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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# Conquering the COVID-19 Infodemic

## How the Digital Black Press Battled Racialized Misinformation in 2020

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### ABSTRACT

In 2020, as many Black people around the world fought both anti-Black racism and COVID-19, the Black press in the US was dealing with another widespread problem: an infodemic. Editors of Black digital publications were on the frontlines of dispelling racialized misinformation about COVID-19, all while reporting on a contentious presidential election, ongoing protests for racial justice, and a rising COVID-19 death toll that disproportionately affected African Americans. This mixed-methods study—which includes semi-structured interviews in addition to website and social media analyses—explains the top five tactics that Black outlets used to serve as an advocate for, and an adviser to, their communities during its time of dire need. Their strategies provided an editorial slant that challenged anti-Black racism in public discourse and countered misinformation with factual public interest journalism.

### KEYWORDS

Black press; covid-19; infodemic; misinformation; digital journalism; social media

## Introduction

On March 11, 2020, after over 4,000 deaths across the globe, the World Health Organization declared that the coronavirus was a pandemic (CDC 2022). Just two months later, the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 reached 100,000, and news outlets reported that African Americans were its disproportionate victims (Price-Haywood et al. 2020; Mahajan and Larkins-Pettigrew 2020). Yet early in the pandemic, misinformation that minimized the severity of the disease and its effect on the Black community was widely circulated. On social media, people shared ideas of “Black immunity” to the virus, based on incorrect claims that there were not any cases in Africa (Ross 2020). Black, conservative commentators Candace Owens and Diamond and Silk said COVID-19 was a hoax and R&B singer Keri Hilson posited that the disease was caused by 5G wireless technology. Later, other Black celebrities like actress Leticia Wright and rapper T.I. also shared unverified content about the vaccine and alternative methods for treating the virus. This misinformation about the virus that circulated among the Black community resulted in a racialized infodemic (Rothkopf 2003).

While it is unclear how much of this rhetoric influenced the actual behavior of African Americans, it is evident that medical misinformation did seep into many Black digital outlets and social media spaces. *Black Man Travels* blog, for example, published one of the earliest rumors about Black invulnerability to COVID-19, and posted the piece to its Facebook page. The February 22, 2020 story explained: “People of color may be immune to the coronavirus because of melanin” (Williams 2020). As the piece went viral, Facebook flagged the Black immunity myth as misinformation, and PolitiFact debunked it several weeks later, on March 10, 2020 (Kertscher 2020). Still, the notion of Black immunity became such a cultural discussion that even Idris Elba, a Black Hollywood A-listed actor, seemed compelled to intervene. In a March 17, 2020 Twitter live stream, he pleaded for Black people to disregard the rumor, after revealing that he had contracted the virus himself. He said: “Something that’s sort of scaring me when I read the comments and see some of the reactions is—my people, Black people, Black people—please, please understand that coronavirus ... you can get it, all right? ... Wherever we are, please understand that you can get it. Just know you have to be as vigilant as every other race.”

Despite appeals from celebrity voices, variations of the immunity lore and other misinformation about the virus continued to travel through Black America. Herein lies our research interest. This project investigated how Black digital news outlets handled an ongoing, racialized infodemic during the global COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve these ends, we interviewed 11 journalists representing 13 leading Black digital publications during the pandemic—between December 2020 and March 2021. Additionally, we scraped the publications’ websites, Instagram and Twitter accounts—between March 2020 and December 2020—to explore their editorial themes and types of audience engagement. This paper documents the editors’ yearlong processes in three parts. First, we review the literature to explore how mainstream media and the Black press covered COVID-19 in 2020. Then, we discuss the effects of misinformation on public communication during the pandemic. Finally, in the third part of the paper, we explain the methods Black publishers used to be an advocate for, and adviser to, a vulnerable population amid this infodemic.

## Covering COVID-19

### *How Mainstream News Reported on COVID-19*

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the world, it so happened that the US was amid a contentious election year. Pres. Donald Trump was seeking reelection. A crowded field of more than two-dozen Democratic candidates vied for the chance to run against him. This zeitgeist may explain why COVID-19 media studies in 2020 largely explored political communication (Druckman et al. 2021; Jiang et al. 2020; Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020). Hart, Chinn, and Soroka (2020), for example, examined the level of polarization in COVID-19 news from March to May 2020. Using computer-assisted content analysis they found that “newspaper coverage was highly politicized, network news coverage somewhat less so, and both newspaper and network news coverage are highly polarized” (2020, 679). Additionally, politicians appeared in newspaper coverage more frequently than scientists, whereas politicians

and scientists were more equally featured in TV network news. The researchers concluded that “the high degree of politicization and polarization in initial COVID-19 coverage may have contributed to polarization in US COVID-19 attitudes” (2020, 679).

This divide had real-world implications too. When the elite class could not agree on a unifying message about COVID-19, for example, researchers found that it hindered effective responses to the public health crisis. In one study, scholars found that in the US Congress, Democrats emphasized threats to public health and American workers, while Republicans placed greater emphasis on China and businesses (Green et al. 2020). This partisan divide split the public’s early reaction to COVID-19.

Cable television news shows exacerbated political disagreements even further, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research and Pew Research Center. The Bureau claimed that Fox News, for instance, stoked the masking debate and convinced its viewers to shirk stay-at-home orders (Simonov et al. 2020). Likewise, Pew discovered: “The group who names MSNBC as their main news source is far more likely than the Fox News group to answer correctly that the coronavirus originated in nature rather than a laboratory and that it will take a year or more for a vaccine to become available” (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020).

