

BLACK FILMMAKERS, BLACK AUDIENCES, AND PUBLIC  
TELEVISION PROGRAMMING'. AN EXAMINATION OF ISSUES  
AND OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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No matter how bad or controversial the Black presence is in commercial television, the visibility of commercial television's response in programming and hiring is surprisingly good when compared to that of public television.

In employment the level of minority participation in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting Service is roughly equal to that of ABC, CBS, and NBC. Only in the technician category does CPB dramatically exceed the record of the commercial networks, and in the officials/managers category PBS is dramatically below the averages of commercial television. [1]

However, on the local level, available figures suggest minority employment in public television lags far behind that of commercial television.[2]

Available data for minority presence in programming on public and commercial television is not always comparable and only suggests what really is the appearance of the overwhelming difference between public television and commercial television. A Formula for Change cites minority representation of 13.4 percent on general adult programming, 10.5 percent in adult dramatic programming, and only 1.6 percent in adult music and dance programs on public television (page 149). Window Dressing on the Set cites 15.1 percent as the latest figure for the number of minority characters appearing on commercial television. Yet this small advantage to commercial television only suggests the difference in visibility. While no comparable figures exist for commercial television, a disproportionate share of Blacks and Hispanics are found in supporting and minor roles on public television, and minority characters spend less time on the air than white characters. [3]

Most important, however, in the issue of visibility, is the presence on commercial television of half a dozen Black oriented shows while public television has only one. Black Perspective on the News, which is not carried by all of its stations. If commercial television is to be blamed for the stereotypical and demeaning low points in minority programming, it must also be credited with the most important successes on the local and national levels. Where commercial television has been bold, public television has been embarrassingly timid. The irony in this comparison is that public television had the opportunity to be the pioneer in minority participation and minority portrayal. Being a new system, it had an opportunity to avoid the well known pitfalls of commercial-television and it was not necessarily the heir to a legacy of discriminatory practices and ossified concepts. However, in reviewing the record of public television after its first decade, we must unfortunately conclude with the Report of the Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting that "the informational, cultural, and educational benefits and opportunities which should flow from the tax payer-supported public broadcasting system are so slight as to be insignificant insofar as minorities are concerned." [4]

Public television is now in the position that commercial television found itself in a decade ago, one of re-evaluation, re-examination, and corrections of past inequities. As it faces the future, one of its most important challenges will be to include minorities within the framework of its very special mandate.

The impact of the minority presence on commercial television, the dramatic and popular successes of shows like Roots, Minstrel Man, A Woman Called Moses, and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, as well as the controversies surrounding shows like King, Youth Terror, and Sanford and Son,

have served to draw attention away from public television's performance in this area.

However, if public television is to expand its role, it must understand that its success is going to involve it in increasingly intense scrutiny in the area of minority participation.

#### Black Americans and the Public Television Mandate

Black filmmakers share in common with other American artists a general frustration with the idea of culture held by public television. We feel that not only is public television bias toward W.A.S.P. American culture, but its overall cultural outlook is extremely Europocentric.

As Carnegie II points out, the problem is a two-edged one. The importation of programs from Great Britain gives the distinct "impression that public television prefers actors and commentators with British accents" and at the same time creates hostility towards public television in all segments of the underemployed American creative community. [5]

Public television has not paid enough attention to developing, caring for, and exposing the artist as an American, much less the artist as a Black or as a Hispanic. The problem here is very complicated and centered around the ideas of defining American culture. We do not and would not propose a culturally isolationist point of view and we do not deny the European background of American culture, but we would assert that the African background is equally important to Blacks and to a true understanding of American culture. We also assert that America has created a rich and strong culture of its own in diverse places as the Southern Afro-American church and the store front in Appalachia. It should be a matter of embarrassment to the public television system that its flag ship stations sit in the middle of the major American cultural centers and reflect to the nation so little of the activities going on around them. The same stations also sit in the middle of large ethnic communities with major pools of internationally known minority talent and make little attempt to reach these audiences or draw on this talent.

