



THE BLACK EXECUTIVE:

A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social
Consequences of Media Distortions

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| **DR. DARNELL HUNT**

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Imagination is the currency that sustains and propels the entertainment industries. Creative storytellers possess an amazing ability to conceive people, places, and circumstances that transpose us all to fantastical realms of “make believe.” But for Black people, the imagination of the dominant culture is the most vulnerable, unhealthy, and dangerous place to reside. Perceptions of Blackness are largely shaped by calculated mythologies that affirm a preordained sphere of normality assigned to the dominant culture and cast a veil of “otherness” on the remaining majority of humanity.



Mass media has continually served to uphold this construct by delivering a constant stream of corroborating images and messages, rife with flaws and inaccuracies. Whether these distortions are born of negligence or intentional disparagement, the result of this institutionalized social engineering is the perpetual glorification of the dominant populace and routine discount or discrediting applied to the history, culture, and welfare of the disfavored segments of society.

This report addresses certain facets of these concerns, particularly intra-cultural dynamics arising from media distortions. The analysis and recommendations continue to emerge and evolve. The NAACP will remain at the forefront of that probe, as the wellbeing of our society depends on the excavation of fact and truth.

Kyle Bowser
Senior Vice President
NAACP Hollywood Bureau

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Beyond Recent Diversity Moves: Controlling How Entertainment is Produced, Marketed and Distributed	11
The Influential Role of Black America (A Long-Standing Hollywood Profit Center) as a Consumer Market and Cultural Influencer	15
MEE's Social-Ecological Model Demonstrates the Impacts of Mass Media on Individuals and Communities	25
There Is a Need for Something More	31
What Are the New Horizons and Possibilities?	33
Endnotes	36
Appendices	
• The Challenges and Trauma Low-Income Urban Youth Experience Directly from the Social Determinants of Health	
• The Full Dr. Darnell Hunt Study	

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Executive Summary

Introduction

The NAACP has long understood that Hollywood is more than a storied geographic location, marked by sidewalks paved with gold-plated stars and luminous klieg lights careening the twinkling skies. The industry of “make believe” serves as a principal apparatus for the articulation of artificial notions of homogeneity and supremacy, carefully calibrated to capture the collective imagination and perpetuate the status quo. The NAACP has been committed to challenging Hollywood’s distortions since the industry’s infancy, by offering a different lens through which the Black experience should be conveyed. Since its founding, the NAACP has maintained a constant vigil and demand for acknowledgement and authenticity in the imagineering of our reality.

The NAACP Hollywood Bureau has partnered with two preeminent thought leaders with keen insights and perspectives on the entertainment industry. This report commingles the work of Dr. Darnell Hunt, PhD, a foremost authority on the intersecting dynamics between media and race, and MEE Productions, a Black-owned communications firm with extensive private-sector experience in Hollywood and a distinct acumen in behavioral health work addressing low-income communities facing the highest health disparities. Combined with the Bureau’s long legacy of advocacy focused on issues related to the depiction of African Americans in film and TV, this collaboration provides a unique collection of expertise to analyze the current landscape and lay out a path to a better future.

The focus of this report is the psycho-social consequences arising from the onslaught of liberties taken by Hollywood, which inflict detrimental harm on a community in desperate need of holistic healing. This analysis steps beyond the acknowledgement of pathological sensitivities, asserting that rejuvenation of the community will require comprehensive measures of support and intensive care. Such sincere dedication can certainly be found within the same community as those victimized by the scheme. Thus, the strong recommendation is that the entertainment industry employ the intellect, creativity, and affinity of Black executives to make meaningful contributions toward both the success and influence of Hollywood, by assuming lead roles in key functions throughout the content creation and delivery process.

Every Frame is Deliberate

Every frame of mass media content is deliberate. Both the explicit and subliminal cues embedded within media messages—whether for uplifting or denigrating—are the result of choices made by large committees of personnel, often without lived experience to validate their instincts. While watching a film or TV show is a passive activity merely requiring viewer presence, the impact and influence wrought by media is both tangible and visceral. For some, perceptions are created or affirmed, as media content represents a primary source of reference. For others, identity is shaped by a strange imitational exchange, blurring lines that separate reality from replication. Perhaps the most damaging consequence of the industry’s faulty approximation of genuine black experiences is the absorption and adoption of those characterizations as misshapen forms of self-identity, worthy of emulation. This report argues for more alignment and accountability for the representations of our people.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Hollywood Images are Harming the African American Community

Stereotypic and one-dimensional images generated by Hollywood have an injurious effect on our community. The ingestion of daily distortions about African American life on television and in movies shape perceptions, identities, and behavior. Media content informs and misinforms opinions about Black people, ultimately influencing laws and policies that govern and define our social circumstance with steep psycho-emotional consequences.

An outraged worldwide response to the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, led many people and institutions to examine injustices and social disparities that had long been ignored. America's racial reckoning follows a national debate on an obvious fact – Black Lives Matter. This report queries whether Hollywood has embraced that fact and incorporated its essence into the modalities of its regular practices. “Mattering” should compel those that endeavor to tell our stories to seek authenticity and render multidimensional characters, whose motivations are nuanced by circumstance and history.

This report argues Black executives are the best and most deserved emissaries on behalf of our interests and should lead the effort to capture the accuracy of our reflection, particularly in aligning Hollywood storytelling with our communal health. This recommendation must be applied across the spectrum of media disciplines, including story development, production, marketing, and distribution. In fact, an omnipresent Black executive involvement will ensure proper care and sensitivities are given to mining the deep, rich, and valuable gems of the Black experience.

Punished by the Very Industry It Makes Profitable

The outsized influence of Black youth culture has often been opportunistically co-opted by corporate America to sell products and services. A reciprocal twist of leverage reveals Black people also over-index in the consumption of TV shows, movies, and other media content. This is a key profit driver for Hollywood, despite African Americans having little control of the content that broadly defines them. This enduring absence of Black control of media imagery had rendered the community vulnerable to a host of false impressions, ranging from negligent disregard to deliberate degradation – the latter raising the specter of racism as a causal factor.

“The AMA recognizes that racism negatively impacts and exacerbates health inequities among historically marginalized communities. Without systemic and structural-level change, health inequities will continue to exist, and the overall health of the nation will suffer,” said AMA Board Member Willarda V. Edwards, MD, MBA.¹

It is this impact on health that drives the research and recommendations contained in this report. While fair-minded corporate citizenry should dictate a responsible approach toward the commercial exploitation of art and its dissemination through media, the prevailing disregard for authenticity and dimension is literally inflicting harm to the well-being of the African American community. That must stop. Instead, media companies must dedicate themselves to a wholesome alternative, largely aided by the inclusion of Black executives, innately prepared to envision and execute plans for transformative change.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Introduction

A History of Entertainment Industry Advocacy

Abolitionist, orator, and statesman Frederick Douglass recognized the power of distorted media representations of Black people. To counter-balance grotesque characterizations in print publications, Douglass waged an intentional campaign to lend his likeness to frequent photographic replication, becoming the most photographed figure of the 19th century. Not one portrait of Frederick Douglass reveals even a glimpse of a smile. Instead, the catalogue of Douglass photos clearly conveys his integrity, sophistication, and unrelenting adherence to the serious demands of his times.