By 2021, research about how legacy media reported on COVID-19 began to expand beyond political polarization frameworks. There were misinformation typologies (Hansson et al. 2021) and newsroom ecologies (García-Avilés 2021; Perreault and Perreault 2021). Studies that explored press freedom emerged; especially in terms of evaluating threats to digital journalism (Papadopoulou and Maniou 2021). Phenomenologies sprang up also, to highlight how journalists dealt with the trauma of reporting a pandemic (Jukes, Fowler-Watt, and Rees 2021) and how reporters working outside of the US adopted creative digital technologies to bring news to rural and remote communities (Ndlovu and Sibanda 2021).

### ***How COVID-19 Misinformation Spread Online***

In addition to the aforementioned flurry of COVID-19 political communication studies, scholars wanted to understand how misinformation traveled throughout various social media channels. The Havey (2020) investigation, for example, found five common misinformation topics regarding the virus on Twitter: (1) the use of hydroxychloroquine as treatment, (2) the use of bleach as a preventative measure, (3) Bill Gates intentionally causing the virus, (4) the Chinese Communist Party intentionally causing the virus, and (5) the Deep State causing the virus to ruin the economy and threaten President Trump’s reelection chances. There were also images containing misinformation about the pandemic on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Mellado et al. 2021; El Damahoury and Garud-Paktar 2021). Visual content served three functions: to “illustrate and selectively emphasize arguments and claims, purport to present evidence for claims, and impersonate supposedly authoritative sources for claims” (Brennan, Simon and Nielsen 2020, 277). All pandemic-related misinformation was problematic because it could have “dire consequences” for the entire country (Havey, 2020 319). Negative online news can arouse strong emotions, such as fear or anger, that significantly influence public opinion during times of crisis (Overgaard 2021).

YouTube proved to be a hub for visual misinformation dissemination as well. A team of scholars identified more than 8,000 videos containing false COVID-19 claims between October 2019 and June 2020, which represented less than one percent of all the platform's videos about coronavirus. It took YouTube roughly 41 days to take down the problematic videos. During that time, users shared them nearly 20 million times across several social media platforms—especially via Facebook, which is where most web users encountered the videos initially. Unfortunately, Facebook placed warning labels on only one percent of the videos that contained false claims, which represented 55 total videos in the dataset (Knuutila et al. 2020). This meant that by the time YouTube took down the video, after about a month of it being online, web users would have shared it more than any other COVID-19 news story from the five largest English-language news sources on YouTube combined (CNN, ABC News, BBC, Fox News and Al Jazeera). These studies demonstrate the challenges that mainstream media faced, as it attempted to report on COVID-19—all while dispelling health-related myths that traveled perhaps faster than they ever had before.

### ***How the Black Press Reported on COVID-19***

While African Americans predominantly use mainstream media as a source for news, they still frequently use Black news outlets for health information and have positive ratings of coverage from these outlets (Brodie et al. 1999). Nearly 65% of African Americans read Black news outlets and non-Black readers consume Black press content as well (Pew Research Center 2023; Williams Fayne and Richardson 2023). Black press newspapers collectively reach over 20 million readers weekly and top Black news websites individually attract 5 to 10 million unique visitors monthly (Ford, McFall, and Dabney 2019; Prince 2023; Williams Fayne and Richardson 2023). The majority of African Americans trust health information from Black press publications and believe they do a good job meeting the needs of African Americans, while only about a third say the same is true for mainstream media outlets (Brodie et al. 1999; Kaiser Family Foundation 1998). Black press outlets typically emphasize systemic causality and include detailed explanations of causes, such as racial discrimination and an absence of culturally relevant care (Rasmussen 2014).

Despite the growing body of literature that analyzed mainstream media's COVID-19 coverage, there remains a dearth of information about how the Black press reported during the pandemic. At the time of our writing, there were only two studies besides this work (Biswas, Sipes, and Brost 2021; Upshaw and Davis 2022). In their analysis of three Black newspapers' COVID-19 coverage, Upshaw and Davis (2022) concluded that these outlets provided culturally tailored information to the Black community. The Black press discussed COVID-19 in the context of historical health barriers the Black community experiences, such as limited access to health care. These publications also addressed many African Americans' anxiety and skepticism regarding testing and vaccination by explaining the advantages and reasoning for interventions.

Biswas, Sipes, and Brost (2021) compared mainstream news media's coverage of the pandemic to Black online news sites' coverage. The team found that the Black press functioned as "mobilizing agents" for African Americans, providing valuable

access to health education and community activism (Biswas, Sipes, and Brost 2021, 410). Aside from those observations, the scholars “did not find any significant difference in the news coverage of African American issues,” (2021, 410) in mainstream publications. The team surmised that legacy media and the Black press were in alignment, for example, with reporting on how systemic racism shaped Black health outcomes. However, the scholars concluded that their study was limited, insofar as it only spanned 10 weeks of the pandemic, between March and May 2020. Moreover, neither study explored the Black press’ fight against misinformation.

### ***How the Black Press Combated COVID-19 Misinformation***

Historically, Black press publications have countered misinformation found in mainstream news and have discredited conspiracy theories about the Black community and disease origins (Kinsella 1989; Lester 1992). For example, *New York Amsterdam News* critiqued mainstream media’s AIDS coverage and investigated conspiracy theories, such as AIDS originating from a CIA experiment in the Congo (Kinsella 1989). Pickle, Quinn, and Brown’s (2002) examination of mainstream media’s AIDS coverage found that many outlets disregarded the Black community’s fears regarding treatment instead of disproving them. However, the Black press provided numerous articles that were informational and discussed nomenclature, prevention, trends, statistics, education and awareness (Krishnan, Durrah, and Winkler 1997). Black press outlets also compared AIDS to other illnesses or social issues, such as racism and inequality, and focused on its impact on the Black community (Campbell et al. 2013; Clarke, McLellan, and Hoffman-Goetz 2006). Other Black press publications countered misinformation by focusing on personal experiences with the disease and celebrity obituaries (Kinsella 1989).

