

Frederick Douglass: From Slave to Freedom's Voice

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### Abstract

During the mid-1800s, a slave living in the South that knew how to read or write was unheard of. Many slaves relied upon poems, songs and journals in order to communicate their stories. Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave that used journalism to establish himself as the most important African American leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through the popularity of his autobiography, “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself” and controversial abolitionist newspaper, the “North Star”, Douglass became the primary spokesman for minorities throughout his lifetime. Frederick Douglass practiced many of the same techniques used in journalism today to draw attention to the moral indictment of slavery prevalent during the 1800s and to encourage people to voice their opinions.

### Frederick Douglass: From Slave to Freedom's Voice

Journalism has played a longstanding and persistent role in shaping American history. The techniques used today when distributing news media to the public have existed within American culture for centuries. According to Streitmatter (2010), “the news media can place an issue on the public agenda... can move it to the front burner... can get people talking about issue” (p. 2). This is a common trend in journalism that can be seen consistently throughout the history of America, and the discourse ensued by publicizing controversial issues allows real change to occur. It is important to identify the themes and trends in regards to the media's influence on historic events because it can be used to understand America's past in addition to its future (Streitmatter, 2008, p. 2). Today, past articles and reports for information are examined as well as historical sources for appropriate information about an issue or story. This shows that no matter what era, news media shapes public opinion and informs the public. According to Winfield and Hume (2007), “our experience of the present depends upon our knowledge of the past, that we experience our current world in a context which is causally connected with past events” (p. 8). Exploring the journalistic efforts of Frederick Douglass during the Abolition Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century will demonstrate how little has changed regarding the journalistic approaches to controversial issues applied in the past to present-day methods used when distributing news media.

By comparing Fredrick Douglass' most influential journalistic piece, the “North Star”, the weekly black abolitionist newspaper, to the journalism currently existing in American society, research will support that journalism techniques exercised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still present today. Three recurring traits the news media has used to shape American history will be analyzed in order to compare the “North Star” to present journalism. These traits include: the

news organizations that have influenced important events haven't been afraid to set the agenda, journalists and their news organizations learned that standing tall meant standing alone and the news organizations that have taken leading roles in shaping the country have consistently recognized that writing talent is potent (Streitmatter, 2008, p. 257-261). John Gillis argued that, "beliefs about the past help a public or society understand both its past and its present, and, by implication, its future" (as cited in Winfield & Hume, 2007, p. 8). An effective analysis that compares Fredrick Douglass's controversial journalism to current journalism will support the evidence of the recurring trends present throughout American history as well as contribute to understanding what is to come in the future of journalism in this society.

Fredrick Douglass was born into slavery, during which his master's wife began to teach him how to read and write even though it was against the law. Eventually, he was able to begin interpreting and determine his views on freedom. Douglass escaped to free soil and shortly after he began to lecture his anti-slavery views as well as wrote his first autobiography, "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself", where he was praised on his eloquent writing and high literacy. The popularity of his autobiography and his anti-slavery speeches helped him become a well-know African American figure. Douglass joined ranks with William Lloyd Garrison, a white man who devoted his life to speaking out against slavery and defending African American rights, while he began to publish the "North Star", a controversial abolitionist newspaper. According to Reyes (1999), "the periodical was one of the leading voices in the struggle to end slavery". With his newspaper, Douglass was able to publish his opinions freely and attack the issue of slavery in the South. The resentment of pro-slavery forces was heard and the conscience of America was aroused as a result of the abolitionist newspaper (Streitmatter, 2008, p. 38). Although the weekly newspaper ceased to

print because of a lack of finances, the “North Star” “had become an important source of racial pride and identity as well as a powerful instrument in the abolitionist struggle” (Streitmatter, 2008, p. 39). Douglass’ newspaper stood out amongst others because he was able to include “his own horrible experiences as a slave and passionately stressed the need to abolish the system” (Thompson, 2009, p. 127).

