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Reading the “Negro Bible” : Online access to Jet and Ebony

Abstract : this article gives a very brief account of the rise to prominence of the black owned and run Johnson Publishing Company, with particular emphasis on its earlier years and specifically on the role played by its two most important publications, *Ebony* and *Jet*. The late Redd Foxx called *Jet* "*The Negro Bible*," and a character in one of poet/playwright Maya Angelou's plays said that "*if it wasn't in Jet, it didn't happen.*" It then describes how runs of these 2 titles, and others from the same publishing house, are now available online from Google Book Search, before looking at some potential uses of these resources as primary source material for research.



Some samples of the covers of issues of Jet and Ebony

Introduction

As yet, there are few 20th century magazine archives freely available online, (with *Time* being a notable exception). By contrast, there is an increasing amount of newspaper content becoming digitised, much of it via Google News Archive Search¹, and available free of charge. Yet perhaps even more so than newspapers, magazines can be hugely important tools for historical research, carrying as they do a range of content such as articles, reviews and advertisements which cumulatively allow unique insights into the cultural mores and attitudes of readership of any given title. Within the African American community, for example, titles like *Ebony* and *Jet*, from the Johnson Publishing Company have long been considered as one of the most important places where have African Americans have been able to see their lives, culture and beliefs reflected. Study of these titles can reveal the fascinating changes that occur over time in such beliefs and attitudes : to take one tiny example, in the light of the historic victory of Barack Obama in the 2008 US Presidential election, it is interesting to note that a Gallup poll reported in *Jet*, in 1969, noted 67% of Americans would vote for a black presidential candidate, up from 38% from a similar poll done in 1958. To understand how significant these magazines were for black Americans, it is necessary to look into their origins.

The Johnson Publishing Company, started by John H. Johnson in Chicago in 1942 with a 500 dollar loan from his mother, rose to become one of the most successful black-owned businesses in America. Today it is the world's largest African-American owned and operated publishing company, and has diversified into areas such as cosmetics, television production and fashion. It currently has offices in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, Detroit, London and Paris, a far cry from its humble beginnings with its first publication, *Negro Digest*, produced by Johnson

¹ <http://news.google.com/archivesearch>

himself in a second floor office in Chicago when he was working as editor of the company newsletter for the black-owned Supreme Liberty Life Insurance.

The timing for such a bold venture was right, coming as it did when black GIs were returning from fighting for “freedom” in World War Two to find they were less than free at home, and facing a climate of racial injustice and prejudice. The feeling amongst the African American community in general was that the American media did not reflect their culture and way of life, and so they were receptive to the new magazines.

The subsequent success of the company was primarily due to two key publications, the monthly title *Ebony* (started in 1945) and the weekly *Jet* magazine (started in 1951). Both these titles were to epitomise the Johnson philosophy whereby the company always aimed at emphasising the positive aspects of black life, and “*increasing African-Americans' pride in themselves by presenting their past and present achievements to America and to the world*”². This editorial approach differed markedly from other contemporary black periodicals and the black newspaper press which were beginning to concentrate their attention on highlighting the topics of segregation, lynching and battle for civil rights. Such concerns were not absent from Johnson publications, but were not given such prominence as they were in these other titles. Thus a typical issue of either *Ebony* or *Jet* would include features on African-American film, television, and music stars, as well as sportsmen and women, businessmen, fashion models and beauty queens. *Ebony*, (modelled after *Life* and *Look* magazines) became a showcase for, in the words of the Encyclopaedia of African American History “*beautiful black people - in all walks of life but with a special emphasis on celebrities*”³