The Black press began to raise concerns about a racialized COVID-19 infodemic in its coverage in March 2020. Given the virus’ disproportionate effect on the African American community, Black news outlets’ efforts to also correct COVID misinformation were arguably even more essential than mainstream’s. Yet there were no scholarly studies that investigated the role these publications played in either quelling or perpetuating false claims that year. The National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), which is a consortium of more than 200 Black newspapers across the US, printed an urgent declaration in all of its outlets: “Dear Black People: Coronavirus Will Kill You” (Burton 2020). Were there more patterns of a myth-busting Black press? We searched the literature for insight.

Research has shown that journalists play a large role in influencing the outcome of social issues and are responsible for informing or misinforming readers about diseases (Baker 1986; Spence 2010). Some scholars believe that Black press outlets should partner with government agencies, health educators and professionals, activists, and community members for more effective health coverage (Campbell et al. 2013; Kinsella 1989; Krishnan, Durrah, and Winkler 1997; Pickle, Quinn, and Brown 2002). The National Medical Association, which consists of Black doctors, dentists and pharmacists, previously advocated for a partnership with the NNPA, in order to educate and inform the Black community about diseases (Morgan 1997). While we did not find any NNPA partnerships with medical organizations during the pandemic, one

study highlighted the NNPA's efforts to give COVID-19 its own Black reporting "beat" (Mangun and Perry 2020). In the report, researchers claimed that the nearly 80-year-old organization's formation of a Coronavirus Task Force and Resource Center offered "a collective voice in the media landscape" and created a platform for Black newspaper publishers to share information and resources (2020, 307).

While the NNPA's collaborative reporting practices are necessary to document, so too are the contributions of the digital Black press, which has grown exponentially since the turn of the century. As Williams Fayne (2020) has noted, the Black press is no longer limited to Black-owned news outlets. In the twenty-first century, African Americans made a "great digital migration" to online publications, which had business structures that differed from previous generations (Williams Fayne 2020). Whereas *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines once were owned by legendary Black magnate John H. Johnson, today's digital Black press is just as likely to be nestled within a white corporate entity, such as ESPN's vertical *Andscape*, formerly named *The Undefeated*, or G/O Media, Inc.'s *The Root*. Williams Fayne has argued that the new defining characteristic for the digital Black press, therefore, is not Black ownership. Instead, the new Black press must demonstrate that it is "targeting a Black audience and advocating for the Black community" (2020 704). Williams Fayne's conclusion, that Black news audiences moved from Black newspapers to Black websites, means that African Americans may have relied heavily on the digital Black press for news during the pandemic.

Many digital Black news outlets have a strong social media presence that they use to engage with their readers. Research has found that journalists pay attention to their audience on social media and often create stories based on trending topics (Wang 2020). Also, some journalists engage with users in order to correct information or answer questions (Xia et al. 2020). This is a tactic that may be more pronounced in the Black press given the close relationship that Black press journalists have with their readers. Digital Black press editors feel a responsibility to serve the Black community and intentionally publish content that generates a conversation with the audience (Williams Fayne 2019). In Florini's (2016) analysis of the Black media outlet *This Week in Blackness*, she noted that the network was prominent on social media because it prioritized "community and audience interaction" (330). She stated that the show highlights group-based experiences in hopes of finding group-based solutions; a practice that may be common among the digital Black press' COVID-19 coverage.

If social media and the web was littered with coronavirus misinformation, however, as Oxford Internet Institute found (Knuutila et al. 2020), then this created a fraught place to learn about the disease and its spread. This intrigued us. We wanted to know how the digital Black press battled this online infodemic. Our inquiry, therefore, comprised three research questions:

- (RQ1) How did the digital Black press challenge racialized COVID-19 misinformation online?
- (RQ2) What mythbusting COVID-19 story angles did the editors use most often?
- (RQ3) How did the publishers measure the efficacy of their editorial approaches?

In this next section, we outline our methods, coding scheme and key findings. Additionally, we will discuss what our observations revealed about the digital Black press' strategy for providing factual information to a vulnerable news audience.

## Method

We triangulated data from semi-structured interviews with 11 founders, top editors or social media managers of top-ranked Black digital news outlets, as determined by ComScore; and a narrative analysis of these outlets' websites, Twitter and Instagram accounts. We chose interviews as our primary method of inquiry, since we wanted to hear behind-the-scenes details from the editors; especially as it pertained to their newsgathering, fact-checking and ethical decision-making. Narrative analysis of Black digital outlets' websites and social media feeds allowed us to dig deeper into what types of pieces these publications produced to account for inaccuracies and report on the truth.

This 12-month project occurred in three phases. First, we used Comscore software to identify the top 50 Black digital publications. We then narrowed that list to outlets that had more than 10,000 followers on Twitter and Instagram, so we could ensure a robust corpus to examine for the narrative analysis. After filtering our list, we requested interviews with the editors who managed the social media accounts for each of the publications. Since Black digital press outlets tend to have lean staffs, some top editors were in fact managing the social media accounts themselves and others were able to speak to the overall strategy. Eleven editors, representing 13 Black news outlets, agreed to be interviewed *via* Zoom video conferencing, for an average of 60min. Their titles are as follows: Akisa Omulepu, web editor/manager (*New York Amsterdam News*); Angelica Nwandu, founder (*The Shade Room*); Charisma Deberry, director, social media (*Essence*); Christine Imareznor, executive editor (*VIBE*); Denver Blackwell, editor-in-chief (*Love B. Scott*); Derrick Lane, chief marketing officer (*Black Doctor*); Lanae Spruce, VP social and content strategy (*Bossip, Madame Noire* and *NewsOne*); Marcus Matthews, general editor, social media (*The Undeclared*); Munson Steed, CEO (*Rolling Out*); Robert Littal, founder and CEO (*Black Sports Online*); and Shana Pinnock, director, social media (*The Grio*). While our interviewees had many different titles, for simplification and clarity purposes, we use the terms editors and journalists throughout this manuscript when referring to them as a collective.

