

The Role of the Black Media in Preserving Traditional Black Values Within Black America

By Lon G. Walls

I would like first to give you just a little background on the Capital Press Club. It is the oldest minority or African-American press organization in the country. It was founded in 1944, interestingly enough, during wartime. Currently our membership is a wide range of individuals in the communications industry. We go from news reporters and cameramen to PR professionals, advertising executives, and communications attorneys. Among our current and former members are columnists Bill Raspberry, Dorothy Gilliam, and Carl Rowan; TV anchors Renee Poussaint, Maureen Bunyan, Jim Vance, and Bruce Johnson; and also Black Entertainment Television and District Cablevision President Robert Johnson. We have a rather wide distribution of individuals, so it is a prestigious organization. I am really proud of it, serving as president—this is my fourth term.

Now that you know a little about the Capital Press Club, we will talk about the question of the day—the role of the media. What is the role of the media in preserving the traditional values within the black community? But before we go further on the topic, we have to clarify terms. First, is the real, clear meaning of traditional values, as I see it. Traditional values in the African-American community mean the same as in the any other community in America: that is the desire to establish and maintain a strong family unit; a respect for law and order; a high regard for human life; and the desire to have an existence that is both meaningful and productive for ourselves and for the community at large.

I do not think anyone can have much of a problem with that definition. In regard to the media—and maybe this is somewhat a point of contention, and I am sure I am going to bring up some other points of contention—it is critical that you understand that we are talking not just about news organizations, news operations of NBC, CBS, CNN, or *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. I look at the media as being much broader than that. For my purposes, the media means the advertising industry, the recording industry, the film industry, the non-news programming on most of your major network television stations. This is what I mean by media. These are entities in addition to radio and TV and print news operations. I think in order for you to gain a full understanding of the impact of the media, you have to understand this. I repeat, I am not talking about just news operations. I think it is critical that you understand what I am talking about.

Positive Images, Traditional Values. Now I am going to stir up a little bit of a dispute, because you may have been thinking that I am talking about the role of the black media. But the role of the black media has only had a partial role in shaping the values within our community, currently anyway. The real impact, obviously, is from the majority—what we call the majority, or white-owned media. Something you have to understand is that historically, for obvious reasons, the black media always tried to evoke positive images and instill traditional values, beginning I guess back in 1827 with the founding of the first black-American newspaper, *The Freedom Journal*. Even at that time, its masthead stated, “We wish to plead our own cause, too long have others spoken for us.” That paper was founded by the Reverend Samuel Cornish and John D. Russwurm. And through the years major black dailies, newsmen, and weekly papers throughout the country have always presented events in the black community, primarily because, as you may well know,

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the white media for many years refused to cover them. The black community felt that the media overlooked it and through the years, it depended primarily on the growing numbers of weeklies and dailies.

Turning Point. Then John H. Johnson, I think, took it a step further with the establishment of black publications like *Jet* magazine and *Ebony* in the late 1940s. Of course at that time there were not black communication entities in terms of broadcast, television, or radio. They were not even thought of. And obviously the film and the recording industries were also areas in which black contribution pretty much was woefully lacking. The turning point, I feel, was during the march on Washington in the Civil Rights era. I think that at that point there was a need for news organizations to cover the black movement, so to speak, and give many opportunities to blacks to be reporters, to be individuals involved in gathering information. Also, I think it was an opportunity for the rest of America to discover that there is a sizable market within the black community. I remember I was very young during the march on Washington; I watched it on television. And I always remember a sign that said "Look, Mom, even dogs have commercials, but negroes don't." And I think that always stood out in my mind because the commercials on television at that time were purely white. The news you heard was purely white. Up until the Civil Rights movement, people felt there was no need for "negro" or "African-American" news but it was the coverage of that particular era that brought black news to light, more or less. So, I think that it is really important to understand that up until that time, the black media—the black newspapers specifically—were the primary conveyors of information to the black community from the black community.

That brings us more or less currently to what is going on, and things are a little different now. And I think that one of the things you have to understand is that we are now reliant upon the majority medium, and for a number of reasons. One is that right now I think there are only two daily black newspapers in this country, *The Atlanta Daily World* and I think *The Chicago Daily Defender*. And they are really not dailies in the sense of publishing seven days a week, or even six days week; they may three or four times a week.

Diminishing Role. A good example of the black newspaper and its diminishing role in some ways appeared in Washington, D.C. *The Afro-American*, the pre-dominant and most influential black newspaper in this area, comes out once a week. It is very influential, but it is a weekly. The number of black weekly newspapers has diminished for a number of reasons, the main one most likely being financial. And, going beyond that, we only have one black-owned TV network—if you want to call it a network—and that is the Black Entertainment Television cable network. I can name two black-owned television stations (I think one is out of Boston, owned by Burtrom Lee), but their programs and format for the most part are obviously standard, general audience programming.

There are several, maybe a hundred or so black-owned radio stations, and even more stations that are black-formatted for black audiences. There are several obviously black major magazines, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Essence*, *Black Enterprise*; and, to my knowledge, one major recording label, which is Motown. I think that it is under MCA, so that it is not really a totally black-owned recording entity. That is very important to understand, because what that means is a diminishing number of black outlets, or a minimal number of black outlets for black individuals to have access to information. And because of that and because of the increased sophistication of the way that information is conveyed, more blacks read majority newspapers now versus reading black-owned newspapers. Blacks obviously view the major networks in considerable numbers. Blacks hear all types of their music and other types of music on black- and urban-formatted stations, and other types of stations. We have now what you might call "black commercials"—the Air Jordans, Bo Knows, etc. There are films which have some black aspects to them, and then there is also a rising, growing market

in videos. So, as a result, the black media can no longer fulfill the enormous desire for information and entertainment. We have to turn to "majority media."

