
NAACP[®]

GUIDELINES FOR THE DEPICTION
OF BLACK LIFE IN MEDIA

PUBLISHED BY

NAACP HOLLYWOOD BUREAU

NAACP | MEDIA GUIDELINES

*The most definitive statement we can offer regarding the composition of mass media content is the incontrovertible fact that **every frame is deliberate**. We have published and explicitly articulated this sentiment in previous reports and convenings, and choose to reiterate the thought here, as the objective of the NAACP Media Guidelines is to clarify the purpose and consequence of mass media storytelling. More specifically, our purpose is to chronicle the relationship between media and the Black community, explore psycho-social dynamics within that relationship, and recommend methods to overcome and/or overhaul the overwhelming deficit those dynamics produce. In short, media can either help or hurt our community. These Guidelines offers insights forged through years of research and experience, that illuminate a path toward a healthy, discerning, and authentically rendered society, wherein the Black experience is understood, appreciated, and celebrated with equitable deference.*

Speech, hieroglyphics, alphabets, scrolls, the printing press, newspapers, photography, telegraph, phonograph, movies, radio, television, satellites, computers, email, digital files, and artificial intelligence are all communication formats that have facilitated the human capacity to transform thoughts into depictions. While media technologies are inherently passive, they wield tremendous power once subjected to the agenda of motivated storytellers and/or the controllers of industry. These Media Guidelines consider those motivations and highlight their correlation to the imposition, indoctrination, consumption, absorption, and adoption of mass media influence on the Black community.

Black fingerprints are present throughout the evolution of media technologies, memorializing oral traditions that reflect natural storytelling proficiencies, delivered with boldness, nuance, and flair. Historically, our documented forays in media have been insular, predominantly focused on internal communal beliefs and lived experience. By contrast, an opposing zeal for global conquest, most pointedly discharged against Black skin, necessitated quasi-moral and pseudo-scientific rationale to justify the exercise of inhumane policy and practice. As a consequence, both internal and external perceptions of Black identity now reflect mass ignorance, confusion, and disdain.

The pairing of media formats with commercial enterprise has heightened the danger of irresponsible storytelling, and strengthened our determination to reconcile ill-informed mythology with greater depth, dimension, and accuracy. The chief impediment to equalizing mass media's renditions of Black life remains the core purpose for which mass media exists – the propagation and perpetuation of a social engineering construct that supports an artificial standard of normality and assigns the remainder of humanity to an underclass existence. The added dimension of economic incentive has produced a nearly impassible phalanx of profiteers, committed to sustaining the social imperative, while reaping rewards for having done so.

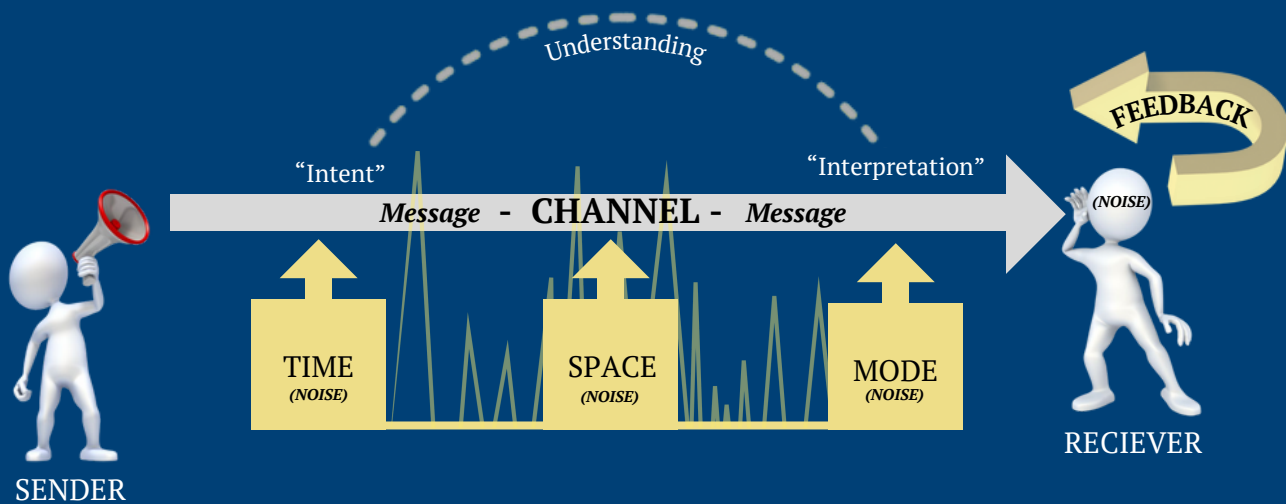
For more than a century, the NAACP has dispelled the artificiality of discriminatory agendas and confronted those that institutionalize such systems. We are determined to light the way to fairness. We are further determined to unearth the truth about people who have been demonized for the benefit of their demonizers. These NAACP Media Guidelines provide much needed awareness about the causal connections between storytelling choices and resulting social outcomes. Mass media storytelling has contributed steadily to the formation of real life circumstance. Adjustments to process and methodology will significantly alter the course of future dynamics, to the benefit of storytellers, audiences, and those who profit from the enterprise. There is value in virtue. Our Six Imperatives for Rendering Black Lives in Media offer a prescription for remedy. So, as every frame is deliberate, so must our efforts be to ensure the sanctity of truth in storytelling.

Kyle Bowser
Senior Vice President
NAACP Hollywood Bureau

WHY MEDIA MATTERS?

Every society is defined by physical and ideological parameters, which are intently reinforced by both internal and external fortifications. The physical characteristics of a society often reflect its political agenda, if not the will of neighboring domains. Within a given society, a dominant cohort of similarly situated influencers typically take the lead in establishing customs and codes that govern the prevailing social culture. Media, in all its forms and extensions, including film, television, music, print, and digital is the principal driver of the design and adherence to the social construct.

THE COMMUNICATION MODEL:



Media is the collective matrix of communication. First established at the advent of a world comprised of two or more inhabitants, interpersonal and mass communication has continued to facilitate the transmission of thoughts from one to another. The Communication Model consists of an interdependent pattern of constants and variables that govern the flow of ideas and resulting manifestations.

- **“The Sender”** is always tasked with selecting the appropriate forum and content to translate the intended thought.
- **“The Receiver”** is expected to interpret the transmission in accordance with that intention.
- **“Channel”** is the conduit through which the communication is distributed.
- **“The Message”** is the embodiment of the thought, sent from sender to receiver and always transmitted through a designated channel.
- **“Noise”** is the intrinsic elements of conduction and interference that influence the qualities of transmission
- **“Time, Place, and Mode”** injects intervening noise that directly impacts the receiver’s interpretation of the sender’s intent. For example, a choice to whisper while communicating across the Grand Canyon will certainly compromise comprehension, as might shouting from the driver to the passenger in an automobile infer inadvertent emphasis. Senders should also be mindful of noise that may exists within a receiver’s perspective.
- **“Feedback”** The only way to secure clear verification the intended thought is accurately interpreted. In transmitting a new and reactionary message, the original receiver becomes a new sender, conveying either an acknowledgment or refutation of the transmitted thought. To achieve effective communication, the sender must consider the receiver’s feedback.
- **“Understanding”** – The ultimate objective on both sides of the exchange.



Image courtesy of Hooked on Houses

The Influence of Storytelling

Storytellers render thoughts with vivid depictions that affirm, refute, or expand consciousness. Skilled storytellers are able to utilize the elements of The Communication Model to tap into the psyche of their audiences, enhancing interpretation through the manipulation of imagination. The best storytellers recognize the power of **hope** and **fear** as foundations to compelling narratives and exercise those levers to direct audiences toward desired outcomes.

The purveyors of prevailing social constructs empower storytellers to influence public perception in ways that support and perpetuate those constructs. Mass communication is particularly effective in its proliferation of construct affirming narratives. In turn, mass adoption of dominant culture values validates media as a trusted apparatus for sharing ideas.

