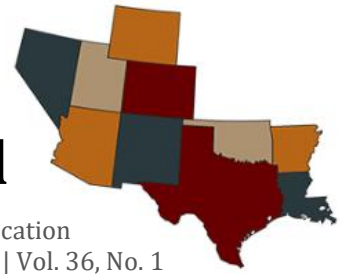


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Activist Journalism: The *Chicago Defender's* Coverage of the 1968 Democratic National Convention

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This paper analyzes the discourse surrounding the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention from the black journalistic perspective. Examination of the *Chicago Defender's* coverage of the protests reveals that the flagship black daily newspaper helped African Americans establish an activist presence at a moment when the mainstream press excluded them from the narrative. In the midst of a propaganda war being waged among media members, radical protesters, and politicians, the *Defender* offered an alternative vantage on the chaos that engulfed the convention by highlighting the activity of African Americans, drawing parallels between the protests and the broader struggle for racial equality in 1968, and ultimately attempting to raise awareness and reframe the national conversation on police violence.

Keywords: Chicago Defender; Black Journalism; Presidential Nominating Conventions; Protest Culture; Police Violence

At the 1968 Democratic National Convention (DNC), two interrelated struggles took form and dominated the surrounding discourse. The first was on the floor of the convention hall, where divisions materialized among party members with divergent opinions regarding president Johnson's war policy and Hubert Humphrey's candidacy. Robert Mason (2004) notes that three primary issues framed the ongoing debate: The Vietnam War, the continued struggle for racial equality, and a heightened concern for basic law and order resulting from antiwar protests and racial unrest throughout the nation (p. 31). This final concern would prove especially relevant given the second primary struggle at the convention. On the streets outside the quadrennial gathering, close to ten thousand protesters met a nearly equal number of uniformed law enforcement agents and "armed defenders of society" (Farber, 1988, xiii).

In the aftermath of the events, the controversy transitioned from a struggle in the streets to a rhetorical battle. As David Farber (1988) notes, "It's hard to say when Chicago '68 ended. Over the next few weeks, the nation debated just what went on in the streets of Chicago" (p. 143). The police force, led by Mayor Richard J. Daley, and the demonstration leaders "fought a propaganda war over the events of the week and neither side worried about the literal truth" (Farber, 1988, p. 143). Government officials and concerned citizens criticized the news media's coverage because it frequently highlighted police violence against demonstrators. Much of the general public expressed disdain toward this framing and agreed with officers' use of extreme force.

Despite the rich history of black protests in Chicago, the African American community was largely absent from the demonstrations, at least according to the mainstream press. Most accounts of the protests emphasize the presence of the Youth International Party, or the Yippies as they came to be known, the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE), and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (Farber, 1988). While Civil Rights activists were not absent in their entirety, the presence of black demonstrators was conspicuously limited. However, while the dominant narrative excludes African Americans from the protests, it would be misguided to assume that the black community chose to largely abstain from the struggle altogether. In lieu of a presence in the streets, black writers across the United States used journalism to raise awareness and advocate in the wake of the events. Among many others, the historical black newspaper, the *Chicago Daily Defender*, covered the events from close proximity and offered a lens for how to understand the protest and its implications for the black community.

In this essay, we bring attention to the *Defender's* post-convention coverage of the '68 DNC. Despite the important perspective the *Defender* offers to our understanding of the Chicago DNC in '68, little scholarly attention has been given to its presence as an activist force (Carroll, 2017). We contend that the *Defender's* discourse provides a window into the way the black community used journalism as a form of rhetorical activism while offering an alternative perspective on the protests that was not widely acknowledged or recognized by the mainstream press. In pursuing these claims, this paper proceeds in three broad movements. We first draw on historical research to provide a context for the convention, the protests, and the various countermovements involved therein. Then, after establishing a framework that uses Jacqueline Jones Royster's (2000) work on the essay as rhetorical form and Kenneth Burke's (1950; 1966) theories on identification and terministic screens, we analyze archival documents from the

Defender. In the midst of the propaganda war being waged among media members and politicians, the *Defender* offered a unique angle to understand the convention events, highlighted the activity of African Americans at the convention and protests, and used the events to comment on the black cultural experience and struggle for equality in 1968. In the conclusion, we offer implications for the *Defender*'s role in covering the controversy and discuss its significance with regard to the contemporary protest culture energized by Black Lives Matter activism.