Inspired by Douglass, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) adopted media advocacy as an integral component of its mandate to press for fulfillment of America's promise of justice and equality. This commitment gained national traction just six years after the organization's founding, with a 1915 initiative protesting D.W. Griffith's blatantly racist film, *The Birth of a Nation*. A cinematic tour de force, the film helped to usher in the feature length film format, which birthed Hollywood and has chiefly sustained the industry's prominence. Production techniques employed by Griffith introduced state-of-the-art methods of camera movement and special effects still in use today.

But the storytelling of *The Birth of a Nation* (an adaptation of Thomas Dixon, Jr's novel *The Clansman*) is an abomination. Set in the post-Civil War Reconstruction era of the South, the film depicts Black people recently freed from enslavement as lazy, ignorant, and inhumane creatures to be feared by the same white populace that either perpetrated or benefitted from the multi-century long oppression. The NAACP lobbied intensely, but unsuccessfully to discourage cinema operators from exhibiting the film. Further exacerbating the sting of black degradation, President Woodrow Wilson saw fit to honor *The Birth of a Nation* by making it the first film ever screened in the White House. Thereafter, national membership in the Ku Klux Klan swelled, as did the number of lynchings of Black people throughout the South.

Connecting to the same race-based polarity in 1946, the Walt Disney Studio released its mixed-media and minstrel-ized depiction of the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. *Song of the South* was soundly rejected by the NAACP, as the film portrays enslaved Blacks as happy and docile invertebrates grinning through a sanitized version of their horrific predicament. Despite Black actor James Baskett's honorary Academy Award for his portrayal of the "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah"-singing Uncle Remus, the NAACP vehemently opposed Disney's distribution of the film. But Americans drank in the gross fabrication of the nation's past, supporting the film at the box office for years on end.

In 1951, the NAACP formally denounced the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, asserting that millions of Americans who watched the alleged comedy each week on CBS were led to believe that Black people were shiftless and lazy. Even the "professional Negroes" (doctors and lawyers) on the show were portrayed as quacks, thieves or cowards. The NAACP filed suit against CBS, seeking to ban the broadcast. CBS relented in 1953, cancelling *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, but continued to syndicate the program to local stations and foreign markets until 1966.

These mid-20th Century portrayals were the precursors for a continuing series of slanderous characterizations that continue into the present, but in response to growing cultural consciousness

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

and pride among African Americans, a burgeoning community of Black artisans in Hollywood resolved to activate a branch of the NAACP in 1962. Meeting regularly in the stately home of megastar Sammy Davis, Jr., members of the NAACP Beverly Hills/Hollywood Branch set their attention on recurring encounters with racism in their chosen profession.

NAACP's Image Awards

Just five years later in 1967, the NAACP launched its prestigious annual tribute to excellence in artistic achievement – the NAACP Image Awards. For more than fifty consecutive years, the NAACP has saluted exemplary artistry in film, TV, music and literature, presenting awards to worthy performers who are often ignored in other industry competitions for acknowledgment and affirmation. Harkening back to the example set by Frederick Douglass, the NAACP Image Awards emphasize a continuing need for self-determination of identity and attention.

NAACP Hollywood Bureau

Twenty years ago, the NAACP further cemented its commitment to influencing the output of Hollywood's image-making apparatus, by opening the NAACP Hollywood Bureau. The NAACP is comprised of 2,200 chapters worldwide, but only two of the Association's divisions are designated as bureaus. The NAACP Washington, DC Bureau lobbies for legislative redress of systematic inequities. The NAACP Hollywood Bureau ascribes the same degree of import to Hollywood's reach and impact, advancing several initiatives designed to enhance and expand the entertainment industry's narrative about African Americans and create more opportunities to improve inclusivity through outreach programs, media partnerships, and fellowships. The NAACP understands the fight for hearts and minds (in Hollywood) is directly linked to resulting laws and policies (in Washington, DC) that determine lived experiences.

Advocacy for People of Color Is More Important Than Ever

The video-documented murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, not yet two years ago, amid a global pandemic, unleashed a wave of disbelief, outrage and psychic trauma felt and heard around the world. Americans of all races took to the streets, risking their own health amid a global pandemic, to demand the overhauling of police practices and to insist that Black lives *do indeed* matter.²

The racial upheaval and protests across the country led to many overdue conversations about injustices and social disparities that had been ignored by many Americans. Notably, prominent Hollywood powerbrokers responded to this moment of racial reckoning with public promises to do their part in helping to move the nation in a more just direction. According to the Committee of Black Writers, the remaining question is whether this was just "another strategic, virtue-signaling performance deemed necessary to survive the times." Indeed, more than 300 Black artists and executives signed a letter in late 2020 calling out Hollywood for its "lack of a true commitment to inclusion and institutional support," rooting this failure in the industry's "legacy of white supremacy."³

What has become clear is the remedy for Hollywood's ills must include expanded narratives about Black people. There must be a more inclusive industry, with more opportunities for advancement, including into executive positions where the power of decision making is wielded regarding project greenlighting, marketing, and distribution.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

NAACP Thought Partners

The NAACP has partnered with two leading social examiners to create this report – one in the academic exploration of sociology, the other in the research and analysis of health disparities.

The NAACP Hollywood Bureau commissioned an academic study conducted by Dr. Darnell Hunt, PhD, a foremost authority on the intersecting dynamics between media and race. Dean of Social Sciences at UCLA, Dr. Hunt used anonymous surveys completed by Black entertainment-industry executives and follow-up interviews to measure the impact of industry reforms designed to address deficiencies in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the aftermath of Floyd's murder.

To augment and broaden this research, the NAACP Hollywood Bureau engaged MEE Productions Inc., a communications, marketing and behavior-change firm, leveraging MEE's more than three decades of work to address health disparities, including the negative impact of media images on the Black community. MEE, like the NAACP, brings grassroots community-engagement experience and a longitudinal prism to these issues as they pertain to those who are most impacted by negative stereotypes and storytelling.

UCLA: Hollywood Diversity Report & Black Executive Study

Dr. Hunt's research expands upon themes addressed in the annual Hollywood Diversity Report, released by UCLA. Conceived within the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, the report analyzes gender and racial diversity in the film industry. Each year since 2014, the Hollywood Diversity Report has examined representations of women and minorities in front of the camera.

