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Introduction

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Introduction

by
Wornie L. Reed

The mass media can be a positive or negative force in the struggle for racial progress. Unfortunately, the black community faces media that provide many negative influences. Consequently, there is a continuing need to address this issue.

The mass media is a major instrument of socialization in American society. As such, it helps to determine how an individual sees the world. The prevailing definitions of social reality and social problems, as well as the characterization of groups of individuals, are learned through the process of socialization. And socialization is one of the consequences of media exposure.

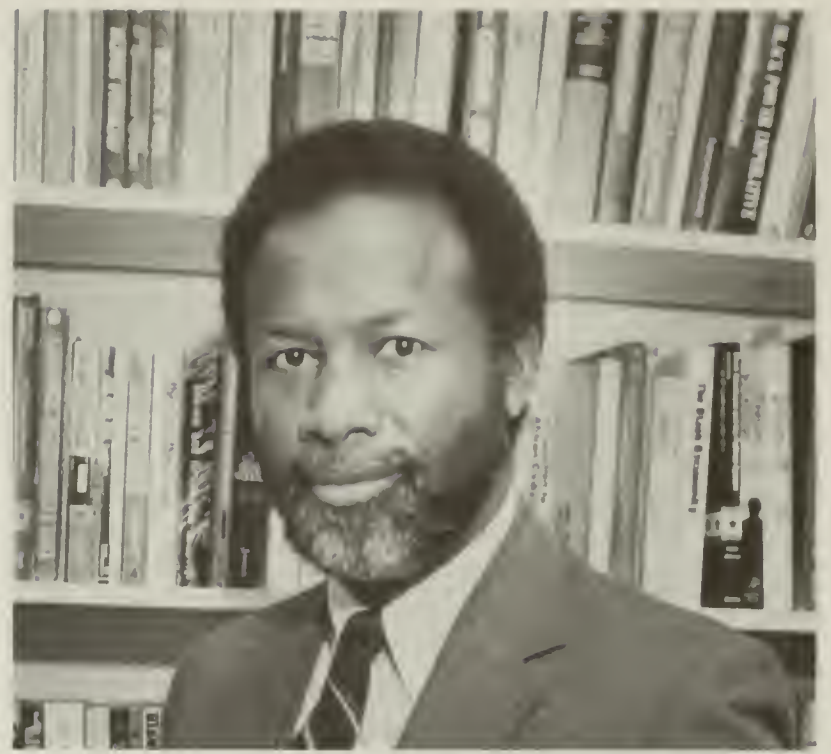
The media are generally seen as functioning as an agency of socialization in two ways. On the one hand, media reinforce existing values and attitudes. For example, attitudes a person may have regarding another racial group are reinforced when similar

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values and attitudes are expressed in the media, implicitly as well as explicitly. On the other hand, the 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 of the media has argued that where local cultures offer no solid 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.

When we protest the description of blacks in the media, we are addressing a situation that has serious consequences. What a person “knows” is a function of his or her life experiences, including formal experiences such as education and informal experiences such as that provided by the media. This means that what one knows is influenced by the society of which he or she is a part. And the mass media, as stated above, is a major societal means of acquiring “knowledge.”

Unfortunately, the transmission of this knowledge occurs whether or not the media presentation is accurate. So when the information transmitted is inaccurate, faulty “knowledge” is obtained. The consequences of distorted portrayals of blacks are the same whether the distortions are intentional or not. Sometimes the distortions are obviously intentional. At other times, intent may be difficult to ascertain.



An example of a movie that intentionally distorted the black experience is *Birth of a Nation* (1915). It is generally accepted that this movie was designed to produce or increase among whites negative feelings toward blacks during the post-reconstruction period. This movie, which told an obviously distorted story of black emancipation, enfranchisement, and debauchery of white womanhood, did more than anything else to promote the myth of black domination and debauchery during Reconstruction. This frame of reference undoubtedly sanctioned the reign of terror and racial oppression against blacks during the post-Reconstruction period.