THE PROTEST CONTEXT

In order to contextualize the events surrounding the convention and the media response in the aftermath, this paper relies primarily on David Farber's widely respected account, *Chicago '68*. Farber (1988) writes that the protesters were predominantly young white people from middle class upbringings (xiii). Rather than conforming to one coordinated effort, the protesters were aligned with a number of different movements. The Yippies, who solidified their political identity in opposition and response to the convention, attempted to exploit "the energy and playfulness of youth culture to wildly redefine radical politics" (Farber, 1988, xvii). MOBE, Farber (1988) suggests, "had a very different answer to the question of what the new politics should be" and "saw the Yippie solution as undisciplined juvenilia that would change nothing" (xvii). Two other prominent groups, SDS and civil rights activists, also waged demonstrations and confronted police in part of the larger effort. Farber (1988) notes that many of the white protesters had "hoped that at long last Chicago blacks would join them in their protests" but "few blacks joined" (p. 204). One black leader was quoted as saying, "This was whitey's demonstration and Convention. . . . It's your turn now, whitey" (as cited in Farber, 1988, p. 204). This attitude coupled with the absence of a significant black presence during the protests suggests that many African Americans were disgruntled by the lack of white liberal support throughout the civil rights struggle of the mid-60s. Chicago '68 thus marked a transition in the black community toward alternative avenues—like journalism—to establish an activist presence.

The protest strategies of groups who descended on Chicago had the potential to overshadow any visible presence that the African American community likely had in the events surrounding the DNC. Prior to the 1968 convention, the growing presence of the Yippies and their warning to wreak havoc on the city were enough to raise the alarm. As they set their sights on Chicago, they called for an "immediate end to the War in Vietnam. . . . The legalization of marijuana and all other psychedelic drugs. . . . The total disarmament of the people, beginning with the police. . . [and] [t]he abolition of money" (Hayden as cited in Walker, 1968, pp. 36-37). They provided fair warning to government officials, preparing the city for what could take shape during the protests: "People will be attempting to use guerilla theater techniques. People will be attempting to use satire. . . . [S]ome will be stoned and some will be fucking on the grass, and people will do whatever they want" (Rubin as cited in Walker, 1968, p. 88). Anticipating a violent confrontation, group leaders issued a call to action and incited members to "[b]ring pot, fake delegate's cards, smoke bombs, costumes, crud to throw and all kinds of interesting props, also football helmets" (Simon, 1968, pp. 4-7). Moreover, the city's refusal to accommodate petition requests for permits that would allow protesters access to city parks and Soldier Field for rally events ensured that only the most radical would travel to Chicago (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, & Schulz, 2010, p. 117). Abbie Hoffman (1980), co-founder of the Yippies, explained, "[w]hen the breakdown of negotiations made it clear the city would force a confrontation, we knew only the bravest

of our generation would answer the call” (p. 150). Not only were the Yippies subversive, but their tactics caustic enough to deflect attention away from the core issues at hand, increasing the likelihood that substantial opportunities for change would be usurped by political theater.

The Yippies exploited mass media in an attempt to undermine the traditional power structures, a move that could shift national attention away from the African American community to more adversarial protest organizations and tactics. Their strategy centered on manipulating the news media through a series of events that would attract media attention while simultaneously making the flaws of the establishment recognizable to the nation (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 115). The Yippies’ guerilla strategies ensured that the clash between the protesters and establishment would dominate the headlines. For example, they nominated a pig for president and walked it through Chicago Civic Center Plaza on August 25, which led to the arrest of Jerry Rubin and six other high profile members (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 122). Protesters also hurled feces, urine, and toilet paper at police while nude women paraded on the beach to distract those attending the convention. The escalation of violence on both sides allowed both the city of Chicago and the protesters to see their actions as justified (Farber, 1968).

