigating resonant myth and implicit racial frames in the digital black press" (p. 1). Another questionable and unsupported statement the authors pose toward the end of the book reads:

Given social media are an attractive platform to non-whites, obviously, then, simply having viable websites is not enough if the black press hopes to recapture influence . . . Increasing their social media presence is a must for the black press because younger generations don't believe institutional racism exists or policies and legislation to combat previous and current racism are needed. (p. 111)

On the same page, the authors recommend "enhanced Search Engine Optimization" techniques, and RSS aggregators to "harness the diverse communities' collective intelligence," and partnerships with colleges "eager to help minority media" to

help the black press keep informed on new technologies adept at covering events in real time . . . designing mobile apps, mostly drag and drop/open (no code at this point) is another area relatively easy to do and can attract more viewers. (p .111)

For a book that claims to be about *digital* Black press, it's "interventions" are dated at best, and it seems out of touch with interventions happening in digital scholarship surrounding Black audiences and publics (e.g., work by scholars like Charlton McIlwain, Meredith D. Clark, Sarah J. Jackson, Kim Gallon, Catherine Knight Steele, Andre Brock, and many others).

Perhaps this is because of its limited scope on what should be included under the banner of "digital Black press" (publications that do not have a print component were not included in the sample, for example) as well as "digital mainstream press." Expanding a multiplatform approach toward coverage of the Tea Party by both Black journalists (which are not a monolith) and mainstream journalists may have revealed even more on the discrepancies and turning points in Tea Party coverage. To start, one omission in the book regarding the role that mainstream media publications played is especially puzzling. The very "birth" of the Tea Party involved CNBC's Rick Santelli's rant on live television in 2009, as a disgruntled journalist who

would have a large role in branding the movement, and there is little analysis on how that complicated the story, and, as Khadijah Costley White (2018) argues, how the mainstream media “explained, critiqued, and reported” on their own place and role in how the Tea Party was covered, and even branded, by the press.

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