Introduction

> Go to BET. Look at all the music videos that they show with all the shows. Everybody's wearing like "authentics." Everybody's rapping. Everybody's shaking their behinds. Like music videos talking about guns and cars and selling drugs and all this. When this is the image that we are fed and this is the character that we are portrayed as by all the media—you blame—I am blaming it on the image that is posted up by the media. (Solamon (2004); quote from students at Columbia High School in Maple Wood, New Jersey: Conrad Martin, Brandon, Williams, and Shegosia Yonae.)

The preceding statement from Columbia High School students in Maple Wood, New Jersey (see Solamon (2004)) was part of a National Public Radio Broadcast of *All Things Considered*. It provides an explanation for why Black youth may perform certain behaviors and why they believe that they are not taken seriously in the academic arena. "Out of the mouth of babes…" It is emblematic of the crisis that many Black youth confront in America today.

If Black Americans comprehend that the media can be problematic because of its power, and if they recognize that certain media images cause serious harm (because of their perception-shaping power for the viewer and the viewed), then why would such images be promulgated and perpetuated through media forms that are ostensibly controlled by Black Americans? This question is at the heart of this chapter.

In 2006, three cable television networks specifically target Black American audiences: Black Entertainment Television; The Black Family Channel; and TV One.[1] These networks have different histories and profiles. In this chapter, we look at them separately and in juxtaposition. Specifically, the three networks' programs are analyzed to determine their nature and their efficacy. All the while, the goal is to answer the previously posed question. We find that a partial answer to the question is "profitability." Whether the networks' programs are viewed as harmful or not, each network has identified a programmatic niche, which produces profitability—in fact or in expectation. The reality or expectation of profitability provides the incentive for the networks to supply their chose lineup of programs going forward until expectations or conditions change.

The next section of the chapter provides background information on the aforementioned three Black networks. This background is limited primarily to a brief history of the networks and a characterization of the programming. In the case of BET, the background is augmented by an intertemporal comparison of early and current programs.

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[1]In addition to the three cited networks, a fourth network, The Africa Channel, is also available in certain locations in the U.S. We do not consider The Africa Channel in this analysis because, although it targets Black Americans, it is also directed to the broader U.S. population. Moreover, the programming presented on The Africa Channel is uniquely "African," and is an "arms length" from the types of programs that appear on the three featured networks in content and purpose.

With this background in hand, the next step is to compare current programs on the three networks. This is accomplished by assessing the extent to which the programs present adverse stereotypical images of Black Americans. Although the assessment may be viewed as somewhat "judgmental," it is based on previously defined criteria. The purpose is not to choose sides, but to remain objective throughout the assessment and to provide current or prospective viewers of the networks with a fair assessment and the likely effects of the programs that are currently broadcast on the networks.

Partly because this book concerns economics, the penultimate section of the chapter seeks to explain the reasons why the networks air certain types of programs. Given that limited information is available on the profitability of the networks, the focus will be on the network's ability to attract audiences. It goes without saying that the networks are businesses that can only continue to operate as long as they experience some degree of profitability.

In the conclusion, the chapter's contents are synthesized to explain why Black-controlled and/or networks that target Black Americans broadcast programs that may or may not be in the best interest of Black Americans. In addition, an answer is provided to the question of whether the programs are consistent with the networks' stated objectives. Finally, conclusions are drawn about why the networks are likely to engender economic harm to Black Americans based on the programs that are broadcast.

Three Black Cable Networks

BET

Founded in 1979 by Robert L. Johnson as a private corporation, BET was launched on January 25, 1980, and was the first cable network specifically designed to attract a Black audience. Initially, its broadcasts were limited to evening and weekend programs, but during the 1990's, it began to provide 24/7 broadcasts. The network has always featured music programming; including the iconic "Video Soul." However, a portion of BET's total programming was, and remains, paid advertising. Quoting from a September 17, 1989 New York Times article, Darnell Hunt wrote that Johnson believed that BET "should be for Black media what Disney is to the general media or what Motown was to music."

By the 1990's, BET was offering a set of diverse programs that featured not only music, but other forms of entertainment including news, politics, sports, and public affairs programs.