Alignment between cultural influencers and influential media is essential to formalizing the social construct.

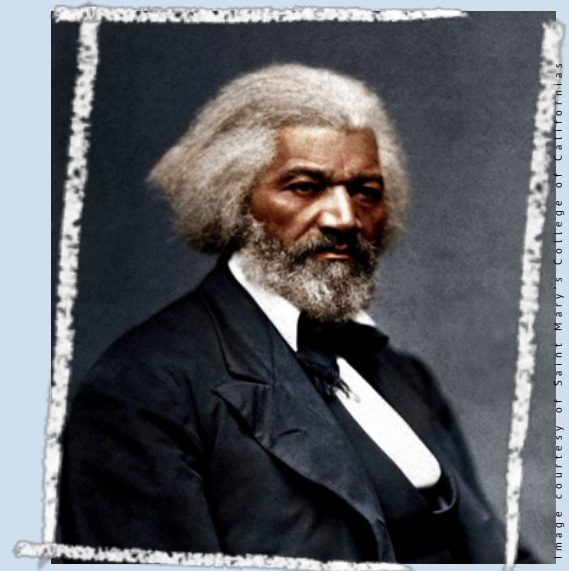
To be effective, media must remain engaging, while surreptitiously distracting audiences from underlying objectives. Typically, a misleading stimulator of amusement is employed to attract audience attention, while core purposes are subliminally camouflaged, in an effort to unwittingly program audiences to subscribe to the worldview of the dominant culture.

In the campaign to control perceptions and behaviors, every turn of text is intentional, and every frame of film is deliberate.

Committees of personnel engage in exhaustive debates about every detail in the story development process. Meticulous care is taken to create a relatable protagonist journey, winding through trials and circumstances that are also resonant, concluding with resolves that affirm prevailing beliefs and assuring the preservation of a social status quo. The consequence of these choices is profound.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Frederick Douglass was the most photographed person in the 19th Century. This was a very deliberate choice on his part. Douglass' objective was to counterbalance the incessant imagery of grotesque Black caricatures printed in local newspapers across the nation each day. The impact of newspaper cartoons was significant, as the American populous of the 19th Century was primarily an agrarian-based society, and literacy rates were exceedingly low. Into this ecosystem of under-educated masses in desperate need to identify an even lower caste, media magnates infused distortions of Black people, lambasted as unsophisticated, unacculturated, and incapable of self-sufficiency.



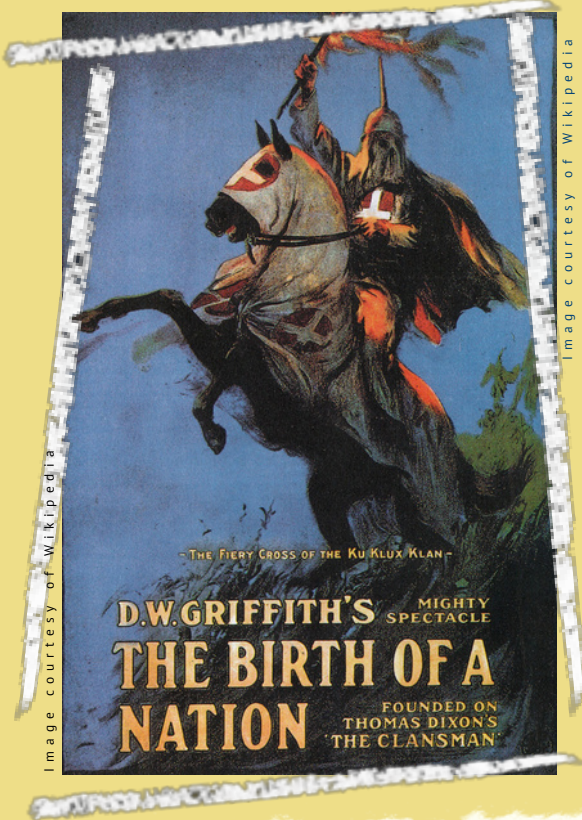
Media misrepresentations of Blacks have had a long and lasting impact on the national psyche, world-wide perceptions, and most insidiously, self-identifying elements of Black consciousness. A people severed from their cultural roots remain vulnerable to external interpretations of their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual identity.

In turn, the failure of the displaced to tell their own story, or denied access to the storytelling apparatus, empowers others to fill the narrative vacuum with inauthentic tales that affirm their own worldview and self-interest.

In his seminal study of Hollywood's Black classifications, author Donald Bogle distilled the industry's typecasting to five major categories – Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks. A perusal of Black movie and TV interpretations produced by studios and their creative operatives will reveal a matching comparison between these categories and on-screen characterizations. The Black lackey, ever-willing to sublimate his own interests; the Black buffoon, too imbecilic to be aware of his own foolishness; the tragically cursed bi-racial progeny never comfortable in or out of his own skin; the asexual caretaker always more focused on the concerns of her white employer than her own; and the ultra-verile stud whose physical value will always exceed the depths of his humanity, are all over-simplifications of a people actually imbued with substance and dimension. A sixth archetype is also deserving of attention and redress – the Jezebel. The image of Black women has been grossly distorted and defamed in the exhausting perversion of a loud, angry, and hyper-sexualized entity, incapable of physical or emotional vulnerability. This disservice has injured the psyche of Black women and clouded the perceptions of all others who engage based on the miseducation.

“Only 32% of Black viewers feel representation of their identity group is accurate.”
-Nielsen

NAACP IN HOLLYWOOD



“We must ensure that the representations circulating in Hollywood storytelling work to affirm and celebrate America’s cultural diversity – as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes about marginalized groups and wittingly (or unwittingly) promoting narratives that work against the ideals of a more inclusive and just society.”

-NAACP

The NAACP focused its attention on the impact of mass media just a few years following the historic founding of the civil rights organization. The 1915 release of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth Of A Nation* crystallized the power of media to shape social dynamics. Griffith’s film was among the first feature length narratives captured on celluloid. The famed director employed novel production techniques to replicate the scope and scale of the Civil War conflict. In fact, some of his camera techniques are still in use in today’s filmmaking. Unfortunately, Griffith’s adaptation of Thomas Dixon’s novel, *The Clansman*, heavily relied on misguided and pejorative tropes, designed to malign the miraculous achievement of Black survivors of multi-generational enslavement and subjugation. Griffith rendered Blacks as ravenous and inhumane intruders on the sacred and proprietary spaces occupied by white America. The NAACP’s demand of cinema operators nationwide, to reject the film’s distribution was largely ignored and further thwarted by President Woodrow Wilson’s offensive choice to grace *The Birth Of A Nation* with the distinction of being the first film ever screened at the White House. The fallout from the film’s release and popularity included a precipitous rise in the roles of Ku Klux Klan membership, as well as a resulting spike in the number of racial lynchings around the country.

That advocacy campaign produced painful lessons about **the power of media and its relationship to social engineering**. The NAACP reasserted its commitment to the issue, launching subsequent and successful campaigns to ban Disney’s *Song Of The South* and *Amos ‘n Andy* on CBS, as well as its support of Black talent, through its Hollywood Bureau and the annual NAACP Image Awards franchise.

The NAACP Hollywood Bureau was established in 2001 to assert a determined effort to achieve equitable outcomes in the industry. The Bureau is most notably focused on the interests of the Black artistic community and audiences that crave their works. Initially, mere presence on screen was a significant objective to pursue. The absence of Black life on screen was an unacceptable form of cultural erasure, endorsing the biased belief that the Black experience was unworthy of widespread attention.

Concerns about the sheer volume of Black characterizations seamlessly evolved to include a wider focus on less apparent, but deeply consequential aspects of the media landscape, most notably Black storytelling, trade crafting, executive representation, marketing strategies, and access to distribution platforms. **The lens through which stories are crystalized determines resonance and impact**. The *Sender, Message, and Receiver* illustration of *The Communication Model* bares out the notion that the elements of story development, production, distribution, and marketing correlate with the interpretation and feedback expressed by audiences.