The chaos that enveloped Chicago fueled a narrative that placed groups like the Yippies and MOBE at the center of the protests and the discourse surrounding the convention. As the news cycle proliferated, violent and obscene demonstrations cast public attention away from African American involvement and interests. National political conventions always attract blanket coverage, and the conflict in 1968 made the situation even more newsworthy. During the most violent encounters with law enforcement, the protesters chanted “The whole world is watching,” capitalizing on the significance of air time and the potential for provocative images to influence public opinion (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 118). The news media amplified reports of violence perpetrated by local police. In many cases, it was not just protesters who were subjected to violent attacks at the hands of law enforcement but also reporters and members of the press (Taylor & Morris, 2018). The events unfolding in Chicago forced the nation and the press to consider the extent to which the news media had contributed to the violence. As Farber (1988) notes, the debate “tore through the profession and public discourse for . . . several years and helped create a new consciousness about the impact of the mass on society” (p. 205).

The African American community and members of the black press had a unique perspective on the demonstrations at the DNC and offered a nuanced interpretation of the events in the aftermath, one differing from the major news media outlets and the general public. The Chicago mayor received an outpouring of public support for his role in influencing strong police action. According to Farber (1988), “Mayor Daley claimed that he received 135,000 letters supporting his actions and only five thousand against. Indeed, public opinion polls quickly established that most Americans approved of the Mayor's handling of the protesters” (p. 206). The black community demonstrated a clear deviation from this trend:

In a Survey Research Center poll taken shortly after the events in Chicago, only a little better than 10% of all whites thought that the police or the Mayor had used too much force; 25% of all respondents thought that not enough force was used. On the other hand, 82% of college-educated blacks felt that the police had used too much force, as did 63% of all blacks polled (Farber, 1988, p. 206).

While the majority of the black community did not join protesters on the streets, African American citizens, members of the black press, and black politicians voiced their opinions in alternative ways.

Located on-site in Chicago, the *Defender* featured black journalists who covered the action at the convention by providing a unique perspective on the protests that might more accurately reflect the attitudes and sentiments of the larger African American community.

METHODS FOR ACTIVISM

In an attempt to prioritize the perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups, Royster (2000) maintains that a “fundamental task for contemporary literacy researchers” is to examine “literacy in its particulars” (p. 45). Focusing on the lived experiences of African American women, Royster (2000) argues that essays can constitute activism, especially when they respond to the “sociocultural conditions” determined by “institutional power systems and structures” (p. 48). Royster (2000) treats essays as “subjective tools,” proposing that they shift in meaning depending on their relation to existing systems of belief (p. 43). Drawing on the theoretical constructs of Kenneth Burke, she acknowledges that words have the power to create identification, or the process whereby individuals of similar interests may become aligned with one another. For what Burke (1950) recognized in identification as the “common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes” that unite people or, as he would say, “make them consubstantial” (p. 21), Royster (2000) repurposed in her theory on essaying as a contextually specific framework for understanding how writers and their audiences build connections on the basis of “mutual interests,” “continuities and discontinuities,” and “beliefs and viewpoints” (p. 55). Viewed this way, journalism published by likeminded individuals who share similar views can create a foundation for agreement between writers and readers while providing insight into the lived experiences of the group more broadly.

