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# Afrocentric Television Programming

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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

We propose 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

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An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Western Journal of Black Studies*; 1994, 18, 4, Winter, 195–200 and is adapted/reprinted with the permission of the copyright holder/author.

programs to adequately serve their informational needs (Poindexter & Stroman, 1981; Gardner, 1983; Addressa, 1991; Entman, 1992). Specifically, we propose 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" (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975).

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

"Njia: The Way" is the Afrocentricity doctrine, that is, the collective expression of the Afrocentric worldview. Njia represents the inspired Afrocentric spirit found in the traditions of African-Americans. There are six parts to a Njia meeting. They are: (1) Libation to Ancestors (honors ancestors), (2) Poetry and Music Creativity (free expression of creativity), (3) Nommo: Generative Word Power (includes Afrocentric discussions of all the problems of the world), (4) Affirmation (reinforces victorious beliefs), (5) Teaching from Njia (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, 1988). *The Cosby Show*, although not explicating every avenue of African-American life, represents the prototypical 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, 1970; Neely, Heckel, & Leichtman, 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. Research supports “cultivation analysis”; the belief that frequent exposure to television cultivates viewers’ perceptions consistent with images projected by television. In this case, frequent exposure to television portrayals of African-Americans cultivates viewer beliefs and images consistent with the dominant cultural perspective on television (Gerbner et al., 1977, 1980, 1982; Dorr, 1982; Matabane, 1988; Gandy and Matabane, 1989; Meritt and Stroman, 1993).

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. 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 di-

rected 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), are all representative programs 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 media's routine portrayal of African-Americans as part of the society was low 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 how media portrayal and presentation of African-Americans contributed to the hypothesized psycho-socio 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's 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, which was interested not only in appearance but with attitudes and values expressed by African-Americans. Contemporary programming, *Black Entertainment* and *The Cosby Show*, tend to take on

more Afrocentric perspectives, as outlined by our definitions, 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 as we approach 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.

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 in 1996.

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), but during particular incidents in which tensions were high, coverage of the race issue tended to exacerbate racial polarization (Warren, 1972). In stories covered during 1974, 1975, and 1977 by ABC, CBS, and NBC, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans (ALANA) rarely appeared in or reported the news (*Window Dressing on the Set*, 1977); there was little news specifically devoted to the problems or achievements of these ethnic groups and women. Ziegler and White (1990) found in a sample of three composite weeks over two years (1987–89) that only seven percent of network correspondents were ALANA; they covered seven percent of the stories. Stroman, et al. (1995) reported that ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox tended to present African-American fictional characters with undeveloped backgrounds, unknown occupations and family connections and continuing restrictions in depictions especially for females. Finally, Foote (1994) stated that from 1988 through 1992, 29 ALANA correspondents appeared on the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC. Seventeen were African-Americans, Asians (5), and Latinos (5).

Harold Lasswell (1948), 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 indicated 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 or the Afrocentric idea. Local newscasts also negatively stereotyped African-Americans (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 ALANA believe news coverage of their communities could be better served if there were ALANA representation in management, a belief which coin-

cided 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, 1987). 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."

In this section we explore 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] Njia 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, and cultural issues. The programs themselves served as training programs by providing internships to African-Americans so they might enter the broadcasting market. *For My People*, *Profiles in Black* and WPGR-TV represent three examples.

An analysis of the conception, creative format, audience feedback, and content analysis of *Profiles in Black* demonstrated that *Profiles in Black* portrayed African-Americans realistically in its broadcasts, reversing the trend of portraying African-Americans as deviants (Tait, 1989). Gilbert Maddox, *Profiles in Black* 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. . . . (Judge, 1969)

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 in Black* 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-Americans, *Profiles in Black* 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, Anglo-Saxons, 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 in Black* 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 in Black*, Maddox was responsible for a number of other programs with similar objectives to those of *Profiles in Black*, most notably: *Black and Unknown Bards*, *Negro History Series*, *Office of Economic Opportunity*, *Mayor's Development Team Report*, and *C.P.T. (Colored People's 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 in Black*, subsequent to, and concomitant to such scholars as M. Karenga (1982) and M. Asante (1988). *Profiles in Black* reflected Afrocentric programming.

One response to the inequities in the media was initiated by Project BAIT with the show *For My People*. Television was viewed as a way to serve "The Struggle," i.e. the Black Power struggle. The resulting television show, *For My People* was planned as a continuation of the Black Power Movement. David Rambeau is the executive producer/director and interviewer of *For My People*, the longest-running program dedicated to the news and public affairs information needs of African-Americans in Detroit. *For My People* airs weekly on Detroit FOX network affiliate WKBD Channel 50 (Rambeau Project BAIT files, 1987, p. 1, personal communication). The overall programming focus is community-based public affairs information and aired for the first time in December 1970. In 1971, *For My People* also began a 10-year run on WDET, Detroit's public radio station (Rambeau Project BAIT files, 1987, personal communication). *For My People* airs on WKBD Channel 50 on Saturday mornings between 6 am and 7 am, and at present is a one hour show but began as a half hour show. Channel 50 maintains records regarding issues discussed on *For My People* and guests which appear on the show.