For more than two decades, the NAACP Hollywood Bureau has remained at the forefront of engagement with industry institutions to advocate and secure greater Black participation in every sector of the business. The thrust of the Bureau's work has deepened, as technologies have further infiltrated popular culture and consumer engagement with media has intensified. While the Black community represents nearly fourteen percent of the total US population, Black engagement with media far exceeds a one-to-one ratio. Black consumers over-index in acquisition of media devices and time spent in use of those devices. An even more elevated analysis of Black import to the media industries is based upon the well documented trove of Black contributions to "mainstream" culture and the loss leader calculus that has failed to produce remuneration for that provision.

To highlight excellence in the arts and the multitude of deserving contributors, the NAACP has presented the annual NAACP Image Awards for more than half a century. Nominees in film, television, music, and literary arts are lauded each year for their unparalleled achievements, as performers, writers, directors, and even social justice advocates. Given the influence of these artists and their ability to impact consumer behavior, one might assume the NAACP Image Awards is heralded as the clearest indicator of cultural trends and sales potential. Yet, **"mainstream" media sources continually rely upon outdated measurements of proximity to established standards of normality to assess market value.** Consequently, Black artistic achievements are often marginalized to prop up the phantasm of a hierarchal delusion. Winners and nominees of "mainstream" awards are typically afforded greater opportunity and increased wages for subsequent work. Still, acceptance speeches delivered by winners of NAACP Image Awards routinely espouse a deep appreciation for the forum, as the recognition proves more authentic and germane to an overall objective to utilize media as an apparatus of progressive social change.



“Over half of viewers surveyed said they were more likely to watch inclusive content. Content representing more than one racial/ethnic group was also found to be more engaging to viewers.”

-Nielsen

THE DEFINITION OF NORMAL

America's sweetheart, Dorothy, and her motley cohort were deeply confused about their true identities, as they embarked on a yellow brick excursion to Oz. Their understanding of society's expectations and their actual juxtaposition to those expectations left the young ingenue, the scarecrow, tin man, and cowardly lion feeling inadequate to meet social demands. They relied on external sources to assess their intrinsic value and sought a prescription for becoming more self-assured. But then, the pesky little dog Toto, pulled back the curtain to reveal the true nature of the all-knowing Wizard. Before his unmasking, the Wizard operated as a unilateral message sender, indifferent to receiver feedback. The good people of Oz simply abided by the Wizard's every edict.



Image courtesy of Vanity Fair

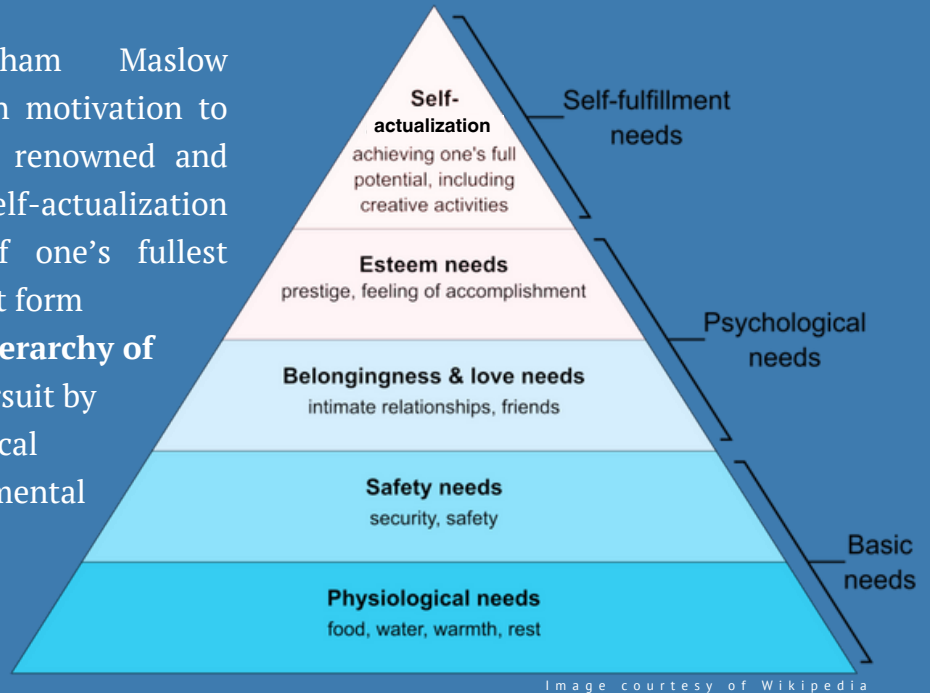
Then suddenly, the truth was finally made apparent. The Wizard was a fraud. Self-identity is actually a manifestation of internal values. External sources are not inclined to affirm those values, unless a nexus of common benefit exists. Toward that end, these Media Guidelines offer insights necessary for the continued engagement of Black and general audiences to consume mass media messaging, and rationale to reform the underlying agenda that is implicit.



Image courtesy of Albertson Halloween House

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON BLACK PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Leading psychologist Abraham Maslow emphasized the inherent human motivation to seek personal fulfillment. His renowned and widely accepted theory posits self-actualization as the ultimate realization of one's fullest potentials, producing the greatest form of personal reward. **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** articulates this human pursuit by placing the most basic physiological needs as the foremost and fundamental priority, followed by safety and security as secondary.



The tertiary driver in human emotional development is the need for a sense of belonging, followed by esteem as the achievement of purpose and respect. Finally, self-actualization completes the human developmental journey.

Conversely, a nation built at the expense of Black bodies and Black liberty was never intended to include accommodations for self-actualization among the victimized. Resources were never allocated for such unfathomable goals. In fact, the structural paradigm designed to perpetuate the American way of life depends on a largely stagnant underclass with an untransmutable incapacity to transcend the purposes for which the dominant culture is inclined to exploit. By and large, pleas and demands to remodel the architecture of this caste construct consistently find refuge within deaf ears, or amid the recurring rubble of intolerable frustration.

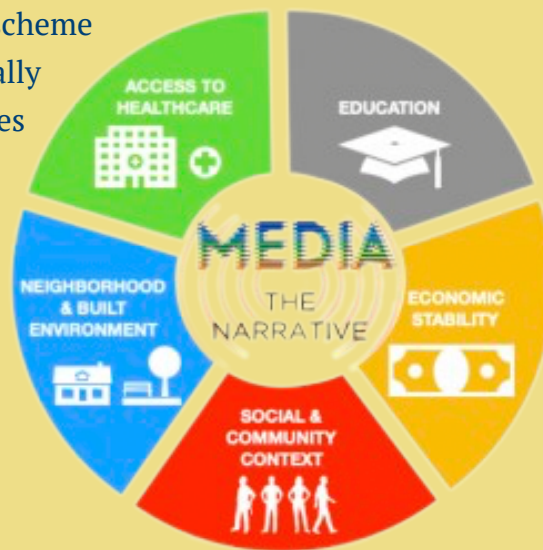
Centuries of subjugation, discrimination, and exploitation have resulted in significant hardships for the Black community, particularly with regard to health disparities. Mortality rates and psycho-social disorders within the community far exceed comparative per capita proportions. Despite rich beauty and deep pride, the onerous weight of Black skin in America can be crippling. Genetic trauma and real-time distress take an immeasurable toll on individual and collective Black psyche and further truncate the brevity of physiological impermanence. Danger, disease, and death triangulate the Black experience, diminishing expectations, while strangling happiness, health, and hope. In response, the media must commit to reflecting a 360-degree truth.

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS

A comprehensive infrastructure system provides foundational support to uphold the ideals espoused by the architects of society. The educational, economic, social, environmental, and health interests of a society are served by public and private systems that assume the reliance of the populace. Equal access and fair treatment within those systems are a bedrock principle necessary to achieve equitable outcomes. Bias baked into the operational policies of social infrastructure sews discontent and mistrust among the disenfranchised. The first steps toward reforming these shortcomings is to reveal and acknowledge their existence, followed by objective persuasion by influential forces to pursue greater social equilibrium.