The data reveals a trend toward more diversity among lead characters — and such diversity (particularly inclusive of African Americans) can pay off financially. There is a growing body of evidence that on-screen diversity in film and television generates more revenue, both nationally and globally. For example, according to the latest Diversity Report, films with casts that were at least 21 percent minority enjoyed the highest viewer ratings.⁴

Last year's Hollywood Diversity Report showed that women and people of color gained ground in all job categories. As UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report documents, people of color saw their share of film leads nearly triple from just 10.5 percent in 2011 to 27.6 percent in 2019. Blacks, in particular, were overrepresented among top film roles in 2019, claiming 15.7 percent of the roles compared to their 14 percent share of the population.⁵ In television, similar trends are evident: People of color more than quadrupled their share of broadcast scripted leads between the 2011-12 and 2018-19 television seasons (from 5.1 percent to 24 percent).⁶ Much of this change is undoubtedly due to the growing body of evidence that on-screen diversity sells, particularly as increasingly diverse audiences in America (and around the globe) demand characters and stories that resonate with their own experiences.⁷

Progress behind the camera has experienced slower growth. The report showed that women and people of color are still underrepresented as film writers and directors, with the representation of people of color among film directors bouncing around over the years, up slightly from 12.2 percent in 2011 to 15.1 percent 2019.⁸

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Progress in Hollywood's studio, network, and production company executive suites (where decisions about which projects get produced, the heft of their marketing budgets, and their distribution plans are made) is a different story. In early 2020, UCLA's report documents that film studio CEOs were 91 percent white and 82 percent male, while studio senior management teams were 93 percent white and 80 percent male, and studio unit heads were 86 white and 59 percent male. The statistics for television networks were similar in 2020, if not a little more inclusive with respect to gender: Network CEOs were 92 percent white and 68 percent male, network senior management teams were 84 percent white and 60 percent male, and network unit heads were 86 percent white and 46 percent male.⁹

Dr. Hunt states, while Hollywood's studios and networks have worked to appease audience demand for more diverse, on-screen content in recent years, it appears as if they have done so without fundamentally altering the way the industry is structured - without also diversifying who is making the decisions behind the scenes.¹⁰

To more fully understand the role of the executive in how greenlighting decisions are made, and how diverse representation in the C-Suite can affect outcomes, the NAACP Hollywood Bureau commissioned Dr. Hunt to conduct a study of a representative sample of highly accomplished, behind-the-scenes personnel – Black executives in the entertainment industry. The resulting hypothesis is that more accurate representations (i.e., images) circulating in Hollywood storytelling can work to affirm and celebrate America's cultural diversity – as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes about marginalized groups and unwittingly (or wittingly) promoting narratives that work against the ideals of a more inclusive and just society.¹¹

MEE Productions Inc.

MEE (Motivational Educational Entertainment) Productions Inc. is a behavioral health communications firm that works in low-income communities facing the highest health disparities. Its work speaks to and incorporates oral communications culture to shift attitudes and influence behaviors.

Starting in 1992, with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded "Reaching the Hip Hop Generation" research, MEE has been profiling the trendsetting culture of low-income Black youth. Thirty years later, the latest generation of these youth are still setting the cultural trends for national and international markets.

Although MEE has primarily been focused on health disparities, it also has extensive private-sector experience with some of the biggest and most successful entertainment media brands and makers of Hollywood content. More than 60 movie/TV projects have validated its model across sectors and over time. MEE also provides deep insights into the ways mass media functions as a social determinant of health (SDOH), and influences policies and practices that can lead to further negative outcomes among already-traumatized and marginalized communities.

This depth of experience qualifies MEE to operationalize leveraging these trends. MEE has framework and strategies for developing and promoting media projects in a culturally relevant way that resonates with Black audiences. MEE's framework reverses the traditional sender-message-channel-receiver communications model and starts with the worldview and environmental context of those who are most impacted by stereotypic storytelling (the Receiver). For the purposes of this report, the "Receiver" is low-income, African American urban youth, their families and

**THE BLACK EXECUTIVE:
A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions**

communities across the nation. Understanding the worldview and influencers of the social determinants of health helps to crystalize ways negative media portrayals can harm this community (The Receiver), directly, inadvertently, and deliberately.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Beyond Recent Diversity Moves: Controlling How Entertainment is Produced, Marketed and Distributed

The Hunt report incorporated herein provides a valuable reference point within the current DEIA focus and tells the story of what's been happening (and not happening) over the last few years. In the aftermath of Floyd's murder, corporate America and philanthropists professed the emergence of a "moment of reckoning." Some in Hollywood, like other industries, re-examined their roles in the quest for racial and social justice and issued statements of "woke" solidarity. Others vowed to launch meaningful diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives to reconstitute who is "in the room" when decisions are made.

The protracted persistence of unfulfilled overtures regarding racial equity necessitates inquiry into whether the promises studios and entertainment corporations made in the wake of the emotional tsunami of murder-before-our-eyes and the resulting massive protests were kept. While UCLA's Hollywood Diversity report establishes that on-screen representations have featured more people of color in lead roles, this report queries whether inclusion gaps in the executive suites, where determinative financial decisions are made, still exist.

The results of Dr. Hunt's focused survey speak volumes. The Hunt report re-confirms the realization that continued change in Hollywood is sorely needed. The talents of Black executives remain largely untapped. It should be noted that there were no Black CEOs or members of the senior management team at the major studios in early 2020, and only 3.9 percent of major studio unit heads were Black.¹²

Comparisons can be made to the paucity of Black coaches in the National Football League. In a professional sport in which 70 percent of its players are Black, the head-coaching ranks continue to be nearly exclusively white. Unlike the NBA, which made a strategic decision to embrace hip-hop culture as part of its public-facing identity, the NFL's pipeline from player to coach, or management, has largely culminated at a dead end. Team owners refuse to abandon their reliance on an "old boys' network" to fulfill their coaching needs, and further refuse to trust and respect prospective coaches who may come from different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is clear the same acumen required to demonstrate superior performance on the field can be redirected toward teaching, motivating, and even coaching the next generation of players. Black football players could develop into Black coaches if provided the opportunity.

