



**REMEMBERING *FREEDOM'S JOURNAL*:
CHERISHING AND CHALLENGING THE BLACK PRESS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

In the midst of the mournful discourse concerning the steady disintegration of big-city and regional dailies and the continuing collapse of journalism as a professional, principled and promising practice, we are compelled to ask ourselves what this means, not only for society, but also for our community. This is clearly a concern for those who rightfully hold that a free and functioning press is central to democracy, to the quality of civic life, to independent investigations of things and to holding officials accountable. But for us, especially with regard to the Black press, it is also a voice for the vulnerable and an advocate for a just and good society and for the struggle that seeks to bring it into being. And it is clearly key to the ability of people to get information needed and necessary to make informed choices. As Ida B. Wells, one of our most distinguished activist-journalists stated, “the people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press”.

The history of providing the people with accurate and useful knowledge is tied to the process of education and is linked with two major ethical principles: truth and justice, which in practice obligates and urges us to seek and speak truth, and to do and demand justice. Indeed, in ancient Egypt, truth and justice are linked conceptually and linguistically. For the ancient Egyptian word *Maat*, means both truth and justice, as well as rightness in its many forms. Our ancestors knew that without truth, justice is denied and without justice truth is deformed. In a word, without both, each suffers and is suppressed. Thus, the ancestors taught in the sacred *Husia*: Speak truth, do justice, and always

act for the well-being of the people and humankind.

On March 16, 1827, when Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm established the first African American paper in the U.S., these views and values were the motivating force for their actions. In their inaugural editorial written in the midst of the Holocaust of enslavement, they laid out the reasons for their establishing the paper which was instructively called *Freedom's Journal*. These same principles and practices inform the best of our media efforts today, and offer guidelines for good and useful print and electronic media from newspapers and radio to TV and internet. These principles have also been reflected in various ways by a long list of major newspapers in our history: the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburg Courier*, *Atlanta Daily World*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *California Eagle*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Cleveland Call and Post* and *Muhammad Speaks*.

The first principle that Cornish and Russwurm put forth is the principle of self-determination. They state at the outset in the first edition of *Freedom's Journal*: “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us dearly” Thus, they affirmed the right and responsibility of a people to speak for itself, to make its own case and define and advocate its own cause. In a word, they asserted the right and responsibility of self-determination as essential to any people or to any paper or other medium, if it claims to

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be free, worthy of respect and in the interest of its people.

Secondly, the publishers and editors also spoke of the need to provide “useful knowledge to the people”. This is what can be also called real and relevant knowledge, knowledge that enhances a person’s and a people’s ability to think critically, to make informed decisions and to act in their own interest and in the larger interest of humankind. They assert that they will speak to Black youth urging them to “enlarge their stock of useful knowledge”, and also “stimulate them to higher attainments in science”, as well as knowledge of the world as a whole. Here Cornish and Russwurm stress the importance of academic education and the need for conscious and committed media to emphasize its indispensable role given that “Education (is) an object of the highest importance to the welfare of society”. But they go on to suggest the paper itself and thus all media are forums and forms of education and must maintain the highest standards in their education of the people and country.

The third principle and practice of real and relevant journalism which Cornish and Russwurm advanced is social advocacy, speaking on behalf of Black people, defending their rights, especially to be free, equal and enjoy justice. They say: “The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value; it shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren when oppressed and to lay the case before the publick” It is advocacy not only for the right to freedom of the enslaved Africans, but also the civil rights of the free Africans. Cornish and Russwurm

also emphasize the importance of Africans exercising the right to vote and practicing an independent politics. They argue “the expediency of (Blacks’) using their elective franchise; and of making an independent use of the same”. For they say, “We wish them not to become the tools of party”.

Fourthly, the publishers and editors of *Freedom’s Journal* stress the need for what they call “useful knowledge” with regard to Africa. They say: “Useful knowledge of every kind, and every thing that relates to Africa, shall find a ready admission into our columns;” This is clearly as urgent now as then and serves as a measure of both the quality and commitment of the Black press. But it is also important to note that *Freedom’s Journal* was also concerned especially with Haiti also and with African communities in Canada and elsewhere and wrote on them extensively.

Finally, *Freedom’s Journal* urged African Americans to support it and by extension independent Black papers and media in the vital work they are doing, by “communications and by their subscriptions, as our labour is one of common cause, and worthy of their consideration and support”. Thus, they asked for support thru subscriptions and submissions of articles and opinions that would build a mutually beneficial and necessary relationship between the paper and the people. For they realized then, as we do now, that the call of a people for a free and relevant press carries with it a call for the people to make the commitment and create the conditions to support and sustain that press.

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