For the second phase of the project, we scraped content from our 13 Black digital outlets' website pages, Twitter accounts and Instagram feeds, from March 1, 2020 (the month that US lockdowns began) to December 31, 2020 (the month that Kaiser Family Foundation began measuring public sentiment for vaccines). We only gathered articles or posts that contained the word COVID, COVID-19, coronavirus, rona, or pandemic. After several months of aggregation, our corpus comprised 11,329 website articles, 56,891 tweets and 17,240 Instagram posts.

During the last phase of the project, we analyzed the interviews, website and social media data alongside each other. We used the data from the articles and posts to corroborate or investigate more of the themes we discovered in the interviews. We first explored a single news outlets' (*New York Amsterdam News*) interview, website articles and social media posts to pilot a potential coding scheme. From the pilot coding session, we generated six main categories that conveyed the common themes, and 26 sub-categories that explained the parent code in more detail. We ultimately coded all of the interviews along with a random sample of 50% of the articles and social media posts.



## Reliability

In the first phase of coding our 13 Black press outlets' COVID coverage, we cleaned the data. For example, search results that contained advertisements for Corona beer, or news stories about Corona, California were captured inadvertently in our API scrape. Once the data were cleaned, we used the *New York Amsterdam News* interview transcript, website and social media feeds as the basis for an initial intercoder reliability test. We trained one additional coder on the above protocol. Then, all three of us coded the *New York Amsterdam News* data independently. Per both Krippendorff's Alpha and Cohen's Kappa calculations, the average pairwise agreement was .92. In the second phase of coding our 13 outlets' websites and social media feeds, we used the same three coders to analyze 100% of the interview data, and a random sampling of 50% of the total data (roughly 43,000 website articles, tweets and Instagram posts). We ran another intercoder reliability measurement. Per both Krippendorff's Alpha and Cohen's Kappa calculations, the three coders achieved .94 agreement on average in phase two, ranging from 0.89 to 1 on the six parent categories.

## Findings

We analyzed our coded social media feeds, website articles, and interviews in one, consolidated NVivo file. We then used inductive coding to group the data by the various themes found in the news outlets' COVID-19 coverage. We found that Black press outlets most commonly dispelled racialized coronavirus myths by referring to (1) *celebrities*, (2) *social changes*, and (3) *safety guidelines*, and by practicing strong (4) *public interest journalism*. We delve into these findings here, by research question.

### ***(RQ1) How did the digital Black press challenge racialized COVID-19 misinformation online?***

#### ***(F1) Editors Posted about Black Celebrities' Illnesses to Dispel the Myth of Black Immunity***

The most popular code in our dataset was *celebrities*, which corresponds with the entertainment focus of about half the outlets in this study. A top misinformation-aversion tactic upon which digital Black publishers relied was posting updates about Black celebrities' health. Coverage of elite Black people's susceptibility to the disease helped to dispel the Black immunity myth and reinforced that the pandemic was to be taken seriously. British actor Idris Elba, as aforementioned, and his wife Sabrina Dhowre, frequently appeared in the dataset. Elba was among the first Black celebrities to tweet about his positive COVID-19 test status in March 2020. Several days later, his wife tweeted that she contracted the virus from Elba, underscoring COVID-19's contagion. Later, a conspiracy theory circulated that celebrities like Elba were being paid to say they had tested positive and the rumor was propelled by rapper Cardi B. The outlets in our dataset reported on Elba's Instagram Live response to this conspiracy theory where he stated, "People wanna spread that, as if it's like, news. It's stupid. It's the quickest way to get people sick."

Another commonly reported Black A-lister was actress and comedian Tiffany Haddish. After Haddish revealed her positive COVID-19 status in September 2020, she

hosted a YouTube Q&A session with the nation's *de facto* coronavirus czar, Dr. Anthony Fauci—the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Many of the digital outlets in the study either referenced or reposted this program on their social media feeds, to share COVID-19 facts.

Other popular celebrity-centered coverage was of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) professional players, who were among the first athletes to return to work and the first to test positive for COVID-19. The dataset is full of reports on the initial shock of the disease's spread throughout the league. Robert Lital of *Black Sports Online* recalled: "The moment that it all changed is when [Utah Jazz player] Rudy Gobert got it [COVID-19]. ...You step back and you're like, 'Whoa, this is serious.'" Indeed, tweets from several outlets in the dataset recounted Gobert mocking the pandemic at a press conference, as he rubbed his hands all over the podium in jest. When Gobert's fellow teammate, Donovan Mitchell, tested positive, coverage of his apology was found among many of the publications that we studied.

Black digital publications often peppered celebrity homages with explicit cautionary messaging. We observed that many of the obituaries of Black celebrities contained quotes from a surviving loved one, which warned African Americans to take the disease seriously. The dataset contained tributes for cult favorite actor Tommy "Tiny" Lister, former US presidential candidate Herman Cain, jazz legend Ellis Marsalis, Jr., former Temptations lead singer Bruce Williamson, Country Music Hall of Famer Charley Pride, legendary Black Hollywood hair stylist Charles Gregory Ross, and other well-known African Americans. In a piece about Ross, his longtime client Tyler Perry (who is a Black film producer and studio owner), told Black news audiences: "This thing is real, Black people. I heard a Black person say, 'Black people don't get it.' That's a lie! You can get it, and you *will* get it if we don't do what we're being told to do."

Charisma Deberry, of *Essence*, echoed Perry's declaration. She said that the magazine had to make tough decisions about excluding some celebrities from its Instagram feed when they defied federal advisories against large gatherings. Deberry explained: "Usually, we post a lot of celeb content... but we have refused to go to any celebrity events or publish any content of any parties, because to us it was inappropriate that these parties have been happening." She added that *Essence* did not want to be seen as giving these large turnouts their "stamp of approval."

