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Newspapers and their Relationship to the Black Agenda

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Cover Page Footnote

Presentation made to the 1986 National Urban League Conference, San Francisco, California, July 22, 1986. Dexter D. Eure, Sr., is Director of Community Relations for the *Boston Globe* newspaper.

equal treatment above the custom of special advantage within the closed neighborhood, no matter how hardened the crust of local custom has become. Alice McGoff, Lisa McGoff, and Freddie Twymon, together or apart, cannot be exculpated. They are what the later decades of the American twentieth century made them become. With the Boston Public Schools, as with Watergate, justice finally prevailed, but not before the worst in many people

crawled out from under the rock of convention.

NOTES

- ¹*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.*, 349 U.S. 294, 1954.
- ²Graglia, L.A. (1976). *Disaster by Decree: The Supreme Court Decisions on Race and the Schools*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- ³Sheehan, J.B. (1984). *The Boston School Integration Dispute: Social Change and Legal Maneuvers*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Newspapers and Their Relationship to The Black Agenda

by
Dexter D. Eure, Sr.



Presentation made to the 1986 National Urban League Conference, San Francisco, California, July 22, 1986. Dexter D. Eure, Sr., is Director of Community Relations for the *Boston Globe* newspaper

Once again we assemble here in San Francisco to evaluate what can be done to improve fair treatment and access for minorities in the establishment media.

At this very same San Francisco Moscone Convention Center two years ago, the Rev. Jesse Jackson addressed the Democratic National Convention — and this singular event proves that America has changed and will continue to change.

Jackson's impact during that presidential campaign and at the convention was truly a psychological boost for blacks and "have-not" Americans and, as he would say, for the "boats stuck on the bottom."

His presence in that campaign means that black America will never again be locked out of debate on issues involving world affairs, defense, the national budget, federal judiciary nominations, and our many and varied domestic concerns.

All of these as well as many other issues, of course, are often promulgated on the front pages of our newspapers and on television and radio news programs. The news media, as we all know, can often very much influence the very events it calls news. As a person who worked for the CIA once said, "Information is Power." In that vein, then, the news media — which gathers an awesome amount of information — is awesome in its power.

The news media, by print or electronics, influences and shapes society's attitudes; it is essential then, if not vital, that the media accurately reflect every aspect of our society — including the good, the bad, and the ugly. By keep-

ing this nation — as well as the world — in its proper context, we can better understand — and thus better solve — the problems that envelop us, such as racism, sexism, unemployment, hazardous waste, and the consequences of a nuclear meltdown.

To help present an accurate picture of who we are and what's happening around us, the news media need input from every diverse segment of society — and not merely from that limited view of society held by many of our unenlightened publishers, editors, news supervisors, and reporters.

Attempts to integrate the newsrooms have met with only qualified success. As the 1968 Kerner Report told us, a major contributor to the discontent and resentment of black Americans was the negative manner in which they were depicted in the nation's newspapers and on national television. And often, these one-sided impressions were created by white editors and reporters who innocently or deliberately reflected these views in their particular newspaper, on television, or on radio.

Some argue that if more blacks and other minorities were not only hired, but promoted to important decision-making roles, these prejudices and negative reflections would disappear from the media altogether. Let's talk about that.

For the sake of this paper, let's say, for instance, that Katherine Graham of *The Washington Post*, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger of *The New York Times*, Warren H. Phillips of *The Wall Street Journal*, Allen H. Neuharth of *U.S.A. Today*, William O. Taylor of *The Boston Globe*, David E. Easterly of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Charles T. Brumback of *The Chicago Tribune*, James M. Moroney, Jr., of *The Dallas Morning News*, and Tom Johnson of *The Los Angeles Times* decided to promote blacks to top editor posts.

Now add these new powerful black roles to the nation's 30 million blacks in urban cities where most blacks live who possess a buying power worth \$200 billion. Would these fantasy promotions in these giant newsrooms give us real clout? The answer is easy. No, they would not.

As sociologists, historians, and our own present-day experiences tell us—quite loudly—the establishment press is inherently aligned with the majority population and cannot be responsive to other constituencies, particularly our minority population.

