

Black Press, White Media, and Black Reporters: How Can We Coexist

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On August 9, 2005, the founder of Jet, Ebony, and Black Enterprise magazines, John H. Johnson, passed away. The media mogul devoted 60 years of his life to building up his business, and paid millions of dollars toward accomplishing his endeavors, which were a huge contribution to the world of journalism. While the Chicago Defender, a newspaper that appeals to its black readership, dedicated 16 separate articles to Johnson, the Wall Street Journal wrote a one line blurb that said: “Died: John H. Johnson, 87, publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, in Chicago” (Martin). This example is indicative of the bias that exists in mainstream media, and is one of the main reasons that publications which target the African-American population, were born and are alive today. In this paper, I intend to further discuss why such publications came to exist, the purpose they serve, and the problems that black reporters have and still face to today. I also intend to examine possible suggestions in resolving the issues that black reporters endure.

Black Press and its Purpose

Even today, there is a difference between white media or mainstream media, and the black press. Roland Wolseley, writer of The Black Press, USA, defines the black press in three ways. Wolseley believes that for a publication to be considered a black publication: it first must be owned and managed by blacks; second, it must be intended for its black consumers; and third, it must “serve, speak, and fight for the black minority” (Wolseley). By Wolseley’s definition, consumers should be able to establish, and understand the purpose of the black publication. But before we get further into the black press and its purpose, we will attempt to understand why such publications came to be.

From the very first African-American publication, the purpose and objective was the fight for a worthy cause, equality. The first black publications, Freedom’s Journal and Rights of All, published in New York between the years of 1827 and 1830, were created to appeal to anti-

slavery abolitionists in the North. Both journals, the brainchildren of John B. Russworm, were issued in an effort to free those Africans who were still being enslaved in the South (Penn). Today, although we are no longer writing in an effort to abolish legal slavery, we are working to attain a certain freedom of speech and self that African-Americans have been deprived of in this country. It is clear that black publications do exist and have a significant place in our society.

Bias in Mainstream Media

After the Reconstruction era many blacks in the state of Mississippi were deprived of the right to vote. This deprivation occurred because the state law changed in 1890 to include a new prerequisite, that all voters be able to read and understand the Constitution (Martindale). The number of African-Americans who were able to vote dwindled down to about 2% of the original 190,000 that were registered to vote prior to the amended Constitution. And those blacks who tried to register to vote encountered death, physical threats and financial punishment (Martindale). Most mainstream publications were aware of this problem, but they ignored it. There had been several riots, protest marches and beatings, but the story only got national news coverage when two of the white protestors were found dead (Martindale). The mainstream media had the opportunity to cover this issue from the beginning, but they refused to approach it because it was of no interest to the local publications and their white readership. This story would have been front-page material for any black publication, but at the time there were very few, if any, black publications in circulation.

In an article written by Karen M. Rowley and David D. Kurpius entitled, “Separate and Still Unequal: A Comparative Study of Blacks in Business Magazines,” Rowley and Kurpius examined the way different publications handled the same topic. The study compared three business magazines: Forbes, Fortune, and Black Enterprise. While the first two publications focused on the white dominated corporate world, excluding blacks from its pages, Black Enterprise handled the topic by focusing on the success of the black business community (Rowley and Kurpius). Both examples reveal the way mainstream media tends to handle the African-American community and our issues. The white press is careful to report on those issues and topics that directly affect or relate to their white readership, but they often neglect the black population. This is a problem which many black reporters realized and tried to rectify, in order to give blacks a voice in the media.

Black Media and Why We Need It

We have already established that there is a distinct difference between mainstream media, and what is considered black media or the black press. These mediums serve two separate and distinct purposes. What I never fully understood is why black people have to have their own newspapers and magazines when the press' job is to serve its readership with the truth? Journalism should be an unbiased, ethical profession that does its best to report the news, with the main intention of providing accurate information. But the fact is that there is a bias in mainstream media. One of the major problems with mainstream media is its depiction of African-Americans. The roots of this negative depiction can be traced back to the 1960s. After the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, in 1954, to desegregate schools, blacks began to fight for the same civil liberties in other areas. While the black community was protesting in favor of the desegregation, whites were fighting against it. There were boycotts, sit-ins, and protests that began in the South, but flared up in parts of the North and West. President Johnson recognized the racial tension and appointed the National Advisory Commission, in 1968, to confront these issues. The NAC, also known as the Kerner Commission, was originally created to investigate the ghetto-riots that were breaking out at that time (Martindale). The commission found that the media had failed at their attempts to fairly report on the underlying issues and circumstances surrounding the rioting. Overall, the commission found that the media neglected to report on what it meant to be black in America (Martindale). The rioting and protesting was the result of blacks wanting the same rights as any white American, but the media depicted the black protestors as trouble makers, instead of freedom seekers. When reporters neglect to do their jobs properly, the audience is misinformed, and this misinformation is the root of stereotypes and stigmas that a culture is subjected to. In a study done by a group of sociologists, a faction of whites in Indianapolis were surveyed about blacks and the results revealed that 58.2% of whites felt that blacks are lazy, and 77.8% believed that blacks do not try as hard as they should to seek employment (Entman and Rojecki). The ideas and stigmas affiliated with black people were either created by, or perpetuated by the press and its inability to report the news thoroughly. This would be an example of the reasoning behind the birth of the black press. Black reporters understood the need for an unbiased depiction of blacks and other minorities in the news, and realized that mainstream media had failed at supplying that need.

