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To cite this article: Jane Rhodes (2001) The Black Panther Newspaper: Standard-bearer for modern black nationalism, *Media History*, 7:2, 151-158, DOI: [10.1080/13688800120092228](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688800120092228)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688800120092228>



Published online: 19 Aug 2010.



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The Black Panther Newspaper: *standard-bearer for modern black nationalism*

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The Black Panther newspaper, born in the tumult of the 1960s black power movement, refuses to die. This radical underground publication officially folded in the early 1980s, yet there have been serious efforts to bring it back to life. In February 1991, for example, a group of former Black Panthers in the San Francisco Bay Area relaunched the newspaper, selling 10,000 copies from Oakland to New York City. The first edition of the new Berkeley-based monthly was a facsimile of the old *Black Panther*, replete with the snarling black cat logo and the image of a rifle-toting Huey Newton in beret and black leather. The banner headline proclaimed 'The Struggle Continues', and the volunteer publishers made it clear that they hoped the paper would inspire the return of the Black Panthers to the political limelight [1].

Across the border that separates Berkeley from Oakland, another *Black Panther* hybrid, calling itself the *Commemorator*, also appeared during the same period. Produced by a group calling themselves the Commemoration Committee for the Black Panther Party, the paper was devoted to the veneration of Panther co-founder Huey Newton and the revival of the principles of the organization. Committee members set up a table outside Cody's bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, selling copies of the *Commemorator* for \$1.50, and distributing leaflets seeking volunteers to keep the monthly newspaper running. Unlike its counterpart, the *Commemorator* didn't directly imitate the original *Black Panther*, but the similarities were striking: publication of the party's 10-point programme, articles on political prisoners and international freedom struggles, and a page devoted to Newton's writing. One of its founders hoped the paper would 'provide a forum for progressive politics in the Oakland Bay Area'. Both papers were published off and on until the end of the decade, and were taken seriously enough to wind up in the collections of public and university libraries across California [2].

The resurrection of *The Black Panther* newspaper served multiple purposes—to recover the memory of an organization central to the experience of black nationalists in the late twentieth century, and to produce a counter-memory that could exist in opposition to the dominant representations of the organization. As George Lipsitz notes, counter-memory 'forces revision of existing histories', by calling on experiences of oppression and difference. One examination of the 1960s identified the prevailing memories of the era using 'positive' or 'negative' metaphors, with the Black Panthers in the latter camp. 'The memory of non-violent civil rights marchers is erased by the spectre of armed Black Panthers', wrote one scholar. If mainstream narratives today characterize the Black Panthers as violent street thugs, anti-democratic anarchists, or misguided pseudo-Marxists, it is up to those who venerate the organization's principles to produce alternative interpretations of its history. The party's original newspaper was the most visible and consistent representation of the organization—one that lasted far

beyond the Panther's heyday. It is not surprising, then, that reclaiming the Black Panther's collective memory involved reviving this radical publication [3].

The resilience of the Black Panther Party in the popular imagination is a direct result of the emphasis the group placed on public communication. The Panthers, initially known as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, were founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale on 15 October 1966 in Oakland, California. Newton and Seale met while they were both students at Merritt College and active in the Soul Students Advisory Council. Their plan to develop a radical college organization gradually became a political unit to resist police harassment in the streets and confront what they considered to be 'bourgeois cultural nationalists' on campus.

Armed with a working knowledge of the writings of Malcolm X, Mao Tse-Tung, and Frantz Fanon, the pair devised a 10-point platform that included demands for full employment, housing, education, self-determination, and an exemption for all black men from military service. They began regular surveillance of the Oakland Police Department's actions in black neighbourhoods with a handful of recruits, often coming dangerously close to armed confrontations. The word spread quickly that there was a new, aggressive group that was constructing a new brand of black nationalism.