The fact is, our powerful news operations will not change until the forces in control—key members of the business community, government and institutional leaders—are, at least, willing to change or, as a generous gesture to progress, relinquish their control.

Just getting black editors, then, solves only a tiny part of the problem—because allowing black editors to be responsible for large metropolitan daily newspapers is not necessarily going to change the content and style of news coverage. That's because the news media, like General Motors or IBM, is a business. And that means the bottom line for a major newspaper is: How much money did it make this year? Profits are what it's all about. And the media will not willingly give up anything that could lead to a lowering of those profits.

So let's keep that in mind as we now talk about bringing minorities into the news media, if the media is forced to increase minority hiring—and that's the only way many news outlets will respond to the lack of minorities in the workplace.

They will hire, for example, blacks who will reflect the views and values that give comfort to the white bosses—the black “yuppies” so to speak, who are intelligent enough to know they can get ahead by playing the establishment game and “won't rock the boat.”

We are not here to denigrate black progress in our country, but to put that progress in proper context. We can boast about our most distinguished accomplishments—the first black U.S. senator since Reconstruction, a black Wall Street banker, a black chancellor at a state university, a black lieutenant-governor of a Southern state, a black New England bishop of a major church, and a black professional sports coach of the world-famous Boston Celtics. These singular breakthroughs do not mean that these areas are now integrated. Not in the least.

Rather, with these few accomplishments, we are merely emphasizing the lack of blacks and other minorities throughout these areas. If we are to truly change the system for the better, we must increase the number of minorities in all areas to the point where the identities such as “black” and “white” and “minority” cease to exist. Then we will know that the system has changed for the better.

We will cease to have a problem of minority access to the boardroom, for example, when there are not just one or two, but more than a few blacks to show there no longer is a problem in this upper strata of society.

This ultimately will have a positive effect on institutional racism, which is firmly entrenched at virtually all managerial levels both on the corporate side and in many of our press unions, which have terrible affirmative action records.

Like any other major business, our news outlets are part of that so-called “system.” And as in any other business, a newspaper cannot survive unless there are people

who want to buy it and advertisers who want to advertise in it.

In essence, the newspaper must have a product the reader is willing to purchase, and that means it must often reflect the news as they like it. And the advertiser wants to make sure its product is reaching as many of these buyers as possible.

Some print and electronic news organizations will try to take some progressive and courageous steps to help wipe out the prejudices and other problems of our society through meaningful affirmative action—but not to the point where it will lose its readership and place itself in danger of going out of business.

In our particular case, we at *The Boston Globe* must maintain our advertising and circulation dominance as the largest paper in the New England region—as well as retaining our place as one of the top five quality newspapers in the country.

Whether we retain our position of power in our areas is dictated by two crucial factors in the “system”—maintaining and increasing our advertising lineage and maintaining and increasing our readership.

For a newspaper's good health to continue, we must ask from whom must the medicine continue to come. In my part of the country, it's Sears and Roebuck, Jordan Marsh, Zayre, Filene's, Bloomingdale's, Lechmere Sales, Stop and Shop, airlines and cigarette manufacturers. These are the major advertisers who let *The Globe* know that its ability to remain a quality, widely-circulated newspaper helps their sales.

I can assure you that the various big advertisers recognize the demographics and buying power of all the consumers, rich and poor, black, white, yellow or brown. For instance, Coca-Cola and General Motors know all too well that they cannot afford to offend black-buying dollars.

We are part of the corporate battles—Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi, Ford vs. General Motors, McDonald's vs. Burger King and so on throughout this buyers' market. Blacks with green dollars can and do make the difference between whether corporations operate on the red or the black side of their ledgers. We don't always have to demonstrate or march. With our buying sophistication, we can let our dollars do the talking—to both the advertisers and the media in which they advertise. We can gain proper respect with all deliberate speed—and that isn't jive talk.

Advertising accounts for 66⅓ percent of the space in the daily *Boston Globe*. And the more ads we have, the more space we also have for news content.