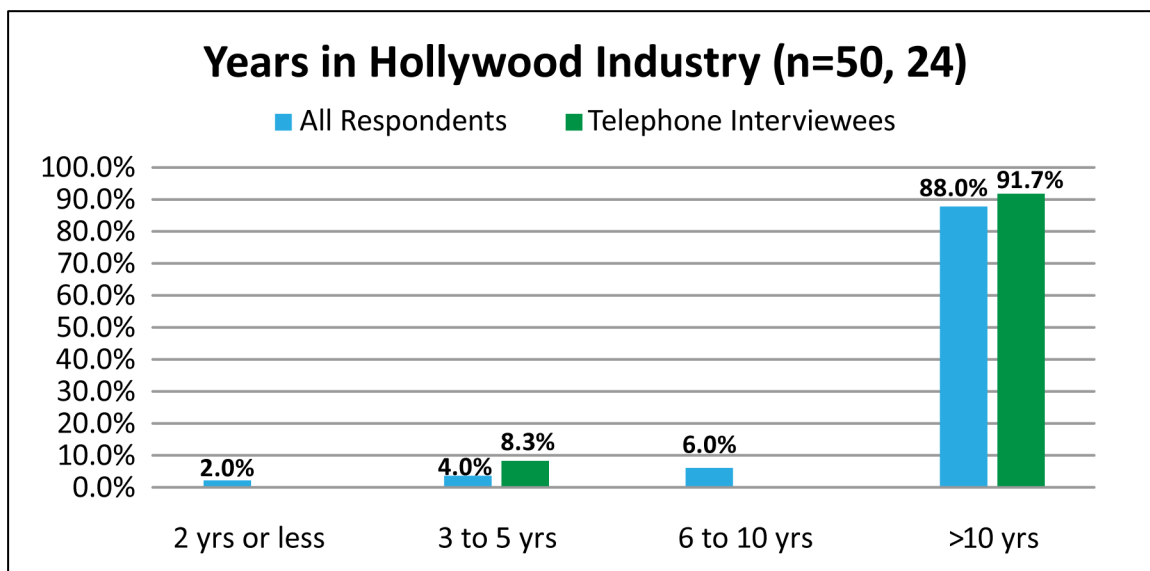
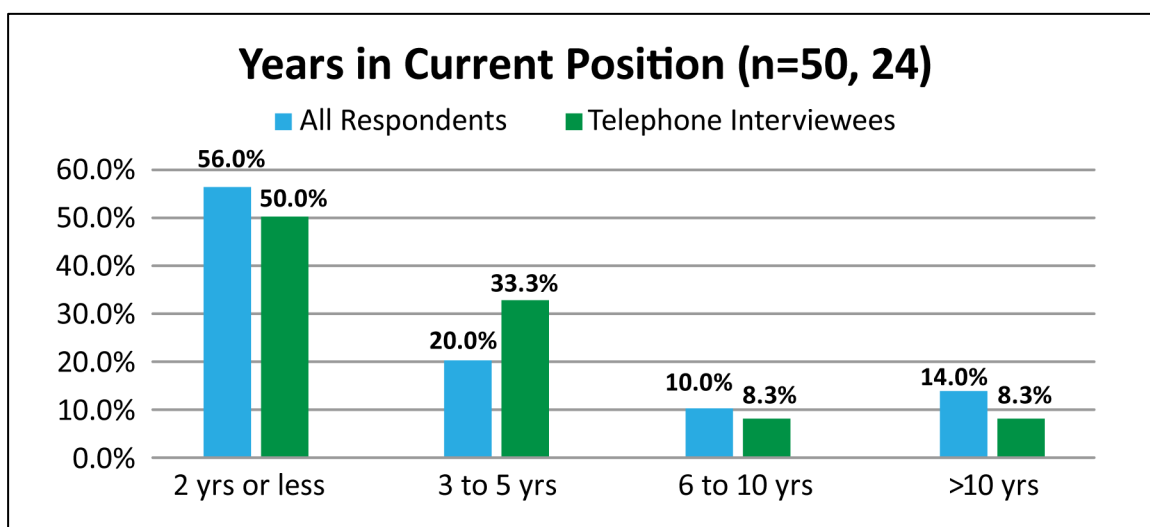
A more analogous comparison might be the minority-rule regime that imposed the tyrannical social construct of Apartheid on the majority Black populace of South Africa for more than 40 repressive years. Afrikaners of European descent spewed a propagandistic theory that they alone possessed the acumen to own and cultivate land, designate subjects worthy of academic assignment, and govern a country not of their origin. The miraculous ability of South Africa's Black population to survive and even thrive amidst their oppression was proof of their capacity for self-determination. Oppressed people have no choice but to chip away at entrenched systems intent on preserving self-aggrandized perversions of reality.

Obstructed paths to achievement serve to preserve the minority status of the Black Hollywood community. Many aspirants are discouraged from pursuing their dreams – not everyone possesses the will or resources necessary to sustain the fight to someday realize the fullness of their potential. Yet, the attached Hunt report demonstrates there are ample Blacks in Hollywood with more experience and expertise than highly-placed white counterparts. Subjective recognition

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

of talent, based on racial bias is not only unethical and unfair, but also unproductive, as unclaimed revenues will continue to elude those unwilling to embrace forward-focused approaches toward growth. As noted in a recent study by McKinsey & Company, Hollywood's refusal to embrace the offerings of Black talent and the appetites of Black audiences results in a forfeiture of \$10 billion dollars in annual revenue.¹³

While the overwhelming majority of survey respondents in Dr. Hunt's study have been in the entertainment industry for more than 10 years, most of them had been in their current senior-level positions for less than two years, coinciding with the global response to the heinous murder of George Floyd.

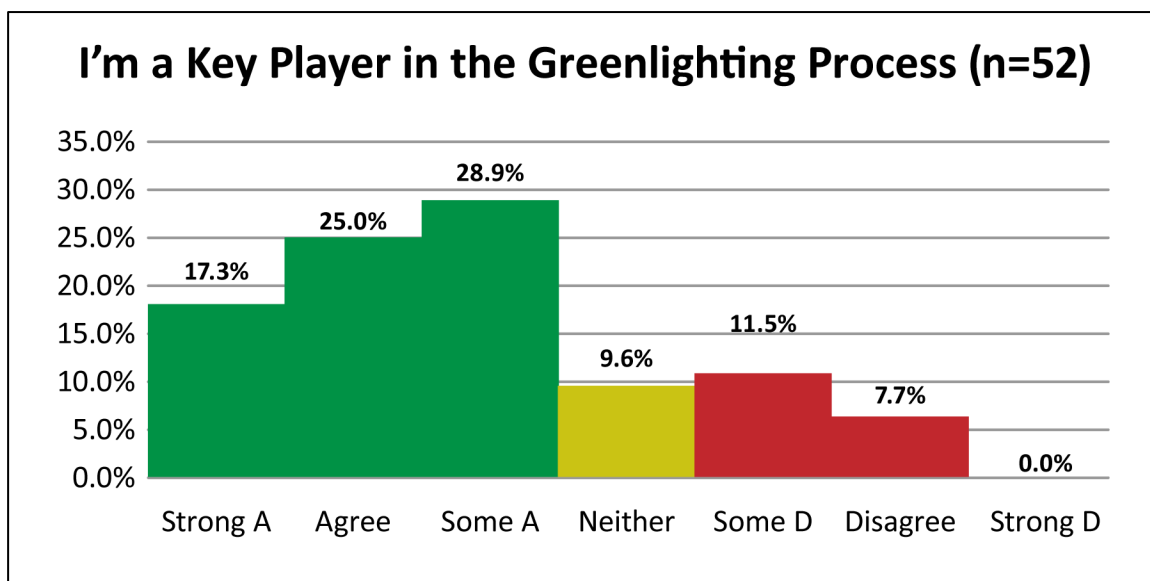


Inference can certainly be drawn that these professionals were hired or promoted in the context of post-traumatic commitments to diversify programming or bring more voices to the table. These efforts must be sustained over a longer period of time in order to measure real, meaningful impact, as movie and/or TV development typically lasts at least two years before stories and images are

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

disseminated to impressionable viewers. The new voices – Black voices – in decision-making roles must be afforded the same margin of opportunity to grow, and even fail, as their white counterparts have enjoyed since the industry’s inception.

Most participants in Dr. Hunt’s survey were not in a position to “greenlight” TV shows or movies.



Dr. Hunt found much of the respondents’ frustration with the greenlighting process was rooted in the simple fact that – with one or two exceptions – Black executives did not have final say on the fate of a project. One interviewee put it this way: “The closer a project gets to being programmed, the higher up the ladder it needs to get approved. And the higher up the ladder you go, the less diverse the industry is overall.”¹⁴

Another Black executive described a greenlighting process that includes a team: “There are about twelve people that get into a room, twelve to fifteen people that discuss it. But a greenlight decision is not arrived at yet in that room. The chairman takes all of those inputs and then the chairman makes the decision. That’s really one person deciding and fifteen people opining.”¹⁵

Everyone in Hollywood knows that if you don’t have “greenlighting” authority over stories that are produced, nor control over the marketing and distribution decisions and budgets, then in actuality, you don’t have much power related to the all-important bottom line. This dearth of diversity in the decision-making ranks is ironic when you consider how important the Black consumer is to Hollywood’s profitability.