The formula clearly worked. Johnson was able to secure advertising revenue from both black and white sources, enabling him to employ the best journalistic and photographic talent available at time, frequently acquiring his writers and photographers from rival black publications. Circulation figure for both titles soared and they became widely disseminated throughout black communities, both in smaller towns and rural communities as well as in the large cities and urban conurbations. They could be found in locations as diverse as bookshops and newspaper stands as well as dentists and doctors waiting room. *Jet* was to acquire the nickname of “*The Negro Bible*”, and as Johnson himself noted a character in one of poet/playwright Maya Angelou's plays said that “if it wasn't in *Jet*, it didn't happen” As well as writers, Johnson set out to attract advertisers who previously would have used black newspapers. By the mid 1950s *Ebony* was describing itself as the “key national medium for advertising to black consumers”, and was able to attract advertising from brand names like Chesterfields, who placed the first full colour adverts in a black magazine. *Ebony* grew to become widely regarded as the top black magazine in terms of circulation and influence. The company was able to build, in 1971, a new 11-story HQ on South Michigan Ave, at a cost of £8 million, as well as opening additional offices overseas in London and Paris. Johnson became a figure of national importance, mixing with the great and the good : in 1966 was awarded the Spingarn medal, the highest honour from the NAACP, and in 1995 he received from Bill Clinton the presidential Medal of Freedom Award, along with Rosa Parks and nine other recipients.

² Taken from the Johnson company website, at http://www.johnsonpublishing.com/assembled/about_overview.html, accessed on 11 June 2009

³ Encyclopaedia of African American History: 1896 to the present. Oxford, 2009 Volume 2, page 120. (The volumes in this set provided much of the background information for this article)

Not everyone within the African American community was happy with the company approach. By the mid fifties and increasingly into the sixties and seventies, events such as the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of Black Power and Black Consciousness were changing the dynamics of the target audience. The publishing house had to take on board the climate of militancy and anger amongst a large proportion of its readership, and so consequently the coverage of events in the political sphere took on a greater significance.

Of particular importance in this context was the role of *Jet* in covering the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, and especially the photographs it chose to publish. Till, a young Negro boy from Chicago had come down to Money, Mississippi, a small town in the state's Delta region, to visit relatives. After chatting to a white woman in a general store in a way that enraged the woman's relatives, Till was seized from the house where he was staying, brutally murdered and his body thrown in the Tallahatchie river. When the corpse was discovered 3 days later, the face was so mutilated that identification was only possible based on the ring that Till was been wearing. His right eye was missing, his nose was broken, and there was a hole in the side of his head. His body was taken back to Chicago for burial where his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, decided to leave the casket open and to allow people to view it and take photographs, because, in her own words, "*I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby.*" The image of the young Emmett Till, a handsome young man, was taped to the coffin for comparison.



The Emmett Till photographs in JET

The response was amazing : tens of thousands of people, almost entirely African Americans, queued in an unending procession to see the body, and *Jet* published 2 photographs in its Sept 15th 1955 issue which drew immediate intense public reaction, and which were to reverberate round the world, turning Till's murder into an international story. For the first time in its history, *Jet* had to reprint an issue, and the photographs have since become iconic images of the Jim Crow era. The subsequent trial of two white men was covered by journalists from all over America. When the 2 defendants were acquitted, the verdict was denounced throughout much of America and elsewhere around the world. . It was "the first great media event of the civil-rights movement," wrote David Halberstam in his 1993 book, "*The Fifties*." The anger and outrage among African Americans, together with the realisation that they were still vulnerable to such treatment at the hands of whites who could subsequently escape justice, meant they would be receptive to the message of those who were beginning to formulate the Civil Rights movement. Hence, subsequent issues of *Jet* and *Ebony* went on to chronicle the great events of the Civil Rights era, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the events at Selma and Little Rock, and the life, career and assassination of Martin Luther King.

The company continued to prosper throughout the seventies and eighties, adding new titles to their range of publications, some of which were more successful than others. It also ventured into other areas, such as videocassettes, greeting cards and home and bath products. John Johnson continued to play in active role in the firm well beyond the conventional retirement age of 65. He died in 2005, aged eighty seven, by which time the company was actually being run by his daughter, Linda Johnson Rice. In 2006, for the first time the company chose an editor from outside its own ranks, with both *Jet* and *Ebony* now under combined editorship. Clearly, like all print-based publications in an age of electronic access to information and entertainment, the firm is facing tough times, and indeed there has recently been speculation that the joint publication is at risk.