In 1999, Johnson relinquished his majority ownership in BET, and the company was absorbed by VIACOM. That sale sparked concern within the Black community that the network would become more profit-driven than ever, and that programs that addressed Black community issues would disappear. Those concerns proved to be valid, as the network ultimately dropped certain long-standing news and public affairs programs.[2]

In 2006, BET reported on its Internet Web site (www.bet.com) that over 80 million households subscribed to the network in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Based on research performed by the Nielsen Media Research Company, the Web site states that 78 percent of BET's audience was Black, 18 percent was White, and 4 percent was of other ethnicities. The network indicated that its mission was: "To be the preeminent source of entertainment, music, news, and information for the African-American consumer."

Given knowledge of the media's power, Black ownership of BET presented a fantastic opportunity for Blacks to invert the status quo and to revise the medium to show blacks in astereotypical roles. Such an effort could have gone far in reshaping the image of Black Americans and in causing a shift in the way non-Blacks viewed Blacks in America. Did BET seize this opportunity?

To answer this question, we undertook a simple experiment: We performed program analysis of BET primetime broadcasts (between 7:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.). This analysis was performed for similar one-week periods during 1990 and 2006.[3] For 1990, we analyzed programs that were aired during the week of December 2nd through December 8th; for 2006, we considered programs that were broadcast on December 3rd through 9th.

Our analysis was consistent with those described in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. We defined stereotypical programs as those presenting Black Americans in stereotypical or mundane roles: Musicians (including religious musicians), comedians, athletes, criminals, law enforcement or military officers, etc. (See Appendix A at the end of Chapter 3 for more details about this definition). We consulted Internet media data bases, performed searches on the Internet, and reviewed media reference works to obtain classifications of programs broadcast during the two weeks: (1) Stereotypical/mundane programs were designated red; (2) programs that had the potential of being astereotypical and about which there was some uncertainty concerning program content we designated yellow; and (3) we designated programs that were clearly astereotypical blue. The schedule of programs reflecting the three-way color designation is presented in Appendix A at the end of this chapter.

For the first full week of December of 1990, BET broadcast 32 programs in primetime: Thirteen or 40.7 percent of the programs were designated red; eight or 25 percent were designated yellow; and 11 or 34.3 percent were designated blue. In terms of air time, 60.8 percent was associated with red programs, 19.6 percent with yellow programs, and 19.6 percent with blue programs. Only two comedy programs were broadcast during the 28 hours of primetime; however, 12.5 of the 28 primetime hours were dedicated to music programming.

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[2] As one expression of this concern, see Bakari Akil, II (2002).

[3] We selected 1990 as the first year for performing the program analysis because it was the first year that BET programs were presented in *TV Week* (an insert in Sunday newspapers with sizeable circulations). Earlier schedules of BET programming were not readily available.

For 2006, BET broadcast 39 programs: Thirty or 76.9 percent were designated red; 6 or 15.4 percent were designated yellow; and 3 or 7.7 percent were designated blue programs. Red programs accounted for 64.3 percent of the primetime broadcast time, 26.8 percent for yellow programs, and 8.9 percent for blue programs. Notably, 16 or 41.0 percent of the 39 programs were comedies.

Whether one is concerned with the number of broadcasts or the broadcast time, BET reflected an increase in red programs from 1990 to 2006. This increase appears to be mainly accounted for by a reduction in blue programs. In addition, there is a clear shift from music oriented programs to situation comedy-type programs. BET broadcast 16 situation comedy-type programs in primetime during the one week under study for 2006. Of course, by 2006, VIACOM would have had six years to assess BET programming and to revise the program lineup to optimize BET's audience. While this shift in programming is inconsistent with an effort to improve the image of Black Americans, it may very well be consistent with creating greater network profitability.

The Black Family Channel

The Black Family Channel (BFC) was launched in December of 1999. It is a private corporation with four principal owners, led by noted trial attorney and philanthropist, Willie E. Gary. According to its media guide, which is available on the BFC Internet Web site (www.blackfamilychannel.com), 16.3 million households subscribed to BFC in 2006. Black Americans constituted 75 percent of BFC's audience. The network was available in each of the top 25 Black American TV Markets and in 49 of the top 50 Nielsen Media Research DMA's (Designated Market Areas) TV Markets.

The network characterized itself in the following way:

> Black Family Channel is America's only African American – owned and operated, 24-hour television network committed to providing quality programming for the entire family. The vision of the network is to inform, entertain, and empower urban communities with responsible family-friendly programming worldwide.