WHET, for example, is licensed to Newark, New Jersey, a city with a large Black majority, and is headquartered in New York City, which by next year's census will be 50 percent Black and Hispanic. New York is also the home of the Negro Ensemble Company, the International African American Ballet, and the National Black Theater. Neither the ethnic makeup of the community nor the existence of minority talent is reflected in WNET's in-house programming, program acquisitions, and decision-making staff.

Public Television and the Black Audiences

Because public television has no consistent commitment to minority programming, it has not created a following in the Black community. Commercial television pays greater attention to minority interests and with the default of public television, in this area. Blacks have come to look to commercial television rather than public television for programming of interest to them. Public television's small minority audience share hurts the Black independent filmmaker in two ways. First, public television does not consider the Black community a significant part of its audience and therefore rarely programs minority shows. [6] Second, the occasional program that would be of interest to Black audiences is an island in a white sea and must compete against established viewing habits that public television has done little to break. Of course programming and audiences are tied together in a cycle. There is no reason why public television could not have a loyal following in the Black community. The more minority programs that appear on public television, the larger the minority share of the audience will become, not only

drawing minority viewers to programs of special interest to them, but to the whole of the public television offering.

#### The Image of the Black American

Minority communities are, with justification, very image conscious. The history of Black people's response to their portrayal in the commercial media adequately demonstrates this point. [7] The issue of "positive images" will be faced by all those involved in minority programming. Obviously there is concern when Black images are controlled by Whites, but Black creative artists have not been exempt from criticism. The issue itself has a long history that antedates the concern that has become focused on the media in the last decade. Black artists and writers, since the 1920's, have been subject to criticism of their portrayal of Black characters. The short range way of solving this problem is to make sure that presentations by Blacks are so bland and non-controversial as to elicit no comment whatsoever. The Black filmmaker looks on this way out of the problem with dread because it locks him into a bland formula that cannot tap his potential as an artist. The other solution is more long range and demands a constant and consistent presentation of a variety of portraits of Black life. In short the real issue is not "positive images" but the multiplicity of images. No single program ought to be made to bear the burden of trying to be representative of the total Black community. On purely artistic grounds, the "positive image" controversy has had a bad history. In the Black community it has reflected the sentiments of some members of the middle class who object to any portrayal of non-middle class Blacks.

In the extreme, as one critic points out, this attitude states:

"If the 'truth' or even an aspect of the 'truth' about Black people was held to be in any manner pejorative, then it must be censored, for images of 'the lowly life' would hamper the quest for civil rights." [8]

Ironically, our most distinguished literary artists, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison have been raked over the "positive image" coals, but their most controversial works have at a later time not only been accepted but also praised as the most important in the canon of Black literature. [9]

#### Public Television and the Black Independent Filmmaker

The creative work of Black filmmakers will challenge public television programmers to develop critical standards about films with unique cultural and political sensibilities. But the vast majority of public television programmers and acquisition managers are white. Of 12U public TV local program executives, one (0.8 percent) is a minority. This is a drop from 1977 when of 13k there were two minorities (one percent). [10] Such non-minority programmers are inhibited by the same emotional, political, and cultural responses to Blacks as others in the majority culture. Films by Black filmmakers often have and will run counter to white middle class sensibilities, but it is non-traditionalism in subject matter and approach that they will make a major contribution to American culture. It is, unfortunately, also more than likely that the white programmer will miss much of the cultural significance in the work of Black independent filmmakers and only appreciate those films that most closely approximate the aesthetic, linguistic, and political references of majority society. The greatest danger in the increase in minority representation is that programs about Blacks will proliferate, but will use established white programs as their models. While this approach might satisfy the purely social and political need for an increased minority presence, it will miss a great many of the benefits to be had from work that is artistically challenging and will not be offering to minorities programming that is truly an alternative to commercial television. We feel that a preference for the traditional poses a

great danger to the creative work and artistic development of filmmakers who seek to work within and truly reflect their ethnic sensibilities, and furthermore for Black audiences it inhibits their identification with the work and the efforts of public television. It is after all in the area of the experimental, the challenging, and the exploratory that public television must make its reputation in the minority as well as majority communities.