The newspaper first appeared in the spring of 1967 amid a flurry of influences. It was part of a surge of 'underground', politically influenced periodicals published during the 1960s including the Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks* (founded by Malcolm X in 1960), and the student-run Los Angeles *Free Press* (1964) and *Berkeley Barb* (1965). Malcolm X was a pioneer in the use of mass media for black nationalism, and he single-handedly launched *Muhammad Speaks* to spread the Nation of Islam movement. Seale and Newton had fashioned the party's 10-point programme from the platform of the Black Muslims, and they sought to emulate their successful newspaper as well. These publications, made possible by the recent availability of inexpensive mimeograph machines and offset printing, captured the zeitgeist of the era. Noted one historian, 'underground newspapers were written by the alienated for the alienated' [4].

Newton and Seale avidly read these publications and understood the necessity of a mass medium to serve the organization. They conceived of the newspaper primarily as a propaganda tool—a means for political education and the recruitment of followers. It was also to play a central role in the construction of an imagined community of black revolutionaries across the USA, and eventually across the globe. As Benedict Anderson has explained, throughout history, print culture has been an essential component in linking widely dispersed populations together in the first step toward forging a national identity. 'These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally-imagined community', noted Anderson. This was clearly the objective of Huey Newton, who wrote in an early issue of *The Black Panther*,

Millions and millions of oppressed people might not know members of the vanguard party personally or directly, but they will gain through an indirect acquaintance the proper strategy for liberation via the mass media and the physical activities of the party. It is of prime importance that the vanguard party develop a political organ, such as a newspaper produced by the party ... [5]

It was equally important for the newspaper to respond to the particular needs of those considering themselves black nationalists—a nationalist identity within a larger and often hostile nation-state. Since the early nineteenth century African Americans have imagined

a race-based collectivity in the USA that offered the possibility of independence, autonomy and protection from discrimination. In modern times, the Nation of Islam, with its self-sufficient business community and insular social networks, comes closest to this ideal. The Black Panther Party, on the other hand, presented adherents with an ideology, sense of purpose, a group identity, and a plan of action that had nothing to do with locale. Media that enabled patterns of interaction and a sense of belonging was the glue for such a movement, in the absence of a 'place'. In his study of media and national identity in Britain, David Morley notes 'the imagined community is, in fact, usually constructed in the language of some particular ethnos', that accords membership in a political formation. *The Black Panther* newspaper was the principle vehicle for this nationalist language and culture [6].

The catalyst for the paper's first issue was the death of a 22-year old black man, Denzil Dowell of nearby Richmond, California, who had been shot and killed by the police. Despite evidence that suggested otherwise, the case was ruled a justifiable homicide, inspiring outrage among Bay Area blacks. The Dowell family asked the newly formed Black Panthers to investigate, and the controversy emerged as an ideal showcase for the group's ideology and image. On 25 April the first issue of *The Black Panther Black Community News Service* appeared, emblazoned with the headline 'Why Was Denzil Dowell Killed?' The four-page mimeographed sheet laid out the details of the case, critiquing both the Sheriff Department's findings and the local press. Dowell's death was cited as justification for the Panther's quest for community protection. 'We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organising black self-defence groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality', the paper proclaimed. The paper was clumsy—headlines were hand-written and columns drawn with black lines—nevertheless it bore the markings of the Panthers' self-fashioning, such as the snarling black cat, the expressions of black rage, and the combative tone that openly condemned the sites of power. It was also a useful organizing tool, announcing a public meeting to support the Dowell family, and urging black men to join their armed community patrols. The 6000 newspapers that circulated free across the Bay Area were weapons far more powerful than the Panther's rifles [7].

