

The Chronicle of Higher Education: In Tense Times, Black Students Find Ways to Tell Their Own Stories

By Katherine Knott | DEC. 09, 2016

A day after the election of Donald J. Trump as president, fliers seeking help to fight "White Genocide" appeared around North Carolina State University, including at distribution points for *The Nubian Message*, the campus newspaper for black students.

Stephanie Tate, the paper's editor in chief, felt targeted by the fliers, which asked people if they were "sick of the blatant anti-white propaganda spread by SJWs [social-justice warriors] and the elite."

College campuses have experienced an [uptick](#) in racist incidents since the presidential election, whether fliers or graffiti or physical violence.

Her newspaper wrote about the fliers, but Ms. Tate wanted to make a statement as well. In an [open letter](#) to the stranger who distributed the fliers, she wrote, "I've received your message, and now, here's mine."

"I am not sorry that our journalism offends you," she wrote. "I will not apologize for our quality coverage of the diverse perspectives of our campus community. ... We have stories to tell, and we will continue doing so. If you have a problem with that, then so be it. However, it's imperative that you know we are a part of a community, and we won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

A surge of publications run by black students has become apparent, as they seek to cultivate a distinct voice on their campuses. For example, [DOWN Magazine](#), at Yale University, started in the spring of 2015, and [The Black Hurricane](#), at Purdue University, in mid-November.

The publications build community and give marginalized groups a platform to talk about issues important to them, readers and observers say. After the election of Mr. Trump, who inflamed racial tensions, that platform is all the more important.

Students are at a breaking point, says Jackie Alexander, associate director of student media at Clemson University. Last year she advised black students who were starting a publication. "They are saying, This is enough. We are tired of trusting you with our stories and having them misrepresented. And we are tired of being ignored. So we are going to create something for ourselves."

'Keep Fighting and Pushing'

"A common theme for black publications is uplifting the black community and sharing good stories as opposed to bad or no news," says Tomika DePriest, senior director of communications at Emory University.

In 1827, she notes, the free black editors of *Freedom's Journal* wrote in the inaugural issue: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentation of things which concern us dearly."

Just such a wish continues to drive students of color to break away from the primary student newspaper, says Ms. DePriest, who has studied and worked in the black press.

The Nubian Message has been published regularly at North Carolina State since 1992, an unusually long run among black-student publications. Some last for a few years, while others come and go, depending on the interests of students and the campus climate.

A print issue is published every other week, but Ms. Tate hopes to produce more articles online during the off weeks. She works with about seven people and has designed many of the issues, even though she didn't have much experience with newspaper layout.

At predominantly white institutions, the publications not only let black students know that they aren't alone but also "remind our majority students that 'we are here, and we are not going anywhere,'" says Clemson's Ms. Alexander. "We deserve to be here just as much as you do, and this is not something that's going to go away. We are going to keep fighting and pushing, and you need to deal with the new normal."

Jeremiah Johnson, a junior at Purdue, says he was frustrated with coverage of minority groups by the campus newspaper and felt a "burning desire" to give black students a forum to talk. So he relaunched as a digital publication *The Black Hurricane*, a newspaper that originally opened in 1969.

Mr. Johnson says he didn't really expect *The Exponent*, the campus newspaper, to fully represent him, so he doesn't fault the editors. Black students account for 3 percent of Purdue's enrollment.

"The only time I am seeing a black face is for a mugshot," he says. "That was problematic to me, because I personally know a lot of people doing great things for our campus, not just black and not just white."

Editors at *The Exponent* didn't respond to an interview request, but it is not the only campus publication to be [criticized](#) for its coverage of underrepresented students. More often than not, it's a feud with the main campus newspaper that serves as a catalyst for students of color to find a different avenue for coverage.

At North Carolina State, *The Nubian Message* calls itself the sentinel for the African-American community there. It was founded after the campus newspaper ran a column criticizing efforts at the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to build a cultural center for black students. (The columnist called the student group at UNC the "Ku Klux Blacks.") Students at North Carolina State [burned copies](#) of the newspaper in protest. *The Nubian Message* printed its first issue two months later and became an official student newspaper in 1994.

In 1992, when *The Nubian Message* started, students across the country were protesting and staging sit-ins. "Ninety-two has been a year of black consciousness," Tim Smith, a co-president of the Black Awareness Council at Chapel Hill, [told The Chronicle](#) at the time. "People are becoming more aware of who they are. They're even showing that they're Afrocentric in what they wear."

Role in Campus Protests

[Controversy embroiled Yale](#) last fall after a campus administrator sent an email critical of another message that had encouraged students to avoid Halloween costumes that might offend other students. Meanwhile, a fraternity allegedly turned away women of color from a party. *DOWN*, which had begun a semester before, provided analysis of the events from the vantage point of students of color.

Eshe Sherley, one of the online weekly's founders, says doing so felt essential for the conversations happening at Yale.

The magazine helped shed light on the protests and worked to highlight how [students' concerns](#) went beyond an email or a party.

"When people, parents, friends at other universities, wanted to understand what was going on and get the perspectives of the students who were most directly affected, we were the place that they went to," says Ms. Sherley, who graduated in May.

She and the other editors say their advantage, when it comes to covering protests and the black community, is trust. "The people, the organizers who were doing the work on campus, trusted us because they knew us," Ms. Sherley says.

Ms. Tate, at North Carolina State, says trust helped *The Nubian Message*, too, do its work. "Because we are a part of the African-American community, I think, gives us a unique perspective because we know the people in the community, so they feel comfortable talking to us as a news organization," she says. "They trust us a little more than they do other mainstream media organizations."

Another Form of Activism

Sometimes the lines between journalist and activist can become blurred.

"They are close to their subjects because it's personal for them, and it makes it more nuanced and it makes" the journalism better, Ms. Alexander says.

When Dom Brodie talks about *Black Ink*, a magazine for black students at Chapel Hill, he talks about freedom, revolution, and making people uncomfortable. "Let's talk about the people who are fighting for our freedom," says the editor in chief. "Let's talk about those issues that are disrupting the African-American community on a day-to-day basis." The magazine has published two issues this semester.

Mr. Brodie, a sophomore, considers his journalism an extension of his activism.

To him, protesting is "one form of fighting back against the narrative that black people aren't worthy or black people don't matter as much as others. But the work that I do as a writer and as the editor of *Black Ink* is also revolutionary in saying that black people deserve a voice, that black people are writers, and that black people have things that are important to say."

Mr. Johnson, of Purdue's *The Black Hurricane*, says his activism is the journalism he does. "Time is passing us by," he says, "and the stories are getting crazier. And I think the world needs our perspective."