

“Profiles” Portrayal of African-Americans, 1969-1979: Detroit’s Direct Response to Negative Stereotypes

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The 1960s witnessed nationwide riots, the Kerner Commission’s report (resulting from the riots), a civil rights revolution—a compendium of legislation, executive orders, and court decisions guaranteeing democratic rights and privileges to all citizens. Among its findings the commission reported that realistic and positive African-American images were absent from the communications media. In defining the impact of such negative media images in shaping the public’s perceptions of African-Americans, the commission concluded the news media “by failing to portray the Negro in a matter of routine and in the context of the total society . . . have . . . contributed to the black-white schism in this country.”¹ In response, African-American leadership joined with some national social organizations, many of them church-related, to appeal the negative African-American stereotypes on television and to demand equal employment opportunity in that medium.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) received these complaints and ruled that stations must comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act in their hiring practices, and issued a number of directives in the belief that increased employment might influence realistic and more favorable television representations of African-Americans. Petitioners for the fair portrayal of African-Americans requested the FCC deny renewal of licenses to broadcasters whose programming inadequately represented the interest of minority groups in the regions they served. As one example of the FCC’s response to public pressure, the FCC reprimanded the station owner but renewed the license. The petitioners took the matter to court and, after a few years of litigation, the U.S. Court of Appeals

¹Otto Werner, *Report of the National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 366.

declared the license vacated and ordered the FCC to request new applications.²

These events created an atmosphere of concern, and broadcasters in the affected areas became more eager to develop appropriate programming that would indicate compliance with FCC directives and demonstrate their willingness to serve the entire audience. Agitation opposing stations' license renewal applications forced the unlikely union of WWJ-TV and Gilbert Maddox, resulting in the creation of "Profiles in Black." Developed because of WWJ-TV's desire to operate more effectively in the public interest and to employ increased numbers of African-Americans, "Profiles" became WWJ's response to the Kerner Commission's report.

As a review of the programs aired before or simultaneously with "Profiles" debut indicated, network television generally portrayed African-Americans in demeaning and low-status occupational roles. "Profiles" attempted to reverse this trend.³

Through an evaluation of "Profiles" conception, creative format, audience feedback, and a content analysis, this study demonstrates that "Profiles" portrayed African-Americans realistically in its broadcasts, thus, reversing the trend of portraying African-Americans in demeaning and low-status jobs.

Gilbert Maddox, "Profiles" host and producer, patterned his new program after Edward R. Murrow's highly successful "Person to Person" series. A half-hour weekly television community service series, "Profiles" was filmed in color and broadcast by WWJ-TV (Detroit), initially during prime time (Saturday, 8:30 p.m.) from November 1969 through December 1979.

Maddox designed "Profiles" to counteract local television's neglect of African-Americans in news and public affairs programming and to replace the medium's traditional stereotyping, if not misrepresentation, of African-Americans with realistic and positive portrayals of African-American life. To achieve this goal Maddox employed a unique production format.

Maddox's production format became the primary vehicle for portraying African-Americans in diversified and realistic occupations.

"Profiles" used the production format of on-location shooting in combination with in-house studio interviewing. Interviewing guests in their homes and workplace offered vantage points that interviewing guests in

²Marsha O'Bannon, "How You Can Influence Radio and TV," *Broadcasting*. (July 1962), 21; Robert Lewis Shayon, "Burger versus F.C.C."

³Paula M. Poindexter and Carolyn A. Stroman, "Blacks and Television: A Review of the Research Literature," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 25 (Spring 1981): 103-121.

the studio did not allow. In their homes, guests became more informal and more relaxed. Their homes reflected their self-concept and became a source of pride. Their career environment reflected their achievements. Appearing in both environments enhanced the guests' television presence.

In 1969, Maddox filmed interviews on location and continued this format through 1973, though videotape replaced film. Maddox introduced a new format in 1974 when in-studio interviews replaced those on location. Inserts of filmed, video-taped sequences provided visual relief by spotlighting the activities of such individuals as Joe Louis, highlighting unique events like the jazz mass at St. Cecilia and demonstrating controversial subjects, i.e., life in the Wayne County jail or the Attica prison outbreaks.

As a result of "Profiles' " unique format, it received such awards as the Meritorious Service Award in the Field of Public Affairs (awarded in 1974 by the 23rd Annual Southern Regional Press Institute), the Outstanding Community Service Award in the Field of Communication from the Trade Union Leadership Council awarded in 1975, and the Alumni Award from Wayne State University in 1973. For its excellence in public-affairs programming, "Profiles" received the *Variety Magazine* Cross Country Award.

Maddox broadened and diversified television programming and coverage of Black America:

1. He presented African-Americans in their professional capacity as doctors, lawyers, judges, educators, bankers, labor leaders, accountants, journalists, architects, businessmen, social workers, artists, performers, university administrators, models, and civil rights workers. Stories of these individuals, which appealed to youth and adults, Caucasians and African-Americans, female and male audiences, showed alternative role models available in the African-American community.

