

Book Award Interview

By Thomas Aiello ©



Aiello

Thomas Aiello received the 2019 American Journalism Historians Association’s award for the best book of the year for *The Grapevine of the Black South: The Scott Newspaper Syndicate in the Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement*. He teaches at Valdosta State University in the Department of History and the African American Studies Program. Along with *The Grapevine of the Black South*, he has written eight other books. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

Aiello: In the summer of 1928, William Alexander Scott began a small four-page weekly in Atlanta. In 1930, his *Atlanta World* became a semi-weekly, and the following year, W.A. began to implement his vision for a massive newspaper chain based in the city, the Southern Newspaper Syndicate. Advertisements proclaimed “Negroes Are Different In Dixie.” Finally, in March 1932, the *Atlanta World* became the nation’s only black daily. When the Syndicate’s reach began drifting beyond the bounds of the South in 1933, Scott changed its name to the Scott Newspaper Syndicate.

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In the generation that followed, the literally hundreds of papers of the Syndicate helped formalize knowledge among the African-American population in the South. They gave black readers in Atlanta, for example, much the same news that they gave readers in New Orleans. The Civil Rights Movement then exploded throughout the region after World War 2, with black southerners finding a collective identity in that struggle. It was a collective identity that couldn't come solely from skin color or resentment of Jim Crow. The relative uniformity in post-*Brown* activism in the South was built in part on the commonality of the news, and the subsequent interpretation of that news. Or, as Gunnar Myrdal explained, the press was "the chief agency of group control. It tells the individual how he should think and feel as an American Negro and creates a tremendous power of suggestion by implying that all other Negroes think and feel in this manner." (Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* [1944], 911.) The opinions of individual editors about syndicated news was by no means monolithic, so southern newspaper syndication didn't create a complete homogeneity in black southern thinking, but it did give thinkers a similar set of tools from which to draw.

The book argues that the black southern press in the post-World War I period became the modern version of antebellum kinship networks. They looked much the same and served similar ends. Syndicate newspapers dominated in small towns of the southern countryside. Calls for land reform were replaced with calls for voting rights, but the authors of that new network had learned from earlier racial crackdowns. In a pragmatic effort to avoid confrontation developing from white fear, newspaper editors developed a practical radicalism that argued on the fringes of racial hegemony, picking their spots, urging local compromise, and saving their loudest vitriol for tyranny that wasn't local and

thus left no stake in the game for would-be white saboteurs.

Q: How did you get the idea for your book?

Aiello: I was actually working on a separate project years ago, and in the process I worked with a variety of southern black newspapers. I was struck by advertisements that proclaimed “Negroes Are Different In Dixie,” and made the case that black southerners who went north were somehow inauthentically black. “Northern Negroes (including those who packed their handbags down in Dixie and got that way) may pass up the Northern Negro papers because white dailies print Negro news, or because they feel a certain guilt in reading Negro medium. But the Southern Negro pores over Southern Newspaper Syndicate presentations,” explained one advertisement. “While his northern brother is busily engaged in ‘getting white’ and ruining racial consciousness, the Southerner has become more closely knit.” That line of thinking was fascinating to me, so I collected all of the advertisements I could find, then saved the project for when I had time to devote to it.

The other real impetus was the fact that northern black newspapers play a large role in the historiography of the black press, but because so many of its newspapers were small, or didn’t last long, or weren’t saved, or didn’t leave behind business records, southern black newspapers receive short shrift in that historiography. I wanted to remedy that, at least to a small degree.

Q: Tell us about the research you did for your book: What were your sources, how did you research your book, how long did you spend, and so forth?

Aiello: This book was a ten year process. My point of departure for re-

search was Emory University, which holds the papers of the *Atlanta Daily World*. Only some Syndicate records are extant, but the ones that remain are truly helpful. I used cash receipt books to make a list of papers involved in the Syndicate, then tracked their payments over two decades to chart when each paper existed. It was a harrowing effort, but once I had a complete spreadsheet, I began going through the list to discover which papers left a trace in the historical record. For those that did, I traveled across the country, as far north as New York and as far west as Austin, to track those traces, often finding only single issues or lone pages from single issues to get an idea of those papers. I then chose some of the most telling, representative stories to drill down on to explain the role of the black press more broadly and the Syndicate papers more specifically.