The complexity of this social scheme requires an engine to continually reinforce artificial contrivances about dominant perspectives, while fortifying fears of alternative views emanating from those who have been “otherized.” Therein lies the core purpose served by media. Beyond news, far from entertainment, and way past the immense wealth

generated from advertising, **media’s primary purpose is to establish and extend a social system that reflects the values of dominant culture.** The essence of this revelation is captured in the 2021 McKinsey & Company report that concluded Hollywood forfeits \$10 Billion annually, due to its refusal to embrace and support the contributions of Black storytellers and the global audiences they seek to serve. An industry that is legendary for fully monetizing every nook and cranny of economic potential would never deliberately forgo the upside of fully engaging the Black narrative, but for the underlying imperative to preserve prevailing perspectives that support an existing social order.



Social determinants have been systematically created and maintained to exclude, injure, and disempower on the basis of race, leaving Black people gripped with stress and trauma. That hardship is exacerbated by narratives in media that perpetuate harmful stereotypes that challenge the temerity to overcome adversity.

The absence of authentic depictions of Black realities results in missed social and economic opportunities, as **stories told through a strength-based lens are more resonant and healthy for both Black and general audiences.** Merchants of media contribute to identity formation for members of both privileged and marginalized groups, by affirming artificial notions of superiority and reinforcing false fabrications of inferiority. Sustained exposure to media produces “para-social relationships” that generate deceptive impressions and distorted dynamics. Like puppet masters, **media merchants influence social health and wellness by manipulating narratives and “building worlds through words.”**

A complicit media machine exacerbates the failure of social systems to deliver equitable services across demographic sectors. **Media's distortions of Black life help to substantiate the application of aberrant modifications to public infrastructure, leaving the community to contend with an unhealthy ecosystem and perpetual resource deficiencies.**

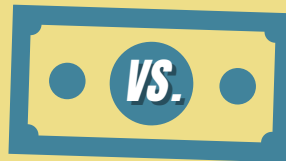
EDUCATION



MISEDUCATION

- Funding Shortage
- Curricular Inadequacy
- Cultural Relevance

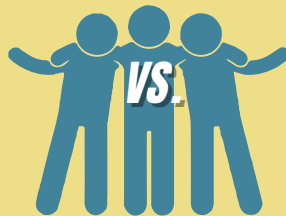
ECONOMIC STABILITY



THE POVERTY PROBLEM

- Limited Personal Resources
- Limited Communal Resources
- Limited Employment

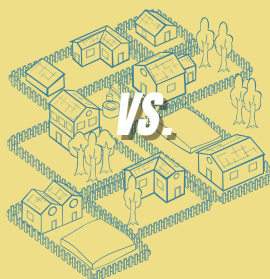
SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONTEXT



THE SYSTEM

- Internal Influences
- External Influences
- Governmental Oversight

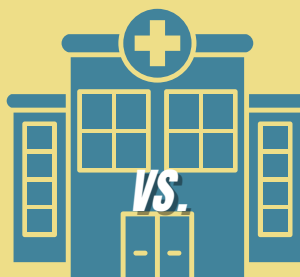
NEIGHBORHOOD & BUILT ENVIRONMENT



A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

- Physical Environment
- Housing Stability
- Behavioral Standards

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE



THE INJURED MIND, BODY, & SOUL

- Illness Prevention
- Institutional Presence
- Medical / Mental Health

THE DEPTH AND DIMENSION OF BLACK LIFE

Another tangible dimension of per capita excess is media's infatuation with Black criminality – an omnipresent narrative serving to increase readership, ratings, subscriptions, sales of tickets, popcorn, game consoles, stoke suspicion, fuel fear, and help justify the world's largest prison industrial complex, also known as the 13th Amendment's preservation of state sponsored slavery. Good vs. Evil will always be a surefire storytelling format, certain to capture audience attention. However, **dimensional character exploration affords greater insight and understanding** about the situational push and gravitational pull that drives folks to either pole.



A multitude of underlying explanations exist for Black criminality and a host of historical elucidations clarify the prominence of Black incarceration. Substantial research dispels false assumptions of a one-to-one correlation between the two. Criminality exists in all communities and cultures. Proportionality of crime within sectors is typically calculated based on culturally biased security metrics, which further reflect law enforcement funding allocations, and directly determines arrest, prosecution, and incarceration rates. Oversight and policing of Black life has always been a mainstay of American governmental attention, yielding an industrialized penal institution designed to warehouse Black bodies and imprison Black minds.

Media serves to legitimize the institution. **The portrayal of Black people and Black communities with predilection toward crime and criminal acumen is ignorant, malicious, and/or criminal in and of itself.** One need only study choices made by news services and entertainment platforms that accentuate the malignant behavior of a small percentage of a minority community, to assess the impulse behind that preoccupation. Yet, the vast majority of inhabitants of those same communities are law abiding, tax paying, value-adding members of society. The disproportionate media focus on Black criminality has largely shaped perception and adoption of myths, tropes, and stereotypes. While fiction and embellishment are artful techniques to inform and entertain, media must strive to be more accurate and less contributory to falsifying the nature of the Black experience.

No more sinister film character exists than *The Wizard of Oz's* Wicked Witch of the West. Her evil spirit is germane to her foul disposition and putrid nature. Early in the film, the Witch (always dressed in black) is established as an uncompromising agent of evil, particularly in contrast to her angelic sister, Glinda the Good Witch (always dressed in white). The accidental death of a third sister provokes the Wicked Witch to unleash the depths of her depravity upon the cherubic protagonist, Dorothy, and her entourage of misfits. For generations, viewers of this classic film and readers of the novel from which it was adapted, have accepted the witch's predilection to evil as a given. But the prequel musical stage play, *Wicked*, challenges that presumption by exploring dimensions of the Wicked Witch's past, to reveal events that led a seemingly nice young lady to dedicate her heart to a life of darkness.



Image courtesy of Blog Richmond

This type of backstory excavation is sorely missing from mass media's depiction of Black people. Far too often, Black story subjects serve a mere perfunctory purpose of propagating sensational myths about "otherized" pathologies. In narrative tales, Black characters often contribute to circumstances that summon a clarion call for heroism from the protagonist. Similarly, highly editorialized news and information reports also require fuel to perpetuate public reliance and allegiance to dominant dynamics. Hence, Black criminality remains prominent and focal in media.

Damaging portrayals and their impact on the psyche of Black people contribute to making media a risk factor in the health of the Black community. It can wear one down just as much as living in poverty or being exposed to community or family violence."

-MEE Productions

MEDIA'S ROLE IN PERPETUATING SYSTEMATIC EXPLOITATION AND RACISM

Media has traditionally failed to depict the full dimension and panoramic breadth of Black lives. This practice has persisted since the inception of mass media systems. Print media was birthed within an ecosystem of a largely illiterate populace. To build larger subscriber scale, newspapers focused editorial attention on stories that might resonate with a lower-educated public. In fact, comic illustrations became a principle feature, as simple drawings and brief captions were easily comprehended.

