
African Americans in Television: An Afrocentric Analysis

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You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*
And in everything but what's about me—
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

—"Note on Commercial Theater," from
Selected Poems of Langston Hughes

Presence and Absence: An Introduction

This paper proposes that historically and contemporarily African-Americans were and are severely under-represented in the Eurocentric press, are portrayed stereotypically, depicted in low-status occupational roles and denied news or public affairs programs to adequately serve their informational needs (Poindexter & Stroman, 1981; Gardner, 1983; Addressa, 1991; Entman, 1992). Specifically, the social forces identified by the Kerner Commission Report, directly and continuously affect the

level of participation of African-Americans in television news media (Tait & Perry, 1987). Furthermore, where African-Americans were placed in programming policy making positions, subsequent news content and coverage displayed an Afrocentric perspective.

The following theories discuss the potential impact of mass media on society and individuals and serve to underscore the media's traditional impact on them both. The *agenda-setting* function of the media is the close relationship between the relative emphasis the media gives to different issues and the relative importance the public places on them (Cohen, 1963; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Lazarsfeld and Merton (1960) described "*status conferral*" as coverage by the press that enhances the status or perceived importance of the person or event covered. *Meaning theory* describes the mass media as an important part of the process of communication in modern society. The media play a significant role in shaping and stabilizing the meanings experienced for the symbols of language. These meanings, in turn, shape behaviors towards those aspects of the social and physical order that are labeled by words. According to this theory, a medium like television can influence the public on how to interpret such labels as "women," "African-Americans" and "sexual attractiveness" (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1975).

Television presents African-Americans to the viewing public as deviant, threatening, and unintelligent sub-humans. Based on the agenda-setting, status conferral, and meaning theories, television news makes an indelible impression because of its visual impact and its



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tendency, by means of inertia, to shape and stabilize the meanings experienced from the symbols of language. The way to correct these negative stereotypical images would be to develop programming which examines from a "Black perspective" the African-American experience. In the media world this would require station owners, writers, producers and individuals who have the perspective to present the African-American experience. A paradigm for creating such foci of analyses that some African-American media scholars historically embraced, without the benefit of the label, is Afrocentrism. Afrocentricity involves a systematic exploration of relationships, social codes, cultural and commercial customs, mythoforms, oral traditions and proverbs of the peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora. Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of Africans in Postmodern history.

Nija: The Way is the Afrocentricity doctrine, that is, the collective expression of the Afrocentric worldview. Nija represents the inspired Afrocentric spirit found in the traditions of African-Americans. There are six parts to a Nija meeting. They are: (1) Libation to Ancestors (honors ancestors), (2) Poetry and Music Creativity (free expression of creativity), (3) Nommo: Generative Word Power (Afrocentric discussions of all the problems of the world occur), (4) Affirmation (reinforce victorious beliefs), (5) Teaching from Nija (Afrocentric ideology), and (6) Libation to Posterity.

Nommo is especially relevant to an analysis of Afrocentric television programming. Nommo is an opportunity for the discussion of problems and the place where facts are disseminated. Historical, cultural and political information can also be discussed during Nommo. An Afrocentric television program attempts to reflect all of these concepts in various forms. Afrocentric television programming is also a form of Nommo (Asante, 1989). *The Cosby Show*, although not explicating every avenue of African-American life, represents the prototype Afrocentric television program as the images produced in the show were consistently reflective of African-American culture. The direction of the programming was African-American influenced. Conversely, the *Amos and Andy* show was the antithesis of Afrocentrism. In this work Afrocentric theory is utilized to interpret how African-Americans are portrayed and should be portrayed in the influential mass media. The effects of the portrayal are inextricably intertwined to viewing habits, to the extent that viewing habits reify negative portrayals.

Research has indicated that television is significant in the lives of all African-Americans—with notable social class differences in the amount of significant effect—because they rely heavily on television as an important source of information about other African-Americans and the larger African-American community (Poindexter &

Stroman, 1981). African-American children are also more likely to be influenced by television commercials and to adopt behavior patterns from televised models than non-African-American children. Since African-American children are the heaviest prime-time television viewers, the problems associated with *agenda-setting*, *status-conferral* and *meaning* theories are thus magnified (Dates, 1980; Donohue & Donohue, 1977; Greenberg & Harneman, 1977; Heckel, Leichtman & Neely, 1973; Heckel, McCarter & Nicholas, 1971; Thelen & Soltz, 1969).

