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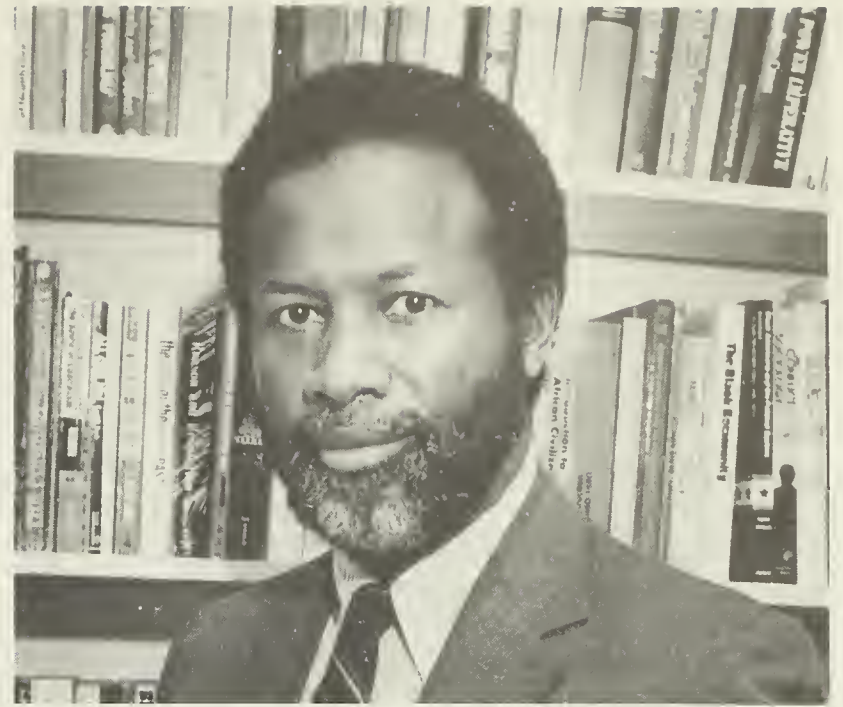
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Commentary

by
Wornie L. Reed



This issue of the *Trotter Institute Review* is devoted to the portrayal of blacks in the media. 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 the 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 values and attitudes are expressed in the media, implicitly as well as explicitly. In addition, 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 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 in 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 just as harmful. What is the consequence of negative portrayals of blacks? As mentioned above, the media help to provide definitions of social reality, of social situations. An attendant part of a social definition is an implicit action orientation, i.e., a suggestion of the appropriate action one may take in regards to the situation.

Slavery was supported by the general definition that blacks were lesser human beings; and the movie *Birth of a Nation* helped to (re)define blacks as savages. Although some of the current negative media portrayals of blacks may be unintentional, action orientations still follow. For example, if an ethnic group (e.g., African Americans) is seen as producing mainly athletes and criminals—two prominent media representations—the group may not be regarded as an important contributor to society. At best, members of the dominant white society may be influenced to hold blacks in low regard. At worst, some members of the dominant society may put forth efforts to block the equal participation of blacks in social and economic activities of the community or the country.

Thus, the media are a significant factor in the ongoing battle for racial progress. While some of the battles take place in official forums (i.e., governmental institutions), other battles—unintentional as well as intentional—take place through such unofficial forums as newspapers, television, radio, movies, books, and magazines. Battles occurring in unofficial forums, however, should not be taken lightly as they can adversely affect racial progress. There is ample evidence that individuals act on the basis of their socialization.

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