Doesn't it appear logical then, that when a newspaper is dominant in a demographic area, it is wise to keep abreast of the entire buying market, whether affluent or nonaffluent?

In this era of new technology and expanding telecommunications, newspapers in general seem to be conservative, settled, and, some would even say, fixed in time and space—as reported recently in Ad Week's critique of the best newspapers in the country.

Most of our larger newspapers today—as against the practice of the 1960s and 1970s—no longer feel the pressure, or the guilt, to hire black entry-level reporters with little or no experience as a means of increasing the number of black faces in the newsroom. Today, publishers and executives can afford, in these conservative times, to be more selective.

They can now seek out black reporters with several years of experience after college. They can also be even more selective in choosing the type of experienced black reporters who will cover the news as a white editor wants it covered—from his often narrow perspective and not from a more diverse, and thus more real, context that a black reporter can give to the readers.

Today many newspapers prefer black editors and black reporters who bend over backwards to cover news as seen in the narrow white context, not in terms of the real and diverse world, in order to please their white bosses. To do so, they will try sometimes to be whiter than white, knowing that their white bosses will see this effort as simply an attempt to be fair and objective.

In fact, a column entitled “*Colorism and Ignorance*,” in the May 22 publication of *The Washington Post*, spoke to this issue. Edward W. Jones, Jr., who conducted a study on the impact of race in the competition for advancement at the top levels of U.S. corporations for the *Harvard Business Review*, was quoted as saying: “Some blacks who have risen in the corporate ranks have done so by accommodating their actions to what they believe the white stereotype requires.” Jones had interviewed 30 black executives with six-figure incomes and several hundred black managers.

Jones also said, “a black on the upward path may think twice about hiring a black assistant or recommending a black colleague for promotion out of fear of how white supervisors will react. And the blacks with the strongest sense of moral courage and the surest sense of self are the most inclined to leave the corporate ranks.”

So, in this context, we begin to understand that merely bringing in black editors and managers to lead major newspapers or be involved in key decision-making roles is not going to basically change the format. We must keep in mind that the vast majority of black journalists hired by major print and electronic news outlets come from traditional and established white institutions. That means, of course, that many of our successful black journalists all too often come from the same environment that reflects the views of the dominant white society.

Thus, the more things seem to change, particularly with the hiring and promoting of minorities, the more things stay the same. The boat isn’t rocked very much at major corporations. And that, too, is how the newspaper establishment plays the game.

Let’s look at another game the establishment plays—the game of statistics. In 1985, for example, ASNE’s annual census of newsroom employment showed no improvement in the proportion of minorities hired by daily newspapers. It was still stalled at 5.7 percent as it was in 1984.

In addition, American newspaper staffs were no better integrated than they were in 1983, with minorities constituting only 3,080 of the 53,800 journalists working on U.S. dailies, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Yet this Spring, the same ASNE boasted that minority employment was up in 1985, climbing from 5.7 to 6 percent.

It also reported that, for the first time, the number of U.S. dailies employing no minorities dropped below 60 percent, with 57 percent reporting all-white editorial staffs.

Despite the newspaper industry’s effort to put on its best statistical face regarding minority hiring, it’s clear that it really has nothing to shout about. The media establishment’s leadership today still has a casual attitude toward involving minorities in meaningful decision-making roles. Today, as in years past, nearly all white faces still dominate the media, while the news industry desperately tries, in vain, to accurately portray a mixed society.

We must conclude, then, that simply hiring black editors or other black executives for our news organizations will not solve the problems of fairness in—and access to—the establishment media for the nation’s black populace.

The overall business decisions and profit scorekeeping is done in the executive offices, and that’s where power-seeking advocates have to focus their attention. The advertising department provides the BULK of the paper’s income and, therefore, has tremendous clout. The circulation department DECIDES WHO GETS THE MESSAGE. The production department with its printing presses, most of which are invisible to the casual visitor, is an area that controls dozens, even hundreds of highly specialized jobs—jobs that have been long denied to blacks.

All these areas are as vitally important as the newsroom. Black movers and shakers have almost totally ignored them, and it has been a near fatal oversight.

