about research practices? In the absence of this kind of repository building, and by way of conclusion, I would like to offer a modest proposal. I wonder what would happen if we—the communities of researchers—made our research and the ways we find materials more transparent, even in its early, messy stages. Perhaps by displaying and sharing our processes and methodologies—in the form of something akin to an open “lab notebook”—we can begin a bottom-up approach of clustering, tagging, and sharing content, and move toward archives that are fully open and accessible.

NOTES


**Chronicling White America**

BENJAMIN FAGAN

As a teacher and scholar of early American newspapers, I have benefited in numerous ways from the digitization of a vast amount of periodicals. Rather than hunting down and scrolling through worn microfilm copies, or traveling to various libraries to consult scattered originals, I am now able to conduct much of my research on my laptop, where I can read through high-quality, searchable scans of many newspapers. Moreover, digital databases and archives allow me to craft research assignments that introduce my students to the world of early American periodicals. Indeed, it was in an undergraduate classroom that I first discovered early American newspapers, and digital databases helped spark my enduring interest in periodicals. But as a specialist in early black newspapers, I am routinely confronted with the deeply uneven nature of digitization projects. For my contribution to this forum on the promise and pitfalls of the digital in periodical studies, I want to briefly explore the racial politics of periodical digitization, consider the consequences of such politics, and offer some provisional suggestions for confronting and correcting a deeply distorted digital archive.

While digital copies of 215 white newspapers published before 1865 have been made publicly available through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling
America project, that archive contains no black newspapers printed during the
same period.\(^1\) Chronicling America does currently list forty-six black newspa-
papers in its digital archive (out of a total of 1,799), but all were printed in 1865
or later.\(^2\) Those interested in researching, teaching, or simply reading early
black newspapers must climb the paywalls of databases controlled by for-profit
corporations. Newspapers such as Freedom’s Journal, the Colored American, the
North Star, and Frederick Douglass’ Paper are held by a handful of corporate da-
tabases. Some early black newspapers can, then, be accessed by teachers and
students located at institutions that subscribe to one or more of these data-
bases. But the vast majority of faculty and students teach and study at schools
that cannot afford these subscriptions, and thus have no access to early black
newspapers. Even for those whose institutions do purchase subscriptions, the
uneven coverage of even the private databases makes access to the full range of
digitized black newspapers nearly impossible. My experience working at two
flagship public institutions has shown that even relatively well-funded public
university libraries will subscribe to one, and very rarely, two such databases.
But not all digitized early black newspapers can be found in all for-profit da-
tabases. For example, the Provincial Freeman, edited by Mary Ann Shadd Cary,
is absent from many of the major databases. As is the Weekly Anglo-African,
one of the few digitized black newspapers that ran during the American Civil
War. And the Christian Recorder, the official organ of the A. M. E. Church and
another invaluable source of Civil War coverage, is included in a single data-
base. Consequently, even teachers and students at institutions that subscribe
to a database that contains early black newspapers may very well lack access
to the writings of a prominent black woman activist or be unable to read black
accounts of the Civil War.

The fact that early black newspapers are completely absent from freely ac-
cessible digital databases has particularly devastating consequences for digital
humanities projects that grapple with vast amounts of data. Take, for example,
the Viral Texts project, an impressive endeavor housed at Northeastern Uni-
versity that “seeks to develop theoretical models that will help scholars better
understand what qualities—both textual and thematic—helped particular news-
stories, short fiction, and poetry ‘go viral’ in nineteenth-century newspapers
and magazines.”\(^3\) I single out Viral Texts because I believe that it exemplifies
the promise of digital approaches to periodical studies, as well as the limi-
tations imposed by racially unequal digitization practices. The project’s first
iteration, explain David Smith, Ryan Cordell, and Abby Mullen, “focused on
pre-Civil War newspapers in the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America
online newspaper archive . . . in large part because its text data is openly avail-
able for computational use.”\(^4\) In the future, Viral Texts hopes to include news-
papers held by for-profit databases, but as the project’s members lament in a
paper outlining their methods, “The raw text data that underlies those search
capabilities, and which would be necessary for the kinds of computational text
analysis described here, are typically not made available, at least by default, even to subscribing libraries. An ambitious project hoping to map out the networks of reprinting in early American newspapers, Viral Texts requires the vast and accessible archive of digitized periodicals provided by Chronicling America. But that archive contains no black newspapers printed before 1865, and the databases that do hold them do not make their data freely available. The racial politics of periodical digitization, then, make it intensely difficult for projects like Viral Texts to include newspapers produced by and for black Americans. And this absence means that African American cultural productions (and the people they represent) are once again erased from early American history.

I would like to suggest two ways to use digital approaches to periodical studies while also confronting the racial politics of digitization. The first is simply to acknowledge the racially discriminatory nature of the archives and databases that we use in our teaching and scholarship. For example, while Chronicling America’s antebellum offerings provide scholars and students with an important resource, at present they can only be used to explore and make arguments about white periodicals. The same must be said for the Making of America projects at the University of Michigan and Cornell University, both of which are freely available, and lily white. The whiteness of these public archives, which projects like Viral Texts necessarily rely upon, does not erase their value. But we must be careful to acknowledge at the outset that any conclusions drawn from such archives apply specifically, and exclusively, to white periodicals, which cannot be made to stand in for all of early American periodical production. Otherwise, we risk conflating Americanness with whiteness. This is a slippage that the racial politics of digitization encourages us to repeat, which makes it all the more important that we reveal it in our teaching and scholarship.

Beyond naming and confronting the erasure of black voices in freely accessible digital archives, I urge all of us to challenge a status quo where antebellum black periodicals are treated as the property of private corporations. There is something particularly disturbing about the modern-day “capturing,” buying, and selling of newspapers produced by and for black men and women who lived in a white supremacist country that equated blackness with chattel. Freeing black newspapers from the paywalls that currently encircle them may not be a simple or easy task, but some steps have already been taken. The full run of Freedom’s Journal, for example, is currently available for free download from archive.org, and I suspect that many scholars have personal digital archives, built from public-domain materials, that could be shared in similar places. Of course, such files cannot yet be searched or included in projects like Viral Texts. But once more materials are made freely available, the potential exists for collectively creating a public digital archive of black newspapers with full search capabilities and freely accessible data. The Colored Conventions
Project at the University of Delaware, which is working to digitize the minutes of nineteenth-century Colored Conventions, offers one example of precisely this kind of endeavor. Digital archives, databases, and tools present immense opportunities for scholars working in periodical studies. One of the most crucial, and rewarding, of those opportunities is in creating projects that confront and change the racial politics of digitization.

NOTES


2 “Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.”


4 Smith, et. al., “Computational Methods.”

5 Smith, et. al., “Computational Methods.”


Mining Images of Race and Gender in Twentieth-Century Black Popular Periodicals

KIM GALLON

It is difficult to deny the value that text mining holds for humanistic analysis of large periodical data sets. A corpus of newspapers, for example, can be easily mined for keywords that can provide greater understanding and generate new questions about an array of topics. However, images of magazine covers and images extracted from within periodicals obviously are not open to these methods of analysis and do not provide the necessary conditions to make text mining a useful process for understanding their significance. Early twentieth-century popular periodicals used compelling visual images to construct and shape modern American culture. Indeed, we might argue that the visual image was at the heart of modernism. This is all the more important when we consider how much periodical editors and publishers relied on a developing visual culture to tell stories to, inform, and entertain their modern readers. Modern periodicals, then, with