

BLACK VOICES

How do publications for ethnic minorities differ from their mainstream counterparts, and are they still relevant in the age of the internet? Georgia Platman investigates *The Voice Online* in search of answers.

Offering a different voice: speaking for Britain's Black communities

In a country where 86% of people in general (2011 census) and 94% of journalists (2016, City University) are white, few could argue against journalist Hugh Muir's assertion that Britain has 'a homogenous press writing

for a pretty homogenous readership'. And Muir should know; as a person of colour who has worked for the BBC and *The Guardian* among other mainstream media (MSM) outlets, he makes up part of the 0.2% of UK journalists who are black.

While tokenistic efforts towards diversification may have been made over the past few years, the mainstream media (MSM) still doesn't actively or adequately prioritise news reports for and about ethnic minorities. What's worse, the fact we're all so aware of the whiteness of our media has led to some media outlets using awkward language, doing 'stupid things' and making 'big mistakes' according to journalist Trevor Phillips (see link at the end of this article). When black people and other ethnic minorities are featured in the media, there is often more than a hint of postcolonial stereotyping in the representation – people of colour (POC) as aggressors, victims or uncivilised in some way. While POC are brought on the news to comment on pieces related to minority communities,

It's rare for POC to be called upon to comment on more 'neutral' topics, like current affairs, sports, culture or lifestyle

writes journalist Dahaba Ali Hussen in *The Independent*.

Hearing Other Voices

So where should people go if they are looking for alternative representations? The internet has undoubtedly helped to diversify the media and helped people of all social tribes and



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communities seek information and a sense of identity. Nevertheless, what's online is of wildly varying quality and, in the era of fake news, many in Britain still place their trust in more established (albeit old fashioned) niche newspapers – like *The Jewish Chronicle*, *Eastern Eye*, or *The Irish World*. One of the longest established is *The Voice*, which has been on Britain's newsstands since 1982. Aimed at the British African-Caribbean community, which makes up 3.3% of the population of England and Wales (2011 census), the brand consists of a monthly print newspaper, a website, a handful of social media channels and an app run by GV Media Group Limited, a subsidiary of the Gleaner Company – most famous for producing Jamaican broadsheet *The Gleaner*. (See MM22 for an introduction to the Black British press)

Once considered a radical campaigning tabloid that fought for equal rights and social justice, *The Voice* these days is more of an institution. Like our 'Aunty', the BBC, *The Voice* has also become like a familiar elder for black Britons: not cool, chic or youthful, but nevertheless cemented in the fabric of black British life. Trevor Phillips, a former *Voice* contributor, once likened the paper to a church:

Nobody would ever go to it because it's too dull and boring and doesn't have anything very much to do with what they're up to. But they would never allow it to be desecrated

It's important to point out that Phillips made that observation almost two decades ago; the brand has invested heavily in its digital output since then. In 2019 it launched a new website, podcast and an app, and it also cut back on its print offering (the newspaper went from weekly to monthly in December). But is that enough to be relevant

The Voice:
representing the
diversity of the Black
British experience
since 1982



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to the black community in 2020?

One way it is still pertinent is that the binary opposites it portrays are still at play in modern Britain. Without the obvious binary of the black minority vs a white majority, it wouldn't exist: in an article reflecting on the brand's history which appeared on the website in December 2019, the vision from its inception was clear

Britain's fast-growing black community should have a voice amid all the social unrest erupting during the 1970s and early 1980s

And despite the push for tolerance and multiculturalism, with our homogenous MSM, institutional racism and hate crimes on the rise, and a much greater awareness of international movements such as Black Lives Matter, those binaries feel as stark in 2020 as ever.

Constructing Identities

The Voice Online remains relevant in helping black Britons carve out a sense of identity. Academic David Gauntlett believes that we piece together a sense of our identity through the media products we consume, so, with that in mind, *The Voice Online's* coverage of black history and culture (for example, special features on the Windrush anniversary and the annual African & Caribbean Food & Restaurant Guide), as well as positive stories about black role models, will undoubtedly inspire some readers and help them understand more about themselves. Connecting with its readership is one of the brand's core tenets, and events organised by *The Voice*, like the Black Business Fair and the annual 'Made By History' competition (which encourages children to actively explore their identity by writing an essay on their favourite black author) will help people learn more

about their identities not only via a screen, but in person too; something which smaller black media outlets will not have the resources to do.

While the internet has made black media from around the world instantly accessible, there is a paucity of quality outlets specifically featuring the black British experience, which makes VO especially relevant. Indeed, comedian and national treasure Lenny Henry stresses the necessity of *The Voice* and black media in general in an interview he did for *The Voice Online* in December last year

Our story is important, and we need an outlet for that, we need a platform for telling our stories.

And beyond storytelling, Henry says that the media is vital to a sense of identity and recognition

I want all of us to acknowledge that we have contributed [...] to the culture and I want that contribution acknowledged.

