

Troy Johnson: Assessing the State of the Black Press

Troy Johnson is the president of AALBC.com, LLC, (The African American Literature Book Club), whose main property is the website AALBC.com, for which Troy is the founder and webmaster. The site was officially launched in March of 1998 and has grown to become the largest and most frequently visited site dedicated to books and film by or about people of African Descent.

Here, he talks about both the challenges and rewards of running AALBC.com

Kam Williams: Hi Troy, thanks for the interview.

Troy Johnson: No problem, Kam, it is my pleasure to have this opportunity. Thank you.

KW: Do you see the recent closing of Borders Bookstores as a sign of the demise of brick-and-mortar operations and hard copy books? How does this development affect your business?

TJ: Those changes are really reflective of more profound and fundamental shifts that are greatly impacting the entire book industry. But I don't think the closing of Borders or the rise of eBooks is sign that the days of brick-and-



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams

mortar stores, and physical books, are numbered. This may sound counter-intuitive, but the closing of Borders actually hurts my business, in much the same way that the closing of independent black bookstores did. Sure, on a superfi-



cial level, one can say there are less competitors in the marketplace and that will drive more people online to learn about new books and that that helps sites like AALBC.com. However, on a deeper level, Borders was actually a big seller of black books. They helped generate excitement and sales for our books across the nation. The better-run stores established relationships with the community and local businesses. They purchased advertising in our publications. This benefits the entire industry, publishers, authors, readers and even other booksellers. When these groups thrive, so does AALBC.com.

KW: How are African-American-oriented websites faring nowadays?

TJ: Kam, it is a challenging time for the vast majority of our websites. I think we should make a

distinction between different types of African-American-oriented websites. First, there are the large corporate entities like AOL's Huffington Post/Black Voices whose primary mandate is to maximize shareholder's wealth. Then there are the mostly independent entities who also have a profit motive, but are driven by a more conscious mission. Sites like AALBC.com, The Network Journal, Black Star News and the other entities who regularly publish your content are part of this mix. As a result of these two different goals, the content produced by the large corporate entities focuses more on scandal, celebrity, and superficial pop-culture. That content is more popular and easier to produce and is therefore more profitable. The content produced by sites like AALBC.com is less sensational which makes keeping the associated sites profitable much more challenging. In fact, even Google favors the larger entities, making things even more difficult.

KW: Can you elaborate more about Google's impact?

TJ: Consider this: for most sites, the largest source of new traffic comes in through people who discover the site through search engines. The lion's share of

this traffic comes from Google. As a result, Google is effectively a gatekeeper who controls access to your website through their ranking of your website in their search results.

Over the past year, I observed Google start to do some really strange things with their search results that have not only adversely impacted my website's traffic, but the very nature of the web itself. Google search results skew to very large corporate websites that are publishing less valuable, usually more scandalous content. This was not always the case with Google. At least the search engine Bing doesn't do this currently. Here are two examples: if you were to do a search for Terry McMillan on Google, you will find in the top five search results a site containing two sentences talking about Terry accusing Will and Jada Smith of pimping their kids, and another site discussing the details of Terry's divorce. My site, which has published original book reviews, a video of Terry reading from a then-unpublished manuscript, a list of all of her published novels and more, only appears on the second page. Which content do you think should rank higher?

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