One of the Black executives makes this case:

- “We should really think about how we need to construct the leadership team in order to ensure that the people greenlighting the film look more like, look representative of the people who attend the film.”¹⁶

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Black executive posed this solution:

- “Everybody’s going to have to start asking themselves the question, ‘Should I be the one making these decisions, or do I have the right people here to caucus with to make decisions?’ These are the hard things, right? So, what can be done better? Let’s start with those questions.”¹⁷

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

The Influential Role of Black America (A Long-Standing Hollywood Profit Center) as a Consumer Market and Cultural Influencer

An Over-Consuming Market

Broader analysis reveals the longitudinal and broader significance African Americans, and Black youth in particular, play in the financial success of the entertainment industry, both as a consumer group and influencer of popular culture. The U.S. Black population has a complex and powerful legacy that continues to shape our nation and cultures around the world. And yet when it comes to representation in media, the complexity that creates the richness of that experience is often lost, and when present, undervalued.¹⁸

Mainstream society is infatuated with the seemingly infinite capacity for cultural improvisation and the audacious flair of Black life. This obsession prompts a reciprocal exchange between Hollywood's exploitation of Black cultural influence and the Black community's passive embrace of the industry's distortions, resulting in a usury trade: self-destructive pathologies imbued by the Black community, swapped for Hollywood's financial benefit.

African Americans, and Black youth in particular, are trendsetters that have generated incalculable contributions to the framework of popular culture – a deposit for which equity should accrue. The reach of global media helps to proliferate versions of African-American cultural cues around the world. Yet, the principal purveyors of global media systems lack the cultural connection or sensitivity to appreciate the authentic qualities and true value of the assets. If allowed to be shaped and guided by Black executives with innate awareness of the roots and extensions of the culture, media opportunists could magnify their success exponentially, and at the same time, perpetuate healthy affirmations of the identity of their loyal suppliers.

One interviewee explained why she believes that Black executives, in the end, are better situated than their white counterparts to address problematic projects when they arise:

- “The intent is always good – the recognition that there is this big representation issue raised... [But] you can't just download what it means to live in a Black body to a non-Black decision maker. Not to say that they can't make decisions on this content. They can. But I think the way you really solve the problem is to have more Black decision-makers.”¹⁹

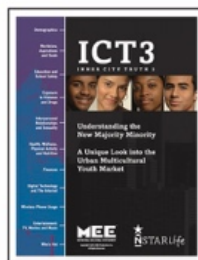
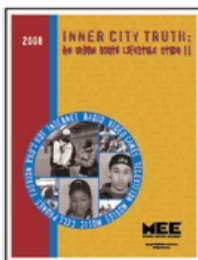
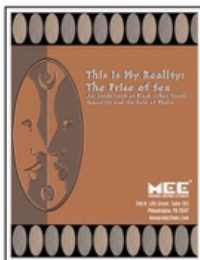
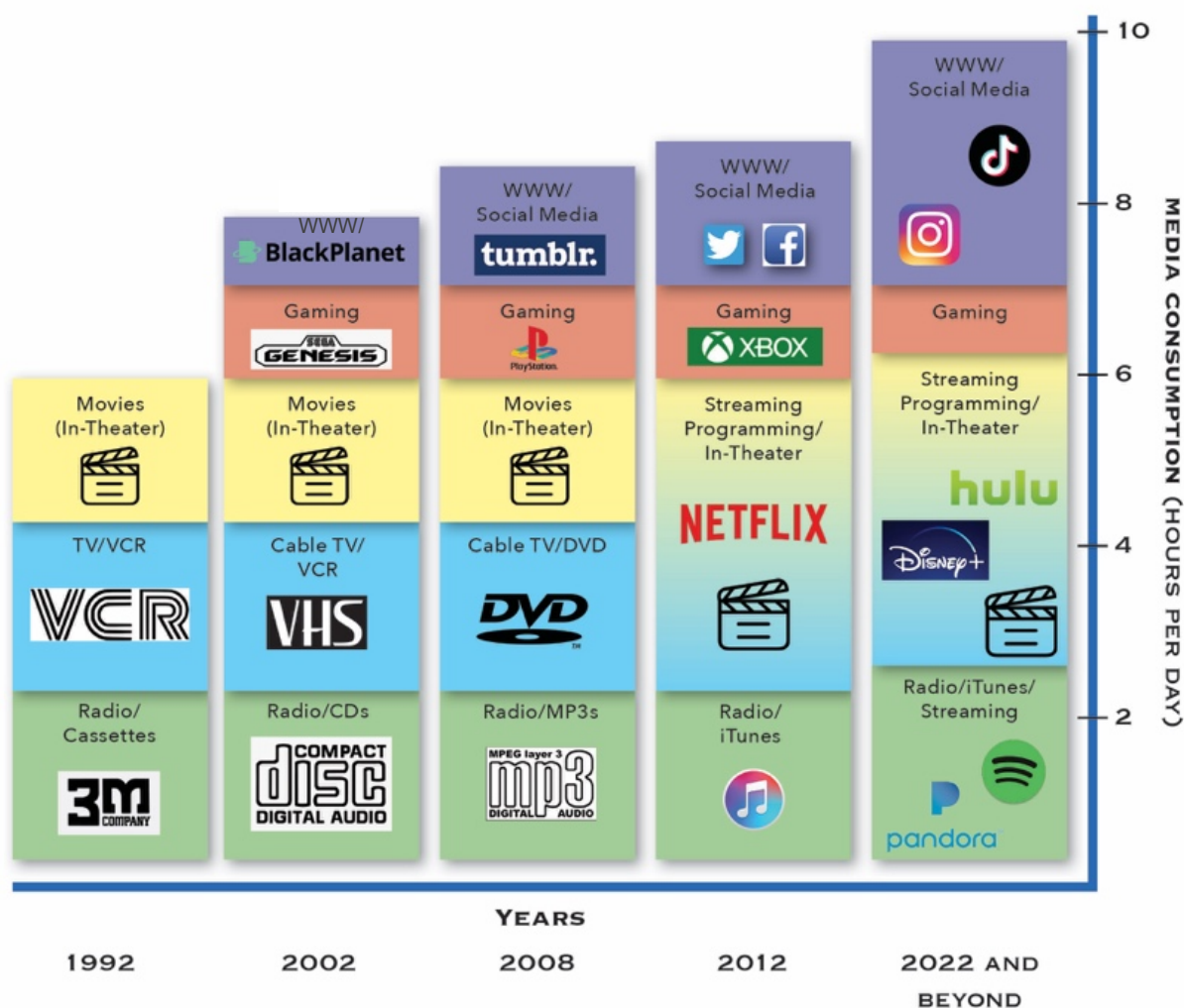
Another Black executive concurred, and explained why it is so important to have diversity at “different levels” of the development process:

- “There's a paucity of diversity, particularly at the more senior levels. You know what is very clear? You need senior voices of color in the room to help advocate for projects and, actually, also help develop them with a clear authentic voice. So, it's an issue that all media companies are focused on and need to address...Whether you're junior or mid-level or senior, you play a really important role in the development process. So, having diversity at all those different levels, I think, will drive more inclusive programming, which again, is what our audience wants.”²⁰