Language and Meaning

The Voice Online is also relevant for its use of media language and the meanings it generates. The brand mimics UK tabloid conventions in terms of style, layout, and colours. In print, its aesthetic similarity to *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* was undeniable from the start – all three have the same big bold red and white sans serif logos. And now, after a relaunch in September 2019, *The Voice Online* has been brought in line with *mirror.co.uk* and *thesun.co.uk*, too. The fact that *The Voice* employs the same red, white, black, and grey colour palette as the mainstream media tabloid news websites gives it a consistent, professional feel, which may enhance trust while providing new readers some reassurance that they know what to expect in terms of tone of voice – informal, direct, simple vocabulary.



The Voice Online Fact File

Headquarters:	London
Owner:	GV Media Group Limited (Jamaican-owned)
Social media followers (as of the end of 2019):	Twitter (37k), Facebook (600k), Instagram (25k)
Ages (website users):	75% of readers (online) are 25-54 years old.
Gender (website users):	54% women, 46% men
Website unique visitors:	30,000 in past 6 months
User countries:	UK, USA, Canada, France, Nigeria

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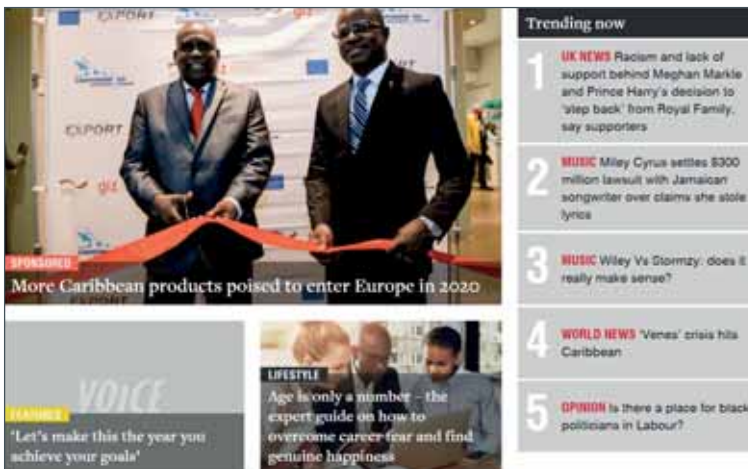
Good News Stories

Another way the website creates meaning for its readers is by featuring a high proportion of good news stories about the black community. In contrast with the MSM's disproportionate focus on negative stories about people of colour, *The Voice Online* posts regular positive stories. Examples at the time of writing (Spring 2020) include: 'Grime legend and pioneer Jammer has a blue plaque mounted on his famous abode'; 'Windrush Generation voices recorded in new book'; 'The Powerlist: Britain's most influential black people'; 'Meet the young entrepreneur shaping the future'; 'Black-owned watch brand pops up in Covent Garden'.

These stories, rarely considered newsworthy by the mainstream media, create and reinforce positive stereotypes of the black community, to help combat the negative ones generated by years of media coverage by demonstrating that black people are successful, entrepreneurial, powerful



Taking *The Voice Online*: connecting with readers during the lockdown and #BlackLivesMatter demonstrations



Read more

BBC Sounds – Hugh Muir explores how the white, middle class dominated profession affects the news
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p05hvnhl>

Trevor Phillips claims UK media diversity efforts have been tokenistic
<https://pressgazette.co.uk/ex-broadcaster-trevor-phillips-claims-uk-media-diversity-efforts-have-been-tokenistic/>

People of colour have more to offer than our trauma. It's time the media recognised that
<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/media-diversity-bame-poc-journalism-equality-racism-a8920056.html>

Is '*The Voice*' in the wilderness?
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/is-the-voice-in-the-wilderness-9153401.html>

Strong and proud – for 37 years, *The Voice* has been fighting your corner
<https://www.voice-online.co.uk/opinion/comment/2019/12/24/strong-and-proud-for-37-years-the-voice-has-been-fighting-your-corner/>

and just as worthy of recognition as their white counterparts. This choice of stories relates to *The Voice Online's* news values: the criteria used to decide what is news and what is not news. According to academics Galtung and Ruge, news values include criteria such as meaningfulness, unambiguity, threshold, frequency, unexpectedness, negativity, and elite people. If we look at the stories in the clipping above from January 2020, only two of them would match concurrent ongoing stories that would have been reported in the mainstream press: the story about Meghan Markle and racism in the press, and the post-election opinion piece about black politicians in the Labour Party. The two stories about musicians and content such as the lifestyle and feature articles might make it into the mainstream press, but probably not reach the top of the home page. The two stories about the Caribbean are aimed specifically at this audience and would not address the news values of most British

mainstream news outlets, as they do not meet any of the traditional criteria. So, by seeking out niche stories, bucking the mainstream media's news values and forging positive stereotypes, *The Voice Online* provides an important space for black voices. And while it may feel uncool and institutional to some, the website's continued existence means there is a way for black Britons to talk about themselves and amongst themselves without having to constantly justify themselves in that infinite binary of black vs white.

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from the MM vaults

Black Ink: Black Press in Britain
 – Jennifer G Robinson, MM22