William Lloyd Garrison and Fredrick Douglass’ had a unique, but peaceful relationship until Douglass’ change of views caused a major dispute. According to Fanuzzi (2001), “disagreements over a pro- or anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution... spilled over into an ugly war of words” (p. 55). Garrison viewed the Constitution as a pro-slavery document while Douglass viewed it as anti-slavery. Their disagreement ultimately helped establish slavery as being a political issue, bringing it into the national arena. According to Garvey, Douglass “decided that henceforth he would encourage African Americans to participate actively in the political process by joining political parties, supporting specific candidates, and, when possible, voting in elections” (p. 229). Fredrick Douglass’ change of focus to the political aspects of the anti-slavery argument resulted in an unlikely association with Abraham Lincoln. P. Kendrick and S. Kendrick (2009) states that the two “forged a strong bond of mutual understanding and respect and as a result, Douglass's personal mission to liberate black Americans became inescapably bound up in Lincoln's life”. Soon after forcing abolition into the national agenda, the Civil War began based upon “slave's insatiable hunger for freedom, Southern masters' struggle to control fractious blacks led them to champion social values and behaviors that clashed with northern norms and to exaggerate the dangers Yankee society posed to their ambitions” (McDonnell, 2009, p. 545).

Previous research from scholarly peer-reviewed articles supports the claim that the journalistic efforts of Frederick Douglass during the Abolition Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century possess three historically recurring traits that have shaped American culture. First, the “North Star” allowed abolitionists to voice their opinion and fight the predominantly racist press. According to Thompson (2009), “the editors allowed abolitionists to express their views and to keep their movement alive until public opinion and politics finally turned and the idea of immediate emancipation became accepted” (p. 128). The “North Star” was published based on Douglass’ individual agenda, not depending on the views of any other person, and was primarily used as an outlet to gain support for the anti-slavery movement. Second, Fredrick Douglass’ decision to turn his focus on the politics of slavery resulted in the loss of allies that had supported his abolitionist newspaper, such as William Lloyd Garrison. P. Kendrick and S. Kendrick (2009) states, “Douglass's decision to leave the Garrisonian fold reflects profoundly important developments in his sense of self and in his aspirations”. Although he had previously found comfort in other people who he shared similar views with, when his beliefs changed, he had to stand alone and separate himself from all he had known. Lastly, Fredrick Douglass’ eloquent writing and passion for writing was powerful and had the ability to conjure emotions in people at a crucial time in American history (Streitmatter, 2008, p. 261). According to Gates, “the will the power was the will to write... the proverbial ‘leap to freedom’ was so inextricably intertwined with literacy”. Conducting a thorough analysis of Frederick Douglass’ journalism efforts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Abolitionist Movement using the three previously stated journalistic trends in history will result in the finding that controversial issues present in America’s history were approached in the same way they are in society today and imply the same outcome for events in the future.

## **Frederick Douglass' Abolitionist Newspaper and Autobiography Set the Agenda for Controversial Topics**

Although Douglass was not the first abolitionist to begin publishing a controversial newspaper regarding slavery, his newspaper was successful in voicing his opinion that opposed slavery in the South. It set the agenda for anti-slavery supporters to come out of the wood work and begin publicizing their opinions on the controversial topic surrounding America leading up to the Civil War. According to Fanuzzi (2001), “the ‘colored newspaper’ did have the effect of giving race, even color itself, a public attribution”. It opened the public’s eye to the anti-slavery argument and provided an incentive for others who oppose slavery to begin protesting. The same techniques are used today when a controversial issue is brought into the public realm. For example, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is an organization that focuses on the need for animal rights and produces multiple controversial print advertisement campaigns opposing the unethical treatment of animals (Glasser and Tamulis, 2008). Using newspapers and magazines, PETA openly voices their opinions and gives individuals a chance to participate in their movement, similar to Fredrick Douglass’ journalistic approach in the “North Star” regarding slavery. Both PETA and Douglass knew it was important to bring issues, even if they oppose a major issue, to people’s attention using news media. The arguments made by PETA and Douglass in the news media simultaneously focus on, “the basis of equality, or the origin of rights” (Glasser and Tamulis, 2008, p. 2). Just as PETA set the stage for the animal rights movement, Fredrick Douglass’ the “North Star” set the stage for the abolitionist movement.

