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THE MASS MEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

20 By Abdulai Vandi

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the one overriding social feature to be reckoned with is that not a single area of American life has escaped the touch and influence of the mass media. It is possible that the impact of the mass media in the next century may be just as great as nuclear energy is today—meaning, the media will represent a source of deep controversy, almost infinite power, great potential benefit, and great potential danger. The responsibility of the 21st century media expert will be to determine the positive ways in which mass communications can be used.

Responsibility is the key word. It represents a basic concept. In the coming century, it will be important that media experts—regardless of their ethnic backgrounds—receive training not only in the technical and business aspects of the media but also in professional responsibility.

By technical training it is meant: in the future, as at present, the television producer will have to understand television production techniques, management methods, social and cultural development, politics and economics, cinematography, graphic design and educational technology, and the like. The newspaper editor will need training in writing, management, advertising, news reporting and editing.

Such a training is crucial today. It will be even more important in the future. The major reason is to be found in the extreme likelihood that future innovations in media technology will make today's gadgetry look primitive by comparison. Obviously, the media expert will need broad technical training if he or she wants to survive and progress in the industry.

But *training in responsibility* is not at all obvious and doesn't show up in the present-day college curriculum. Yet this training is as important as technical training to the mass media expert.

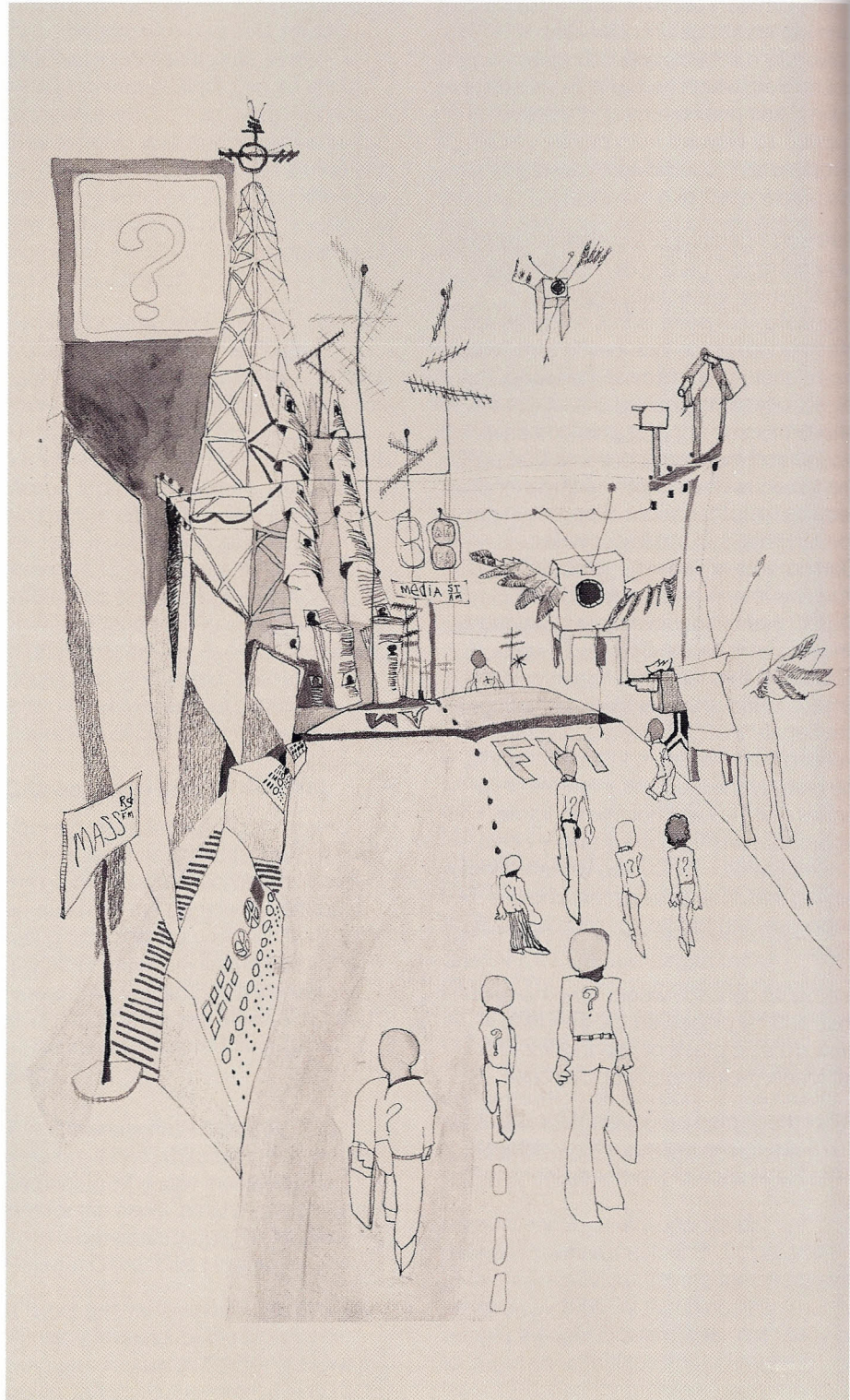


ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PLATT

The first responsibility of the media expert is to fulfill the needs of the industry. If the media expert does not accommodate those needs, he or she simply will not find rewarding employment. This is a difficult area to discuss because the needs of the industry change constantly. Yet it seems safe to say that the media expert of the future will be best prepared to fit those needs only if he or she has received a solid formal education in mass communications, mass sociology, mass psychology, and related areas.

The day of the self-made media expert is all but over. As proof one can note that more than 450 schools in this country offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in mass communications. Many more institutions that do not have degree programs offer courses in journalism, broadcasting, speech, drama and advertising.

No breakdown on the numbers of Black and white students enrolled in media courses and schools is available. But some key figures give an indication of the growing influence of the mass media. By 1972, there were 41,691 journalism students enrolled in 166 American schools and departments exclusive of enrollments in journalism courses at other schools. Of the 223 4-year colleges and universities providing courses in radio and television, 180 offered broadcasting as a major leading to a degree. Also in 1972, a total of 12,162 students were enrolled in these courses, but only 251 students were engaged in doctoral level programs at 26 schools.