African-American audiences are influencers, and also over-index in the consumption of TV shows, movies, and other media content. MEE's primary audience research indicates young people spend more time, consuming entertainment than they spend in school, reading, in church, and with their parents, combined.²¹ This over-indexing has remained consistent over three decades.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

BLACK YOUTH ENTERTAINMENT OVER-CONSUMPTION OVER THE LAST 30 YEARS



Whatever the leading media channels are at any point on the timeline, Black urban youth over-index in usage/consumption.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

- TV serves as an easily accessible escape for youth. Just like listening to the radio, youth seem to watch TV — broadcast/cable/streaming — anytime they can. MEE's survey found that nearly two in every five Black youth (34 percent) watch four or more hours of television per day. Another 47 percent watch between two and three hours of television a day.²²
- More than six out of ten (62 percent) African American youth surveyed claimed to go see movies in the theater either on opening weekend or during the first week of its release; that same percentage claimed to go see movies in the theater at least twice per month.²³
- MEE's *Inner City Truth* lifestyle survey showed Black teens see two or more movies a month, while watching more than three hours of television per day.²⁴
- When asked how often they watch a movie online or on pay-per-view, more than half of the African American/Black youth surveyed (55 percent) watch a movie online or via pay-per-view at least twice a month. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) said they watch "more than 4 times per month."²⁵
- Nielsen's *It's In The Bag: Black Consumers' Path to Purchase* report states that African Americans continue to be voracious consumers of television content, spending more than 50 hours watching live and time-shifted television a week in the first quarter of 2019. That is over 10 hours more than the total population, according to the research company.²⁶
- Black America delivers over 1 trillion viewing minutes in a single quarter but is also twice as likely to feel portrayals of their identity group on TV are completely inaccurate.²⁷

The urgency to get representation right is real - it's a primary factor for the massive viewing levels Black audiences deliver and the shift in Black viewing power to platforms most representative of their community and identity group. But getting representation right is increasingly nuanced.

- According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 9 percent of America's rural population is Black; 16 percent of Black people in the U.S. report speaking a language other than English at home; people identifying as "Black in combination with another race" increased 89% in the last decade; and Afro-Latinos are 8 percent of today's U.S. Black population.
- 58 percent of Black audiences say there's still not enough representation of their identity group on screen.
- Nearly a quarter of the reported genres in Gracenote Inclusion Analytics reported zero representation of Black talent in recurring lead roles.²⁸

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Over-Consumption Leads to Greater Profits

African-American moviegoers represent a disproportionately larger share of the film industry, making up 25 percent – 30 percent of frequent moviegoers (pre-pandemic) while representing just over 12 percent of the American population in the 2020 Census. Hollywood has known for decades that young Black moviegoers, in particular, are the #1 consumers of movie entertainment media, at two to three times the rate of the general market.

The Black economic segment is an expanding market, exceeding over \$1.5 trillion dollars annually. The impact of the 30 million annual Black moviegoers matters well beyond the dollar value. This audience comprises a voracious media consumer block; often over-indexing in its consumption by more than 50 percent, depending on the category of film. Two out of three Black viewers are more likely to watch representative content and buy from brands that advertise in representative content.²⁹

An example can be found in the launch of the Fox Network in the 1990's. Fox had hit shows like *Martin*, *Living Single* (a precursor to *Friends*), *In Living Color*, *Roc*, *New York Undercover* and more with Black leads and ensembles. UPN (United Paramount Network) emerged in 1995. This upstart network catered to Black audiences, with shows such as *Moesha*. The WB Television Network launched the same year, with programming targeting Black teens and young adults (12-34), including comedy shows like *The Wayans Bros.* and *The Jamie Foxx Show*. Many of these shows were the highest-rated for Black audiences but failed to crack the top 100 for white viewers. Despite the lack of white viewership, these shows still made substantial amounts of money for their respective networks and advertisers.

Ironically, the success of these groundbreaking TV shows, genre-bending “urban” films, and the raw hip-hop soundscape that grew in mainstream popularity during the same era, served to redefine mainstream sensibilities. White audiences today are far more interested and accepting of Black themed content, often adopting and appropriating Black culture for their own inauthentic expression.

A Major Profit Center for Media Companies

African Americans have long been early adopters/trendsetters and play an over-sized role in cultural influences in America and even globally. MEE has data tracing back 30 years, to “Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation” (1992), that proves the trendsetting influence of this long-standing Hollywood profit center. Black consumers are also important in nearly every related market segment (i.e., digital media, music technology, advertising, consumer products, fashion, dance, etc.). Below are four (4) case studies that elucidate the African American influence on mainstream popular culture.

A Major Profit Center in the American Economy, Even Beyond Hollywood

The immense influence of Black youth culture has often been opportunistically co-opted by corporate America to sell products to mainstream consumers. There are a number of examples of how the Black youth market has catapulted a product's relevance into an industry-leading position. When marketing is done well and to and through the Black market, it both attracts and greatly influences the general market. Consider these examples:

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Case Study #1: **Sprite**: ("Obey Your Thirst")

Sprite ("Obey Your Thirst")

In the early 1990's, the Sprite brand of soda was never even a quarter the size of its chief competition 7Up and had a flat trend line for nearly a decade. At this time, hip-hop and rap music had exploded as a cultural reference point for not only for urban youth, but also for white, suburban and mainstream youth who wanted to take a peek into the culture at a safe distance. More than just a new music genre, it was to become a celebration of urban culture itself. An unlikely connection was bubbling up.



By repositioning the Sprite brand and deeply associating it early and directly with an ascending Hip-Hop Culture, Sprite was able to authentically claim and protect its turf as a trendsetting and aspirational brand. This bold, new "insider's" status laid the groundwork to more than triple sales numbers, outpace the competition for decades and usher in a new generation of marketing for corporations globally.

Case Study #2: **Boost Mobile**: ("Where You At?")



Boost Mobile ("Where You At?")

The Australian-based Boost Mobile pay-as-you-go wireless service originally launched in the US in partnership with Nextel in 2001. Boost shifted from the industry's then-standard of marketing network quality or price by appealing to the trendsetting status of urban youth for its national launch across America.

Boost Mobile came to be embraced as an urban brand and rose from start-up to more than 4 million users in less than 36 months, generating nearly \$2 billion in revenue. It was also the fastest-growing brand in the emerging pre-paid segment, shifting the American wireless industry from contract plans to no contract plans, thereby generating billions for the industry as a whole.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Distorted Content is the Norm

While the Black market represents the largest consumer of media entertainment, and a major profit center for the Industry, it has little control of the content that targets its consumption. Even beyond its distortions of the Black community, Hollywood's view seems to be that entertainment media has to be biased and sensational in order to be profitable.