As rhetorical activism, essays not only allow writers to “interact with their audiences” but empower oppressed communities to challenge the status quo in novel ways (Royster, 2000, p. 55). For example, in the attempt to create new understanding while working within the traditional power structures, the essay is a catalyst for the “subversion of old ways of thinking, being, and doing; the conversion to new ways of thinking, being, and doing; the affirmation of fused horizons, newly negotiated and mediated spaces that bridge communicative gaps and direct us toward the future” (Royster, 2000, p. 60). That is to say, every literary perspective can offer a lens for understanding the conditions of marginalization and exclusion from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged or oppressed. Creating what Burke (1966) might call a “terministic screen,” the essay provides a “filter” for the larger conversation in which each perspective is a “reflection,” “selection,” and ultimately “deflection” of reality (p. 45). Toward that end, while the dominant narrative of the 1968 DNC protests largely excludes African Americans, the *Defender* promoted black political agency, established opportunities for coalition building, and provided the African American community a strategy to reframe the conversation.

In the following section, we analyze a collection of articles from the *Defender* while treating them as mouthpiece for black citizens at time of the protests. While the *Defender*’s content in the aftermath of the Chicago DNC may not reflect the African American sentiment in its entirety, it provides an interpretation of the protests from members of the black community and reveals the attitudes of black journalists in the city where the events transpired. Viewed collectively, we suggest the *Defender*’s content offers a heuristic for understanding the events surrounding the DNC from the African American worldview. While the black community did not have a strong physical presence

during the protests, the *Defender* offered a different voice and perspective of the events, using its pages as rhetorical activism in the midst of the propaganda war being waged among politicians, journalists, and members of the public in the aftermath of the controversy and within the larger context of the civil rights struggle.

FINDINGS OF ANALYSIS

This analysis examines a series of articles published between August 29th and September 3rd, a timespan that covers the final days of the protests as well as the few days following their conclusion. We argue that the articles can be grouped by their coherence to three prominent themes: (1) those providing a specific angle to view the convention events with reporting and photography of the police brutality at the convention, (2) those highlighting prominent African American figures and instances of black activism during the convention, and (3) those reflecting on the convention's implications for the African American sociocultural experience and struggle for equality.

The *Defender* featured a significant amount of primary photography and reporting from journalists who were on scene during the convention. Pictures were often captioned with an explanation or accompanied by a short article. One was titled "Police Confront Yippies" where the photographer captured a group of policeman confronting and beating a young woman. The journalist observed the following: "Before being struck by police, the girl reportedly was knocked to the ground by another police officer for no apparent reason, witnesses said." Another article titled "Police, Guardsmen Battle 'Yippies'" showed a close-up photograph of police confronting and beating numerous demonstrators. The caption read: "Police fought thousands of protesters, using billy clubs, tear gas, and Mace." The *Defender* also printed a number of photomontages displaying numerous shots of demonstrators in confrontation with police.

As a second theme, the *Defender* highlighted important African American figures and their involvement at the convention. Although it was admittedly limited, the *Defender* stressed the importance of the African American presence. For example, in the article "1st Black Presidential Hopeful is Nominated," the *Defender* covered the first black presidential nomination, Channing E. Phillips, but noted that it was not meant to have any practical advancement; instead it "was only a token gesture by black delegates who wanted to show their disdain for the Democratic Party." Another article highlighted Hubert Humphrey's presidential nomination, arguing that Humphrey was only chosen because Johnson withdrew from consideration, likely because "a *Defender* poll showing eight out of 10 black delegates who were interviewed were against a Johnson nomination," which the *Defender* suggested had "undoubtedly figure[d] in the President's decision" (Payne, 1968a). A number of other articles, including "Negro Delegates Stage Protest"; "Humphrey's Big Task—Winning the Black Vote"; "Greg Raps Cop Tactics"; and "Black Power Comes on Strong at Demo Parley" all highlighted the presence of African Americans in relation to the events surrounding the convention. In "Greg Raps Cop Tactics" the *Defender* highlighted how comedian-turned-activist Dick Gregory suggested that the events of the convention represented a microcosm for police treatment toward activists in the United States.