Finding the titles online

It is important to note that at the time of writing this article, the online access to *Jet* and *Ebony* resides only within Google Book Search, although eventually the company hopes to make the content available via Google News Archive Search, or indeed via the standard Google search, To find one of these magazines, you can go Google Book Search, opt to do an [advanced search] and then opposite the [content] button, put a check against [magazines] and then enter, for example, the title of a specific magazine eg *Jet*. (Despite requests, as yet Google are not providing a specific list of magazine titles, but another way to access such materials would be to use one of the directories which have appeared and which list all the magazines titles that have been currently been digitised - there is a useful one contained within a blog from the University of Iowa on the web at

<http://blog.lib.uiowa.edu/hardinmd/2008/12/10/google-magazines-titles/>)

Browsing/Searching

Once you navigate to a particular issue, there are then a number of options to explore the content : by clicking on [browse all issues], you can browse by decade to navigate to the issues for any month or year that you are interested in. In magazines, the basic record unit is the issue, and within a particular issue you can use the toolbar to

- display one page at a time
- display 2 pages
- display thumbnails of all the pages in any issue.
- go backward or forwards a page at a time
- jump to any particular page

There is also a contents dropdown box that allows you to jump to any article within a particular issues.

It is also possible to search *across all issues* of a particular title, simply by checking the [search in all issues box] found on the left hand side of the page, and then entering your search term in the search in this magazine box. It is this feature that will perhaps be most useful for research.

It is worth pointing out that the images in magazine content should be better than other Google Book Search content, since as Jim Gerber, director of content partnerships at Google, explains, many of the publishers ship hard copies of their magazine archives to Google, where sheet-fed scanners perform the digitization, giving a better image that that obtained by using non-destructive scanning, which is the method used with the book materials obtained from Library partners. (Currently , magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony* come into Google Book Search from the Publisher Partner side of Google, rather than from Library partners, with Google offering free digitization)

Current content

- Issues of *Jet* are available from 01 Nov 1951 – 20 Oct 2008
- Issues of *Ebony* are available from Nov 1959 – Nov 2008
- Issues of *Ebony JR*, a short-lived youth orientated publication, launched in 1973, are available from May 1973 - Oct 1985
- Issues of *Black World/Negro Digest* are available from Nov 1961- Apr 1976

Research potential

The potential for research topics using these materials as primary sources seems almost limitless. Apart from the coverage of Civil Rights topics as noted above, the nature of these titles means they could be used to explore all areas of cultural, economic and social life. In music, for example, one could delve into back numbers to discover articles and reviews on topics such as record labels like Tamla Motown or Stax; musical genres such as Rap, Soul or HipHop; or to explore the careers of individual artists and groups as diverse as Stevie Wonder, the Jacksons, the Supremes, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding etc. In sport, you could look at individuals like Ali, Liston, Tiger Woods, Lee Elder etc, or sports where African Americans made such an important contribution, such as baseball, basketball, American football, and track and field athletics.

Popular magazines in general can also provide endless opportunities to research areas like the history of advertising - because Google's indexing of these titles picks up all the advertisements, you have a rich source to tap into, so that you can find out what cars people drove, what clothes they wore, what music they listened to, what films they watched, and what they ate and drank. So whether you are interested in the social, cultural, political or economic aspects of the African American experience in the latter half of the twentieth century, it is difficult to envisage not profiting from a look at these titles.

Future Developments and related titles

- Later, these magazine articles will be available through the Google News Archive as well as the main Google search
- Pre 1960 issues of *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* will be available
- Currently, magazine articles appear with advertisements next to them, as with the regular Google Book Search, although there is apparently an option for publishers to opt out of this. Additionally, Google is planning to have a version of magazine search that can appear on a publishers own website for their own publications⁴
- Of related interest to those looking at American Studies are titles already available, such as *Billboard* (1942 -1999); and *New York Magazine* (1968 – 1997) and Google are committed to expand their coverage of magazine content from a wide range of publications.

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⁴ <http://searchengineland.com/google-book-search-puts-magazines-online-15762>, accessed on 04 July 09