2. He presented politically active persons who later became local and national figures of note such as Judge George Crockett, Mayor Coleman Young, Mayor Robert Blackwell and Congressman Charles Diggs.

3. He provided coverage of significant events in the community. "Profiles" covered such events as Black Expo, an annual exhibition designed to highlight African-American businesses and their products; the Bakke conference, a discussion of the implications of reverse racism; and the NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner, the organization's annual fund-raiser, usually featuring some nationally renowned speaker.

4. The program depicted the historical contributions of African-Americans by focusing on the lives of such individuals as Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Mrs. Rosa Parks and by featuring

such special programs as "Black Odyssey" and the African-American presence in the American Revolutionary War.

5. He presented the contributions of Detroit's performing artists: opera singer George Shirley; symphony conductors Paul Freeman and James Frazier; the cast of *Porgy and Bess*; playwrights Ron Milner and Yusef Lateef, musician Opus 4; the Spinners, Bill Daniels, the Supremes, the Tripoli Steel Band, Kim Weston and folk singer Josh White.

6. The program discussed the contributions of working-class and low-income people and told stories seldom heard of domestic workers, waiters, garbage men, bus drivers, meter maids, factory workers, barbers, janitors, cooks, dressmakers and ADC mothers.

7. "Profiles" highlighted the unique character of Detroit's African-American and African-American-controlled institutions such as: Homes for Black Children, Urban League's Twelfth Street Academy, United Black Appeal, Shrine of the Black Madonna, Black Action Movement, First Independence National Banks, Nation of Islam, Republic of New Africa, and the Pan-African Congress.

8. And "Profiles" provided a forum for the community's dissident voices, including those of the president of the Nation of Islam, Robert Williams, Imori Obedia of Republic of New Africa, Ken Cockrel, and Madeline Fletcher, Reverend Albert Cleage and others.⁴

Throughout its ten-year history, "Profiles" continued its presentation of public-affairs programming for the Metropolitan Detroit viewer. In the words of columnist Frank Angelo, writing for the February 8, *Detroit Free Press*: "Maddox . . . has done about as much as anyone in America to destroy stereotypes that whites have of Blacks—and too often Blacks have of themselves."⁵

To determine the extent to which "Profiles" influenced the representation of African-Americans in demeaning and low-status occupational roles, the writer conducted a content analysis.⁶

⁴Gilbert A. Maddox, "An Overview of *Profiles*: Past and Future," Report to WWJ-TV, August 1978.

⁵Frank Angelo, "Gilbert Maddox TV Host Profiles Breaks Black Stereotypes," *Detroit Free Press*, 8 February 1974, 7-8.

⁶The study consisted of 460 thirty-minute programs broadcast weekly in varying prime-time slots from September 1969 through December 1979. Using systematic sampling, the researcher randomly selected every fourth program resulting in a sample of 115 programs. Some programs were unavailable for 1977-1979 and coders used program summaries and scripts to determine occupations.

Three female coders were trained. The study used the test-retest method to establish reliability. During the training, coders reached agreement on 95 percent of variables; those not agreed upon were noted.

Validity was assessed by the known group method, which relies on defined characteristics as established in a known body of literature. The literature review of this study served in this capacity.

The researcher established the occupation category to classify the content of each program. This category answered the research question, "What were the occupations of guests and the status of their occupations?" Answering this question allowed the researcher to determine whether or not "Profiles" fulfilled its objective of presenting African-Americans in realistic occupational roles. Specific occupations, i.e., lawyer and doctor, were rated against Duncan's scale of social economic status.

The researcher determined occupational status by means of the Duncan Socio-Economic Status Scale⁷ and listed them according to the two-digit Duncan Socio-Economic Index, an aggregate of average income and educational level, presented in descending order from the highest rated occupation to the lowest. To put this score in a more general context, the researcher grouped occupations for each year of the program's broadcast according to the Duncan Decile Score which relates occupations to population percentiles.

Over the life of the program, there were 159 guests categorized as having occupations. Sixty-two (32 percent) of these fell in the ninth, or highest decile; forty-eight in the eighth decile, and seven in the seventh. These three groupings comprised 107 of all the guests who were categorized, which means that 56 percent of all categorized occupations fell in the highest three deciles of the Duncan Scale. Three guest occupations fell in the sixth decile, three in the fifth decile and three in the fourth. Three guest occupations came in the first, or lowest decile. Sixty-two guest occupations were either unidentifiable or not listed on the Duncan Scale.

Thus, according to the Duncan Scale, which measures the relative status of an occupation, "Profiles" presented guests whose occupations fell predominantly within the highest deciles. A very small percentage of guests fell in the lower deciles, and these represented a cross-section of the African-American community.