As a final theme, a collection of articles reflected on the meaning of the events at the convention for the black community. In "Black Voting Strength is Key to Equality," Sheryl Fitzgerald (1968) wrote that "[s]ince the beginning of the convention business last week, black delegates from across the nation have been making their presence felt in the party's policies." She went on to say that despite the

“rhetoric, confusion, and hoopla” the black presence at the DNC suggested a sign of hope: “A black leader here, a black mayor there, a challenge to racism won” (Fitzgerald, 1968). Capitalizing on Fitzgerald’s argument, another article titled “How to Build Black Pride” advocated for the mobilization of young black men into leadership positions. The author argued that black pride could be built by urging “Black men to assume the leadership and protection of our communities” and by seeking black leaders who are “honest with themselves and the community and wish to help 30 million black people not a few” (Geyer, 1968). Another article—“Democratic Platform”—took the opposite approach, choosing to highlight the negative implications of the convention events for the black community. The author responded to the presentation of a Democratic platform at the convention that stressed attention to the Vietnam War and domestic peace while disparaging black efforts for social justice.

At least five articles drew parallels between the violence waged against white demonstrators and the long legacy of police violence against African Americans. In “Judge Cracks Down on Police Abuse” the author wrote that “Chicago policemen’s recent attacks on antiwar demonstrators and newsmen show very clearly to the rest of the nation if not the world the kind of harassing treatment that black people have been subjected to for a long time in Chicago.” The author laments that while significant attention was given to the complaints of the victims in the aftermath of Chicago, “Black people, on the other hand, haven’t been listened to when they have complained about police brutality.” Another article revealed recent comments by the Executive Director of the National Urban League, Whitney M. Young Jr., who said, “‘police brutality’ in Chicago should prove to the white man that such things are not figments of Negroes’ imagination.”

The *Defender* also featured reactions from civil rights organizations. The paper noted that a joint statement had been released that pointed out “the ‘validity’ of complaints of police brutality in black communities.” Two articles from Doris Saunders’ essay series “Confetti” were among this group. In each article, Saunders ruminates on the events of the convention and what they say about society more generally, especially for African Americans. In one case, she warns that “anxiety fills the air. . . . In spite of what anyone tells you officially—all is not well in this city—or in this society” (Saunders, 1968a). In another article, Saunders (1968b) aptly opens by noting “How Tired I Am...,” and then goes on to explain, “There is in me the kind of fatigue that I find almost impossible to describe.” She recounts her experience as a journalist and a black woman too afraid to participate in the protests only to be confronted by police in the apartment where she watched the demonstrations from afar. She told officers that “nothing had, that I knew of . . . been thrown from our window,” but all persons without journalists credentials were forced to vacate (Saunders, 1968b). Saunders was allowed to stay, “because my tags were in order,” she recalls, but “the view from the window had gotten dull” (Saunders, 1968b). To contextualize her experience, part of her reflection is quoted at length:

After last week how can one just pick up the pieces and say business as usual? Back to the same old routines. Life goes on, and we make new sick jokes, and we go about the daily business and we try not to remember the week that began with Aretha’s soulful, yet not quite perfect rendition of the Star Spangled Banner. Just as she forgot some of the words of our national anthem . . . the kaleidoscope of scenes that are forever etched in my brain will not let escape the fact that something was missing (Saunders, 1968b).

Saunders’ reflections suggest a larger societal problem observable from the experience of a woman of color covering the convention. As a black female journalist in Chicago at the time of the

protests, Saunders offers insight to her lived experience as a black woman trying not only to maintain a career amid political turmoil and social unrest but perhaps, more importantly, to live and breathe in a society where skin color is a qualifier for discrimination, harassment, and torment. Yet, in spite of the fatigue, she remains hopeful, pointing to the first African American contender “who had worked all his life for this moment [and] was being nominated by his party to run for the Presidency of the United States” (Saunders, 1968b).