The second issue of the paper followed their first big media coup. On 2 May, a group of 30 armed Panthers marched on the State Capitol in Sacramento to protest a pending bill that would have made it illegal for them to carry weapons. They drew the attention of the state's press corps as they walked across the Capitol lawn, delivered a manifesto on the State House steps, and then scuffled with police inside. The story was quickly picked up by the national news media, and the Black Panthers were irresistibly drawn into the spotlight. Co-founder Bobby Seale remembered that receiving this kind of publicity was a heady experience for the young radicals. 'A colossal event had occurred that had significant meaning to the Black Party. News of the existence of the Party went all the way around the world', he wrote [8].

Seale and Newton understood that publishing a newspaper was a key strategy in maintaining this momentum. While they fielded questions from reporters in the mainstream press, they stayed up nights to produce another issue of *The Black Panther*. This time, the focus was on the Sacramento action, and the resulting charges of trespassing and conspiracy lodged against 24 of the protesters. The newspaper was used to rally support for those Panthers under arrest, and to raise money for their bail and legal defence. This issue also introduced one of the group's enduring symbolic devices—the pig. Under a grotesque cartoon of a pig in police uniform, the caption read 'A Pig is an

ill-natured beast who has no respect for law and order, a foul traducer who's usually found masquerading as a victim of an unprovoked attack.' In just a month, the Panther's rhetoric and iconography had escalated dramatically [9].

Overnight, the newspaper became an essential part of the Black Panthers' revolutionary culture. Eldridge Cleaver was the paper's first editor, and he had a profound influence on the language and style of the publication. While in prison, Cleaver published a best-selling black power manifesto *Soul on Ice*, and he was a contributor to the radical magazine *Ramparts*. His writing was flamboyant and provocative; he could be outrageous and incisive at the same moment, and this became true of much of the paper's content. Newton and Cleaver were masters of hyperbole, borrowing phrases from Maoist, Nation of Islam, and other radical literatures. The newspaper reminded readers that 'The Sky's the Limit', that the Panthers stood for 'All Power to the People', and that revolution would come 'By Any Means Necessary'. Cleaver insisted on crediting Newton for having the vision to get the paper published each week. 'It was this concern for getting information to the people, that drove Huey practically at the point of a gun, to round us all up and stay on our backs until we would get out another issue of the Black Panther newspaper', Cleaver said [10].

Emory Douglass, who became the Panthers' Minister of Culture, shaped the visual content of the paper through his cartoons and graphics. Douglass coined the term 'revolutionary art', to define his visual politics. He invented much of the paper's iconography; the images of exaggerated Panther warriors with massive armament, the grotesque police and government officials as pigs, the bootlickers' gallery that showed assimilated blacks prostrate before symbols of white power, and the ever-present black fist. Douglass fashioned himself as a cultural soldier whose products were a 'tool for liberation'. Revolutionary art 'gives the people the correct picture of our struggle whereas the Revolutionary Ideology gives the people the correct political understanding of our struggle', explained Douglass in 1968 [11]. In a recent interview, Douglass noted with pride that

the paper became a paper that people relied on. Readers sought our political endorsements; like in the bootlickers' column, that had an impact. It was sharper than a double-edged sword. People loved those pictures. Our art, our paper was reflective of the community. [12]

The Black Panther Party took a dramatic turn in October 1967 when Huey Newton was arrested and charged with murdering a police officer after a gunfight that also left one Black Panther dead. By the next year—1968—the party was concentrating much of its energy on the campaign to free Huey Newton from prison. The newspaper's existence became crucial to the daily work of the party. The flag carried a photograph of the martyred Newton in full military regalia next to the snarling cat. He was referred to as a political prisoner, and considerable space was devoted to his legal case. The newspaper's growing national circulation helped to catapult the case into the mainstream media, where network television news made Huey Newton a household name. The Free Huey campaign also succeeded in winning dozens of new recruits to the party, as they were urged to join demonstrations at the Alameda County Courthouse to protest Newton's incarceration. The newspaper was essential for rallying public opinion in support of Newton's legal battles, simultaneously encouraging the formation of new party chapters around the country.