The late Dr. Asa Hilliard in MEE's Black Youth Sexuality and the Role of Media Report: "They're [Black youth] not only major media consumers; the culture that they create is a major profit center for our economic system. [And] it's both of those things together that have us in trouble. For example, media consumption is dictated by people who don't have anything to do with our community. Time Warner is fundamentally in charge of the media that we see, and BET, for example, is under Viacom. The fact is that, in the end, the decisions about the content of the media are not in our hands."³⁰

"Let's take rappers," said Dr. Hilliard. "You have all kinds of rappers. Hip-Hop culture has people who have very high values and some who have very low values. But what sells are the people with the low values, the ones who will dishonor women....No self-respecting community would raise its children on most of the fare we see on MTV if they had a choice. My community wouldn't make those choices for exposure. We have to be looking at the big picture — what the kid is doing, what the parent is doing and what the economic structure is doing. We have to gain control of all of that in order to make something positive happen."³¹



Dr. Dan Romer University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center: Gun violence in popular PG-13 films (for ages 13+) has nearly tripled over the past 25 years and by 2015 exceeded the rate in R-rated films (for ages 17+).³²

Romer: The socializing influence of entertainment media has long been known regarding such behaviors as smoking, alcohol use, early sex, and aggression. A long history of research also shows that entertainment media can influence methods of suicidal behavior.³³



The late Dr. George Gerbner said that sexual health messages, for example, that don't positively contribute to the media's bottom line will not likely ever be a priority because "there's no morality in the producers. They are strictly out for profit," he says. "They can't tell their stockholders, 'I'm sorry, you're not getting any profits, but we're very moral.'"³⁴

Despite certain "adjustments" made by content merchants in the wake of the 2020 social justice protests, it remains uncertain whether the actuality that Black Lives Matter has seeped into the


THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

intentional process of rendering and merchandising the Black experience by the White-owned and dominated media industry. Including Black leadership among the upper echelon ranks of media merchants will increase the likelihood that Black perspectives determine the manifestation of Black representation in media representation.

MEE Production Case Studies

MEE Productions provides an illustration of the effectiveness of Black inclusion in positioning media content for a greater vibration across demographic distinctions. In an effort to increase resonance with Black audiences who were mildly intrigued with TV shows experiencing overwhelming popularity among mainstream audiences, MEE Productions has been engaged to conduct research, administer surveys, and offer creative and strategic recommendations. Consider these examples:

Case Study #3: **Judge Judy**: Launch and Syndication by World Vision (Paramount).



Judge Judy Launch and Syndication by World Vision (Paramount)

The Situation
In the mid-90s, the TV market was reeling from the hyper-fragmentation caused by the rise in cable (i.e., more cable channels caused individual markets to shrink). During this time, only two highly-rated TV shows overlapped on the general market and African-American markets (60 Minutes, NFL). Even then, African-American audiences over-indexed by 50% over the general market's media usage/consumptions (both daytime and primetime).

Background
An industry benchmark is that a TV show in syndication needs three years of solid revenues to break even. Judge Judy's financial model indicated a need to launch with enough momentum to justify a renewal for a 2nd year. The first twelve weeks of broadcast ratings (Nielson's rating book evaluation) are critical for a TV show to secure being renewed for a 2nd year.

Strategy
Judge Judy became one of the first general market daytime TV shows to be inclusive by creating and launching two culturally-relevant campaigns:

- For General Market Women, the key framing for their campaign was *"Real People, Real Cases, Real Judge."*
- For the over-consuming urban African-American market, MEE's audience research for World Vision showed this market was key on conflict and resolution, so the framing of the campaign was *"Gotta Grudge, Take it to the Judge."*

Results
Judge Judy over performed by 100% in African-American households to lead its syndication launch. Due to the two campaigns, Judge Judy was locked in with improved Nielson ratings that led to a 25-year syndicated run. Because of that, Judy Sheindlin negotiated an equity stake in the show and became the highest paid television talent over that time period.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Case Study #4: **Third Rock from the Sun:** Augmenting and Maximizing the Advertising Revenues of a #1 Rated Network Show (By Being Inclusive of Diverse Audiences)



Third Rock from the Sun: Augmenting and Maximizing the Advertising Revenues of a #1 Rated Network Show (By Being Inclusive of Diverse Audiences)

The Situation

In the very early 2000s, Carsey Werner wanted to maximize 3rd Rock's advertising inventory revenues by increasing the show's ratings in the top twenty urban markets. Lower ratings yield less revenue. Studies showed that the show could benefit from a secondary marketing campaign introducing an unknown show to the urban African-American audience.

Strategy

The show, through MEE's audience market research, created an introductory campaign targeting the urban market by using George Clinton's P-Funk Mothership track. The slogan "Make My Rock the Third Rock... The Third Rock from the Sun" was developed, tested and used in TV promotional spots. In contrast, the general market slogan was, "May the Force Be With You."

Results

The introductory urban marketing campaign was a success, well beyond Carsey Werner's expectations. Results in the top twenty urban markets yielded higher ratings and more advertising revenues for the studio. A general market #1 rated show capitalized on the trendsetting capabilities of the urban audience, showing that Hollywood can benefit from being inclusive of a diverse audience.

These are examples of translating influence into ratings and profits without maligning the nature and character of a community.

Hollywood is Missing an Opportunity

Profits Don't Have to Be Tied to Inauthentic, Non-Dimensional Storytelling

Hollywood's tendency has been to subjectively determine which stories are made available for public consumption. Consequently, the industry also determines which ideas are made available for public consideration. Traditional distribution models are defined by finite inventory and limited opportunity. Telecasters control a specific number of broadcast hours and movie theaters offer a specific number of screens and hours of operation. Like the children's game Musical Chairs, where players compete to occupy a limited number of seats when the music ends, there are a restrictive number of precious openings for the distribution of great stories or important ideas embedded therein.

On the whole, Hollywood gatekeepers are risk adverse and tend to respond most favorably to projects that reflect or affirm the prevailing worldview subscription. Frequently, their receptivity to Black stories depends on the extent to which those stories strike a responsive chord that is

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

palatable to a distributor's subjective taste. The least flattering aspects of the Black experience are frequently selected for mass media exposure, thereby obscuring the true essence of Black humanity and reinforcing the artificial paradigm of white superiority.

Hollywood relishes the over-consuming Black market but doesn't truly appreciate the scale of the opportunity the community offers. The application of external cultural cues to the evaluation of Black consumer propensities overlooks considerations that are germane to the culture and its genuine motivations. The challenge for established Hollywood power brokers is to relinquish false notions of omniscience and control, and finally recruit talented Black executives, adept at understanding the interests of Black audiences and the most effective ways to export their stylized trends to ravenous enthusiasts of their culture.

"As the media industry looks to be more inclusive of Black storytellers and brands look to grow their bottom lines and brand awareness with Black audiences, understanding who we are, where we're connected, and how we're changing is as important as ever. All of this work translates to the important acknowledgment of the value the Black community delivers 'for the culture' and beyond," says Charlene Polite Corley, Vice President, Diverse Insights & Partnerships, Nielsen.³⁵

One Black film studio executive said: "There are very few senior people of color on the marketing team. Holistically the marketing team's probably about fifty or seventy people. There's not many people of color – and definitely more women, actually, than men – but not a lot of racial diversity."³⁶

A Black executive suggested that a possible, short-term solution to the diversity problem burdening Hollywood's marketing space is for companies like hers to support outside, minority-owned agencies that otherwise "can't scale" due to the industry's reluctance to hire them on a regular basis: "We need to start employing more diverse-owned marketing agencies and PR agencies — and not just on movies that have people of color in them. But like on every movie, so that we're actually allowing those marketing companies to scale. Because right now, diverse-owned marketing and PR agencies can't scale because they are only hired to work on the one or two, quote-unquote, diverse titles that every studio makes."³⁷

The industry exploits the power and influence of Black youth as a valuable economic driver that consistently out-consumes other racial, ethnic, and age groups, even when storytelling reflects unhealthy and destructive themes of Black subjectivity and victimization. As trendsetters both nationally and internationally, this audience could just as easily lead the way in embracing and supporting healthy content that provides a foundation for strengthening communities and creating a more equitable society.