Although less virulent and less obvious in its intent, current representations of blacks in the media are evoking images of blacks that are equally harmful. In the articles in this issue of the *Trotter Review*

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we examine the current representation of blacks in the news media and representations of blacks in history through the entertainment media.

One of the primary arguments advanced through the years for the necessity of having books and courses on black history was that accurate socio-historic data are needed to correct distortions and other inaccuracies about the black experience. Movies continue to be troublesome for those who are concerned about the accuracy of the portrayals of the black experience—and consequently the description of black Americans. They continue to demonstrate the need for such vigilance.

Evidence of this need for vigilance is all about us. For example, two years ago we had a visit from a white Navy veteran of World War II from nearby Quincy, Massachusetts, who had his own black history story—although he did not express it as such. Quincy, a city of some 85,000 persons, has one of the lowest percentages of blacks of any city its size in the country. In this setting, and perhaps others, this man has grown weary of hearing his friends and acquaintances proclaim the worthlessness of blacks and the relative lack of contributions that blacks have made to this country. So he brought in a yellowed newspaper clipping that described the heroics of some black Navy personnel on his aircraft carrier when it was attacked during World War II.

Although on his carrier black men were consigned to the mess hall and similar duties and were not permitted to hold positions that required them to participate in the fighting, the black men on his ship had badgered their superiors for the opportunity to participate directly in the conflict. Consequently, several of them were on duty manning the anti-aircraft guns when the ship was attacked by a kamikaze air corps. Heroically, the men stayed at their posts and managed to shoot down several of the aircraft before suffering several casualties. In fact, during that particular mission, blacks suffered a higher percentage of casualties than the regular white fighting force.

The actions of the blacks in this episode appear to be typical. Throughout the history of this country, blacks have pushed hard to be included in the wars and in the battles of America. Some 5,000 blacks fought in the Revolutionary War. Just as Lafayette came from France to help during the war, so did Haitians. When Paul Revere galloped through the Massachusetts countryside, he alerted black as well as white Minutemen. Blacks were at Lexington and at Concord. In fact, they fought in practically all of the major battles of the war. Two made the famous Delaware crossing with General George Washington.

And of course, blacks fought in the Civil War. By the end of 1863, there were some 50,000 black soldiers in the Union ranks. In the early part of this century, W.E.B. Du Bois and other black leaders

asked black Americans to close ranks and join the great World War to make the world safe for democracy with the implicit assumption that such contributions would bring democracy to black Americans. While reported lynchings in America totaled 54 in 1916, 38 in 1917, 64 in 1918, and 83 in 1919, and black leaders were trying in vain to get U.S. presidents to make statements against lynching, some 370,000 black soldiers were fighting in Europe, only to return home to some 26 major race riots across the country. White mobs were attacking blacks in city after city because blacks were working in factories at jobs that were previously presumed to be reserved for whites.

A history of the United States with the missing pages restored—that is, the pages that tell of the experiences and contributions of blacks—shows them to have participated extensively in the activities of their times, including fighting and dying in all the major wars. This history is slowly being added to the history books, but this restoration of history is being outpaced by mischaracterizations in the popular media, e.g., the movies.

One recent movie discussed here is *Glory*, a story about the 54th Regiment from Massachusetts during the Civil War. We at the Trotter Institute have a special obligation to address the distortions in this film because William Monroe Trotter's father, James Trotter, was a key figure in the all-black 55th Regiment from Massachusetts.

We also concern ourselves here with the current story. For instance, while black urban communities of Boston have been carrying on a major fight with drugs and crime, they are also dealing with other issues such as education, city government, community and cultural events, and business development. These issues often get covered in the mainstream media when they emanate from white communities but not so often when they occur in black communities. The articles presented here examine some of the issues and implications of the ways blacks are depicted in the entertainment and news media.

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