#### Black Programming: Black Filmmakers versus White Filmmakers

There is a deep and growing frustration within the Black independent film community arising from their attempts to acquire public television funds for the production and acquisition of films about the life and culture of Black Americans. Their frustration becomes resentment when public television funds are committed to films about Blacks made by Whites, like Police Tapes, Harlem Voices and Faces, Bad Boys, Black Britannica, Always for Pleasure, and Black Man's Land. The use of white producers to make so many of the films about Blacks is almost, in the eyes of Black filmmakers, tantamount to saying that Black life and culture is worth documentary and dramatic portrayals on public television, but that Black filmmakers are not critically or technically qualified to make them. The irony is that more likely the reverse is true. Black American life portrayed and documented by outsiders invariably is bereft of the cultural and political sensibility of Black people. The white filmmaker is never privy to the interior cultural reference among Blacks and as a result the white filmmaker/interviewer's questions tell us more about white attitudes about Blacks than the subjects' answers tell us about Blacks. In fact quite often there is an on-camera joke being played on the white filmmaker, a joke that he never becomes aware of. So as the white filmmaker seeks to impose some terms for understanding his Black subjects, the subjects, as the saying goes, "change the joke and slip the yoke."

Many Black independents describe the Black subject-White filmmaker phenomenon as media colonization. This is a tension that should not exist. It is intellectually indefensible to maintain that whites have no right to avoid claims of exclusivity, when Black filmmakers are not given the opportunity to make films on non-Black subjects. Since such a strong tradition exists in the majority community. Black filmmakers ought to be supported and encouraged to explore non-minority subjects. The white filmmaker's perspective on Black subjects would be better understood and appreciated in a schedule of programs that offers the perspective of Black filmmakers on a consistent basis.

#### Public Television Funds and Minority Programming

Competition for scarce resources is a reality. The consciousness and personality of public television has been shaped by its history of inadequate funding. Every recommendation and mandate to share the programming pie is addressed to a system in which no one feels that he has enough to eat. Yet neither public television nor Black filmmakers can depend on increased funding to ease them out of their problems. First, in an era when the American citizen is much more conscious of the tax bite and of government expenditures, such an increase is far from certain. And second, and more importantly, it is equally unlikely that any level of funding will keep step with the system's ability to generate legitimately fundworthy ideas. So, the perception of hunger will remain. The adequate representation of minorities must be understood as one of determining priorities, a problem that will remain at every funding level. Public television cannot avoid making and regularizing a commitment to minority programming. The inclusion of minority filmmakers and addressing the programming needs of minority communities must be addressed squarely as a question of priorities, not funding.

### The Report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting

A Public Trust, the Report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting, emphasizes what we feel to be the important frame of reference for the inclusion of minority programming in the public television schedule. Carnegie maintains that minority programming "should not in any way be seen as merely a political obligation to special interests, but as a difficult and challenging goal aimed ultimately at using America's cultural diversity in order to promote intergroup understanding." [12] Carnegie further acknowledges the problem and is incisive in defining the challenges for the system, its recommendations weak and tentative. Its only recommendation related to minority programming is for planning research on Black cultural programming and related types of special programs. [13] The Commission did not spend enough time on the problems of minorities and the real meaningfulness of its recommendations in this area are questionable.

The Commission's recommendation of planning research for minority programming would treat the minority audience out of the context of the total American viewing public. What is clearly needed is an internal redefinition of public television's relation to the American audience and a study which would focus on its present audience, on those who do not now watch public television, and minorities. Otherwise this information gathering would become a poor substitute of the funding and promotion of a wide range of program offerings by and about Blacks and minorities.

We are concerned about the decision-making process within the Commission's proposed Program Services Endowment. We hope that Black and minority representation on its staff and review panels will not just be token representation but in ratios that would allow decision-making leverage, and not simply advocacy in the review of minority films and proposals.