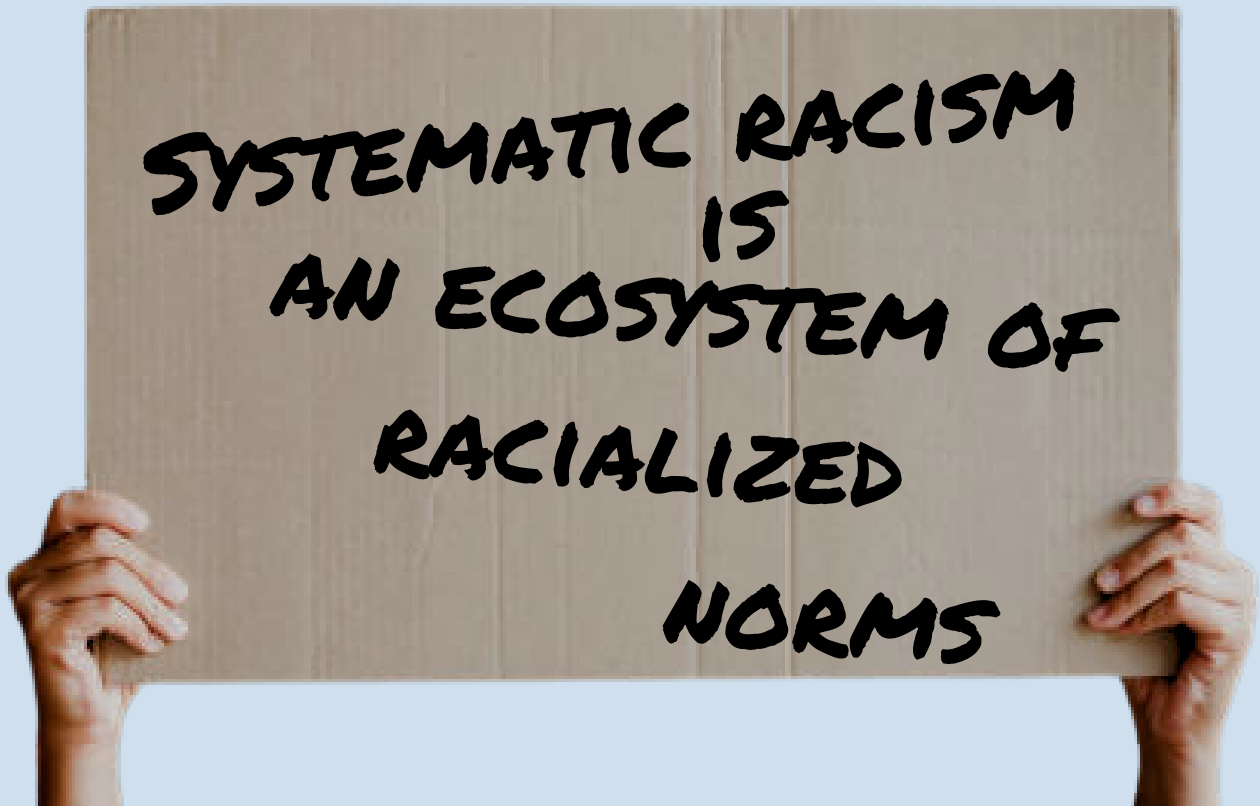
In the maligning tradition of print and film industries, the soundtracking of American life was also designed to support a prevalent social engineering scheme. The emergence of the radio industry in the early 1920's adversely impacted the record business, as consumers began to rely on audio broadcasting to fulfill their demand for popular music. In response, record labels began to make measured investment in Black artists, offering to expose them to otherwise elusive distribution opportunities. A two-tier investment model distinguished opportunities for white artists from those made for Blacks, despite the wildly successful returns generated by the new market segment, dubbed race records. Not surprisingly, the niche market ballooned to not only becoming a staple within the industry, but an overwhelming leader. Today's version of race records (Hip-Hop) is unquestionably the most popular genre of music worldwide.

Recycled iterations of fabricated, but familiar aesthetics about American life were routinely broadcasted, until the 1990's opened a new pipeline of television content, specifically culled from the Black experience. Under the pseudonymic banner of "urban entertainment," fledgling TV networks were programmed to appeal to previously underserved audiences and the overserved masses in search of more exciting points of reference.

Black style and nomenclature suddenly became the rage within the popular zeitgeist, and quickly reshaped the defining characteristics of culture and class. Low and behold, Black was in vogue. But in each case, as the pioneering networks gained greater market share and advertiser support, they swiftly pivoted to more established tonal sensibilities in programming. Though popular culture maintained its fixation with the "urban"/Black aesthetic, for a time, reflections of the Black experience were again dimmed across the TV landscape.

Yet, the power of Black culture is undeniable. The aesthetic continues to captivate the world and occupy bandwidth across the media spectrum. Every genre of film, TV, and music content has been infiltrated with an incursion of Blackness, though often crafted to uphold prevailing social dynamics.

One particularly illustrative example lies in a comparison between Black ethos and that of similarly situated white counterparts in the face of crisis. The tragedy of the crack epidemic has been addressed repeatedly in film, television, and music storytelling, typically couching narratives in a context of Black predacious criminalization. Ominous drug dealers, depraved junkies, and overzealous cops are always the protagonists or focal points of such accounts. Conversely, media's treatment of the opioid epidemic, which has generally plagued white America, is always couched in a context of victimization. The unfortunate souls addicted to pharmaceutical opioids are rendered as unwitting prey, subjected to the inescapable grip of the drug and the greed of its manufacturers. Even the bad guys of the saga are presented as misguided tycoons, blinded by avarice, in finely tailored suits and ties.



The media has played an enormous role in the way the nation has reacted to “mainstream” America’s opioid tragedy. The priorities of empathetic treatment and the hope of recovery have been firmly reinforced. To the contrary, America’s struggle with the rampant crack tragedy has been met with a reinforcement of the supposed “War on Drugs,” and a loud public proclamation to “Lock them up!”

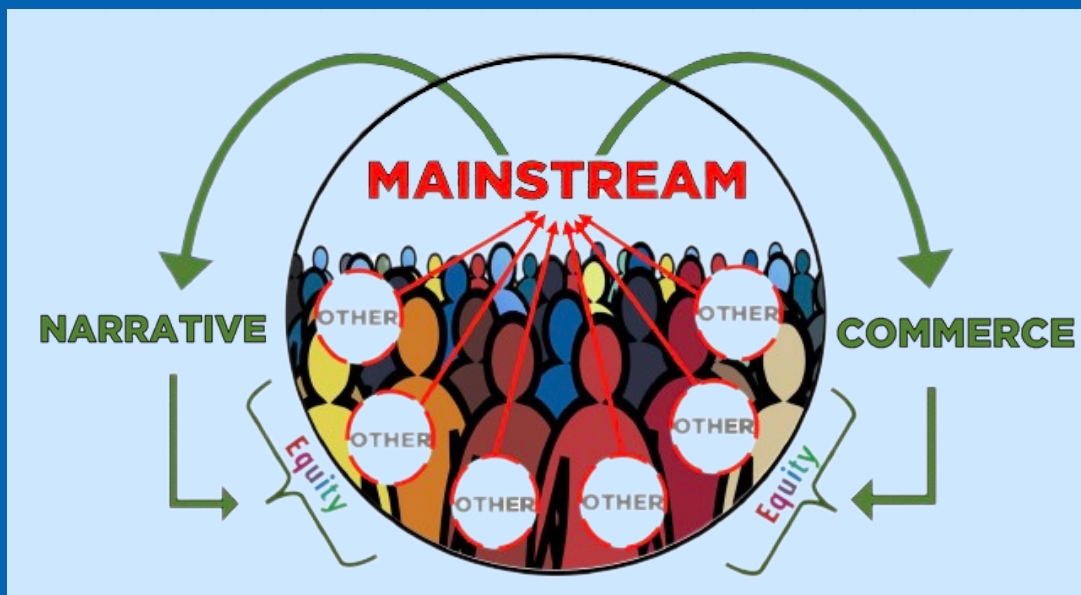
These distinctions can be seen in the depiction of familial bonding, housing environments, educational pursuits, career aspiration, health priorities, gun violence, and many other comparative factors. Ironically, even unflattering renditions of Black life prove profitable, as perceptions have been primed to that default. While the narratives must be reimagined, so must the relationship between the sources of culture and the value they generate.

Time and again, media industries have achieved measurable success on the back of Black culture, yet the Black community holds no equity stake in that exploitation. Typically, over time, contributors accrue an increasing stakeholder interest in the asset supported by their contributions. Mortgages, auto loans, and other gradual payment instruments are universally recognized as worthy investment models for lenders and borrowers alike. Each receives a fair bargain in the exchange. Conversely, media is designed to extract Black culture from its sources, without an intention to share the value.