Taken together, the stories in the *Defender* provide an alternative perspective on the chaos that engulfed the 1968 Democratic National Convention. By publishing photojournalism, featuring stories that emphasized African American figures, and drawing parallels to police violence not only for African Americans but articulating those stakes for the nation at large, the *Defender* helped the black community establish an activist presence at a time when the dominant narrative excluded their participation and involvement. As a screen for the national conversation, the *Defender* illuminated the lived experiences of African Americans during the protest in an attempt to reframe the discussion while providing insight into an alternative perspective. In doing so, the *Defender* created new understanding of the convention protests and its broader significance within the context of the civil rights struggle.

DISCUSSION

As the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election beckons, the social unrest that defined 1968 feels remarkably recurrent. The unlawful killing of George Floyd and other African Americans at the hands of police, accelerated by the racially disparate impact of a global pandemic on the nation’s communities of color, was the catalyst for national protests and widescale calls for institutional reform. While Floyd’s death and the ensuing protests triggered an upsurge in public support for Black Lives Matter activism (Cohen & Quealy, 2020), peaceful demonstrations which, in some cities, precipitated riots, looting, and the destruction of public spaces and federal property continue to fuel the news cycle and a polarized citizenry. On the one hand, demonstrations decrying the unmitigated authority of law enforcement are emboldened when they culminate in state violence. At the same time, lawful protest usurped by vandalism and the decimation of government infrastructure feeds the opposition, potentially bolstering justifications for authoritarian control and deployments of the National Guard. But focusing on this narrative alone risks overlooking the greater point. As Jamelle Bouie (2020) writes, “the George Floyd protests are not just about police violence. They’re about structural racism and white supremacy; about the unresolved and unaddressed disadvantages of the past; as well as bigotry . . . in the age of Trump.” While the parallels are multiple, perhaps reexamining the *Defender* provides for a more productive comparison between 1968 and the present. After all the chaos, obscenity, and violence framed the national conversation, the *Defender* raised awareness of the larger and underlying issue, a pattern of police violence afflicting not only African Americans but potentially putting an entire nation at risk.

During a time when African Americans had limited representation and political agency, the *Defender* brought a reasoned voice to the controversy while helping to advance progressive views of equality and race relations across the 1960s and beyond. The articles in the *Defender* presented an alternative lens through which to understand the events of the convention and their implications for both the black community and society more generally. Offering an outlook on the protests that highlighted the black cultural perspective, the *Defender* contextualized the controversy over police violence according to their historical legacy. In doing so, the *Defender* provided a candid look at state-sponsored

violence that introduced a new critical perspective in the nationwide controversy. Moreover, the *Defender* highlighted the role of black individuals at the convention, which empowered a neglected narrative foregrounding the actions and experiences of the African American community. Finally, and perhaps most relevant in terms of activism, the *Defender* drew parallels between law enforcement's response to the convention and the history of police violence toward African Americans. The *Defender* thus used the well-publicized nature of the controversy to advocate for more attention to the abuses of authority and demonstrated the ways in which communities of color had been subject to this type of violence for some time.

The *Defender's* coverage in the aftermath of the convention established a foundation for agreement between black journalists and the larger black community in Chicago amid the political turmoil and cultural unrest of 1968. This shared perspective not only gave voice to a historically disenfranchised group, but it also created a novel way for viewing the protests that invited alternative understandings. To the extent that the *Defender* violated consensus and offered a vantage that challenged the status quo, its coverage of the convention protests underscored activist journalism that sought to reframe the public perception while using the paper to say something more significant about the broader sociocultural landscape. The *Defender's* discourse surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention calls attention to the need for more scholarship on activist journalism. While print journalism continues to dissipate in the digital age, studies such as this one suggest that important work remains for primary source analysis of journalism from historically marginalized groups. Future research ought to continue to highlight historically and culturally important forms of activist journalism, even if they are relatively obscure in comparison to much of what is regarded as mainstream. Perhaps we can work to expand theories of activist journalism in ways that privilege important artifacts like the *Defender*.

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