White Media, Misinformed Audience

Those of us who have or will dedicate our lives in the pursuit of a good story know the importance of supplying our audience with all the necessary and important aspects of every story. We understand that our opinion has no place in hard news and we need not include it to effectively report the news. When a reporter or publication does not understand this objective, the readership or audience suffers. If the only image the audience is exposed to sheds a negative or an undesirable light on a specific culture, that audience will be more inclined to believe that perception. The media and popular culture can be described as "the cultural and social sites where theoretical abstraction and cultural representation come down to earth, percolating through the imagination of America" (Entman and Rojecki). In other words, mainstream media and popular culture control the images and therefore the stereotypes that exist in this country. Carolyn Martindale, in The White Press and Black America, found that media coverage of African-Americans and their cultural problems are not a huge concern of its predominantly white audience. Because of this problem, the only time African-Americans become newsworthy is when they act out as a result of their daily tensions, like racial violence or demonstrations (47). Ordinarily whites are not concerned with what happens in the black ghetto. The depiction of African-Americans in mainstream media plays a large part in the birth of many black publications. And for a while, pre-civil rights movement, many African-American periodicals reveled in their success in maintaining their objective of giving the black community a voice. Even in the midst of the Depression, the black press was flourishing. But change came during the civil rights movement, and although no one really knows what caused the decline, black publications were no longer being patronized and many of these journals folded, leaving black journalists no other options but to join white owned publications (Wilson). What could have been a positive turning point became another hurdle for black reporters, and brought on a new set of problems.

Mainstream Media and Black Reporters

The onslaught of African-American journalists in white media brought on a whole new set of issues. According to Clint C. Wilson II, in Black Journalists in Paradox: Historical Perspectives and Current Dilemmas, the already established black press lost its momentum around the 1970s, and many black publications diminished during this period. America was thrust into the civil rights movement. Dr. King was

standing tall amongst a group of black activists, the NAACP had triumphed in litigation, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, and the assassination of Malcolm X brought on rioting in Watts, California. Mainstream media had taken a position of equality but neglected to take that stance in the newsroom, and in the midst of it all, the black press had lost its voice (84-85). By the time the dust had settled, the white press had bought many of the black publications. Black reporters, who had once owned and run their own publications, found themselves working for and taking orders from white editors. The new situation meant that the objective the black press was once dedicated to got lost in the transition. During the early 1970s, journalist Dorothy Gilliam quoted a Chicago reporter who said that there was, “little opportunity for black reporters to deal in depth with the basic issues which affect black people...By the time a story runs the gamut of white editors, he said, often it is ‘laundered if not eliminated’”(Martindale). This issue is not isolated to the 1970s. Earl Caldwell attested to dealing with the same problem when he admitted that he was forced to drop a by-line that his editor, working for The New York Daily News, refused to send to print. The story was about a corrupt white cop who had sexually assaulted a group of African and Cuban male immigrants, and the article Caldwell was working on could have been used in court as evidence to convict that cop (Jue). Caldwell’s situation, not unlike the normal experience for black reporters, is indicative of the struggle that still exists between white editors and their minority employees.

The problem in the newsroom was a product of the bias and indifference between the two groups. Because of the immediacy of the convergence between the black press and mainstream media, many African-Americans who were formerly in authoritative positions found themselves taking orders from white men in power. The staff of the average mainstream publication was usually composed of white males. While the blacks were getting hired to cover certain stories, the newsroom hierarchy prohibited them from having any say about which stories the publication would run (Wilson). The newsroom tension between the white editors and black reporters caused a conflict that made it difficult for black reporters to continue to write for the white press. Caldwell’s experience with The Daily News gave him the impression that mainstream media is so unethical that blacks do not have a chance in this venue (Jue). However, in spite of that tension, many black reporters managed to make a name for themselves in mainstream media.