In addition to denying some Black celebrities news coverage, some publications chided them outright as well—especially when they were spreading misinformation directly on social media. The outlets often did this by writing on how African American social media users were joking about and correcting these celebrities' unfounded claims. For example, we found that several outlets, such as *Rolling Out*, covered how the Black community reproached R&B singer Keri Hilson when she stated that 5G wireless technology was to blame for the pandemic. Its top editor, Munson Steed, said that although the publication typically favors a moderate social media presence, he recognized during the pandemic that Twitter and Instagram were the fastest way to shout to his 300,000 followers, "No cell phone towers are going to give you COVID!" Likewise, rapper T.I. said Black people could beat COVID-19 if they "catch it in the throat and wash it down with warm liquids," but all of the outlets in our dataset contradicted advice of this type with official information from Black medical experts.

### ***(F2) To Limit the Spread of Misinformation, Editors Engaged with and Removed Social Media Comments***

Digital Black press editors were quick to address problematic and untrue comments that social media users made on their outlet's COVID-19 posts. Shana Pinnock shared that *The Grio* provided peace-of-mind to readers by dispelling myths about the Tuskegee experiment, which people were correlating with the COVID-19 vaccine. She said readers often referenced the infamous Tuskegee experiments of 1943 (which lasted for 40 years), in which scientists withheld treatment from 399 Black men who had contracted syphilis, to observe the late-stage effects of the disease (Washington 2006). When she observed that news audience members on the company's Twitter feed were saying that Black men were injected with syphilis during the notorious experiments, she said she felt compelled to intervene. She explained: "I thought, 'No, no. Let's not stick to misinformation again. No one was injected with the virus, they were withheld from treatment for syphilis. That's what happened. Let's be very clear.'" The user pushed back, however, commenting, "No, we were injected with syphilis!" Pinnock said she responded via *The Grio's* account with three words: "Cite your sources." She then recalled, "All of a sudden that person just disappeared into the night." She said it is important for Black digital publishers to moderate users such as this, since: "people will post that and here goes tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people liking that [Twitter post], responding to it, and further pushing that out... It's so dumb. Social media is a wonderful thing, but it's a terrible place too."

Some editors restricted comments that they felt would harm their audience. They took this approach instead of deleting them because it allows the original poster to see the comment but hides it from other users. However, other editors found it necessary to delete posts that were coming from trolls outside of the Black community. Lanae Spruce of *Bossip*, *Madame Noire* and *News One*, which are all under iOne Digital, shared:

I've seen a couple of posts that are COVID-related where there were some trolls coming in and saying, 'This is not real!' And those kind of things, we just ignore or delete. I'm not in a space where I want my team to go back and forth with a troll and argue with them. And then also, at the same time, I don't want our audience getting the wrong information.

In an effort to conserve resources, some editors chose to remove negative comments from trolls instead of engaging with them in futility. Editors also shared that they eventually block users who continue to post problematic content. For some social media posts, Black press outlets turned off the comments completely because the volume of harmful information posted by users was too much to manage. This strategy allowed readers to just focus on the correct content that was originally posted by the outlets.

### ***(F3) To Disprove Hoax Theories, Editors Posted about How the Pandemic Was Affecting Black America***

The second most popular code in our dataset was *social changes*. We found that the digital Black press provided valuable information about how COVID-19 was impacting traditional African American gatherings and customs, thus underscoring the pandemic's severity. Publishers posted about hospital visitation limitations, which did not allow Black family members to advocate for their loved ones' equitable care. There were

also posts and articles that lamented the cancellation or postponement of major Black cultural events and programming. Additionally, editors posted about the treatment of Black incarcerated persons in America's prisons; about the advantages and disadvantages of remote learning and what Black children may gain from not returning to biased, in-person school environments; and about how the US Census' "undercount" would affect Black Americans. The more the Black press reported on the myriad ways that African Americans were bearing the brunt of the pandemic in the US, the less likely it seemed that this pandemic was a hoax. Robert Littal of *Black Sports Online* explained, "I think my job as a journalist at that point [in 2020] was to try to provide as much accurate information" as possible.

Shana Pinnock, of *The Grio*, agreed. She said she will never forget an argument that she had online with a reader who parroted a popular conspiracy. They claimed: "You all must be on Bill Gates' payroll because you all are pushing his [COVID-19] vaccine." Pinnock said she had reached a boiling point that week, as hoax theories swirled online. She said she felt protective of her Black staff who had relatives that died from COVID-19. For them, the notion of a hoax was not only offensive, she said, but it was uninformed too. She explained:

I kind of responded back like, 'Listen, it may have not affected you, but one of our own writers—one of our own team members—lost her mother, her grandmother, and her aunt all within a two-week period. In Detroit. Yeah. Lost them all. She wasn't able to bury them. She's still trying to process grief. Do understand that your ignorance right now is not just wrong; it's callous and heartless too.

After the user left the social media thread, Pinnock said she realized, "We, as a Black company, have a duty to make sure that everyone is educated. We're not telling you what decision to make. We're not advocating for either/or, but what we are advocating is that everyone is educated." Other outlets in our dataset shared this strategy as many posted humanizing coverage about Black essential workers, educators, mothers and children who died from the virus.

