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Seren Snow

$750,000 Schmidt Sciences grant uses AI to transform Black press archives

As much of the early Black press remains scattered or difficult to access, UC Santa Barbara English assistant professor Jim Casey is leading a project to recover and share 19th-century African American newspapers using artificial intelligence. He will head a national research team awarded $750,000 from Schmidt Sciences' Humanities and AI Virtual Institute for "Communities in the Loop: AI for Cultures & Contexts in Multimodal Archives," a project that brings together technology, scholarship and community participation to make early African American newspapers more broadly and freely accessible to the public.

Under Casey's leadership, the interdisciplinary team brings together expertise from 10 universities and the Adler Planetarium to develop new AI tools that will help unlock fragmented archives of 19th-century Black newspapers. The project represents a fundamentally different approach to artificial intelligence — one that centers community participation and historical justice rather than corporate extraction and "black box" algorithms trained on biased data.

"As Freedom's Journal, the first Black newspaper, declared in 1827, 'Too long have others spoken for us,'" said Casey, founding director of the Early Black Press Project. "We are not just adapting existing AI to read these archives. We are asking: What can the Black press tradition itself teach us about gathering, sharing and

transforming information?

"Early Black editors and journalists were innovating under slavery and Jim Crow — their methods have something profound to teach us about building better, non-extractive technology today."

Translating this vision into functional technology requires overcoming significant technical hurdles. According to Casey, current commercial AI tools are often trained on mainstream datasets that fail to account for historical nuances. As a result, these models struggle to accurately read the complex, experimental layouts of historical Black newspapers and frequently generate errors based on biased training data.

To address this, the UCSB-led team is developing machine learning models specifically trained on Black press materials to perform page layout segmentation and optical character recognition.

"Professor Casey's work represents a vital convergence of historical inquiry and technological innovation," said [Daina Ramey Berry,](#) the Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts. "By bridging the gap between advanced computing and the humanities, this new project not only recovers crucial history but demonstrates how UCSB is leading the way in ethical, community-focused research."

The newly-developed tools will prepare documents for Zooniverse, the world's leading crowdsourcing platform. There, volunteers will validate and improve the machine-generated text — a process known as "human in the loop" — ensuring the history is preserved accurately while training the AI to be more culturally competent.

The award accelerates the expansion of an award-winning set of projects and a national network Casey has established with his collaborator of more than a decade, P. Gabrielle Foreman, the MacArthur-winning co-director of the Center for Black Digital Research at Penn State. At UCSB, Casey will build a West Coast hub for the Early Black Press Project, along with the long-running Colored Conventions Project and Douglass Day.

In addition to Casey and Foreman, the collaboration's leadership team includes Christopher L. Dancy (Penn State), Samantha Blickhan (Adler Planetarium), Tiffanie R. Smith (Lincoln University) and Benjamin Charles Germain Lee (University of Washington).

The technology developed through this grant will power a massive public launch on Douglass Day 2027, coinciding with the 200th anniversary of Freedom's Journal. The event will invite tens of thousands of participants to transcribe historical documents via a new mobile interface, removing barriers to entry and allowing anyone with a phone to help save Black history.

The result, Casey hopes, will demonstrate that "another version of AI is possible — one that doesn't have to be extractive, harmful or discriminatory. One that learns from communities who survived and resisted under impossible circumstances."

While this grant prepares for the 2027 bicentennial launch, UCSB will host a local Douglass Day 2026 event on Feb. 13, 2026, focusing on the Colored Conventions Movement. [Additional details regarding](#) local coverage and participation will be shared closer to the event date.

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