“Despite progress in addressing explicit discrimination, racial inequities continue to be deep, pervasive, and persistent across the country. Racial inequities exist across all indicators for success, including in education, criminal justice, jobs, housing, public infrastructure, and health, regardless of region.”
-RacialEquityAlliance.org

THE BLACK STAKEHOLDER INTEREST

While “**otherized**” communities suffer extensive hardships and marginalization, their cultural contributions are often celebrated and appropriated for the benefit of a monolithic vacuum called “**mainstream**.” This homogenized kettle of culture is filled with ingredients contributed from the “otherized” remainder of humanity. Once stamped with the approval of dominant culture certification, these outcast contributions are processed through a matrix of exploitation, that produces **narrative** and **commercial** results. Typically, contributions of value generate an accrual of **equity** over time. A contributor of value is usually afforded an increasing measure of stakeholder interest as their contributions span a continuum.



Culture is America’s chief export and Black contribution to “mainstream” culture is dominant and incalculable. Still, an equity dividend for the Black cultural endowment must be calculated and remitted. Hollywood has certainly benefitted from deliberate efforts to capture the essence of Black culture, only to then monetize the experience without equitable recognition of its sources. This habit is so engrained in Hollywood’s business model that **Black culture shows up on screen, even when Black people are absent from the frames.**

The origins of Black culture must be documented and vested. Recognition of its basis has tremendous value, particularly in light of the American tradition of revisionist history and disenfranchisement. Once severed from ancestry, preservation of culture emerged as a binding clasp that connects and sustains the Black community. The proprietary interest in that vital lifeline must not be sacrificed for the economic interests of others.

A PATH FORWARD

Despite substantial adversity and generational trauma, the Black community has cultivated organic skills and alternate infrastructure formulated for the preservation of culture and civility. These protective factors have sustained the community despite a persistent onslaught of degradation. Mass media has embraced a compelling and profitable storytelling regimen that accentuates the maladies of the Black experience, while grossly overlooking the more compelling and healthy illustrations of Black self-sustainability. **The protective factors that undergird the Black community are rich with humanistic qualities that transcend the brunt of any specific ordeal, instead offering relatable reflections that are common among all.**



Image courtesy of Campaign

Most poignantly, Black resiliency is the quintessential measurement of the nation's founding principles, serving as an accounting of the efficacy of the founders' ideals. An earnest analysis of the American experiment, exploring the contrast between espoused intentions and actual lived realities, need only look to the saga of the African American for a lucid accounting. The stark deficit that separates propaganda from truth is vast, painful, and illuminating. **Media serves to maintain the marketing campaign of the national brand.**

This role of a subjugated, oppressed, and exploited underclass is essential to America's reliance on unfettered capitalistic greed. The national mantra is to win, at all cost, even at the expense of others, including the obliteration of cultural authenticity among those whose true nature contravenes the scheme. The construct requires subscription to the prescribed value system and consumption of its methods of manipulation. Media firmly implants those virtues and leads the indoctrinated toward those outcomes.

Two alternate choices are available for mass media storytellers:

1

Demonstrate the realities these systems play in the health and wellness of Black people



Media must honestly address the injurious outcomes determinative systems impose on Black life and must also highlight the undefeated vitality of the community's commitment to persevere.

Acknowledgement of these diametric truths will aid the community in its transition from mere subsistence to a posture of thriving.

By re-rendering the scope of normalcy imposed by a dominant few, toward a boundless province inhabited by all, media can curtail the never-ending quest by all to navigate proximity to an artificial standard. The existing hierarchal scheme forces each inhabitant to calculate the measure of access, achievement, and association that separates their existence from a desired quotient of privilege. The closer one's lived experience resembles the prevailing standard, as echoed by mass media messaging, the more affirmed the belief in a singular cultural definition of normalcy.

2

Illustrate the strengths and resiliency of the community, despite sustained adversity and chronic trauma.



To the contrary, “otherized” people are in fact normal. Their ways and means are valid and righteous, not as compared to an established benchmark, but based singularly on their divine charter to live uncompromised lives. **If there is an “otherized” facet of the Black experience, it is the unceasing capacity to prevail, with fierce determination and humanity.** Those seeking to tell stories of the Black experience should focus their energies on that infinite reservoir of redemptive qualities that empower.

SIX IMPERATIVES FOR RENDERING BLACK LIVES IN MEDIA

1. Recognize Media's Role in Perpetuating a Social Engineering Scheme.



Media is an apparatus used to validate the values of a dominant culture.

2. Consider the Existence and Validity of Different Points of View.



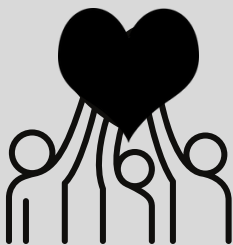
Alternate perspectives are likely, as are opportunities to realize enhanced results, once multiple views are considered.

3. Acknowledge the History of Subjugation that has Produced a Traumatized Community in Need of Affirmation.



Psycho-social disorders are not intrinsic to Black life but are the result of determinative systems designed to exploit and malign.

4. Focus on the Black Community's Reliance on Self-Sustaining Protective Factors.



Black resilience is the consequence of determined efforts to propagate the culture.

5. Inclusion of Authentic Black Storytelling Produces Healthy Outcomes for the Community and the World.



Black involvement in the development, production, marketing, and distribution of stories reflective of Black life ensures greater resonance and value.

6. Black Contributors to Mainstream Culture Deserve an Equitable Stake in the Exploitation of their Contributions.



The creation of valuable cultural assets is worthy of stakeholder interests and documentation of the origins of each specimen.

1. Recognize Media's Role in Perpetuating a Social Engineering Scheme

While most participants in the assembly, marketing, and distribution of media messages are attracted by the opportunity to engage in creative content delivery, they also inadvertently help to facilitate a dominant social agenda that relies on macro-scale media engagement to gain acceptance and adherence. Evidence of this dynamic is present throughout the history of mass media proliferation and highlighted in these Guidelines. To avoid unconsciously contributing to this continued scheme, storytellers and media practitioners must:

1. Consider one's cultural and experiential proximity to the intended media message and the audience intended for engagement.
2. Consider the depth and dimension of characters and circumstances rendered within the intended content.
3. Consider the consequential implications realized by intended audiences and the collateral impact on others.
4. Consider whether opposing perspectives are afforded equitable access to media platforms that support the message at hand.
5. Consider whether the redundancy of the media message at hand serves to authenticate a prevailing perspective.

“Black viewers of the superhero movie *Black Panther* expressed pride, empowerment, and connection to their racial identity after watching the movie.”
 -USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center: *Media Impact Project*

CASE STUDY: *Black Panther* (written and directed by Ryan Coogler)

In an effort to refute longstanding misconceptions about Black life, held by non-Blacks and more tragically by the Black victims of massive and systemically imposed identity crisis, *Black Panther* imagines an all-Black utopian environment, protected from intrusion and colonization. Separate from the heroics of its Afro-gifted characters, the film conjures possibilities for Black self-determination. The emotional craving for such a possibility is so profound within the community, the film engendered expressions of genuine pride and communion across the diaspora. It also commanded unprecedented successes in the international film trade, debunking the age-old myth about “Black films not appealing to overseas audiences.” While the filmmakers and distributors of the film realized unprecedented financial success, the project also generated a unique form of equity for the donors of its cultural palette. Self-pride is a precious commodity. *Black Panther* injected that priceless currency into circulation and produced invaluable dividends to be realized for generations.

2. Consider the Existence and Validity of Different Points of View

Two factors heavily influence the role of media in public discourse:

1. Mass media serves to affirm the values of dominant culture; and
2. Dominant culture dominates the operation of societal systems

By perpetuating the notion of a collective consciousness and universal value system, media tends to thwart or ignore efforts to proffer alternate perspectives. A frequent presumption about stories reflecting alternate perspectives is that they lack the humanistic qualities necessary to resonate and gain traction with “mainstream” audiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, clear evidence demonstrates the more culturally specific the expressions of the human experience, the more universal and relatable the engagement. This is true even when themes and plot points contravene established mythology. The determining factor is whether audiences are willing to accept the human qualities resident in us all.

