

# Black Journalists Oral History Collection

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The [Black Journalists Oral History Collection](#) meddles with the definition of “business oral history” by presenting business practices that center community care and activism rather than profit and providing narratives that show the success of the Black press as dependent on a network rather than a single individual. Certainly, many of the narrators interviewer Henry Le Brie speaks to in the collection are business people who are concerned with managing and training their staff, soliciting and printing advertisements, balancing budgets, and other activities necessary to running businesses. However, narrators in the collection often express a political or activist motive in running their papers and give credit to others in their offices and communities for the success of the papers.

For example, journalist and advertising manager Norman Powell discusses qualities other than the ability to make a profit that make a good newspaper man. La Brie asks Powell whether he thinks a boycott of companies with racist advertising practices would stimulate advertising with Black newspapers. Powell answers:

[\[Oral history interview with Norman Powell 1971; Audio Clip\]](#)

Transcript:

*No, I don't think that that would stimulate advertising at all, but I take my hat off to this man for letting the community that he represents know that his newspaper is there for the sole purpose of representing them, and that any fight that they undertook, or was involved in, was also his fight. And if it meant that he would lose money to further their gains or their needs or their wants, which were his, because he's solely part of that community as well, he would go to that extent to do it, and I think he's going to be a very good newspaper man. (page 13)*

Listen to the full [interview with Norman Powell](#) in the Columbia Libraries Digital Libraries Collection.

Doris Wooten Wesley, a social worker and newspaper publisher, also describes the crucial role of advertising from Black businessmen and Black churches, who purchased advertisements in her family's newspaper. She recalls:

[\[Oral history interview with Doris Wooten Wesley 1971; Audio Clip 1\]](#)

Transcript:

*Q: The Negro businessman—has he advertised in the Negro newspaper?*

*Wesley: Has he ever what?*

*Q: Has the advertised in the Negro newspaper?*

*Wesley: If it hadn't been for Negro business, we wouldn't have had the twenty-five percent. They have advertised as they have had the money. And then, another thing that helped us too—this is a thing that maybe nobody else will tell you. Churches would take whole pages. They knew we had to live. They would have a big men's day and all the men would pay for their pictures. (page 35)*

Earlier in her interview, Doris Wooten Wesley describes her late husband Carter Wesley's dedication to reporting on racist policing in their newspaper even when police reacted with violence, which eventually led to Carter Wesley's death. For Carter Wesley and Doris Wooten Wesley, their business was not just a way to make a living—it was a cause worth giving their lives for. She says:

[\[Oral history interview with Doris Wooten Wesley 1971; Audio Clip 2\]](#)

Transcript:

*Wesley: [...] I've never quite understood this, but the average person wants to know what happens at the police station. To you, that isn't anything, but there have been so many Negroes who are not guilty that police pick up. So can't you see why they really want to know who did they get. Now, you know about the tremendous beatings Mr. Wesley got. He traveled a lot. Every week he had to go someplace. Of course, having all these papers he had to go. And he told what happened. And if a policeman beat a man and he had no right to beat him, he said so. Well, the police didn't like that. They didn't want him to do it. They'd tell him, 'Write about your own people. Don't write about us.' But he only wrote about them as they concerned our people. So they got together. This is a state organization. At that time, he had a Dodge—every time that Dodge left Houston, well, first, they beat him up. And when they beat him—*

*Q: When you say they, you mean?*

*Wesley: Two policemen—two or three. I think it was three of them. And he died from some of those wounds that he got. He never quit writing about it. He told it exactly like it happened. One saw me, since he's been dead. He said, 'You know, I've never seen a man say what actually happened to him as well as Mr. Wesley did.' Well, he was a good storyteller. He could tell it just like it was.*

*Well, this somehow got to be national news. And, of course, thousands of white and Negro people wrote to the State Department. And the State Department man was just mad about the whole thing. [Laughs] He just thought he just shouldn't have done it and all. You know how that is. But nevertheless, after so many people wrote, he began to think about it. And he decided himself it was not the thing he wanted to be head of [unclear]. But every time he would go out someplace, somebody would put him in jail. And they never said why, but they just put him in jail. And, well, he was in so many jails that I just never knew when I got a call whether it was saying he was in jail or what. But it was a pretty shabby thing that they did.*

*They had a meeting in Houston, and they were laughing about how they kept him disturbed. But they never stopped him from writing. He always felt that you die for what you believe in. And if you don't do all you can, you have no right to live. Now, he used to just say that just as regular as events would come up. So much so that I believed in him, and I backed him up. I said, 'If we die, we will die for what we believe in.' And our children even sort of got that philosophy. So that his going and getting arrested, it was one of the things we accepted as a part of what we had to bear.*  
(pages 17-18)

Listen to the [full interview with Doris Wooten Wesley](#) in the Columbia Libraries Digital Libraries Collection.

The interviews in this collection were recorded in the early 1970s by interviewer Henry La Brie III, a white male journalism student, as part of his PhD research. Le Brie asks questions like “How much advertising revenue did you make versus subscription revenue?” and “What is the state of the Black press today and what is its future?” and “Is the Black press necessary, and why?” As listeners today, we might ask different questions of this archive. We might ask what the Black Journalists Oral History Collection tells us about business oral history and how we might change our approach to recording business oral histories now.

The [Black Journalists Oral History Collection](#) includes 93 interviews “publishers, editors, writers, sportswriters, photographers, cartoonists, businesspeople, and journalism professors” associated with the African American press, focusing on history from the 1930s-1960s. The Ford Foundation provided funding for La Brie to travel and conduct the interviews.

Columbia University students, staff, and faculty can browse and listen to full interviews from the Black Journalists Oral History Collection through the [Digital Library Collections \(DLC\) portal](#).