The Black Panther had also become the organization's steadiest source of income. Each Panther chapter or cadre was assigned a number of newspapers they were expected

to sell, at 25 cents a copy. Hawking the paper was a regular task for party members. Non-members, often neighbourhood children, were also recruited to sell the paper, with the promise that they could keep 10 cents for every sale. *The Black Panther* became ubiquitous in black communities across the USA. By 1968, Bobby Seale boasted that the party was selling 125,000 copies per week. A government investigation surmised that the national headquarters received about 12.5 cents for each copy sold, and that the circulation neared 140,000 copies by 1970, netting the party \$40,000 a month. Selling and producing the newspaper became a concrete activity for Panther members searching for some tangible result for their often-symbolic efforts [13].

The act of publishing the paper was also a process of community building. In the present age of desktop publishing and digital imagery, it is difficult to imagine the very physical, tactile nature of producing a periodical like *The Black Panther*. It was a group process that required creativity and collaboration. The act of getting people together to lay out pages and type and edit articles into the wee hours of the night facilitated organizational cohesiveness. This was a mode of expression not often available to party members, and it was a treasured experience. As one author has noted, 'alternative media flourish in the wastelands left by official media'. Publishing *The Black Panther* was a weekly act of resistance against the corporatization and homogenization of mainstream media that generally characterized this group of black radicals as a threat to the national order [14].

The paper deployed several symbolic and rhetorical devices toward this end. Perhaps the best known was the use of 'pig' in words and pictures to represent all forms of authority. Others have credited Newton with coining the term as an epithet for police, and this slang was used widely by black and white radicals of the era. The term was extended in the newspaper to include government, business, and black public figures considered 'uncle Toms'. One former Panther remembered that 'We were looking for the most despicable name to call the police, and the pig is symbolically the nastiest animal. Pig caught on very naturally' [15]. An equally pervasive symbol was the gun. Throughout the paper photographs and sketches often portrayed a lone black man aiming or carrying a rifle; sometimes a black figure was portrayed as shooting a pig. The gun was represented as a necessity in the daily lives of the revolutionary, and the paper's text urged members to arm themselves, often giving detailed discussions of gun styles and architecture. The paper attempted to convince readers that guns were to be desired rather than feared. For example, during one Christmas season the paper's back page was devoted to a 'Black Revolutionary Xmas List', which offered a visual smorgasbord of pistols, bullets, grenades, and machine guns. Weapons represented power and the ability to seize control of one's destiny [16].

Heroes and martyrs were another staple of *The Black Panther*—essential components for an invented community. In the first year, there were regular full-page tributes to Malcolm X and Che Guevara—icons who stood for the ideals of strength, courage, and commitment to 'the struggle'. As the party moved toward an ideology of revolutionary intercommunalism there was a concerted effort to link the Panthers to other Third World communities. There were regular reports on protests, strikes and wars in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and expressions of solidarity with the Republic of Vietnam. Dispatches from Palestine, Biafra, and Mexico, among others, sought to show followers that there was a world-wide revolt against oppression in which the Panthers played an active role. As more and more Panthers were jailed or killed, they achieved martyrdom through their sacrifices—particularly the absent leader Huey Newton.

The editors sought to shape the party's internal culture through *The Black Panther*,

particularly for those members beyond the Northern California environs who might not have direct contact with the leadership. In addition to publishing the 10-point programme each week, the paper disseminated rules of behaviour and a value system for party members to follow. There was to be no drug use or alcohol consumption at Panther headquarters and meetings, and there were strict guidelines for carrying weapons. Although we know now, in hindsight, that many of these rules were ignored or flaunted, Newton, Seale and Cleaver understood the necessity of creating the impression of order and discipline within party ranks. This was important in creating a distinct identity for the party, which sought to differentiate itself from the southern-based civil rights movement or cultural nationalists. The Panthers saw themselves more akin to the troops marching under Mao and Castro, than to those blacks celebrating Kwaanza and taking on African names. The black leather jacket was linked to the urban street culture of the party's origins; it connoted sophistication and style, and required considerable hustling to acquire the money to buy it. But everyone could wear their hair in a natural, put on a black beret and sunglasses, and stand in military formation. The Panthers taught party members the stern, scowling facial expressions by example; everyone wanted to be Huey, or Bobby, or Eldridge.