CASE STUDY: *13TH* (written and directed by Ava DuVernay)

The US Constitution is the written embodiment of rights, privileges, and ideals that bind our nation in a cohesive system of governance. Through a series of twenty-seven Amendments, the document has been perfected over time to more clearly interpret the intentions of its framers and the evolving mores of its beneficiaries. *13th* fully explores the context and application of a particular Constitutional provision that preserves the institution of slavery, through an underlying policy to maintain America’s dependence on free and cheap labor to support its economic growth. The 13th Amendment places command of such servitude within the hands of the prison industrial complex, exempting convicted wards of State supervision from the liberation promised in the same Amendment. The film disimbuces the myth of slavery’s abolishment and crystallizes the continuing American legacy of oppression and bondage.

“Films that scored higher on a measure of “authentically inclusive representation” (AIR) did better at the box office and received more acclaim from critics and audience members.”

- UCLA Center for Scholars and Storytellers

3. Acknowledge the History of Subjugation that has Produced a Traumatized Community in Need of Affirmation

Adverse circumstances are common to all, but media's fascination with the pain of Black people suggests the community suffers from an innate predisposition toward tragic choices and consequences. Media's persuasive inference of this imagined penchant for pain and stress is often processed as an unenviable fact by observers of the community and emulated by its inhabitants. Informed and enlightened analysis of the dynamic reveals pervasive conditions tracing to the origins of African kidnapping, exploitation, and brutality in North America. This unprecedented campaign of centuries-long barbarous atrocity continues to impact the generational transference of Black cellular data, regenerating debilitating trauma.

Exposing the causes of traumatic dynamics engrained in Black life would certainly help to eradicate any willful or neglectful denial of awareness or intention. Media should serve the necessary objective of baring witness to comprehensive elucidations of truth, including exposing persecution and injustice, but too often it contributes to misapprehensions of Black communal culture by saturating the storytelling gaze with redundant narratives about the tragedy of misguided Black choice.

CASE STUDY: *AMERICAN SKIN* (written and directed by Nate Parker)

The tender bond between Black fathers and their children is rarely depicted in mass media. Too often, those authentic qualities are lost to tired tropes about absentee and/or unsupportive paternalism. *American Skin* provides a glimpse at the genuine rapport that typically exist between Black fathers and the sons they must raise at an accelerated pace, to avoid the encroachment of a fearful and suspecting world. Such is the case when father and son are detained for a minor traffic infraction, while driving in an unwelcomed part of town. After an overzealous police officer shoots the teenage son to death, the father succumbs to the traumatic anguish of being unable to shield his son from the presumptuous attack. An acquittal for liability deepens the father's descent in the abyss, leading to an eventual military-style takeover of the officer's precinct, a hostage siege, and a mock trial to reach a more credible verdict. *American Skin* reveals the raw nerves exposed by Black trauma. While the father's pain is derived from a very specific interaction, not uncommon to Black people, its depiction strikes a universal chord, humanizing the headlines of State sponsored abuse and murder of Black people.

“Black trauma movies provide a window into the trauma embedded in the history and cultural narrative of Black Americans. They tackle different aspects of the personal and collective struggle of Black people, as well as the forces at play that reinforce trauma, both in previous generations and in the current era”

-The Meadows, a behavioral health treatment center

4. Focus on the Black Community's Reliance on Self-Sustaining Protective Factors

Despite seemingly insurmountable adversity that draws restrictive parameters around Black life, an organic infrastructure of self-preservation and survival continues to sustain the culture and the commitment to overcome. Social, economic, health, and welfare matters are addressed by intricate networks of individual and organizational support systems. Media tends to accentuate destructive elements within the Black community, reinforcing internal and external misperceptions and resulting behavior. To the contrary, the community is replete with constructive methods of productivity. Miss Johnson's choice to reprimand wayward children (not her own) is an example of the intra-reliance that helps to secure community welfare. Not only does Miss Johnson make an affirmative choice to assert her authority as a community elder, but she is empowered by a communal ecosystem that depends on supplemental support and trusts the judgement of those who have proven their ability to navigate circumstances that might otherwise cause harm.

Typical Protective Factors:

- Social Connections
- Emotional Competence
- Parental Resilience
- Communal Resourcefulness

“There is extensive evidence that popular media has a significant impact on audiences' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, policy support, and behavior. Showing individual and structural perspective can help build support for systematic solutions.”

-USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center: Media Impact Project

“Social service and mental health research shows that protective factors can balance out or even outweigh risk factors in a person's life. Media can make a difference.”

-MEE Productions

CASE STUDY: *A THOUSAND AND ONE* (written and directed by A.V. Rockwell)

As New York City begins its transformation toward gentrification and stop-and-frisk policing, the safety net for residents living on the margins starts to unravel. Caught in a vortex of change and challenge, Inez kidnaps her young son from the foster care system that has held custody of him since her incarceration. Throughout her son's childhood and adolescence, Inez battles the odds to provide stability, largely driven by the commitment to overcome the absence of the domestic calm in her own life. This film provides a raw and visceral look at the protective factors that emerge in the absence of formalized structural support in the Black community. A village of characters augment Inez's efforts, even as traditional systems unplug from their formal commission.

5. Inclusion of Authentic Black Storytelling Produces Healthy Outcomes for the Community and the World

Diverse inclusion is a proven and well-documented element of organizational and commercial success. There are many definitions for diversity and inclusion, as well as numerous philosophical approaches toward their achievement. The interests of the Black community require comprehensive efforts to diversify the determinative systems and industries that impact communal outcomes. Media's depiction of diversity is crucial to social embrace and implementation of the objective. Society's regard for public littering, tobacco use, bullying and many other collective concerns has been significantly adjusted as a result of media campaigns designed to raise awareness and eliminate abuses. **A genuine effort to depict Black life authentically requires a commitment to utilize vision and voices with relevant lived experiences.** Even still, care must be taken, as the impact of dominant culture indoctrination may influence any storyteller seeking to render Black life in media.

“When it comes to the male gaze, Black women have to choose between being ignored or being fetishized.”

-MEE Productions

“Repeated or cumulative exposure to positive portrayals of marginalized groups fosters acceptance. Feelings of friendship with characters can lead to impact.”

- USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center: Media Impact Project

CASE STUDY: *THE WOMAN KING* (directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood)

If ever the power of Black women was questioned, all doubt is obliterated by *The Woman King*. The telling of the long-ignored history of African female warriors and their fierce fighting skills is vividly displayed in the film. Carefully embedded in the tale is the tender reckoning of a mother's separation from her child and their emotional reunion. While the narrative serves to empower Black females with a sense of agency and dominion over self and space, it also showcases the diasporic connections Black women hold, internationalizing their presence and power.

6. Black Contributors to Mainstream Culture Deserve an Equitable Stake in the Exploitation of their Contributions

Imagine a large pot filled with ingredients contributed by a vast array of suppliers, each subscribing to unique customs and traditions reflecting their lived experiences and the conventions of their origin. Imagine the blend of this mixture being processed and marketed as a homogenized substance, owing its nature to “mainstream” culture, instead of properly acknowledging the actual sourcing of the individual elements. Now, imagine the base compound of this concoction being derived from a single source, germane to the overall taste, but left without attribution or a secured interest in its exploitation. Not much imagination is actually required to recognize the reality of such a scenario. Black contribution to “mainstream” culture is historic, extensive, and undeniable. The victims of severance from origin and resource continue to produce indisputable and indispensable specimens of culture that cause fascination and replication around the world. While imitation is a form of flattery, recognition and recompense are greater forms of equity. Style, intellect, soul, music, dance, fashion, linguistics, cuisine, and swagger are all indicators of Black cultural influence that are consistently borrowed or appropriated without sufficient remuneration. Mass media has always benefitted from its arrogated exploitation of Black culture. An adequate stakeholder interest in that exploitation must be allocated to sources of such allure.