Maddox's enlightened format of realistically portraying African-Americans came under close scrutiny from media critics as well as its audience. There was no consensus among critics and viewers as to "Profiles" quality. One reviewer accused the show of dullness and technical inferiority, but his comments were specific to a particular segment.⁸

Another condemned "Profiles" more generally as a perpetrator of white supremacy and elitism, commenting that "Profiles" was ". . .

⁷John P. Robinson, Robert Athanasiou, Wendra B. Head, *Measure of Occupational Attitudes and Occupational Characteristics*, Ann Arbor: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1969), 335-375.

⁸"Black Profiles," *The Courier Newspapers, Westside Courier Newspapers*, 12 February 1970, 4.

counterproductive, because the blacks seen on the program are artists and rich people and do not represent the black community."⁹ In a more positive vein, *Detroit News* media critic Frank Judge had this to say about "Profiles":

and because of this, "Profiles in Black" on Channel 4 at 3:30 p.m. Saturday tells the best Joe Louis story of all that have been told before and since Detroit feted him at Cobo Arena last week.¹⁰

In 1971, the same columnist described "Profiles" as ". . . an excellent program which I'm delighted to salute."¹¹

Some five years following "Profiles" debut, columnist Frank Angelo, of the *Detroit Free Press*, praised Maddox for attempting to destroy African-American stereotypes.

"It won't win an Academy award, but it's an improvement," said Maddox, who himself has done about as much as anyone in America to destroy stereotypes that whites have of Blacks—and too often Blacks have of themselves.¹²

Flowers and Middlebrook interviewed 100 respondents regarding the program's appeal, format, host-guest status, and the function of the program's information. Surveys of viewers were as divided as media critics. Of those interviewed, 58 percent were African-Americans, 37 percent were Caucasian, the remainder were Indian or Latin-American.¹³ Respondents liked the diversity of presentation and the various "on-location" sets. Approximately half of the interviewees failed to identify their likes or dislikes about the host-guest relationship, offering such noncommittal replies as "It's all right," "It's cool," or "I don't know." However, thirty-five of those who did comment on the guest-host relationship liked the approach of the host. Most respondents believed the discussion of personal histories provided a framework for positions taken on issues. Twenty of the Caucasians interviewed and half of the African-Americans saw "Profiles" as an important instrument in developing inter-racial harmony.

The remaining African-Americans disagreed. Those who did not believe "Profiles" fostered racial unity said the program guests were "atypi-

⁹Quoted in: Gilbert Maddox to Tony Brown 1 May 1970, Personal Files of Gilbert Maddox, Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁰Frank Judge, " 'Profiles': Joe Louis," *The Detroit News*, 22 August 1970.

¹¹Frank Judge, " 'Profiles': Salute" *The Detroit News*, 23 November 1971.

¹²Frank Angelo, "Gilbert Maddox" TV Host, 'Profiles' Breaks Black Stereotypes," *The Detroit Free Press*, 8 February 1974, 7A.

¹³Interview results from: Jerree Flowers and Pamela Middlebrook, "A Profile of 'Profiles in Black'" (Paper, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan), 6-15.

cal" of the black community, representing the city's Caucasian accepted African-American socialities or "upper-crust." These respondents believed the program could not foster Black-white unity because the light, interview format was nonconducive to such a heavy task.

However, nearly all respondents stated that "Profiles" was instrumental in furthering the Black pride movement.

Audience feedback, derived from 278 letters,¹⁴ to the host of "Profiles" and to the station during the ten years of its existence, were generally favorable. For ease of analysis the letters were categorized as: (1) guest appearance request, (2) thanks for appearing on the program, (3) evaluations of the program, (4) contacts and appearances for Gilbert Maddox, and (5) actions resulting from a program appearance. A summary analysis of the entire ten-year period follows.

Guest Appearance Requests. Over the ten-year period the program aired, there were 108 requests for appearances. Of this total, seventy-nine or roughly 74 percent were written by persons representing organizations wishing to apprise the viewing public of their services or programs. Approximately one-third were from community service groups such as nonprofit health care, drug counseling, or other social service organizations; the balance were equally divided among units of state or local government, churches, schools, and business or commercial entities.

The twenty-eight individual requests did not generally represent the same level of community interest. There were some exceptions, but, generally people wanted to appear to enhance their personal image, to promote business interests, or to advance careers. The writers were generally artists, musicians, or athletes. There were also those individuals who advocated their special "causes."

Thanks for Appearing on the Program. "Profiles" received forty-two letters expressing gratitude. Most came from state officials or local governments, representatives of commercial organizations, institutions or associations, with a small number from individuals saying thanks for themselves or their families.

