

JRN527 Visual Analysis



Reporters for the New York Amsterdam News at work in the newsroom, 1936

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The image above depicts reporters working in a newsroom for the New York Amsterdam News, in 1936. This photograph is interesting for a number of reasons, which relate to the context of the era, and the differences in how newsrooms look and operate today. The Great Depression dominated the 1930s, and it had devastating economic effects on countries all over the world. For contextual purposes, it's important to also note that the New York Amsterdam News is one of the oldest and most influential, continuously published African American newspapers in the United States. The vast majority of the newspaper's content covers issues in African American culture, and in particular, events in New York City from a black

perspective ("New York Amsterdam News|About Us", n.d.). Another significant aspect of this image, which relates to the context of the era, is the indication that women are working alongside the men, in the New York Amsterdam newsroom. During the Depression, women were forced into becoming the breadwinners, to compensate for the declining family income from unemployed male family members (Milkman, 1976, p. 80). They still however, faced employment discrimination, with male unionists arguing that women's entrance into the workforce was taking much-needed jobs away from men (Milkman, 1976, pp. 80-81).

As Hardt and Brennen (1999, p. 25) explain, supplying in-depth context can help identify historical evidence embedded in an image, as well as help overcome a mere conventional surface analysis. With historical context established, the following visual analysis of the above photograph will identify key journalistic cultures and practices of the 1930s.

First Impressions

The first visibly noticeable aspect of this photograph is its busyness. It suggests that reporters would never be short of a topic or task, in fact, the newsroom looks to be overrun with assignments, evident in the pileups of documents, newspapers, and books. The stacks upon stacks of papers beside the four sitting reporters is an immediate observation, and it conveys an "organised chaos" ambience. There are papers pinned to a back wall of the newsroom as if to make sure they don't get lost in the sea of documents already occupying work desks. This could be a signifier to their importance or a simple space saving technique. The lack of desk space is another instant reflection. The already tiny workstations for the sitting journalists are made smaller, by the intrusion of each other's documents overflowing into each other's spaces. This intrusion flows onto a vacant chair in the newsroom, which is acting as

a desk extension under the mess of documents. The cluttered office represents a typical newsroom in the 1930s (Hardt & Brennen, 1999, p. 24), and has the potential to evoke feelings of frustration, as a consequence of the lack of personal space. On the other hand, a small and intimate workspace could suggest strong working relationships and collaboration on assignments. The latter wouldn't be unlikely since the newspaper was continuing to grow more successful during the 1930s ("New York Amsterdam News|About Us", n.d.) and it would only make sense to work cooperatively, as opposed to the fiercely competitive nature of typical journalism newsrooms.

The photograph provides a snapshot in time with respect to the types of technology journalists used during this decade. Bulky typewriters crowd the small workspaces, and rotary dial desk phones are also on show. Hardt and Brennen write that technological advances in the 1930s had made communication with the public and the dissemination of news and current events significantly easier (1999, p. 20). But increased product availability meant an increase in demand, and it caused longer hours for reporters to ensure the providence of daily newspapers to audiences. Every journalist in the image is engrossed in their work; they are seemingly unaware the photograph is even being taken. Each sitting person appears to be fully engaged with their own assignments, with their head down, unbothered by their disordered surroundings. The body language of the standing figures suggests an inquiry is being made, or a new project is being assigned. It's unsurprising the image exudes an active atmosphere since newspapers in the 1930s wanted to maintain their dominance in the media market, because during this time radio was enjoying its "golden age" and newspapers were being overshadowed (Gorman & McLean, 2009, p. 25).

The clothing on each figure gives the immediate impression of a different era. Smart business attire can be seen with the men donning suspenders and ties; one has on a fedora hat and vest. It's safe to assume the colour scheme of these outfits to be significantly subdued compared to the Roaring Twenties, based on the fact the photograph was taken during the Depression. Arnold (2002, p. 50) writes that during the Depression simple, plain fabrics began to gain more popularity; a sobering consequence of the global economic crash. Journalism in the 1930s was fast-paced, had strict deadlines, and excessive expectations (Hardt & Brennen, 1999, p. 24), which is not unlike newsrooms today, however, in this era, it was matched with 15-hour days and extremely low wages. Each reporter appears to be under 40 years of age, which reinforces the point put forward by Hardt and Brennen, that reporting during this era was seen as primarily a business for the young, due to these challenging factors (1999, p. 25).

Second Impressions

A primary analysis of the above photograph also reveals an important point, that all figures in the image appear to be African American. This observation evokes a curiosity to delve into a deeper understanding of the image, which goes beyond the supplied caption and into a more contextual analysis. During the Depression, African Americans suffered significantly more with respect to employment, than their white peers (Greenberg, 2009, p. 123) and racial discrimination was still a significant part of American culture. The New York Amsterdam newspaper was and continues to be today, an incredibly important media organisation which celebrates Black achievements and challenges inequality (Waldman, 1998). During the 1930s, there was a rise in 'interpretive journalism' which saw journalists insist that the world needed to be not only reported but explained (Schudson, 2001, p. 164). This era of reporters felt it was their responsibility to teach their audiences and help them

understand the world around them. With this context in mind, it's easy to see the significance of this photograph. It shows six successful African American people working in a professional newsroom environment, in the midst of the Depression, with the aim of teaching their audiences about their culture and community.

The observation of women in the photograph is interesting, given the context of the era. The Depression caused men from industry and manufacturing sectors to be laid off from their jobs, meaning that women were consequently forced into the workforce to help make ends meet (Milkman, 1976, p. 82). Both women in the photograph are youthful and well dressed, reinforcing Lumsden's idea that for females to make it in the journalism sector, they had to have both brains, and the perfect profile (1995, p. 914). But the 1930s was a time when wage-earning women were charged with stealing jobs from men and there were even employment sanctions placed on married women in the United States (Milkman, 1976, p. 81). This photograph alludes to none of the aforementioned concerns, which suggests a unity within this newsroom. There is no segregation of sexes, and each reporter is working as hard as the next, performing the same role. This rejection of genderised social norms could be a reflection of the context of the news organisation. As an African American publication, journalists would not only report on discrimination of their culture but would experience it in their everyday lives as well.

Final Observations

This photograph provides important historical evidence of journalism in the 1930s, and in particular, in an African American news institution. Despite this contextual element, a first impression of the photograph reveals details about how a typical newspaper office functioned during this era. From a general reading, journalists endured extremely small workspaces, had limited technology, and tolerated being

inundated with documents, newspapers, and books. Newsrooms in the 21st Century, share some similarities with those from the 1930s, in the sense that workstations are still often unkempt and with limited space. But the digitisation of the modern world has decreased the sheer amount of paper, we see in this photograph. The ability to report and share information is now possible with just the click of a button; technology the reporters in this photograph could only dream of. This surface analysis suggests newsrooms in the 1930s, despite their racial context were much the same, but through a deeper examination, the importance of this photograph can be established. The New York Amsterdam news remains as one of the most influential African American newspapers in the United States and stands as a pioneer for black journalists, students and media-related professionals. This photograph would have only been a fleeting moment for these working reporters, but it demonstrates the history of journalism and how far the sector has come socially, technologically and culturally.

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