Overall, the Commission's recommendation of minority programming is limited to a general endorsement. Although minority filmmakers would have preferred a detailed response to this serious problem, we are even more disturbed by the Commission's explicit assumption that with an increase in public television funding, minority programming needs will be addressed. [14]. This notion is interwoven with their position that the implementation of this programming should be self-imposed and self-enforced. The Commission's position reflects a faith in public television decision makers that to us seems unwarranted considering their performance to date. Unfortunately, the overall approach of the Commission follows this line of reasoning and in effect holds minority programming hostage to increased funding.

### The Report of the Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting

The recommendations of Carnegie II fail to address the problems of minorities in public broadcasting in ways that would lead directly to concrete and meaningful change. Fortunately the Report of the Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting focuses on the problem in a highly productive way. As opposed to Carnegie II, the Task Force Report, "A Formula For Change," should be considered the major document on the issues of Blacks and public television. The Task Force report thoroughly documents the need for changes and provides concrete recommendations and a timetable for implementations. We list below some of the highlights of its recommendations that we feel are particularly important to the Black independent filmmaker.

The Task Force recommends that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provide specific funds on a matching and non-matching basis for the production and acquisition of minority programming based on a minimum percentage that reflects the national minority population.[15] We see a regulation of financial commitment as the only basis from which to integrate

minorities into public television in a meaningful and consistent way.

The Task Force recommends that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting lease a satellite transponder which would be minority controlled and used solely for the distribution of minority programs to stations. [16] We feel that this is an exciting and useful idea. It would provide minority filmmakers an opportunity to have direct contact with local stations and allow local stations more independence in meeting their responsibilities toward minorities.

The Task Force recommends that a Standard Proposal Review Process be established. [17] All independent filmmakers will benefit from this recommendation. The clearly stated guidelines and timetables for processing and review will do much to ease the tensions between public television and independent filmmakers.

The Task Force establishes the definition of minority programming as programming "by and about minorities." It points out that this programming should not necessarily be perceived as programming for minorities only.[18] The Task Force also makes note of the new PBS policy of "mainstreaming." We feel that mainstreaming is valuable, but it should be a supplement to specific budget allocations for minority specials and series rather than a substitute.

### Conclusion

Until 1973, public television had no clearly definable policies relating to minorities. Since that time there have been at least 22 policy resolutions passed by the Board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and two advisory panels created. Although CPB has been long on verbiage relative to improving the status of minorities, the Minority Task Force notes that recommendations of these panels and resolutions of the CPB Board have not been implemented to any appreciable degree by the public television management.

It is in public television's own interest to work immediately and effectively to correct this failure to represent and speak to all Americans. We cannot over-emphasize the fact that this failure is not only a social and political failure, but also an artistic and creative failure. The problems are not overly complex nor are they delicate nor difficult to handle. It is a matter of deciding whether or not public television will make a commitment to reaching minority audiences and incorporate minority filmmakers, and whether or not they are willing to allocate part of its budget to do this.

### About the Authors

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THE BLACK FILMMAKERS FOUNDATION is a non-profit tax exempt organization established to support the independently produced work of Black filmmakers and video artists. The Foundation sponsors programs and services designed to facilitate and encourage this work and activities which will promote

its public recognition and support. The Foundation's current projects include the publication of a catalogue of independently produced films by Black filmmakers, the organizing of a Black Filmmaker Cooperative Distribution Service and the co-production of the "Filmobile" and "Dialogue" series of outdoor traveling film exhibitions in New York City.



Footnote(1.) Percentage of Minorities in Commercial and Public Television  
 (National)

	<u>Officials/Managers</u>	<u>Professionals</u>	<u>Technicians</u>
ABC	20.8 %	17.7 %	25.7 %
CBS	20.2 %	21.7 %	26.2 %
NBC	14.7 %	24.2 %	24.6 %
CPB	21.0 %	21.0 %	53.0 %
PBS	8.0 %	19.0 %	27.0 %

(2.) Percentage of Minorities in Commercial and Public Television  
 (Local)

	<u>Officials/Managers</u>	<u>Professionals</u>	<u>Technicians</u>
Public Stations	6.7 %	11.4 %	12.2 %
Commercial Stations	14.4 %	28.0 %	32.0 %