Q: Besides the sources you used, were there any others you wish you had been able to examine?

Aiello: My biggest regret is not missing any papers that survived. It is instead missing out on the ability to review all of those papers that didn't survive. More than half of the newspapers involved with the Scott Newspaper Syndicate have no surviving issues. I was only able to track their survival through their participation in the Syndicate itself.

Q: Based on your research for the book, what would you advise other historians in our field about working with sources?

Aiello: My advice would be to not assume an inability to evaluate a given journalistic source simply because that source wasn't saved in any kind of systematic way. There is much to learn, for example, from single

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issues of small black newspapers that reside in a lone archive somewhere away from more comprehensive journalism archives. It is those smaller issues, those pieces of journalistic literature that never made into the proverbial canon, that can best help us to challenge that canon, push back against ingrained assumptions, and alter the historiography of journalism in the process.

Q: What were the challenges you faced in researching your book?

Aiello: Access to the papers themselves was an obvious challenge, as I've mentioned. But along with that, another challenge was finding secondary materials in the historiography itself that treated issues of black southern journalism in a comprehensive manner. Often, when we are dealing with subjects that have not been well-trod by those who came before us, finding proper contextual material can be its own challenge, and that was certainly the case here.

Q: Is it possible to get too close to a research subject? How do historians maintain their neutrality of viewpoint when conducting and interpreting research?

Aiello: It can be a thorny issue. Especially when doing race history, it is easy to see good guys and bad guys, to want to defend the oppressed against their oppressors, rather than analyzing the specific reasons for the historic dispossessions that have accrued over time. When added to the general historian's plight of spending so much time with the subjects of research that there becomes a temptation to defend them over and against their own frailties and faults, being conscious of our role as collectors and interpreters of various arguments, and that the

debts and credits of such arguments will uplift or fell the arguers for individual readers on their own, is paramount. Race history isn't melodrama, and the righteous anger that sometimes develops over the consequences of white supremacy can often lead it into that territory. The righteous anger is good, of course. It makes us human. But realizing that those who persecute others will hang themselves with their own argumentative rope if careful retelling and analysis is applied is what makes us historians.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

Aiello: The Scott Newspaper Syndicate, run by the owners of the *Atlanta Daily World*, included more than 240 black newspapers between 1931 and 1955. It became after World War I the modern version of the nineteenth century kinship network, the grapevine, and it looked much the same and served similar ends. In a pragmatic effort to avoid racial confrontation developing from white fear, newspaper editors developed a practical radicalism that argued on the fringes of racial hegemony and saving their loudest vitriol for tyranny that wasn't local and thus left no stake in the game for would-be white saboteurs. But the Syndicate did not remain in the South. Its membership followed the path of the Great Migration into the Midwest and West. The comparative reach of the SNS and its hundreds of newspapers was simply unparalleled. This book examines that reach, and in the process reexamines historical thinking about the Depression-era black South, the information flow of the Great Migration, the place of southern newspapers in the historiography of black journalism, and even the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the civil rights movement.

Q: *What findings most surprised you?*

Aiello: I think the biggest surprise for me was the Syndicate's move outside of the South. It followed the Great Migration as its readers went north and west with papers as far north as Connecticut and as far west as Arizona. In July 1932, less than a year-and-a-half after its 1931 founding, the Syndicate added the *St. Louis Argus*. The following month it added the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the *Newark Herald*, and the *Detroit Independent*. That the spread of the SNS would mirror the spread of the black population during the Great Migration is not surprising. Instead, the interesting fact of the spread is that a company that originally sold itself as uniquely and fundamentally southern in order to compete with more radical northern competitors like the *Chicago Defender* sending editions down South would in relatively short order move outside of those bounds in order to compete with those established northern syndicates emanating from Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and New York.

Q: *What advice would you give to people in our field who are considering doing a book in JMC history?*

Aiello: I think my best advice would be to do the book. There are so many great stories and so many holes in the historiography just waiting to be filled. It is such a fruitful area of research, and one that bears directly on the issues still weighing on us today. I would also encourage them to lean on those who are steeped in the existing historiography. We have come to this work because we think it is important. We are a community. And we are eager and ready to suggest directions, texts, or other helpful avenues for those hoping to engage with the material.