Frederick Douglass’ autobiography, “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself”, also contributed to setting the agenda for the abolitionist movement and the shaping American society. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was very rare for slaves to

learn how to read or write because it was illegal to teach them to. According to Brewton (2005), “he chronicles his experiences as a slave, obscures his escape to freedom, and sketches the formation of his early identity as child and man”. His autobiography was written to express to the public the truth about what was happening to African Americans being kept as slaves in the South. Many individuals living in America at the time did not fully understand how badly slaves were being treated and Douglass’ autobiography shared the grave reality of slavery to the nation. Drake (1997) states that Douglass wrote to “disprove the myths of black inferiority and to claim for himself and his race the ability to achieve success in mainstream American culture”. By telling the story of his own experiences as a slave and escape to freedom, Douglass gave many other African Americans hope that change will occur in America. He used his journalistic abilities to provide awareness of the truth of what was happening in slavery and that it was corrupting American society. In the present, individuals use the same means Fredrick Douglass did to reach a nation that may be unaware of a serious issue. Grace Lee Boggs, A Chinese American, wrote an autobiography called, “Living For Change” in order to showcase her belief in a better society after enduring hardships because of being Chinese during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Duncan & Lindberg, 2001). Grace Lee Boggs states, “I began seeing my own life as a part of the development of the United States” (as cited in Duncan & Lindberg, 2001, p. 44). Both Douglass and Boggs used journalism as a means to use their unfavorable pasts to promote awareness of the unfair treatment of minority ethnic groups in America in order for change to occur. Autobiographies use previous experiences to bring issues to the front burner and set the agenda for other people participate in supporting the cause.

Fredrick Douglass’ the “North Star and “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself”, PETA advertisements, and Grace Lee Boggs’ “Living

For Change”, have influenced important events by not being afraid to set the agenda. According to Streitmatter (2008), “they’ve approached the news media as an institution that leads society, not as an institution that merely records facts” (p. 257). Each used journalism as a means to promote awareness of a controversial issue and span across three centuries. They have shaped American history because they demonstrate how important it is for individuals to voice their opinions through news media in order to reach a wide range of people that can help make a change in the current society. Also, it shows how timeless and effective it is to use journalism when setting the agenda to gain support for a belief or opposition.

### **Frederick Douglass’ Opinion Shift in the “North Star” Causes the Him to Separate Himself**

Fredrick Douglass joined William Lloyd Garrison in his view that the United States Constitution was a pro-slavery document and that it was immoral to participate in politics (Gates, 1995, p.3). Garrison was a radical abolitionist and served as Douglass’ mentor in the beginning of Douglass’ anti-slavery journalism. Garrison’s view on the United States Constitution was that “it enabled slaveowners ‘to plunder, persecute and destroy’ slaves” (McDonald, 1987, p. 30). In the first four years of publishing his own newspaper, Douglass supported not participating in politics and continued to denounce the Constitution (Gates, 1995, p. 3). Gates (1995) states, “an independent voice compelled him to reevaluate the relationship between his own sense of moral authority and the political norms in which he was struggling” (p. 3). Frederick Douglass soon began to listen to his inner voice and think on his own terms which ultimately lead to a reversal of beliefs. Once Douglass began to consider the Constitution as anti-slavery, he also began focusing on the politics concerning slavery and the Abolitionist Movement. This completely separated him from Garrison. According to McDonald (1987), “nowhere does it [United States Constitution] explicitly mention slavery; its preamble and ‘great principles’ refer to the self-

evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, applicable to all” (p. 30). By reversing his opinion, he angered Garrison and ultimately their relationship was destroyed beyond repair and Douglass was forced to stand up for his new individual belief without the help of his mentor.

He used journalism in the “North Star” to aid him in expressing his decision to radically change his opinion of the United States Constitution and the participation in politics. Douglass’ new found independence was first brought to the public’s attention in an editorial in which he pronounces that he believed the Constitution was not pro-slavery (Gates, 1995, p. 3). Soon after, the “North Star” began to feature multiple articles where his new beliefs were voiced. Frederick Douglass’ standing alone to support his new anti-slavery opinion used the news media in order to influence the public and shaped American history. The Abolitionist Movement may have not played out in the same way if it was not for Douglass’ journalistic support of the Constitution and political systems using the “North Star”. A public reversal of opinion that caused an individual to stand alone for what they believed in, similar to Frederick Douglass’ situation, regarding controversial issues is still seen in the news media today. Norma McCorvey, more commonly known as Jane Roe in the court case of Roe vs. Wade, fought for her right to an abortion in 1973. According to Sherman (2009), “she has converted to Catholicism and become active in the pro-life movement”. She used journalism in her book, “Won by Love” to express her radical change of opinion. McCorvey had surrounded herself with pro-choice activists, which became friends, for years before deciding to reevaluate her opinion on abortion. By doing so, she had to break away from everything she had previously known to join the opposing side of the argument. This demonstrates that like Frederick Douglass in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using the news media in order to stand up for individual beliefs is a continuous occurrence and still happens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Streitmatter (2008), “the journalists who’ve helped build this

country into what it is today did so by consciously and fearlessly breaking from the pack, despite what were often severe consequences” (p. 257). Douglass’ suffered the consequence of losing his mentor and friend by separating himself from Garrison’s belief system while McCorvey suffered the loss of her pro-choice friends and fans for radically changing her stance on abortion. Both used journalism to clearly define their new views, showing a continuous cycle of leaders breaking away from the pack in order to express their individual beliefs.