The latter figure is important. Journalism and communications faculty members at the university and college level are engaged in three major activities—teaching, research, and service. They pursue one or more specialties in journalistic techniques acquired through their own experience: magazine writing, radio news, production and so on. But the communications teacher is also well advised to be equipped for teaching and research in one of the scholarly fields, such as the

history of journalism, literary criticism, public opinion polling, and mass communications theory.

Various other kinds of media students can be listed: filmmaking, advertising, public relations, book production and printing.

Formal training in mass communications teaches the individual responsibility to the industry by engendering understanding of the system and the basic skills of communication. It must also provide the individual with a liberal, generalist background. If media personnel are to be socially responsible and constructive, they must have an intelligent understanding of the social, cultural, and economic issues that they report.

How does the Black media expert of the future fit into this picture?

The answers lie essentially with journalism school education, which is designed to train workers for the industry. For example, the Black student whose ambition is to establish and operate a community newspaper will likely find no course that will assist him reach this goal.

We can note a paradox: the Black media expert is being asked to be responsible to an industry which, by and large, has not been responsible or responsive to him or her. In general, the mass media industry has a history of exclusion with regard to minorities.

Except in recent years, Black reporters and editors could find no employment in the white press establishment. Nonetheless, there has been a thriving Black press in the United States since the founding of the *Freedom's Journal* in New York in 1827. Since 1850, more than 3,000 Black publications have been founded; many of these were short-lived, but some survived for generations. For a long time, the Black press provided the only training ground for the nation's Black media men and women.

But changes in the Black press are reflective of the changes that have also affected the white press. These changes

may be a portent of the future. The fact is that television and radio have made inroads on circulation and newspaper readership.

If anything, it was probably easier to start a Black periodical in the first half of the 20th century. Before that time, only 24 Black publications were in existence. But social and economic repression became more effective and balanced after the onset of industrialism.

The standard-bearers among the nation's daily Black newspapers did not change substantially until in the mid-1940s. Since that time a substantial change in the character of the Black press has occurred, particularly in the area of circulation. In 1945, the three "giants" were the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*. At present, the *Defender's* circulation is down to 33,300, from 202,000 in 1945; the *Courier's* is down to 48,800, from 257,000. Only the *Afro-American* is close to its 1945 circulation, despite the fact that the nation's Black population has increased by about half during this period.