(3 A.) Percentage of Minority Characters on Public Television  
 According to Role (General Adult, Adult-Dramatic)

	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>
Major	23.8 %	9.1 %	0.0 %
Supporting	3.3 %	45.5 %	0.0 %
Minor	73.0 %	45.5 %	100.0 %

(3 B.) Amount of Time Spent in Active Participation by White and  
 Minority Characters

	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>
1-30 seconds	27.9 %	36.4 %	50.0 %
31-60 seconds	21.3 %	18.2 %	0.0 %
1-5 minutes	41.8 %	36.4 %	50.0 %
5-10 minutes	6.6 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
10-20 minutes	3.3 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
20 + minutes	8.2 %	9.1 %	0.0 %

- (4.) A Formula for Change: The Report of the Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting (n.p., 1978), p. xx.
- (5.) A Public Trust: The Report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting, (New York, 1979)» P. 159. Labor Unions also are beginning to express dissatisfaction with the number of imports from Great Britain. "Ask Limits on TV Imports, Etc.," Variety. December 13, 1977.
- (6.) "1. About 48.6% (18) of the 40 public television station managers responding to the Task Force management questionnaire each spend less than \$5,000 annually for national minority programming. 2. Slightly under one-third of the public television station managers responding (11, or 30.6%) each spend less than \$5,000 annually on local minority programming. 3. Of the 40 public television station managers responding to the Task Force management questionnaire 79.. 5^ (32) indicated^ that there are no monies specifically earmarked for promoting (publicizing) local minority programs. 4. About 17.5^ (7) of the television station managers responding to the Task Force questionnaire stated that they do not promote general audience programming among minorities. A Formula For Change, pp. 154-155.
- (7.) Nathan I. Huggins, "Opportunities for Minorities in Television and Movies, Facade of Humor can Obscure Substance of Subject," Washington post. April 13, 1978, and Eugenia Collier, "Black Shows for White Viewers," in Freedomways Reader: Afro-American in the Seventies, ed. Ernest Kaiser (New York, 1977), PP. 235-245, both present different aspects of the controversy.
- (8.) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Portraits in Black," Harpers June. 1976, p. 18.
- (9.) Langston-Hughes says about one volume of his poetry, "The Pittsburgh Courier ran a big headline across the top of the page, LANGSTON HUGHES' BOOK OF POEMS TRASH. The headline in the New York Amsterdam News was LANGSTON HUGHES - THE SEWER DWELLER. The Chicago Whip characterized me as 'The poet lowrate of Harlem.' Others called the book a disgrace to the race, a return to the dialect tradition, and a parading of all our racial defects before the public....There was a reason for it, of course. They had seen their race laughed at and caricatured so often in stories like those by Octavus Roy Cohen, maligned and abused so often in books like Thomas Dixon's, made a servant or a clown always in the movies, and forever defeated on the Broadway stage, that when Negroes^ wrote books they wanted them to be books in which only good Negroes, clean and cultured and not-funny Negroes, beautiful and nice and upper class, were presented....But I did not see how they could expect every Negro author to write such books. Certainly, I personally knew very few people anywhere who were wholly beautiful and wholly good. Besides I felt that the masses of our people had as much in their lives to put into books as did those more fortunate ones who had been born with some means and the ability to work up to a master's degree at a Northern college. Anyway, I didn't know the upper class Negroes well enough to

write much about them. I knew only the people I had grown up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard of Bach. But they seemed to me good people, too.... Curiously enough, a short ten years later, many of those very poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew were being used in Negro schools and colleges." The Big Sea (New York, 1940), pp. 265-68.

- (10.) A Formula For Change, p 155.
- (11.) A Public Trust, pp. 157-158.
- (12.) *ibid.*, p. 168
- (13.) *ibid.*
- (14.) *ibid.*, pp. 284-285
- (15.) A Formula For Change, p. 251
- (16.) *ibid.*, p. 257
- (17.) *ibid.*, p. 253
- (18.) *ibid.*, pp. 158-159