“Our society watches Black youth for the next hot trends. But as individuals, they are regrettably – too often feared or ignored. Media depiction contributes to that reality.”
-MEE Productions

“Black consumers are willing to shift approximately \$260 Billion (about 30 percent of their current aggregate spending) to companies that can better deliver what they need, and even pay up to 1.2 times more on average for offerings that are better suited to their needs and preferences. This could unlock another estimated \$25 Billion to \$40 Billion in the net new spending.”
-McKinsey & Co.

CASE STUDY: *GET OUT* (written and directed by Jordan Peele)

The horror of color blindness resides in its implicit aim toward anti-Blackness. Such horror is revealed in *Get Out*, as a seemingly liberal New England family methodically extracts the utter essence from the few Black people in their vicinity. A Black boyfriend is charmed by the white family, until his hypnosis leads to a series of “soul-sucking” incidents and his realization that the family seeks to wrest the sheer Blackness from his spirit. This cautionary tale ultimately celebrates the value of Blackness and the need to protect it against systematic withdrawal. The sharing of culture is benevolent, but Black altruism must be appreciated and respected with demonstrations of equity, parity, and fair exchange. The outdated paradigm of “mainstream” affirmation of Black excellence no longer substantiates misappropriation of invaluable cultural assets. *Get Out* explores the enchantment of Blackness and the excessive measures taken to capture it in a bottle.

In conclusion, legal consideration for proceedings in civil or criminal litigation requires an accounting of statutory elements that define an action in question. In most instances, a plaintiff must prove the element of “intent” in order to demonstrate a willful choice perpetrated by a defendant to cause harm. This element of intent is central to establishing the existence of a resolve to realize an outcome. When an aggrieved party experiences a harm or loss, motivated by another party’s purposeful scheme, the element of intent is satisfied. While proof of a given cause of action may require the presence of additional definitional components, the element of intent is most indicative of the perpetrating party’s state of mind and aim.

*These Guidelines rest on the core premise that **media operates with intent and every frame is deliberate**. These two allegations are similar but should be distinguished. Media does not operate haphazardly. Choices about what stories to tell, how to tell those stories, and who should tell those stories are and have always been very intentional. As we have proffered, the values of dominant culture are reinforced and affirmed by intentional elections made by media operators, in selecting which visions and voices to empower. Industry gatekeepers grant or deny access to precious streams of communication, while industry toll takers conduct commerce by merchandising storytelling specimens deemed eligible to proceed toward public access.*

Conversely, “deliberate” choices made by media to assert dominant perspectives are the result of concerted and contemplative efforts to perpetuate a status quo. Long before public distribution is authorized and monetized, individual frames of visual messaging are sequentially assembled to construct linear narratives that are deliberated by committees of creative crafters and financial evaluators. In fact, authorization to distribute requires satisfaction of certain overall objectives, before monetization can be achieved. These Guidelines highlight psycho-social objectives that underlie mass media’s evaluation of creative merit and fiscal prudence, pinpointing its overarching purpose.

Our assertion that every frame is deliberate also addresses the consequence of media’s selection process. The circumstances of Black life have been largely influenced by media. Internal and external perceptions of Black life can be directly traced to media’s depictions. The skill and will necessary to reform media’s distortions of Black life will also rest in hands permitted to ply media’s plough. Those sincerely dedicated to reversing the legacy of Black mischaracterization should be supported with opportunity and resource.

The NAACP Guidelines for the Depiction of Black Life in Media are intended to inspire those within media to reconsider traditional processes by which stories are told. Further, we hope to inspire new entrants to the process. We hope alternate perspectives begin to reshape the worldwide cloud that cast a pall of misconception, apprehension, ignorance, and fear of Black life and Black narratives.

An equivalent effort must also be mounted to impact the demand side of media’s supply chain domination. Consumers must gain a greater awareness of their active engagement with media. Despite an overwhelming assumption, encounters with media are not a passive activity of no consequence. As images and messaging wash over consumer consciousness, ideas and perceptions are formed, further entrenching dominant values. To remediate this pervasive condition, media literacy is necessary to provide consumers with deeper insight about media distortions and resulting circumstances. Toward that end, the NAACP Hollywood Bureau is currently developing strategies and curriculum intended to educate and enlighten consumers about their role and responsibility in customizing a media diet that supports preferred outcomes.

The NAACP Hollywood Bureau is poised to assist all parties engaged in the storytelling process. We offer thought leadership and clarity on the most impactful and satisfying methods to find resonance with audiences, while achieving authentic and equitable results for the sources of exploited narratives. Our expertise is honed from decades of experience and analysis of the precepts of entertainment, media, technology, and all related disciplines.

We look forward to the depictions of Black life evolving toward healthier renderings of portrayal and representation.

NAACP IS YOUR RESOURCE

About the NAACP:

The NAACP advocates, agitates, and litigates for social justice. Its legacy is built on the foundation of grassroots activism by the leading civil rights pioneers of the 20th century and is sustained by dynamic 21st century advocates for progressive change. From classrooms and courtrooms to city halls and halls of Congress, NAACP members across the country work to secure the social and political power to end race-based discrimination and other forms of injustice. The work is rooted in racial equity, civic engagement, and supportive policies for all marginalized people. The NAACP is committed to a world without racism, sexism, and other barriers that prohibit people from enjoying equitable opportunities in thriving communities.

NAACP Mission:

Our mission is to achieve equity, political rights, and social inclusion by advancing policies and practices that expand human and civil rights, eliminate discrimination, and accelerate well-being, education, and economic security for all people.

NAACP Vision:

We envision an inclusive community rooted in liberation where all persons can exercise their civil and human rights without discrimination.

Our Theory of Change:

We are committed to a world without racism where Black people enjoy equitable opportunities in thriving communities. Our work is rooted in racial equity, civic engagement, and supportive policies and institutions for all marginalized people.

The Centers of Innovation

The NAACP Centers of Innovation are focused on five enduring commitments: Education Innovation; Environmental Climate Justice; Health and Well-Being; Inclusive Economy; and Race and Justice. The centers bring together NAACP expertise: issue-area leads, policy strategist, lobbyists, communications, researchers and state advocates. Each center leads a portfolio of work aligned to our enduring commitments. Our Centers for Innovation Directors can serve as a resource to content creators seeking more research or policy information for stories and characters they look to develop.

- Center for Health Equity (health and well-being)
<https://naacp.org/issues/health-wellbeing>
- Center for Opportunity, Race and Justice (inclusive economy and race and justice)
<https://naacp.org/issues/race-justice>
<https://naacp.org/issues/inclusive-economy>
- Center for Prosperity (education innovation)
<https://naacp.org/issues/education-innovation>
- Center for Environmental and Climate Justice (environmental and climate justice)
<https://naacp.org/know-issues/environmental-climate-justice>

About the NAACP Hollywood Bureau:

For more than twenty years, the NAACP has steadily increased its commitment to influencing the output of Hollywood's image-making apparatus, by activating the NAACP Hollywood Bureau as a center for advocacy and change. The Bureau's purpose is to pursue and secure equitable opportunities and authentic representations in media that reflect our diverse communities. The alliances, coalitions, and partnerships we forge are dedicated to honoring diverse and multicultural forms of artistic expression and promoting responsible approaches toward commercial exploitation. Contact the NAACP Hollywood Bureau to learn more about our consultation services, outreach programs and advocacy efforts.
<https://naacp.org/our-work/diversity-entertainment>

**Thanks to the thought leaders that offered
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analysis of these Guidelines...**

NAACP Hollywood Bureau:

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**Your commitment to directing the power of
storytelling toward more equitable
opportunity and outcomes is greatly
appreciated.**

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NAACP HOLLYWOOD BUREAU