Creating "Monsters." And, more than that, I think we have another problem. We talk about the problems in the black communities with the drugs, violence, and the desire of young people to leave what is called "traditional values." I was in Los Angeles about a year ago, and the opulence, the emphasis on material values were so obvious in that particular city. And then I looked at some of the programs on television and the commercials and saw the emphasis on material values, the need to have a Jag or a Benz or a gold chain. Then being in Los Angeles, I compared with what black kids are surrounded by. These kids do not have the means, for whatever reason, to gain through legal methods—or earnest methods—some of the material wealth that is around them which they see on television and hear about on the radio. I think that we stress the material so much that we are not really paying attention to the audience which we are trying to reach and what the overall result is. I think we are starting to create a class of individuals who do not think about the means as much as the ends. And I think that is a responsibility that falls on all of us, but especially on the media, because we are now creating some "monsters" through the media. This concerns me a great deal.

I will give you some examples. I am very disturbed about the types of music that we hear (when I say "we" I am talking about the black community), the kind of videos that we see. I have been a real strong proponent of respecting oneself and gaining the respect of the community. But sometimes I find it a bit difficult to understand how we can command respect when we have videos and music that show a lack of respect for ourselves and for our women. Yet we want to have the respect of the rest of the world. And this is something which you see more and more now. I enjoy the music. I enjoy some of the videos I have seen, but I am starting to be a bit disturbed by what I see. And the same thing in terms of film—the violence, not just necessarily black on black, but just the violence that is portrayed by the film industry right now. I think that what I am trying to get at is that the throwing out of the values by the media that we call the communication industry is very disturbing. And it has, obviously, a very negative impact upon the black community in terms of trying to instill or maintain some kind of traditional values. I talked to a number of people—some friends of mine—in trying to prepare some comments for today. And the thing that I got more and more, and it really hit home, was the fact that at some point we all as individuals—not just blacks, but whites and everybody else as well—have to try to define our values, and try to instill these values especially at home, and at any opportunity we get.

Media Manipulation. I think that what has happened, for the most part, is that instead of our defining the values to be portrayed by television, television and the media have basically set the values, and this has influenced us. That is a very disturbing situation. A case in point, you look at the Godfather movies and *Goodfellas*, and all of sudden there seems to be an overwhelming desire to know more about gangsters and the Italians. It is not because the timing of those movies coincides with desire of the people to want to know about these things; it is because these movies and this film genre have created that desire and created that movement. I think we have to start to realize that we are being manipulated by certain aspects of the media to the point that we have lost some sense of value.

Now we can go back to trying to reinstill some of this in the black media, but as I said before, it is a little difficult to do because the black media is a very limited vehicle. There are a lot of ways in which we can try to instill some change. I have been a strong proponent of the fact that if you look at the advertising industry, and the public relations industry of this country, I hate to say it, but for the most part, it has been pretty much dominated by the majority population, by whites. That concerns me a great deal because the same thing is true in the record industry. These areas

are where the values and the messages are coming from, and this is something we need to think about. We need to try to instill the kind of changes there. I have been in this business for awhile, and I see how the media's impact on cities such as Washington moves outward. A friend of mine and I traveled from Washington to Athens, Ohio, where I went to college. And we said while we were away from Washington we could get away from the stress, from all of the problems. We turned on CBS's *48 Hours* and what did we see but a piece on Marion Barry and a piece on the violence in Washington—all the way out in Athens, Ohio. Obviously it was a network program, but it just hit home that this was the image the rest of the country was going to have of Washington, D.C.

Regaining Control. It is easy for me to talk about the problems; it is easy to talk about what is wrong. But what can we do? I have mentioned one thing is to try to get more blacks and obviously more minorities into the advertising industry, the public relations industry, the recording industry in terms of management decisions. And the war is another indication of the dominance of the media and the dominance of technology and how far it has come. We all need to sit back and try to understand and to try to have more input into what is going on in this country and what is going on with the people of the media. The Capital Press Club is one organization that tries to lobby, to influence issues management, have some issue control. We try to stay on top of the legislation before Congress, and local issues, so that we can monitor this and try to have some impact. But we need to organize even more, because we are in troubled times right now, obviously with the war and the economy. I think that it is imperative that we have these groups here, that people are able to sit down and try to discuss the problem of the media and try to instill within their children what is fiction, what is fantasy and what is pretty much destructive of the establishment of traditional values.

I came here with a lot of thoughts—I had prepared some remarks. But I want to say just from my heart that the media are very, very powerful, becoming more powerful by the day, and I think that we are losing control. And now is the time that we have to try to regain the control of something that we have that is very valuable to us, and especially to the black community. It is imperative because we are losing control of our kids, we are losing control of communities. I think the message that we are trying to convey is you have to get back to the media, you have to get back to the majority media and let them know that we want more control of this particular message and that we want to be able to have more of a say in our lives.