With actor, director, and producer Robert Townsend as President and CEO of Productions, BFC provides a broad mix of programs that are created for Black Americans by Black Americans. There is a heavy emphasis on family programs, particularly programs for youth. For the winter of 2006, BFC featured the following major program categories: Kids TV, Family Matters, Teen and Tweens, Lifestyle programs, Primetime programs, Sports Saturday.

Given the type of market segmentation that was evolving at the turn of the millennium (see Chapter Two, "Power of the Media"), BFC was in a unique position at its launching to provide cable television audiences with a real alternative to traditional Black American television images. Did BFC take advantage of this opportunity? We will entertain this question after we have introduced the third Black cable television network—TV One.

TV One

TV One was launched in January 2004, and the author recorded elsewhere an opinionated response to the announcement of that launching (see Appendix B at the end of this chapter); more studied thoughts are provided here. The network's Internet Web site (www.tvoneonline.com) indicates that TV One was available in 33 million households in 2006, offering a wide range of lifestyle, entertainment, and classic programs, as well as movies, and fashion and music programs. TV One's primary investors include Radio One (the largest radio company that targets Black American and urban listeners); Comcast Corporation (one of the nation's top cable television companies); the Direct TV Group; Constellation Ventures; Syndicated Communications; Pacesetter Capital Group; and Opportunity Capital Partners.

The network's Web site also states that it is focused on the Black American adult audience, and touts itself as providing a "sophisticated alternative." TV One says that its programming respects the values and reflects the intellectual and cultural diversity of its audience. The network claims that certain programs that were launched during 2006 attracted more than one million viewers.

Like BFC, TV One faced what may be one of the final opportunities to change the course of television by significantly improving the image of Blacks on its network. With three networks operating, it seems implausible that another cable television network that focuses strictly on the Black American audience will surface in the near term. Moreover, the previously mentioned market segmentation trend is making it more and more difficult to garner a large swatch of Black and non-Black television viewers because most viewers self-select their television genre and fail to deviate significantly from it (again, see Chapter Two, "Power of the Media," and the section on market segmentation). Did TV One provide bold leadership, or did it adhere closely to the status quo? We will answer this question as we replicate the program analysis that was conducted for BET—this time with respect to TV One and BFC. In fact, we compare and contrast the programming of the three Black cable television networks that are considered in this chapter in the next section.

Three-Way Network Program Analysis

Appendix C at the end of this chapter forms the basis of the three-way network program analysis that is presented here. As in the BET program analysis, we assessed BFC and TV One programs for the first week of December 2006 (December 3rd through 9th), and designated the programs as red, yellow, or blue depending on whether they were stereotypical, possibly astereotypical with some uncertainty about program content, and clearly astereotypical programs, respectively (again, see the definition of stereotypical programs in Appendix A at the end of Chapter 3). Table 1 provides the results of that analysis, including a presentation of the results of the BET program analysis.

Table 1.—Three-Way Network Program Analysis:
Percentages of Programs and Broadcast Air Time

Program Designations	BET	BFC	TV One
Panel A	Programs		
Stereotypical (Red)	76.9%	26.8%%	95.5%
Possibly astereotypical with some uncertainty about program content (Yellow)	15.4%	34.1	4.5%
Clearly astereotypical (blue)	7.7%	39.1%	0.0
Panel B	Broadcast Air Time		
Stereotypical (Red)	64.3%	26.8%	85.7%
Possibly astereotypical with some uncertainty about program content (Yellow)	26.8%	42.8%	14.3%
Clearly astereotypical (blue)	8.9%	30.4%	0.0%

Ignoring for the moment BET's results, which were discussed previously, and focusing on the BFC results, we find that 39.1 percent of the latter network's programs were clearly astereotypical (blue). In fact, BFC also broadcast more seemingly astereotypical programs with some uncertainty about program content (yellow) than stereotypical (red) programs. This is a complete inversion of the pattern of BET's programming. The broadcast air time results for BFC in Panel B of table 1 are relatively consistent with the program results: Yellow programs accounted for 42.8 percent of the air time, blue programs accounted for 30.4 percent, and red programs accounted for only 26.8 percent.

Turning to TV One results, Panel A of table 1 shows a very skewed and truncated pattern of programs; 95.5 percent were red program, the remaining 4.5 percent were yellow, and there were no blue programs. On the broadcast air time side, 85.7 percent of TV One's primetime broadcasts represented red programs, while the remaining 14.3 percent of the time was accounted for by yellow programs.

