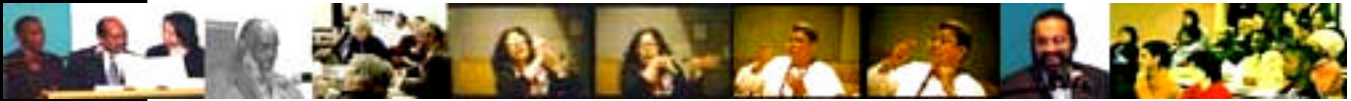


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BLACK WOMEN & THE MEDIA

Solutions Toward A Social Change Agenda

In January 1994, MIT and Radcliffe Colleges sponsored a national conference entitled "Black Women in the Academy Defending our Name." Several thousand people showed up to hear a wide variety of diverse speakers address Black Women's issues, including the renowned Angela Davis, the controversial Anita Hill, and the first black woman President of Spelman College, Johnetta B. Cole. IITE President, Paula Robinson designed, coordinated and hosted a symposium for the conference entitled "Black Women and The Media; Solutions Toward a Social Change Agenda." One hundred and seventy-five people (175) attended the symposium, which was audio, and video taped. This transcript is by, for and about the black women (and several men) that attended, preserving the voice of the people.

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Black Women & The Media

Solutions Toward A Social Change Agenda

Strategies for Utilizing Media for Solutions Toward Social Change



Overview The workshop Black Women and the Media (BWMN) focused on a brief historical analysis and review of socio-economic issues surrounding mass media, as well as strategies for utilizing media for social change/development. Our review spanned from 1894 - 1994, analyzing what solutions toward a social change agenda had worked in the past and what wasn't working. The theme "What is the Influence of Media on Black Women and How Can Black Women Have More Control Over the Media," was the main question given out in a forum of 175 attendees. The forum was created in such a way that the influence of mass-media on black women could be examined closely through critical dialogue, with a purposive sampling of black women from across the United States. In addition, a panel of black women who worked in the media presented their experiences as a frame of reference from the producer's side of the story.

values and attitudes are expressed in the media, implicitly as well as explicitly. On the other hand media may function as a source of norms and values. In other words, the media may provide the initial definitions of social phenomena. One student argued that where local cultures offer no social guide for what is good or bad in a particular situation, the media may reach a person directly and carry heavy weight in such value definition." Dr. Wormie L. Reed¹ Media has always been used to educate and therefore socialize the American public. The first concepts of media were paintings of scenes depicted on cave walls. Eventually there were scrolls of papyrus which evolved into paper, and animated drawings which evolved into film and television. Our socialization as human beings has been handed down from generation to generation using these forms of media to clearly illustrate our thoughts, history and values. Those who have had control over the media, have had control over journalizing life, however they saw fit to do so. Slave traders successfully initiated the practice of using mass-media to create stereotypes. They marketed and sold blacks by defining them for menial work roles, propagating lack of intelligence, animalistic physical strength, and vapidty. During the Industrial Revolution, when the least privileged European immigrant women relegated to the mills were recognized as a working class, although poor; black women were denied even this social status. Today, the residual effects of: the African slave trade, the Industrial Revolution, and the exploitation of capitalism bring new paradigms to bear on the black community; and black women in particular. There is a strange paradox that lies in the dichotomy between advertisers and their host media regarding their respective views of women of color. To the advertiser she is a glamorized shill and the designated bellwether of a \$216 billion market (National Urban League 1994). On the other hand, in the editorial world-view she is presented consistently as abused, welfare-dependant, and doomed. Sexy marketing tool or social problem? In their respective spheres these images have become accepted and exploited by marketers and editorial boards. That both images are without substantive reality has not prevented them from becoming cliché's.

I interviewed approximately 1500 youths and adults in Public Schools, workshops and conferences, on the subject of media and its influence. Many commonalities and themes emerged. Three key highlights (2 observations and 1 recommendation) are included here for the purpose of this paper. 1. The Influence of media is undeniable (i.e. print, radio, television and movies) on the socialization process. 2. Under normal circumstances black women affected by negative media have no voice. Additionally, media often holds black women responsible for the negative or stereotyped behavior it portrays of black men and youths. 3. Establish an oversight committee to monitor mass media with a mandate to conduct, on a yearly basis, a critical review of media reporting and provide recommendations.

Workshop Presenters : Moderator: Paula Robinson, Marketing Specialist
Panelist: Sarah Ann Shaw, News Reporter, Channel 4 Panelist: Beth Deare, Independent Film Producer
Panelist: Elaine Ray, Editorial Board, The Boston Globe Panelist: Laura Brown, Independent Television Producer. Audience
174 participants.

BLACK WOMEN AND THE MEDIA; and strategies for utilizing media for SOLUTIONS TOWARD A SOCIAL CHANGE AGENDA.