Because the media sets an agenda, confers status and interprets meaning, one effect of all this television viewing is that it legitimizes deviant, threatening and unintelligent behavior. A self-fulfilling prophecy thus emerges; television creates the problem, and because of its power and appeal, perpetuates the problem by socializing African-American youth into believing that deviant behavior is acceptable and rewarding. Furthermore, non-African-American youth are provided with only the resultant negative stereotypes of African American youth that continue to mar inter-ethnic relations.

From 1952-1969 a series of studies concluded that African-Americans: changed from low to high media usage for political news (McCombs, 1968), used television as a primary source of general and especially political information (Becker & Stroman, 1978), were devoted to news and minimally researched public affairs programs, viewed local newscasts and listened to radio news regularly, and, for older and more educated African-Americans as opposed to younger and less educated African-Americans, were more likely to be regular viewers of public affairs programs. These observations suggest African-Americans viewed television as a credible source of information concerning other African-Americans; again, the agenda-setting function of mass media. One explanation for this attitude lies in the increased visibility of African-Americans, which resulted in *status conferral*, as other media oriented African-Americans began to recognize their importance.

Given these trends as reported in the Eurocentric media, in order to further explicate this information in Afrocentric terms, it is necessary that the media directed at African-Americans embody both information and role-modeling. While the ideal is seldom achieved historically, several other programs have attempted to report, record, and portray the African-American community from the perspective of its people. The most notable of these: *Profiles in Black* (Detroit, Mi.), a series about well-known African-Americans, *Black Journal* (Detroit, Mi.), *Tony Brown's Journal* (New York, NY), and *For My People* (Detroit, Mi.)—all representative series dealing with a variety of contemporary and historical African-American issues.

Eurocentric Window Dressing

In the early days of television, African-Americans were rarely seen on the screen. A 1962 study, for example, found that three African-American faces appeared once every five hours (Lowenstein, Plotkin & Pugh, 1964). The drama of the civil rights movement, however, captured media attention. African-Americans became more visible and instilled a new awareness in the American public that they had been denied equality under the law and that they were determined to achieve it.

Television's role in publicizing the civil rights movement raised an important issue: to what extent and in what ways had television played a role in perpetuating the inequality that non-African-Americans were just beginning to perceive had been suffered by African-Americans? The first major study of this issue, popularly known as The Kerner Commission Report, investigated a series of racial disorders in order to discover what happened, why it happened, and what could be done to prevent it from happening again (Werner, 1968). The Commission Report concluded, among other things, the news media failed to communicate to the American people "on race relations, and problems of the underclass. Further the commission found the news media routine portrayal of African-Americans as part of the society was law, and presented African-Americans as whites saw them, not as they saw themselves." The Kerner Commission was concerned about the effect—on whites as well as on African-Americans—of a television world that is "almost totally white in both appearance and attitude." Inherent in this statement, made by a culturally diverse commission, lies the importance of the Afrocentric idea being represented and needed in television programming.

This indictment of the media was directed toward its portrayal of African-Americans, and the ways in which African-Americans and whites perceived African-Americans, and at how media portrayal and presentation of African-Americans contribute to the hypothesized psycho-sociological effect of African-American negative self-esteem. The key to addressing the still unfulfilled Kerner Commission documented concern lies in the willingness and the media ability to project an Afrocentric perspective.

In support of the Commission, Roberts (1975) concluded "the most notable quality of the newscasts . . . is the relatively few appearances made by African-Americans and their low visibility in those appearances." Visibility alone does not address the concern of the Commission that was not only interested in appearance but with attitudes and values expressed by African-Americans. Contemporary programming, *Black Entertainment* and *The Bill Cosby Show*, tend to take on more Afrocentric perspectives, as outlined by definitions stated

in this paper, but this is not true of television news in general. Thus, the struggle for African-American identity and value perspective television programming remains elusive.

The Kerner Commission's conclusion that a Eurocentric mass media will ultimately fail in its attempts to communicate with an audience that includes African-Americans and other Americans is no less valid approaching the 21st century than when it was published 25 years ago. The continuance of this phenomena served in part to encourage the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency which regulates the broadcast industry, to adopt policies and procedures designed to assure equal employment opportunities in all television and radio stations.

Contemporary African-American News Programming

In 1968, however, the Kerner Commission suggested that the news media should perform another function—to condition viewer's expectations regarding what is "ordinary and normal" in society. The Commission found that African-Americans were not presented in the news as a matter of routine, nor were they presented within the context of the society. Primarily, they appeared in the context of disorder. This observation is still accurate today.