Comparing and contrasting the three networks' programs and broadcast air times yields clearly demarcated results: BFC stands as the network that provided the most astereotypical programs and broadcast air time, and the least amount of stereotypical programs and broadcast air time; BET occupies the middle slot; and TV One provides the most stereotypical programs and broadcast air time, by far, and the least astereotypical programs and broadcast air time.

We noted previously that 16 situation comedies were broadcast by BET in primetime during the first week of December of 2006. In contrast, BFC broadcast only 3 comedies. At the opposite end of the spectrum, and as might be expected, 37 of TV One's 44 primetime programs were comedic in nature.

These results present clear-cut evidence that BFC was the network making a positive and concerted effort to remake the image of Black Americans on cable television. It is also clear, based on the statistics reported previously, that BFC has the smallest subscribership. The latter point is somewhat surprising given that BFC's launch preceded TV One's by four years. For Black Americans who value BFC's programs and efforts to improve the Black image, the question that comes to mind is whether the network can sustain itself long enough to catch on and attract increased subscribership and broader viewership. Because BET and TV One have shareholders that may demand profitability, it is difficult to imagine that these networks will ever see a self-directed reversal in the types and number of stereotypical programs currently being broadcast. Such a change will only occur when audience tastes change unilaterally, and subscribership and viewership fall for these two networks.

Networks Profitability

What do we know about the network's profitability? For the two publicly held corporations, BET and TV One, it is difficult to obtain separate readings on their profitability because details are buried in their owning companies' reports that are filed with Securities and Exchange Commission. In the case of TV One, with several corporate owners, owning company annual reports may also prove difficult to decipher to determine the network's profitability.[4] Consequently, we deviate from traditional measures of profitability and focus on viewership as a signal of prospective profitability. We have already noted subscribership levels for the networks, which also serve as indicators of profitability.

For viewership, Nielsen Media Research and the Zap2it Internet Web site provide weekly top 10 and top 15 cable television series rankings, respectively. For the week ending December 10, 2006, neither Nielsen Media Research nor ZAP2it listed BET, BCF, or TV One among the networks with one of the top 10 or 15 cable television series for the period, respectively. In the case of Nielsen and Zap2it, it took 2.6 million and 2.4 million households to reach the top 10 or 15 program ranking, respectively.

These results imply that, "profitable" though they may be, based on subscribership and advertising revenue, which are driven by viewership, the three Black cable television networks do not rank among the top cable networks. Among them, they have no programs that garner an audience of 2.4-to-2.6 million households or more. This is not to say the companies are not viable. On the contrary, the Black networks may experience relatively high operating profits because their operating revenues may far exceed their operating expenditures. It is noteworthy that operating expenditures can be held down by minimizing production costs, which can be accomplished by purchasing existing programs for rebroadcasts. Our earlier analysis of BET and TV One revealed that they aired a preponderance of previously broadcast situation-type comedies, which were obtained for rebroadcast.

Having no financial statements in hand, we cannot conclude definitively which of the three Black cable television networks is most profitable. However, it stands to reason that networks that obtain mainly previously broadcast programs for rebroadcast have good prospects for minimizing their operating expenditures and incurring sizable

[4]A rare and important source for information about the profitability of Black cable television networks is Paul Kagan Associates' (2006) *Economics of Basic Cable Networks*. However, this source was not available to the author at the time of this writing.

profits. On the other hand, this approach to developing a lineup of programs to broadcast almost guarantees that stereotypical programs will be in the offing.

Conclusion

Consider the colloquialism, "To whom much is given, much is required." The three Black cable television networks considered in this chapter have a tremendous amount of power. However, for the most part, that power is not being used to transform the image of Black Americans on television. Only BFC has put its money where its mouth is and has developed a lineup of programs that reflect few stereotypical images. BFC is the only network that appears to have a sincere interest in breaking the cycle of adverse stereotypical programs, which create adverse stereotypical behavior, which produces adverse economic and other outcomes. The two remaining networks, BET and TV One are owned by large media corporations, which may be driven by their shareholders to mainly have the profit motive as a driving force. They likely keep profits high by obtaining for rebroadcast old situation-type comedies that present Black Americans quite often in roles that border on buffoonery. The latter two networks are satisfied to use tried and true approaches to attract Black audiences for their advertisers. They do not appear to be concerned about the adverse implications of their programming.

In their profiles, each of the networks includes language that infers an intent to provide beneficial programs to the Black American audience. Based on the foregoing analysis, only BFC appears to honor that intent.