The discourses in *The Black Panther* newspaper bore an instructional quality, as well. One discursive trend centred on gender roles and gender politics—a subject taken up by scholars elsewhere. While the paper's iconography celebrated strong black women carrying weapons and functioning as dedicated soldiers to the revolutionary cause, the texts tended to argue for an assertion of masculine authority and a sexual division of labour. In one essay, it was asked:

What is a black woman's chief function, if it is not to live for her man? The black woman must drop the white ways of trying to be equal to the black man. The woman's place is to stand behind the black man, so in the event he should start to fall, she is there to hold him up with her strength.

Men and women appeared in equal numbers in the photographs of disciplined and earnest Black Panthers at marches, protests and rallies. But, with the exception of Kathleen Cleaver in the late 1960s, and Elaine Brown in the mid-1970s, visual and verbal authority was generally accorded to men [17].

Children were to develop an early social and political consciousness, and to consider themselves as soldiers in training. The Black Child's Pledge was published as much for the rhetorical strategy of incorporating children into the revolutionary culture, as it was an actual directive:

I Pledge allegiance to my Black People.
I Pledge to develop my mind and body to the greatest extent possible.
I will learn all that I can in order to give my best to my people in their struggle for liberation. [18]

The Black Panther newspaper—with titles including the Black Panther Community News Service and the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service—was the most important tool for the party's efforts at self-representation directed at multiple audiences. It was, particularly during the early years, the only medium completely under their control. Newton wrote in the first issue of the paper 'Lacking access to radio, television, or any other mass media, we needed an alternative means of communication ... a way of interpreting events to the community from a Black perspective.' The Black Panther Party was as much at war with the nation's symbolic culture as they were with law

enforcement authorities. As Lauren Berlant has explained, dominant mass media circulate 'traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals and narratives' which provides the mechanism for a collective national identity. The Black Panther Party was intent on producing and maintaining a dissident symbolic culture. If national media are oriented toward the creation of moments of national communion—a sense of national unity—then radical media like *The Black Panther* seek to induce a sense of common outrage and grievance among the disenfranchised [19].

The Panthers considered themselves under siege, not only from law enforcement agencies, but also in the world of public discourse. Huey Newton complained that the Panthers' rhetorical use of guns as political instruments was exaggerated by outside media, while the other projects of the party (such as free breakfast programmes, community health clinics, and neighbourhood schools) were obscured. 'What never became clear to the public, largely because it was always de-emphasised in the media, was that the armed self-defence program of the Party was just one form of what Party leaders viewed as self-defence against oppression', he argued. Thus, it was up to the party itself to shape its image and promote its programmes, and the newspaper was the most consistent site through which to accomplish this goal [20].

Not surprisingly, the outrageous hyperbole and iconography that were staples of the newspaper attracted intense scrutiny from law enforcement authorities. Indeed, entire government reports investigating the revolutionary activities of the Black Panther Party relied heavily on what was published in the newspaper. The newspaper was an effective location through which the Black Panthers' opponents could contest their politics and their very existence. Bobby Seale remembered numerous instances in which the newspaper's existence was threatened, such as when the local printers union complained that the paper was being typeset and packaged by non-union party members and they threatened a boycott. On another occasion, half the employees at their San Francisco printer's outfit refused to work on the paper because of its inflammatory content. Other tales included charges that the airlines interfered with delivery of the paper, often 'losing' it en route, and that the FBI sprayed noxious chemicals and inks on bundles of the paper to make them unusable. Perhaps most tragic was the murder of the paper's circulation director Sam Napier in New York City in April 1971. Although accounts of the incident were muddled, the Panthers insisted Napier was killed by FBI operatives bent on silencing the newspaper and the organization [21].