From 1973-1992 researchers found: that race relations as an issue was covered in a balanced manner during a typical week of news programming by the networks (Pride & Clark, 1973), during particular incidents in which tensions were high, that coverage of the race issue tended to exacerbate racial polarization (Warren, 1972). In stories covered during 1974, 1975 & 1977 by ABC, CBS and NBC, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans rarely appeared in or reported the news; there was little news specifically devoted to the problems or achievements of these ethnic groups and women.

Harold Lasswell, a European mass media theorist, postulated in a serendipitous fashion some of the elements of Afrocentricity in his presentation of the unity of mass media functions; that is, that environment, social heritage and entertainment are inextricably intertwined as mass media functions. In presenting this hypothesis, Lasswell embraced the essence of the African aesthetic. However, results from research presented above and elsewhere in the present document indicate television news was potentially dysfunctional for African-Americans. In terms of the theorized mass media functions, therefore, the medium probably did not fulfill Lasswell's serendipitous thesis nor the Afrocentric idea. Local newscasts were also stereotypically negative, conflict oriented

(Gardner, 1983), sparsely covered African-American issues (Addessa, 1991), and promoted modern racism (Entman, 1992).

In order to more fully understand the extent of change since the Kerner Commission Report and the quality of that change, an analysis of African-American television management and ownership needs to be accomplished. Alter (1986) stated that African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans believe news coverage of their communities could be better served if there were minority representation in management, a belief which coincides with the Kerner Commission's call for better coverage of racial issues. Most of the few African-American news directors in television were either heading low-budget operations or at ethnic stations (Stone, 1987b). Alter (1986) stated "the desire to manage is partly healthy ambition and partly a reflection of unhappiness over how white-dominated news organizations cover the news."

This section explores several Nommo examples of African-American produced and directed programs. These programs were and are unique because they all sought to offer a diverse balanced perspective of African-Americans and embodied Afrocentric programming. According to Asante (1988), "When the oppressor seeks to use language and images (added) for the manipulation of our reality; Nommo, for ourselves, and of ourselves, must continue the correct path of critical analysis. Such a path is not dictated necessarily by the oppressor's rhetoric but [by] Nija for the Afro-American intellectual. Objectivism, born of the history, culture, and materials of our existence must be at the base of our talk and our essaying." The goal of these programs was to document, explore and articulate African-American political, economic, cultural issues. The programs themselves served as training programs by providing internships to African-Americans so they might enter the broadcasting market. *Profiles in Black* and WPCR-TV represent two examples.

An analysis of the conception, creative format, audience feedback, and content analysis of *Profiles* demonstrated that *Profiles* portrayed African-Americans realistically in its broadcasts, reversing the trend of portraying African-Americans as deviants (Tait, 1989). Gilbert Maddox, *Profiles* host and producer, made the following observations, published by *The Detroit News*:

We black people are moving in the direction of establishing identities, of gaining political, economic and social control of the black community. We are not opposed to the white community, but we want to make our own community as viable as possible . . . The series will show the full range of people comprising the black population—the professionals who have succeeded, ADC mothers with their problems and hopes, young students, conservative and militant clergymen . . . (Maddox, 1978)

Maddox demonstrates in this published statement essential ideas of Afrocentric theory by showing the interrelatedness of all African-Americans transcending social status and class. Maddox thus enlarges the American universal discourse because he embodies the whole spectrum of Black culture and allows African-American voices to speak for themselves without imposing definitions.

A half-hour weekly television community service series, WWJ-TV (Detroit) filmed and broadcast *Profiles* initially during prime time (Saturday, 8:30 p.m.) from November 1969 through December 1979. Developed because of WWJ-TV's desire to operate more effectively in the public interest and, additionally, to employ increased numbers of African-American, *Profiles* became WWJ's response to the Kerner Commission Report.

Maddox portrayed the African-American community's hopes and frustrations as well as highlighted their accomplishments and achievements. One technique he employed was to interview guests in their homes with their families to display their degree of community involvement. Maddox presented African-American professionals, politically active persons such as retired Congressman George Crockett (a former Judge) and Mayor Coleman Young; significant events such as the NAACP Freedom Fund dinner, that organization's annual fund raiser, usually featuring some nationally renowned speaker; the historical contributions of Paul Robeson and Malcolm X; contributions of the working class; Detroit's African-American and African-American controlled institutions such as Homes for Black Children; and the community's dissident voices, including those of the Minister of the Nation of Islam. These stories appealed to youths, adults, Caucasians, African-Americans, female and male audiences, and also showed alternative role models available in the African-American community (Maddox, 1978).