Triumph in the Face of Adversity

During this period of transition, many black reporters who went to work for the white press were able to maintain those jobs while rebuilding a black publication. In some cases, those black journalists had made such a name for themselves that they were able to rise above the social issues and make ground-breaking strides in mainstream media. William J. Drummond worked as a reporter for the white owned Los Angeles Times, and was still able to attain two journalistic degrees, and start the Louisville Courier-Journal (Wolseley). William A. Hilliard of the Portland Oregonian was another success story. It took this black journalist more than ten years to acquire an executive level position on a white-owned publication. Hilliard started as a copy boy in 1952 and climbed the journalistic ladder to the position of head editor of the journal by about 1985 (Wolseley). Black people were being incrementally ushered into mainstream media and while some people were in support of the change, others felt that the black press was suffering. The question was, is the African-American population suffering or benefiting from the integration of more black reporters into mainstream media?

Illusion of Integration

The percentage of black reporters in mainstream media is quite diminutive. And many researchers speculate that this lack of black reporters is the biggest problem in mainstream media. As of 2001 the percentage of black journalists in mainstream media was at 5.23, or 2,951 black reporters. According to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), 422 newspapers do not have any journalists of color on their staff (Hubbard). The implication is that, with fewer African-Americans reporting through mainstream media publications, the African American population is suffering (Entman and Rojecki). To have an insightful and realistic publication means that there must be a holistic look at minorities and their culture. This is not to suggest that only black people can cover black communities, but simply to imply that different cultures can offer a more enlightening and intuitive look at their own communities (Martindale). Dori Maynard insists that omitting blacks from mainstream media is a mistake because of the structure of our society. Maynard reveals:

In journalism, there are five fault lines. We look at race, class, gender, generation and geography, and these are the things that

divide us in our nation. If you are only having one or two fault line perspectives in your newspapers, you are not accurately covering your community (Hubbard).

Many scholars who have studied race relations in reference to media contend that blacks are sorely lacking in the white press, and these publications need to diligently hire more African-American reporters.

But there are those who disagree with the idea of blacks being more involved in mainstream media. Some people feel that this integration would only cause more problems. Many of those black journalists who have entered white media feel as though there is little chance for advancement, and that racism is still prevalent (Martindale). Entman and Rojecki assert that although there are more black anchors and correspondents in Chicago media, there is no distinction in perspective. The image that white viewers see is that of black anchors reporting exactly like any white reporter. The unique perspective that black reporters normally bring to a story is lost when the reporters are forced to comply with the job description of the white press. African-American journalists, once again, become subservient to the dominant culture, and this abandonment of self leads the white viewer to believe that racism has diminished and the blacks who are not “making it” in society are the ones who are lazy and refuse to follow the rules like their peers (Entman and Rojecki). Caldwell believes that the racial bias in the newsroom is not worth the fight for black journalists. We must have our own publications to keep the progress we have made (Jue). More black faces in primetime slots does not mean that there is a progression in mind set; it simply means that minority journalists have proven their ability to brilliantly report the news. The problem is that the underlying bias and racism still apply. Black reporters continue to grow and progress, but the prejudice in mainstream journalism has not really changed its mind about the importance of the black voice.

A Call to Action

So what can be done about this issue? From my research, I have seen that there are innumerable concerns for African-American journalists to face today. But to some extent it seems like this is a two-edged sword. While there is proof that there are more blacks in mainstream media today, are they really making a difference in the grand scheme of things? Is the presence of more black anchors perpetuating, in a sense, the very ideology that my ancestors in journalism fought so hard against? The original African-American journals and periodicals were

fighting for equality, using their pens as swords, so can we be considered as sell-outs when we work for a white publication where our voices are silenced? What can we do? We can certainly prove our ability and get hired to work for a white publication. But is it worth it? Perhaps we should heed Caldwell’s advice and stick primarily to our own publications, where we know for sure that our voices will be heard.

Despite the pessimistic opinions, I still tend to feel that we need to find a way to incorporate our opinions and ideas into mainstream media. Perhaps I am not being realistic, but I feel like we can do such positive work as part of the white press. The fact is that some publications ask for our perspective on certain issues, because they recognize the ability and the insight of black reporters (Penn). While I do not suggest an abandonment of our own publications, I do not believe that we should stand idly by while the white press perpetuates those negative images of us that we have fought so diligently to eradicate. And I believe that we can be effective in both venues. Caldwell believes that the hope of young black journalists lies in the Internet (Jue). He thinks that black reporters have a real chance to make a difference, just like our ancestors, by infiltrating the world of internet media and reestablishing our perspective. In the meantime, I think that we cannot change the ideals of the general population, so we must do what we can to support those black publications that exist today. So the next time we go to the local newsstand, we might ask for Amsterdam News, Chicago Tribune, or Ebony magazine, in an effort to keep our community informed and actively preserve the freedom that we have already attained.

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