Many digital Black press outlets partnered with other organizations to amplify how COVID-19 was affecting the Black community. For example, *Black Doctor* partnered with Facebook's COVID-19 Resource Center, *Rolling Out* partnered with The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and *Essence* partnered with the American Medical Association. Marcus Matthews of *The Undeclared* said,

"We partnered with the Kaiser Foundation for a study and poll on just how Blacks feel about the healthcare system, how Blacks are affected by COVID, [and] how Blacks' feelings are toward a vaccine once it comes out." He mentioned how it was important for them to provide their audience with the facts and that readers' response was unprecedented. Matthews said, "We had done previous polls and partnerships with other organizations in the past. We've never had any reception to the content that we've had with this kind." He attributed this reaction to the fact that Black readers felt the information being presented was relevant to their lives. Ultimately, each of the aforementioned partnerships provided digital Black press outlets with additional resources or sources of knowledge and enabled them to exponentially increase awareness of COVID-19's impact on the Black community.

***(RQ2) What mythbusting COVID-19 story angles did the editors use most often?***

***(F4) Editors Focused on Safety Guidelines, to Reinforce That Black Immunity Did Not Exist, and to Counter Anti-Black Sentiments of Black Peoples' Irresponsibility***

The social media posts and website articles that we coded as *safety guidelines* functioned to correct misinformation in a nuanced way. For example, digital Black press outlets shared information about social distancing, symptoms, and prevention. By pointing out the inability for some Black Americans to adhere to basic COVID-19 risk mitigation factors, the digital Black press drew attention to the inequitable ways that African Americans were experiencing the pandemic, and tried to remove anti-Black, victim-blaming news frames from the national discourse.

Some of the victim blaming came from within the Black community. For example, in April 2020, about a month into the US lockdowns, US Surgeon General Jerome Adams was criticized for attributing COVID-19 racial disparities to Black and Brown communities' lifestyle choices (Aleem 2020; Bunn 2020). In an interview with PBS' Yamiche Alcindor, Adams (who is Black) said:

African Americans and Latinos should avoid alcohol, drugs and tobacco. Do it for your abuela, do it for your granddaddy, do it for your big momma, do it for your pop-pop. We need you to understand, especially in communities of color. We need you to step up and stop the spread so that we can protect those who are most vulnerable.

Critics of Adams noted he did not mention structural inequities that led to varying COVID-19 outcomes, such as crowded, multi-generational housing; chronic, underlying health conditions; the lack of access to high-quality healthcare; or the medical racism that Black and Brown people often encounter when they seek care (Biswas, Sipes, and Brost 2021; Kendi 2020). Moreover, Adams did not mention how communities of color were more likely to occupy essential worker roles during the pandemic, which would have put them into direct contact with a multitude of sick people (Aleem 2020). Adams defended his comments, despite widespread rebuke. Congresswoman Maxine Waters, for example, issued a press release that read, in part:

That the Surgeon General of the United States would stand before the American people – and his [Black] community – and deliver an address riddled with racist tropes in the midst of a public health crisis is absolutely unconscionable and deeply offensive. Instead of using the full power of his office to better inform and direct resources to the African American community, Jerome Adams used his five minutes of fame to do [Pres.] Trump's dirty work and insult African Americans and other communities of color.

The surgeon general did not reply to Rep. Waters, but a few months later, anti-Black sentiments from another government official surfaced. Ohio State Senator Stephen A. Huffman, who is an emergency room doctor, asked at a public hearing whether the high rate of coronavirus cases in the Black community was because "the colored population did not wash their hands as well as other groups" (Gabriel 2020). The irony of Huffman's statement, which led to his termination from his hospital, is that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that white men were actually the least likely demographic to wash their hands (Haston et al. 2020).

Racialized (and some might argue, racist) misinformation such as this inspired the digital Black press to increase its efforts to provide safety guidelines to African Americans. Editors we interviewed believed that if the highest-ranking US government officials were going to victim-blame Black people, then African Americans needed to know what truly made them most vulnerable to the disease. Matthews, of *The Undeclared*, explained: “When COVID first hit, we had stories about ... what it means for a lot of us who can’t stay home from our job. We have to go out and work. A lot of people are in essential positions, and that trickles down to the longevity of the Black family.” Matthews said he felt compelled to reiterate this so that African Americans would take proactive steps to protect themselves amid a system that was not acknowledging, initially, how race played a factor in Black people’s susceptibility to COVID-19.

#### ***(F5) Editors Practiced Public Interest Journalism by Offering Q&A Sessions***

The fourth-most popular code in the corpus was *public interest journalism*. Black digital publications focused on providing facts and information about free resources at a time when the public was confused, fearful and vulnerable. They informed readers about infection rates, death tolls, and food banks, and shared ways to cope with the pandemic. They also held Instagram Live, Facebook Live and other online events where readers could interact with journalists and ask Black healthcare experts questions about the virus. There was a breach of the so-called “fourth wall,” where editors who usually appeared only on the masthead took positions in front of the camera for live video chats. *The Shade Room’s* Angelica Nwandu, for example, marveled at her staff’s versatility as they pivoted from posting viral celebrity videos, to producing original, live Q&A sessions on Instagram. She explained: “...If we weren’t able to be as flexible, our audience would not respect us as much as they do or love us as much as they do.”

Munson Steed of *Rolling Out* explained that social media afforded instant intimacy with his news audience. “The first thing we did was tell our community about what they needed to do in order to survive,” he said, adding, “It was really important to be in a place of truth.” Steed said he invited trusted Black doctors on his social media pages to share regular updates about COVID-19. Likewise, Charisma Deberry said she forged a similar sense of familiarity and trust by focusing on the imagined, quintessential *Essence* woman. When her team planned its Instagram Live sessions and Twitter Q&A threads, she said the editorial mindset was as follows: “We live, sleep and breathe the Black woman and what’s best for her—and how she’s going to be the most effective and prosperous. That’s what we wake up thinking about. I don’t think there’s any other brand that has that in mind.”