Introduction, Paula: I have selected a group of panelists whom I have known and respect the work of, and who can speak to some of the issues. They will help us move forward into the year 2000, beginning with redefining how women, and especially, how black women are portrayed. We're going to review how we've been stereotyped; and what we've been doing to create "social-change movements" over the past 100 years. We will also review how our images and personalities can be defined and re-defined in the future; and what impact we can have in shaping that perspective. My background is in Marketing. This field has given me a lot of insight about how we are viewed as an audience by: people who define us; people who try to sell us things; and

are women, there are men, who know about this who are, perhaps, from the country. Why don't we get them to be our expert instead of a white person?" And they say, "oh well, we know so and so." So I say, "it doesn't matter if you know so and so, having this person as an expert can give you a different perspective." For a little while there will be an effort to bring in other kinds of experts and then it returns to where it was before. Community stories really aren't news any more. Trying to change conditions really isn't news anymore, and that is unfortunate from my vantage point. Because young people who watch television, when they see images on a regular basis which are more negative than they are positive, cannot start to develop a sense of knowing who they are and what their people have accomplished. And unless we as a people start demanding through a variety of different ways, which will be part of the later discussion, that some of this change, we are going to have a generation of young people who are not going to know who they are-and what they have accomplished. It is difficult for me being a television reporter now-a-days, because the things that are important to me are often not that important to younger people who come into the business. A lot of the young people who have come into the business weren't born during the 60's, so what happened then is old news. What is important to them now is: where am I going and, sort of being more amenable to what management wants. As a result, you don't have unity within stations. To a great degree, people say in concert, this is what we should be doing. But, only on rare occasions do you have people of color working together toward a shared goal: of better coverage, to hire more minorities, and more fairness. I don't know what the solution is, I hope that we can find one during the question and answer period.

ELAINE RAY: I'm on the editorial board of the Boston Globe. I not really sure how I ended up in the business, accept that, well, my father was a Newspaper person. He worked for the Pittsburgh Courier which was, during the 40's and 50's, one of the premier voices of protest among the Black Newspapers in the country. My mother, who was a social worker and a

teacher, would not miss an opportunity to tell me not to become a teacher or a social worker. Go into some other business, because there are too many black women in teaching and in social work," she'd say. And I like to write, my inclination probably would have been to write poetry-but it was also instilled in me, particularly by my mother, that I needed to be able to eat and survive-so I ended up in publishing. One of my earliest recollections of images in the print media was a cover on Ebony Magazine that asked the question: "Are Negro Girls Getting Prettier?" And it sort of suggested that somehow we needed to, and that we weren't-but maybe there was hope for us yet. I was in High School in 1970, when the first issue of "Essence" Magazine came out. Finally, it was a magazine who's premise was that black women had always been beautiful and that was very affirming. I ended up going to Essence to work several years later. And although there were times when the magazine might have gone very far in another direction to protect the image of black women; I think there was a conscientious effort, and I'm sure there still is, to present black women-not only as beautiful but also multi-dimensional. They presented various professions, various hair textures, various skin colors, various economic levels, various points of view, sexual orientation, the whole gamut. It was a very affirming experience to be able to work somewhere where the effort was to counter negative images that were in the white and some of the Black, media. I started out not in newspapers or magazines, but in book publishing. My first job was at Houghton Mifflin on Beacon Street, in the Art department of the textbook division. Their effort was to make sure that there were a percentage of: African-Americans, Latinos, Asians or other, and whites, in every textbook . And, it was supposed to be 50% female and 50% male. The art editors were extremely resistant and resentful that they had to be conscious of this. That was in 1976, and things have not changed, as I can tell, in the media in general. So imagine my shock when I ended up on the Editorial Board of the Boston Globe where, among seven or eight editorial board members, I was the only person of color-I still am; and one of only two women, there are now three. Imagine being at a Newspaper that has

demonstrated time and time again that it just doesn't get it when it comes to images of black people and black women? As a member of the Editorial Board, and a member of the staff at the Globe, I find myself constantly sending messages to editors. For instance, there was a calendar for mothers day with little pictures (they were all kinda weird), but all of the Black women had really round faces, big smiles and they looked liked "Topsy." Several of us sent messages to the editor of the calendar, to the designer, and nobody seemed to understand why we were so upset. This is the most disheartening thing, because you hope that at least if you call their attention to it, they won't do it again. But the problem is, that often times, they don't understand what the problem is. It is a constant struggle, for instance saying in an editorial board meeting: "The next time you write something about the Fernald School and the radiation experience, or the radiation experiments, please make sure to mention that Hazel O'Leary has done a great job." I don't think that anybody would have to remind them to say that some white male cabinet person or administration person did a good job. But they need a constant reminder that they need to affirm black women when they do a good job. Imagine that.