The three newspapers take a generally conservative stance. Thus the changes in Black readership may reflect an evolution of Black consciousness. Two of the major replacements are *Muhammed Speaks* (now the *Bilalian News*) and the *Black Panther*. The former has a professional staff of more than 30. The *Black Panther*, on the other hand, is a tabloid produced and distributed by volunteers.

Further, even though copies of the largest Black "standard" newspapers can still be found outside their home base, the end of the national Black newspaper seems near. Circulation costs and losses have to be minimized because the maintenance of a far-flung distribution network is too costly.

In the past 10 years, more and more Blacks have found employment with the white media establishment. But a study by the Black Congressional Caucus shows that only 4.2 percent of all news-

22. paper employees throughout the country are Black and that Blacks make up only 1.5 percent of those employees in decision-making jobs. In periodical publications, Black journalists fared only slightly better, making up 7.3 percent of the working force and 2.5 percent of the professionals. In the broadcast industry, Blacks made up only 2 percent of the officials and managers, 6 percent of the broadcasters and news reporters, 3 percent of the technicians, and 2 percent of the sales employees. Significantly, 15 percent of the laborers in the broadcasting industry and 46 percent of the service workers were Black.

For Black Americans, these statistics are both depressing and familiar. As in many other industries, the mass media have failed to employ Black applicants in anything like a proportion of their percentage in the total population.

One has also to face the problem of Black media ownership. This is best understood against the background of the corporate media picture in the United States. The 1972 figures showed 1,761 dailies and 10,100 nondaily periodicals published in America—more than any other country in the world.

Approximately 93 percent of all the radio stations in the United States are privately owned, but more than 2,300 of these are affiliated with one of the three major networks. About 76 percent—or 701—of all television stations are commercially owned and operated; but 178 of these are owned by newspaper or magazine companies. For example, the Newhouse chain owns 21 newspapers, 5 television stations, and 3 radio stations. Also, practically all television stations are affiliated with a network, mainly because of the high costs of production. About 220 noncommercial educational stations and 4,875 cable television (CATV) systems are currently in operation in the United States.

In contrast, figures compiled during 1973-74 show 163 Black-oriented publications, with a total circulation of 5.1 mil-

lion. But almost 40 percent of this circulation was accounted for by three publications—*Ebony*, with 1,222,000 monthly, *Jet*, with a weekly circulation of 565,000, and *Bilalian News*, with a weekly circulation of 530,000. About 385 radio stations have some Black programming, with only 67 featuring Black programming exclusively.

This picture is not uniformly depressing. Conditions are improving every year, and they will continue to do so into the next century. Federal regulations concerning equal opportunity employment are pressuring the industry to recognize its responsibility to hire more qualified Blacks. And the industry is recognizing that the Black community houses intensive consumers of the mass media product, particularly in the areas of radio, television, and film. In order to continue to serve these consumers, the media industry needs experts who can provide the kind of entertainment and information that the Black community demands.

The main challenge is obvious: the mass media industry is learning that it needs Black media experts who can do the job right, and who possess the necessary technical skills in mass communications.

In order to be responsible to the industry, the Black media expert will have to exemplify a pervasive Black consciousness at all times. The reason is that the changing roles of Blacks in mass communications followed rather than preceded the civil rights upheaval of the last decade. Black revolution was not a product of mass communications but of forces more fundamental to the formation of private and public attitudes.

The other key area of responsibility for the mass media expert is the public—the larger society that the mass media are designed to serve. In general, the media expert serves the public in three ways: preserve the society's culture, history, tradition, and national identity; provide useful and relevant information to the public; provide instruction that is important to the community, such as family

planning, health, safety and vocational training.

One may ask: "How can the Black media expert fulfill his or her responsibilities in this area?"

Before answering the question, it is important to note that in the past the mass media have failed in their responsibilities to the Black community. At various times Blacks have been ignored, ridiculed, and stereotyped. Years ago radio institutionalized racism by introducing the "Amos 'n' Andy" syndrome. In radio and in the early days of television and film, Blacks occasionally appeared on news and sports programs; but rarely was any effort made to depict the American Black experience in all its richness and diversity.