Derrick Lane of *Black Doctor* had a similar segment on Facebook Live. He called it *Straight Facts: You Decide*. “We did it from a regional angle,” Lane explained, adding that he invited government officials from various states to come online and share resources with geographically segmented audiences. As news of a vaccine began to surface, Lane said the Facebook Live sessions proved invaluable for dispelling myths about it. He said many people in his news audience were scared of being vaccinated, due to the many tragic instances of medical racism in America’s history, such as the

Tuskegee experiments. Lane shared that he spent a lot of time saying online: “Yes, I know that what happened at Tuskegee was horrible. But these are the facts *now*.” Lane added that some of his social media followers told him that seeing Black experts discuss facts, alongside their concerns, brought them comfort.

In addition, as federal and state relief became available, Black digital outlets informed African Americans about the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and stimulus checks. They also discussed the importance of mental health and how to access free or reduced services; the hardship of paying rent during the pandemic and the landlords and celebrities offering rental assistance; and the uneven economic impact on Black small business owners and how they can find relief. Spruce who oversees the social media accounts for *Bossip*, *Madame Noire* and *News One* said,

*Madame Noire* did a series with Tia Brown, who is a therapist, that talked about how to cope with this new space that we are living in. So emotional support, depression, mental health like that ... The *News One* brand hosted a discussion with folks around economic empowerment, where to go for resources. We were sharing resources in carousel posts on Instagram ... the whole point of us during the height of this pandemic...was to be an authentic voice for our Black audiences.

### ***(RQ3) How did the publishers measure the efficacy of their editorial approaches?***

#### ***(F6) Editors Monitored Their Engagement Metrics and Their Social Media Accounts' Growth***

Our last area of inquiry was how publishers tracked their success with their core audience. Some gathered original data. Others developed new content areas. Still others created more intentional audience engagement strategies. Spruce, for example, explained: “We did a case study, maybe in May or June, that just surveyed people around the pandemic from the Black perspective, and we shared that out on social. So it was just stats on [Black] people, how COVID was impacting families, impacting jobs, and impacting, frankly, everything.” Spruce said that she and her team developed a series of infographics. Those Instagram posts eventually became some of the most-shared stories of the year. She said it felt good to provide Black news audiences solid data journalism at a time of confusion and uncertainty.

Angelica Nwandu, of *The Shade Room*, said her staff also realized that it had to be creative about their content, all while foregrounding Black people’s needs. As the editor of the most popular Black digital news outlet in the entire dataset (with nearly 25 million Instagram followers), her strategy deserves to be quoted here at length. She explained:

During the COVID-19 and BLM [Black Lives Matter] protests, it was a very interesting time because we were primarily celebrity news. And what we found was that the audience—because we were the biggest Black platform out there—they were like, ‘I don’t care what you used to do. I don’t care if you used to do celebrity news, you have to turn into a news company.’ But see, that’s the thing. When you have a Black audience, one of the things about the Black audience is that when they support a company, they don’t just support you as a company and your product. They also want you to be social. They want you to stand up for them. They want you to have a little bit of activism. They want you to give back to the community. We had to shapeshift as a company.

As *The Shade Room* pivoted away from celebrity coverage to hard news, Nwandu said she noticed a fascinating pattern in the comments section of the outlet's Instagram page. As the vaccine debate gained traction in late 2020, she said some audience members, whom she calls "roommates," argued about dubious viral videos of Black people fainting after their shot was administered. Nwandu shared that her team decided to craft a corporate reply underneath the comment. Before Nwandu could intervene on Instagram, however, she observed that her audience already began chiding users who attempted to spread vaccine rumors. Nwandu said it felt good to know *The Shade Room's* reporting empowered Black people to educate each other. To her, that was the most important metric of 2020.

## Discussion

This study investigated how the digital Black press served its audiences during a daunting COVID-19 infodemic as racialized misinformation swirled online rapidly. Ours is the first investigation of the editorial decisions that the digital Black press made to address rumors that could harm the Black community. Our inquiry included three main areas: (1) how the digital Black press used its authoritative social media presence to challenge online misinformation from various sources; (2) how the outlets made editorial decisions about its story angles and tone; and (3) how the publishers measured the efficacy of these approaches. We offer here, in the third section of this paper, the key observations that may be a blueprint for future publishers of color who must report during crises and fight misinformation at the same time.

### ***The Digital Black Press Limited Their Audience's Exposure to Misinformation***

Given that many Black press websites foreground entertainment news (Williams Fayne 2020), the outlets in our sample's most commonly published COVID-19 coverage was celebrity-related. However, editors intentionally did not post content with celebrities flaunting safety guidelines. Also, when they chose to discuss Black entertainers' hoax theories, it was always in the context of reproach. Entertainment news is commonly found among digital Black press outlets because it provides additional coverage of African Americans that is not typically present in mainstream media (Williams Fayne 2020). Due to Dawson's (1994) concept of linked fate, which states that African Americans perceive a connection between individual interests and collective group interests, Black press readers may identify with the success or plight of Black celebrities (Williams Fayne 2020). The articles Black press outlets posted about celebrity COVID-19-related deaths or positive test results can then be valuable in helping readers believe that they too are susceptible to the disease. Similar to the Black press' inclusion of celebrity obituaries during the AIDS epidemic (Kinsella 1989), their coverage of pandemic deaths evidenced that African Americans were not immune to the disease. Humanizing framing (Keliikoa et al. 2022) of African Americans is a practice often seen in the Black press. We find that in their COVID-19 coverage, editors humanized celebrities, essential workers and others in the Black community as an intentional strategy to convey to readers the actual impact of the virus.



Many Black press outlets have limited financial resources, in comparison to mainstream news outlets, which often results in smaller staffs (Williams Fayne 2019). But despite these restrictions, the editors invested time in protecting their readers from misinformation on social media. They monitored the comments on Twitter and Instagram and chose to respond, restrict or delete content that was not factual. Future research should investigate how the audience responds to these editorial strategies. Do they feel that their free speech rights are being violated or do they appreciate the editors maintaining a safe space for Black readers? Trolling is something that Black social media users are more prone to (Freelon et al. 2022) so the editors' tactics may be more warranted and welcomed. Also investigating what motivates Black press readers to comment on social media at all may help to expand research that has been conducted on digital news commenting (Tenenboim and Cohen 2015).