### **Frederick Douglass’ Writing Ability Draws in Support**

Against all odds, Douglass learned how to read and write while a slave through the help of one of his master’s wife and by tricking local school boys into educating him (Gates, 1995, p. 3). Streitmatter (2008) states, “the eloquence and high literary qualities of the work of...men such as... Douglass undermined popular charges that black people were intellectually inferior” (p. 39). Using his writing talent he successfully published his autobiography, “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself”. He used writing techniques such as irony and metaphor in order to take his readers on a journey through his hardships and endeavors as a slave in the South along with recounts of his escape to freedom (Gates, 1995, p. 3). This helped him evoke anti-slavery emotions in his audience through the channel of news media. Frederick Douglass’ used his autobiography and abolitionist newspaper to inspire and inform his readers, this tactic is has been seen time and time again in America history. Gates (1995) describes Douglass as “someone who during the greatest moral struggle of modern times used the public presentation of his life as his chosen weapon” (p.3). His use of journalism was a strategic way to enlighten the public about what happens to slaves in the South.

Douglass’ journalism in “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself” is unlike the other slave narrative writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Burns

(2005) states, “Douglass fashions his autobiography in a language that is carefully and skillfully crafted... typical not of a black slave but of a white slave owner” (p. 83). His writing ability helped him gain popularity and become “the most celebrated black author in history” (Gates, 1995, p. 3). Douglass successfully executes multi-layered irony in his autobiography where words are used in ways that signify that the complete opposite of their meanings. An example of the use of irony in “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself” is when Douglass states “the luxury of whipping slaves” (as cited in Burns, 2005, p. 85). The use of irony is used by Douglass to create emotions in his audience in order to gain support against slavery. Eloquent writing and the uses of creative journalistic techniques like irony and metaphor have been used throughout the history of American journalism to influence audiences during vital turning points in history.

This can be seen centuries later during the Civil Rights Movement in journalistic works by Martin Luther King, Jr. In King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech he uses metaphors to give rise to emotions in his audience thus hopefully gaining more support for his cause. Martin Luther King, Jr. states, “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope” (as cited in “I Have a Dream”, 2009. P. 20). This metaphor is used to demonstrate racism as being a mountain, or obstacle that can be conquered through faith. Both Douglass’ writing talent and King’s oratory skill are journalistic techniques used to communicate their opinions during major events in American history. The use the news media to inflict emotions in an audience has shaped American history because it can be seen in various crucial times. If neither of these individuals used their skills in journalism, the outcomes for both the Abolitionist Movement and Civil Rights Movement could be drastically different. Douglass and

King transformed the nation's opinion on major issues during both movements using news media.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the news media has playing a huge role in shaping American history during major events in the past. The journalism techniques seen in the current American society are the same as the ones Frederick Douglass' used in his 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist journalism. Advocates for change over the centuries have proven that using news media brings controversial issues to the public's level of awareness. By the implementation of certain journalistic strategies, policies will change, opinions will be heard, and individuals will be influenced. Using examples of journalism from different eras in American history will help predict what will come of major events in the future.

The future of journalism in American society will depend heavily on the influence of social media and the need for innovative new ways to share information (Quinn, 2009, p. 70). There has already been a decrease in print newspapers because the majority of American citizens can get news from their cell phones or computer because it is cheaper and not as time consuming. This does not mean that the journalistic techniques used by Douglass will no longer exist. Major controversial issues will continue to use news media, whether it's a print newspaper or online social media, to promote awareness of issues to the public and voice their opinions. Neiger (2007) states, "before the telegraph was invented 'news' could be even several months old, in the age of the world wide web ... an event is deemed 'new' for an extremely short time (p. 318). Although, news can be retrieved much more quickly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, journalism is still used to draw attention to issues and give people the opportunity to voice their views. For example, online journalism, such a blogging, has emerged as a means to publish individual beliefs. The

news media will continue to evolve as time progress, just as it has since the very first accounts of journalism in American history and the news media will continue to shape the American culture.

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