Throughout its ten-year history, *Profiles* continued its presentation of public affairs programming for the Metropolitan Detroit viewer. According to Frank Angelo (1974): "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." Prior to producing, hosting and directing *Profiles*, Maddox was responsible for a number of other programs with similar objectives of those of *Profiles*, most notably: *Black and Unknown Bards*, *Negro History Series*, *Office of Economic Opportunity*, *Mayor's Development Team Report*, and *C.P.T. (Colored Peoples' Time) Television Program*. Maddox's work as chronicled in this discussion revealed that he was deeply grounded in the applied aspects of Afrocentricity, before *Profiles*, subsequent to, and concomitant to such scholars as M. Karenga (Kawaida theory) and M. Asante (Afrocentricity). *Profiles* reflected Afrocentric programming.

The relationship between Afrocentricity and ownership can best be understood by reviewing the work of Fife (1979). She found that: African-American ownership does impact images in the news, such images are influenced by philosophies of ownership and philosophies of ownership are in turn influenced by community characteristics.

WGPR-TV debuted September 1974, and holds the distinction of being the first black-owned and operated TV station in the U.S. It is owned and operated by the International F.M. and A.M. Modern Masons and Eastern Star, a fraternal organization founded by William V Banks, the first President and General Manager of WGPR, Inc., who also owns Detroit radio station WGPR-FM since 1964.

WGPR's philosophy is that African-American Detroiters deserve a television station attuned to their community in the same way that the "mainstream" media are attuned to the white community. WGPR's stated purpose is to provide African-American Detroiters the opportunity to have experiences with the broadcast industry, so they stress training and community access, and they emphasize a Black perspective to the largest degree possible.

WGPR aired several hours daily of locally-produced programming including "Big City News," discontinued in 1992, a 30-minute, Monday through Friday newscast. Both themanagement and ownership see "Big City News" (BCN) as focusing on the African-American community, while complementing mainstream media with alternative aspects on current events. BCN uses the same newscast format as larer operations. Crews are sent out on assignment of general news events as well as specific events in the African-American community not covered by mainstream media. Management stresses that a BCN viewer could not watch other stations and still feel adequately informed on Detroit news, with the unique asset of getting that news from an African-American perspective. By "African-American perspective," management means that 1) the implications of issues for minorities are discussed, and 2) the participation of African-American leaders in area events is fairly and fully covered. BCN sees itself as "commitment coverage" to represent the African-American community.

To that end, WGPR monitors their syndicated news sources for stories about African-American issues to supplement local coverage. They sometimes contact syndication services to complain about the dearth of

African-American issues to supplement their local coverage. They include as many visible minorities in stories as possible, including neighborhood leaders as much as city-wide or national leaders. They especially try to showcase "success stories" of African-Americans. Results from a content analysis of WGPR-TV programming showed that the programming reflects the station's philosophy.

Thus the essence of WGPR's television programming philosophy is Afrocentric because it places African ideals at the center of its programming philosophy and the ownership does not separate itself from the community, it is part of the community. It is also unique reporting in that it exemplifies the "caring or nurturing mythoform" that is part of the Afrocentric idea (Asante, 1987).

These two programs (*Profiles* and WGPR-TV) were directly successful in their attempts to address the issues raised by the 1968 Kerner Commission Report. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that African-American producers and directors designed programs to present African-American family life and social issues as ordinary and normal subject matter. Such achievements were accomplished where African-Americans were in policy-making positions. However, even this sparse programming accomplishment could hardly have occurred without the Kerner Report's findings and its subsequent effect on FCC policy.

Research discussed in this paper and conducted over a period of years documented the neglect of African-Americans in the news. Research designs of this study focused on African-Americans in the news and in the production of news programming. *Profiles in Black* and WGPR addressed issues raised by the Kerner Commission Report; to wit, that African-Americans were not being represented and were not, moreover, being presented in an Afrocentric context. The two programs surveyed present family and social issues from a patently African-American perspective.

One implication to be drawn from this initial study is that the strongest impact on the portrayal of African-Americans in the news appears to be achieved when African-Americans influence the conception and the news selection process. The studies indicate change is occurring, although from all accounts, such change appears to be painfully slow. We found that, although Afrocentricity had not been fully or faithfully articulated, these programs clearly operated within the spirit and context embraced by the philosophy.

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