### ***The Digital Black Press Revived Public Interest Journalism***

The Black press' educational turn may signal a revival of public interest journalism, which strives to give audiences the information they need to participate fully in society (Sweet et al. 2021; Jukes, Fowler-Watt, and Rees 2021). Prior to the pandemic, Williams Fayne (2021) posited that the twentieth-century Black press is conceptualized most often as an advocacy press that focused on activist campaigns for equality. In the twenty-first century, however, Williams Fayne argued that a shift away from hard news, toward entertainment, offered positive representations of Black life or "soft advocacy" (2021, 1). Our dataset revealed that these two concepts—of hard advocacy and soft advocacy—are both present during times of crisis.

We found that Black publishers indeed hooked their news audiences with celebrity angles often. However, once the reader or viewer entered celebrity news stories, they were often met with statistics and sourcing from COVID-19 officials, such as Dr. Fauci. Further research is warranted to show why this approach was so effective. Did Black celebrities comfort Black news audiences in ways that the government or the medical community alone could not; especially in light of African Americans' intimate knowledge of medical racism (Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tamir 2021; Devakumar et al. 2020; Egede and Walker 2020)? Might Black Americans' loyalty to these outlets during the pandemic indicate a rise in journalistic fact-checking as an act of "de-fusion," which focuses on "separating audiences from actors when the latter lack authenticity and credibility" (Luengo and García-Marín 2020)? These are researchable questions.

### ***The Digital Black Press Expanded Its Content, Yet Remained On-Brand***

Perhaps one of the most notable observations in this study is how the digital Black press leveraged the instantaneous communication that Twitter and Instagram afforded, to interact with an audience that was afraid and grieving. They held live Q&A sessions with journalists and health care experts and provided their audience with a means to obtain authoritative information firsthand. Many editors found their social media strategy effective given the large amount of shares and comments they received on posts. Black press journalists also created partnerships with other organizations to

inform the public and spread awareness about how COVID-19 was affecting the Black community. This enactment of collaborations with health professionals, which research previously suggested as a potential solution for addressing minority health disparities (Campbell et al. 2013; Kinsella 1989; Krishnan, Durrah, and Winkler 1997; Pickle, Quinn, and Brown 2002) was then brought to fruition in the Black press' pandemic coverage.

Still, future studies might research how Black news audiences perceived these brand aspirations. Emergent studies have begun to indicate that people struggled during the pandemic "between conflicting needs for information and disconnection" (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021, 1). A study of Norwegian media users, for instance, revealed a pattern of "doomscrolling, monitoring and avoiding" news (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021, 6). Similarly, a study of Dutch young people (ages 19-36) found that after an increase in their news consumption at the beginning of the pandemic, they later experienced "corona fatigue," which made them decrease their news intake (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2021).

Does this pattern hold for Black American news audiences? Did African Americans doomscroll, monitor and avoid Black press outlets, or did they check them more often than ever? If the latter is true, then why did they rely on these publications so much, even when other news consumers around the world were reducing their news diets? More ethnocentric media studies would help elucidate how various groups of people around the world, with varying levels of vulnerability to COVID-19, engaged with news in 2020.

## Conclusion

Through our mixed-methods approach, we observed five core interventions across the 13 participating digital Black press outlets. These publications attempted to dispel racialized myths by: (1) using Black celebrity updates as a hook for hard news; (2) removing unfactual information from social media comments, (3) reporting on the pandemic's effects on Black life; (4) providing culturally specific tips for staying healthy; and (5) crafting spaces for Black news audiences to ask Black medical officials questions. These strategies allowed Black press outlets to address misinformation from multiple angles and reach a diverse audience. Content appealed to readers interested in celebrities and soft news as well as those looking for more hard news public service journalism. Monitoring social media comments gave the editors control over what information was being disseminated to their audience and prevented trolls outside of the Black community from spreading misinformation. By centering Blackness in all of their coverage, editors were able to create posts that were more likely to resonate with their readers as opposed to mainstream news content that is not Black-targeted. Given that African Americans trust the Black press more than mainstream outlets, the editors' interventions were imperative to inform and protect a community that was disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

We found that digital Black press editors used both proactive and reactive tactics to counter misinformation. They proactively created posts about celebrities' COVID test results and published factual information about the virus and vaccines to educate their audience. Editors also used Facebook and Instagram Live to hold Q&A sessions with medical experts and provide their readers the opportunity to get direct answers

to questions. Black press outlets reactively published content refuting the misinformation some celebrities were spreading about COVID's origins and treatment. Another reactive response was editors' replying to potentially harmful comments with correct information or censoring comments when users made unfounded claims. Both of these approaches were essential and effective in providing comprehensive coverage of COVID and its effect on the Black community. We contend that digital Black press editors used social media to both prevent and rectify misinformation by employing strategies that prioritized their audience's coronavirus knowledge.

While news outlets across the globe combatted COVID-19 misinformation, the Black press' efforts were especially significant. These outlets occupied a unique position as trusted sources among Black readers regarding issues of Black health. As such, we argue that Black press journalists were effectively able to correct unverified information about the disease, whether from readers or celebrities, and provide factual information that was from and for the Black community. The editors understood the value of their content and believed that African American readers were relying on a strong Black press. Lanae Spruce of iOne Digital said, "It's so important, in this day and age, where there's so much misinformation, that we do our job, especially with our community, to help combat that. And people could expect that from us...at the height of the pandemic, when people were looking for information, we were definitely making sure to keep them informed."

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