BETH DEARE: Basically, I wanted to bring a couple of ideas to the table today, one of them was a project that I was involved in for the past three or four years, actually much longer, that turned out to be one of the greatest pleasures of my life. I was involved in the making of a film for the American Experience Series on P.B.S., which basically reviewed the participation of people of color, primarily Black people in the media and in film making. I did know a lot of the history, I admit, I am a history buff, but there were so many side aspects of this and I thought it was important to share some of this story. This is a wonderful cross generational audience, there are probably a lot of people here who do remember something about Race Movie History. But for those of you that don't know: the Race Movie industry itself represents the making of film by, for, and about black people; distributed through a black network. It was an industry which thrived here in America between 1910 and

1950 where over 500 or more films were made; feature length silent and talkie. And in addition, those films were shown throughout a network of, between 500 and 800, black owned theaters. Cities like Cleveland and Chicago might have 10-15 Black owned theaters named after people like Booker T, Lincoln, etc. Anytime you go through town and see movie theaters named after people that sound right to you, those were more than likely black theaters at one time. It is very interesting how many people are not aware that the Lincoln down on Broad street used to be a totally black owned theater, and part of a chain of black owned theaters; that stretched from north to south and east to west in America. In response to the kind of negative imagery that prevailed even from the very beginning of film making in America, black people were there. They were on the front line saying, oh no buddy, your not going to make a movie about me and have me look like a fool, or misrepresent my family, or my culture, or my issues, without a response. And the way in which black people responded was in the making of what is known today as Race Movies. These movies were in fact financed by black people, they issued stocks, they made corporations. Just like in a current movie where you see Amblin Entertainment, presents a Warner Brothers Production, by Stephen Spielberg and all of his friends; that same thing has been going on for a long time. The bottom line is that as a people, we have had the energy, the "wherewithal", the social consciousness, the commitment, the talent, the skill and the equipment. There were black film studios in Philadelphia, Chicago, New York and California, actual studios that looked just like Twentieth Century Fox looks today. Now there are some elements in terms of the tide of the times and change that affected what we now view as Race Movies. A lot of that had to do with the complete and total domination of the American theater by the Hollywood studios. So that the more theaters they owned, the fewer black movies they were obliged to show. The other thing that tremendously affected us toward the end of the race movie era was the second world war, which took many of our film makers out of the country, onto the battlefields; and then when they came back-integration. So black folks that

had been confined for sixty or seventy years to a little mom and pop black owned theater could now go to 42nd Street; and for many that was what they had yearned and longed for. Little did we know that it would in effect cut off our avenue of seeing films produced by and for us, and financed by and for us. Because this conference is about women, I would like to say that it was not just a man's battle that was being fought. Much of the money that made these early Race Movies, came out of the black womens' community. There was a black womens' club movement that played a very prominent role in "defending our name." Thank you.

LAURA BROWN: During my 3 and 1/2 years producing black public affairs programs for Channel 5: I learned that we didn't use Rap music, because Rap music wasn't acceptable to white men. We had to focus on people of lighter tones, because darker toned people were hard to light and that upset our technicians. We shied away from dialects because they posed for problems for general viewers. When we looked for individual spokes-persons for certain issues, it was asked: "How many degrees were they layered with?" Not: "How active they have been in the cause?" So unfortunately, we people of color became colorless and lifeless on our own shows. I was surprised in the field, by how many more white people knew more about our programming than we did; and I learned that it was because we weren't watching. Black Public Affairs programs were set up to balance the images that we see of ourselves on the news and prime time TV, yet they were placed in time slots that everyone forgot. The shows aired when we were out doing our shopping, in church, or taking care of our families. And that is somewhat disconcerting. But still Sarah Ann, and so many of the others who remain in the stations (and there are fewer and fewer as each day passes), are people who desire to bring out our diversity and the range of our experience. And I believe that their task is important. It seems as if blacks are shown more and more on television, but in reality our numbers are dwindling; we reached our peak of appearances on television in the middle 80's. Since then we have been diminishing within the

order to show the black community as multi-dimensional and culturally diverse, mass-media should develop more community contact that it may educate itself about covering events important to the community. There should also be more affirmation of black people who do good work. In response to negative imagery, blacks should take personal responsibility for the way their images are portrayed by developing television productions, films and other media. They should also finance and show them in time slots and distribution centers designed for black culture and lifestyles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Establish a community based committee who's purpose is to develop a business plan, which details consistent long-term financing and responsibilities of a media center.

2) Develop an organizational vehicle to carry forth the business plan using communication from residents and institutions as raw data to move the organization forward.

Endnote 1. Introduction "Racial Stereotyping: The Role of the Media," February, 1990 William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts/Boston.