Despite, or perhaps because of, this siege mentality, keeping *The Black Panther* in print was a symbol of the organization's longevity. Between 1969 and late 1970 there was a constant turnover of editors, with four different individuals filling this role. Nevertheless, keeping the paper going was an organizational priority. By the early 1970s Newton was released from jail, Cleaver was in exile and later expunged from the party, and other leaders like Chicago's Fred Hampton, were either in prison or dead. Newton continued publishing the paper with help from loyal members of the party. Elaine Brown, who took over the helm of the party during the mid-1970s, first served as the paper's editor. By the end of the decade, *The Black Panther* had become little more than a forum for Newton's political projects as the bulk of the party was dismantled. It gradually dwindled from a weekly, to a monthly, and finally an occasional publication, officially folding in 1980. To many African Americans, however, the Black Panther Party continues to have an allure. 'A lot of today's young blacks are hearing through hip-hop or whatever vehicle ... that there was a great transformation in the '60s. Many want to go back and understand it, and I think the Panthers play a role in that', notes sociologist Troy Duster. The past and the present of *The Black Panther* newspaper

provides a lens through which this exploration of black nationalism in the USA continues [22].

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NOTES

- [1] *San Jose Mercury News* (26 March 1991).
- [2] For discussion of *Commemorator*, see JoNina M. Abron, "'Raising the Consciousness of the People": The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, 1967-1980', in Ken Wachsberger, ed., *Voices from the Underground: Volume 1, insider histories of the Vietnam era underground press* (Tempe: Mica Press, 1993), 343-59; also see various holdings for California Digital Library.
- [3] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: collective memory and American popular culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 213; Meta Mendel-Reyes, *Reclaiming Democracy: the sixties in politics and memory* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 82. For example, Hugh Pearson describes the Black Panther leadership as having a 'criminal mindset' in *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the price of black power in America* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1994).
- [4] Robert J. Glessing, *The Underground Press in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 3. On Malcolm X, see Komozi Woodard, *A Nation with a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and black power politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 59-60.
- [5] *The Black Panther* (20 July 1967); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1987), 47.
- [6] On early black nationalism, see Floyd Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: black emigration and colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); David Morley, *Home Territories: media, mobility, and identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 118.
- [7] *The Black Panther* (25 April 1967).
- [8] Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: the story of the Black Panther Party and Huey Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970), 177.
- [9] *The Black Panther* (May 1967).
- [10] Eldridge Cleaver, *Introduction to the Genius of Huey Newton*, n.p.
- [11] *The Black Panther* (19 October 1968).
- [12] Interview with Emory Douglass, San Francisco, 28 February 1995.
- [13] Seale, *Seize the Time*, 179; US House of Representatives, Committee on Internal Security, *Gun-Barrel Politics: the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1971).
- [14] John Downing, *Radical Media: the political experience of alternative communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 35.
- [15] Earl Anthony, *Picking Up the Gun: a report on the Black Panthers* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 25.
- [16] *The Black Panther* (21 December 1968).
- [17] *The Black Panther* (28 September 1968); on gender dynamics, see Tracie Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, what a Man's Role in the Revolution Is": gender and the politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1970', in Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 267-304.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] See Lauren Berlant, *Anatomy of a National Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- [20] Huey Newton, *War Against the Panthers: a study of repression in America* (New York: Harlem River Press, 1996), 34.
- [21] In addition to *Gun-Barrel Politics*, see US House of Representatives, Committee on Internal Security, *The Black Panther Party: its origin and development as reflected in its official weekly newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1970); Seale, *Seize the Time*, 180; and Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: the FBI's secret file on black America, 1960-1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989).
- [22] On the newspaper, see Abron, 'Raising Consciousness', 356-57; Duster quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (29 August 1994).