*For My People* also airs seven-days-a-week on Detroit-based independent cable station Barden Cable on a rotating schedule. *For My People* airs on Barden Cable channel 67 to a possible audience of 119,000 subscribers in the city of Detroit only. Barden Cable does not maintain ratings information, nor has public access personnel indicated receiving any viewer responses as a result of the show (Winkfield, 1994).

Topics for discussion should focus primarily on economics/finance, politics, education, and social struggle (Project BAIT Manual, 1983, p. 1, personal communication). *For My People* interviews consist of an African-American Project BAIT interviewer and an African-American guest. Guests are ordinarily from a African-American organization, and discuss a topic from the African-American perspec-

tive that is of basic interest to the survival of prosperity of the African-American community (Project BAIT Manual, 1983, personal communication). Essentially Afrocentrism is a conscious effort to use African-Americans as sources and references on any subjects, and seek only the expertise of African-Americans. Whenever guests are solicited from any organization for the show, African-Americans are explicitly requested, the purpose of which is to hold local African-American political and economic leaders accountable to the issues discussed (Rambeau Interview, personal communication 1992).

Rambeau hopes that the interview format transmits Afrocentrism by directing the audience to view the discussion within the context of Afrocentrism (Rambeau Interview, 1992, personal communication). The production staff of *For My People* consists of Project BAIT workshop members who view Project BAIT as a "school" of art and communication. It offers hands-on training and experience in video production among other activities that encourage faculty and students to become actively involved in their community (Rambeau Project BAIT files, 1987, personal communication). To demonstrate the Afrocentric focus, the host of the interview wears a traditional African dashiki. As expressed by the producer/host/founder, David Rambeau, the Project BAIT Afrocentric ideals with regard to all projects, including *For My People*, are:

- That African-Americans are the focal point of any and all concerns.
- That any issue is validated with respect to its impact on the African-American community.
- That the discussion format of *For My People* is not accountable to represent, nor interested in the Eurocentric viewpoint.

Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist ideology (referred to here as Afrocentrism) as outlined in the Project BAIT membership training manual of 1982 is as follows:

BAIT is a Black Nationalist or/and Pan-Africanist organization. Study of either or both of these political positions can and must be done. We don't push this ideology on members but it should be clear to everyone that this is our position. Most folk enter without any kind of conscious position. Within the group we ask people to do certain tasks that if they possessed a nationalist philosophy they would do automatically. This is perhaps best since people generally don't (want) ideology, they want skills, jobs, etc. The leadership merely gives them assignments or tasks that fulfill a nationalist's ideology and ordinarily folk will be along simply because it is in their own best interest anyway. However, there must be some consciousness-raising in the group about our relationship to each other, to our community (that's why among other reasons we request that members bank at the Black bank) and to the other communities that we come in contact with. When there are differences of position on a particular question we don't make our decision on an arbitrary basis. We attempt to make our decisions in congruence with our philosophy of life, and that is Black nationalism." (BAIT Notes On Practice, 1982, p. 7, personal communication).

According to Rambeau, *For My People* is still on the air because it serves Channel 50 as a foil against complaints concerning equal representation because, within the African-American community, *For My People* covers news and public affairs programming by, for, and about African-American people.

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 in September 1974, and holds the distinction of being the first black-owned and operated TV station in the United States. It was owned and operated by the International F.M. and A.M. Modern Masons and Eastern Star, a fraternal organization founded by Dr. William V. Banks, the first President and General Manager of WGPR, Inc., who also owns Detroit radio station WPGR-FM. CBS purchased WGPR-TV in September, 1993.

WPGR's philosophy was that African-American Detroiters deserved a television station attuned to their community in the same way that the "mainstream" media are attuned to the Anglo-Saxon community. WGPR's stated purpose was to provide African-American Detroiters the opportunity to have experiences with the broadcast industry, so they stressed training and community access. They emphasized an African-American 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 the management and ownership saw "Big City News" (BCN) as focusing on the African-American community, while complementing mainstream media with alternative aspects on current events. BCN used the same newscast format as larger operations. Crews were sent out on assignments 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 saw itself as "commitment coverage" to represent the African-American community.

To that end, WGPR monitored their syndicated news sources for stories about African-American issues to supplement local coverage. They sometimes contacted syndication services to complain about the dearth of African-American issues to supplement their local coverage. They included as many visible minorities in stories as possible, including neighborhood leaders as much as city-wide or national leaders. They especially tried to showcase "success stories" of African-Americans. Results from a content analysis of WPGR-TV programming showed that the programming reflects the station's philosophy.

Thus the essence of WGPR's television programming philosophy was Afrocentric because it placed African ideals at the center of its programming philosophy. The ownership did not separate itself from the community; it was a part of the community. It was also unique reporting in that it exemplified the "caring or nurturing mythoform" that is part of the Afrocentric idea (Asante, 1988).

*For My People, Profiles in Black* 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 accom-

plished when African-Americans were in policy-making positions. However, even this sparse programming accomplishment could hardly have occurred without the Kerner Commission 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. *For My People, 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 programs surveyed presented 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 indicated 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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