Chapter Five of this book, which is entitled "Black Unemployment and Infotainment," reveals the transmission mechanism by which adverse stereotypical images of Black Americans on television produces adverse economic outcomes. Given the state of Black economics in America today, Black Americans can hardly afford the continued broadcast of such images. Even more dire economic and social consequences are likely to ensue, if such images are not discontinued.

It is clear that Black Americans will have to take unilateral action and change their taste for television programs, if they wish to break the previously described negative cycle and to transform the nature of the Black image on television. How this can be accomplished is discussed in detail in the next chapter (Chapter 8: Game Theory and SIGs). But in the simplest terms, if Blacks are concerned about their future in America and the world, they must act to reduce their support for networks that are not operating in their best interest and to increase their support for networks that operate in their best interest. We believe that Black Americans will be wise enough to take this action at some point in the future. The question is whether the BFC and networks like it can hold on long enough, with or without profitability, until Black Americans recognize the real efficacy of their programming.

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Appendix B.—Opposing Editorial

"Don't Look this 'Gift Horse' in the Mouth"

by

B. B. Robinson, Ph.D.

African-Americans must view the arrival of TV One on the cable television scene as a "gift horse" with mixed-blessings--at best. The new network, headquartered in Lanham, Maryland, began broadcasting this week on cable networks in urban centers around the country with sizeable African-American populations. Developed primarily by the largest African-American radio network, Radio One, and the leading cable television company, Comcast Corporation, TV One will operate 24-7, presenting a mix of African-American programs that its $135 million in start-up capital can purchase.

The downside to this new gift is that the programming that TV One has to offer is not good enough. *The Washington Post* magazine *TV Week* reports the following adverse news about the new network: It will feature reruns of former network series, new programs of the comedy and talent-search variety, no news programs, and will avoid covering political issues with a passion.[5]

We welcome a new African-American television network. However, rather than following in the footsteps of the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network by providing programs that do not elevate, the new network should compete with BET for the African-American audience by providing high-quality programs that produce optimal outcomes for African-Americans and that do not have deleterious effects.

In her 1994 book Dr. Camille Cosby discusses the adverse effects of African-Americans imbibing the stereotypical images of characters such as J.J. from the program "Good Times," which will be featured prominently on the TV One network.[6] These types of programs do more harm than good.

Do African-Americans really need more African-American comedy and talent-search programs? Clearly, the networks should be able to use the creative minds of African-Americans to produce new, high-quality, and interesting programs that entertain without a comedy or music focus.

Why no news and no politics on the new network? We live in an information society. Without news and other forms of information, the African-American audience will be absolutely lost—out of the picture. No politics is absurd. African-Americans have achieved so much through politics and government; to ignore these important vehicles of progress is a huge step backward. Is it TV One's goal to create a headless and strategy-less African-American populous?

[5] See Michael E. Hills article, "TV One Debuts on Cable," in the January 18-24, 2004 issue of *TV Week*, pp. 6-7.
[6] See *Television Imageable Influences: The Self-Perceptions of Young African-Americans*, published by University Press of America, Incorporated, Lanham, Maryland.

TV One's likely response is that African-Americans have a record of viewing the programs that it plans to broadcast, and that these programs must be offered if the network is to attract sufficient advertisers to remain afloat. Besides, we do not have the resources to present the best programs for African-Americans.

TV One should realize that the 25-to-54 African-American female audience that it is targeting is changing. African-American females with significant discretionary income are fastly assuming a character that rejects stereotypical images of the J.J. variety, they do not desire to be entertained by ridiculous comedies and music talent-search programs, they enjoy news, and they have strong political interests.

If TV One does not have the resources to present quality programs, then maybe it should consider the approach used by BET when it was first launched--broadcasting only evening programs. TV One could conserve considerable resources, which could be directed toward acquiring higher-quality programming, if it backed off on its plans to broadcast 24-7.

Given BET and now TV One, African-Americans must remain aware of the increasing attempts to fragment and segment media audiences and the related implications.[7] Remember that African-Americans advocated for a desegregated nation for much of the last century, and significant progress has been made on this front. Care should be taken to prevent the spread of segregated TV, especially if the networks to which African-Americans are steered offer mainly pernicious programs.

In the case of TV One, African-Americans should be cautious not only about "looking this 'gift horse' in the mouth," but also about looking at it at all.

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[7] See a discussion of this topic in Joseph Turow's 1997 book, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*, published by the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.