Probably the biggest economic support on which the media depend comes through advertising agencies that coordinate the advertising lineage for their clients. They also are the persons who design and create the copy that portrays our images of society.

The Madison Avenue crowd, with all their massive influence for channeling advertising into both print and electronic media, have a far worse affirmative action record than either newspapers or TV/radio. You’ll find very few blacks in decision-making slots at these agencies and few visible even in their plush offices. So here, too, a serious and related “attack” should fall. Keep in mind that the copy created by the agencies that dominate much national and local lineage many times makes blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities INVISIBLE.

We offer here some suggestions that might help resolve some of the problems we outlined in this position paper:

1. Blacks and other minorities should begin serious efforts toward eventual acquisition of newspapers; should work toward placing more blacks on corporate boards; and should purchase more shares of available stock in newspapers, television, and radio.
2. Read newspapers, watch television news, and listen to radio broadcasts not only to get the news, but to understand how it’s packaged and to make an intelligent appraisal of the company’s policies regarding the news.
3. Monitor the advertising in the news media and make an evaluation of how that advertising has an impact on you in particular and minorities in general.
4. Determine how blacks can influence a newspaper or other media outlets—whether the owners will be adversely affected economically if blacks decided not to purchase their product.

Also, evaluate how much black buying power affects the advertiser using a particular media outlet, since advertisers pay most of the cost of any major operation.

5. Blacks in EVERY area, at EVERY level, ought to involve themselves more in “networking”—sharing with each other their knowledge and experiences and how they can have an influence on news, media employment, and advertising.
This “networking” should not be the preserve of black journalists. For examples, black doctors, lawyers, advertisers, engineers, and community religious leaders must work more closely with black bricklayers, carpenters, beauticians, teachers, barbers, bartenders, police, janitors, and unskilled workers to gain a better knowledge of how the media impacts all of us.
6. White media owners and other executives must look within themselves to find a long-entrenched source of the news media’s problem with hiring and pro-

moting blacks. They must learn to be as fair with blacks as they are with whites. They must give them, as they do whites, not only a chance for success, but the right to make mistakes, a right to fail, a right to another chance.

7. Adding “color” at all levels is a vital step. But our white corporate leaders in the news media must add MUCH MORE COLOR from top to bottom before they can truly say that race no longer is an issue in the workplace.
8. Use access to editorial review boards of newspapers, large and small, as this contact will definitely open up communications for both sides. Use consistent, organized letters to the editor (and publisher) and the op-ed pages as platforms.

Reel Blacks

by

Patricia A. Turner



Blacks in Disguise

Negative ethnic stereotypes frequently emerge in films that ostensibly lack racial themes. Two popularly-styled science fiction films, the 1984 release *Gremlins* and the 1986 movie *Little Shop of Horrors*, exemplify this fact. In the former, a charmingly inept white father purchases a furry little “Mogwi” from a mysterious Chinese gentleman. As his reluctant vendor has demanded, the father warns his teen-aged son not to 1) expose the Mogwi to light, 2) get the Mogwi wet or 3) feed the Mogwi after dark. Inadvertently, Billy, the befuddled teenager, preoccupied with thoughts of his job, his dog and his pretty co-worker, breaks the interdictions. The Mogwi, named Gizmo by Billy, miraculously reproduces itself. These offspring bear little resemblance to their benevolent parent.

They gleefully begin to destroy the idyllic town of Kingston Falls and the humans that they encounter. Together with the girl and Gizmo, the hero manages to rescue the town from the clutches of the evil gremlins. The film concludes when the mysterious Chinese gentleman reclaims the original Mogwi and removes him from the household.

The musical *Little Shop of Horrors* is somewhat more difficult to summarize. The time is the early sixties, the setting is Skid Row and the primary characters are a pair of poor, young, white, well-meaning employees of an unsuccessful Jewish flower store owner. Unnoticed by any of the players, a trio of talented black singers (Krystal, Chiffon and Ronette) comment on the action throughout the film. Seymour Krelborn, the male hero, is anxious to help his employer and unofficial adoptive father, Mr. Mushnik, to save his unpopular flower shop. Why Mushnik