A statistic underscores the importance of such neglected material: 90 percent of all low-income households in the United States have at least one television set. Cinema is less prevalent among Blacks than watching television but it remains an important media outlet. Further, the average low-income Black family has two periodicals regularly available. Research has shown that urban Blacks use television as stimulation but also as a kind of school to learn from the mistakes of others. Such watching is most common when the program has at least one Black character.

The media outlets, therefore, help to reinforce the prejudices held by the white public with regard to Blacks. At its best, the industry ignored Blacks; at its worst, it made them look childish, inept, and ridiculous.

Recently, however, some changes have occurred—particularly in the 1960s. In the mid-'60s Bill Cosby became the first nonsinger, nondancer, nonbuffoon Black television star. Others followed, and Blacks began to appear as television newscasters and film stars.

In the '60s, things seemed to be improving but the industry still was not employing Blacks to any great degree. As recently as 1972, a study on Children's Television Programming for BEST (Black Effort for Soul in Television) showed that

more than 60 percent of the shows on television had no Black characters at all, and that no show had an all-Black cast. Blacks on children's television rarely appeared in work situations. Black characters usually had only positive attributes while white characters tended to be well-rounded and realistically presented. The occasional Black leader had a white co-leader, but most shows had white leaders. Most shows did not display interaction between races, race was never discussed, and all figures of authority and sources of information were white.

Films were taking basically the same route. The so-called "blaxploitation" films like *Shaft*, *Superfly*, and *Cleopatra Jones*, offered absurdly one-dimensional portraits of Black people. A major rationale was that such films enabled Black producers to get the money needed for "better" productions. But while the media were no longer ignoring or ridiculing Blacks, they were continuing to stereotype Blacks by failing to reflect the true diversity of the Black community and its experiences.

The situation has improved in the past few years. Today television programs and films depict Blacks as both good guys and bad guys, as leaders and followers, as wealthy and poor, as smart and not so smart, as strong and weak. The industry is moving away from stereotyping Blacks to a more honest portrayal. But much remains to be done. And what has been gained can also be lost. If things have improved, it is because the industry has recognized the importance of the Black media consumer. But the Black media expert will have to see that the industry continues to serve the Black public.

The increase in the number of Black media personnel in white organizations has threatened the professional level of Black newspapers. But this only means more employment opportunities for Blacks. Just as the Black media expert has an equal right to employment, the Black community has an equal right to be

served by the media and to have access to them.

For obvious reasons, the white media expert—even with the best of intentions—can only know the American Black experience from the outside. The Black media expert with a pervasive Black consciousness knows the Black experience from within, and he or she can use technical skills to see to it that the media remain true to that experience.

Every media expert is responsible to the media industry only insofar as it also serves the specific community or communities and the larger public. This can form the basis for self-responsibility. As in most American industries, the media industry has a way of making employees feel that they are expendable. Therefore, the training of mass media personnel must give the individual a sense of personal achievement and fulfillment.

New possibilities for Black media experts are opening up and will continue to improve in the future. These possibilities are not only to be found in the traditional Black press but in such newer technological fields as cassette systems and television recording methods. A Black media industry is actually developing. Blacks as individuals and as groups are making efforts to purchase television stations, and Black film companies are coming into existence. A major area, one that reflects the newer technology, is the Black-owned cable television outlets. Efforts to establish and to operate such companies are already under way in New York, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and other major cities.

The place for the Black media expert in the 21st century is now being prepared. In order to find that place, Blacks must be trained not only in technical skills but in responsibility as well. And a sense of responsibility without the management skill necessary to make it work is meaningless. Technical skill without a sense of responsibility is dangerous, given the immense influence that the mass media have on people's lives.

In the future, institutions of higher learning will have to recognize their obligation to provide for this vital sense of responsibility. In the case of the Black trainee, this will mean courses in the history of Blacks in the media, the Black press, Black culture and the Black experience. But this must be supplemented by economics, management and administrative programs, courses on incorporating and where to go for funding assistance. Schools such as Howard University must constantly re-evaluate their curricula.

Without such training, the Black media expert of the future will have gained in technical knowledge but will have lost humanity. The future task calls for encouragement, hope, support for the means of struggle, development of Black talents and self-awareness, and the transmission to American society of a true image of the Black experience. □

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