Letters from Audience Evaluating the Program. The first nineteen letters received in this category were not so much concerned with "Profiles in Black" as they were with its replacing "Adam 12," a popular police program. Most of the remaining eighty-three letters were congratulatory, addressed directly to Gilbert Maddox or to the station. Another ten letters, classified as "requests for help," were viewed as an indirect

¹⁴Citations in this section are from: The Personal Files of Gilbert Maddox, Detroit, Michigan. For the sake of brevity, specific letters were not identified. The writer's dissertation contains a more detailed discussion and analysis.

affirmation of the show's acceptance and appeal. "Profiles," after its cancellation in late 1979, received thirteen protest letters.

Contacts and Appearances for Gilbert Maddox Resulting from the Program. For speaking engagements, seminars, and panels, Maddox received nineteen letters.

Actions Resulting from Appearances on the Program. "Profiles" received three letters in this category during its first full year (1970).

Most of the audience response activity occurred in the program's early life and "Profiles" received sixty-five percent of all letters by the end of the third broadcast year. In the last five years, audience responses related to one category only: guest appearance requests.

Most of this "feedback" congratulated Maddox. Maddox achieved a high visibility in the form of speaking engagements, other community and educational involvement, a high level of praise from professional critics and peers. Maddox received three letters classified as programmatic criticisms. These letters noted the programs timeliness, praised its conception, production, direction, and presentation.

Discussion

Findings from this study demonstrate that Gilbert Maddox successfully fulfilled his objective. First, Maddox presented guests whose occupational status potentially reversed the trend created by network television, i.e., the presentation of African-Americans in demeaning and low-status occupations. Second, the viewing public's reception of the program as evidenced by critic's reviews and audience letters reinforced Maddox's portrayal of African-Americans. The critics separated into two groups: (a) professional radio and television critics and (b) students or groups of students who conducted studies of the program. The professional critics praised the program and clearly approved its concept, format, and delivery. The students, on the other hand, expressed concern and disappointment, possibly because of philosophical differences with the concept and purpose of "Profiles" as well as with its format.

The letters received by the station and its personnel from viewers register the public's comments and opinions about the program. In the beginning, some letters complained the program replaced their favorite police program, while others demonstrated a lack of interest or concern for the subject matter of "Profiles." In general, however, most of the letters received fell into one of two categories: direct compliments to the station, the host, or others of the personnel and requests from individuals or organizations to appear on the show. At the program's conclusion, there were a fair number of letters that requested, some even demanded, immediate reinstatement of the show.

Having established that "Profiles" portrayed African-Americans in high-status occupations, what does this imply? The potential impact of "Profiles" can be understood only in light of mass-media theory, through a comparison of "Profiles' " efforts with television's traditional portrayal of African-Americans and its historical context.

Several theories support the potential impact and influence of the media. Those theories divide into two broad classifications: functionalism and mass media indirect effects. The mass media indirect effects theories are the modeling and meaning theory, social comparison, cultivation analysis, and agenda setting. The functionalist theories include Lasswell's theories of the media function and status conferral.

With respect to the presentation of African-Americans in high-status occupations, "Profiles" may have been unrepresentative. The program, however, is consistent with television's tendency to operate in extremes. Equally unrepresentative is television's traditional portrayal of African-Americans in low-status occupations. Thus, while "Profiles" may be guilty of exaggeration, it erred on the positive side. Given television's potential influence on society, "Profiles' " portrayal of African-Americans in high-status occupations, though somewhat skewed, benefitted society.

Traditionally portrayed in low-status occupations, African-Americans received low-status conferral and were therefore potentially irrelevant or insignificant in the larger society. According to the social comparison theory, persons may compare themselves with persons appearing in the media. Thus, comparisons made by African-Americans could result in disassociation from the society which portrayed them negatively.

The meaning theory described the media's role in shaping and stabilizing meanings experienced for language symbols. Through television's portrayal of certain groups, the medium may influence society's interpretation of such labels as "women," "Black people," and "sexual attractions." "Black people" could be a negative or positive phrase, depending on how Black people were presented in the media. By portraying African-Americans in high-status occupational roles, "Profiles" helped redefine the term "Black people."

Cultivation analysis suggests heavy television viewing "cultivates" perceptions of reality consistent with the world as presented in television programs. If the media presents African-Americans in insignificant professions, they will be viewed as insignificant, because society judges people on the basis of their occupations. "Profiles' " portrayal of African-Americans in high-status occupations helped viewers develop a positive perspective of African Americans as being involved in meaningful and significant professions.

The forces of history demanded television usher in a new agenda for

the portrayal of African-Americans. The 1960s nationwide riots, the Kerner Commission's report, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and revolution, and the Federal Communication Commission represented those forces. As this study demonstrated, WWJ's (now WDIV) and Maddox's "Profiles In Black" responded by portraying African-Americans realistically, thus, reversing the trend of portraying African-Americans in demeaning and low-status occupations.