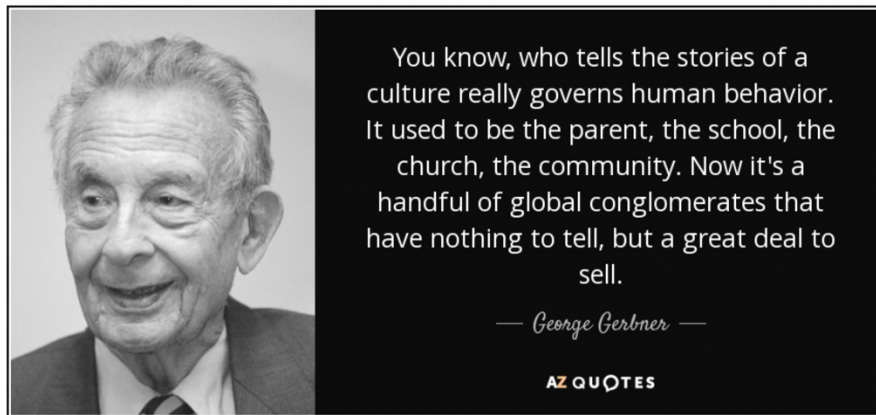
Black stories, Black storytellers, and Black audiences have been pacified, but largely unfulfilled for generations. While the thirst for mere presence within media projections is being served, especially since the advent of newer forms of digital distribution, the hunger for depth, breadth, and continuity in Black depictions persists. Even the less tolerable pathologies of the Black experience deserve to be examined in full dimension, including causation, motivation, and redemption. The cursory approach has proven to be profitable, but a holistic approach would generate even greater revenues, while also remedying false identity dynamics internal and external to Black America.

One Black executive who has influence over the selection of TV series executive producers spoke of her network's "concerted effort" to hire diverse showrunners, and the financial considerations

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

often present: “[W]e are making a concerted effort. If it is diverse subject matter, we’re specifically looking for diverse talent to helm it in the showrunner space. There are not a lot [of diverse candidates] because there are not a lot of opportunities that have been given in the past. So, we’re making a concerted effort, but that can be very difficult when you’re spending, you know, six to ten million dollars on an episode and you’re going to entrust it to a first-time director or first-time showrunner. And that I think is the real hurdle.”³⁸

Another summed up a view expressed by several interviewees about the unique perspective and understanding Black executives can bring to the development process: “Black people, we have to know about everyone else. White people don’t have to know about us, you know? That’s the general rule that people that are not Black do not understand.”³⁹



THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

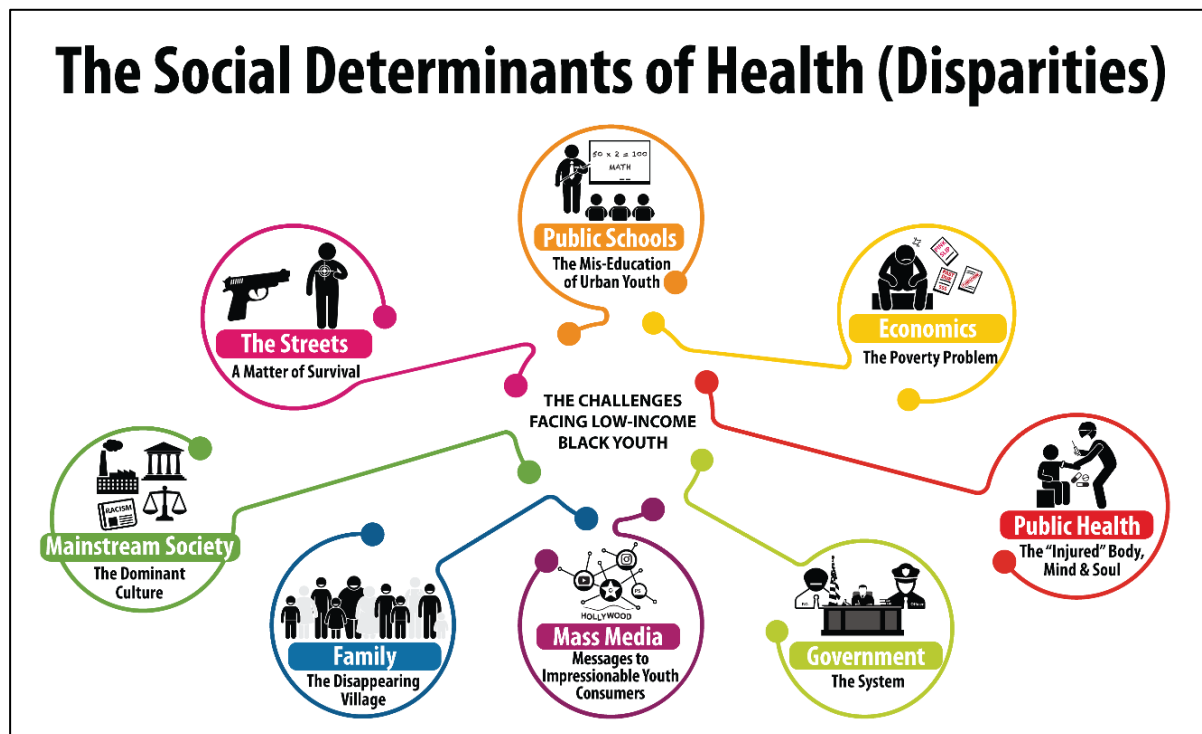
MEE's Social-Ecological Model Demonstrates the Impacts of Mass Media on Individuals and Communities

MEE first introduced its social-ecological model – the “Social Determinants of Health Disparities” – in its 1995 research report *In Search of Love: Dating Violence Among Urban Youth*, which focused on interpersonal violence among urban youth.

The model provides a mechanism for understanding how low-income urban youth view their world and why seemingly pro-social messages aren’t “speaking to” them and are leading them to opt out. It provides insights into the chronic stress and trauma that become constants early on in many of the lives of low-income Black youth, males in particular, as they struggle to keep defeat at bay.

The social-ecological realities of where people live and work affect a broad range of quality-of-life outcomes.⁴⁰ Challenges from these environmental realities include:

- **Economics:** Living in Poverty Makes You Angry
- **The Streets/Physical Environment:** Day-to-Day Community Life is a Matter of Survival
- **Public Schools:** The Miseducation of Black Youth Negatively Impacts All of Society
- **Public Health:** The Injured Mind, Body and Soul – Healthcare Isn’t the Major Asset It Should Be, Because of Mistreatment
- **Government:** Government Systems Make the “American Dream” a Nightmare for Many
- **Mass Media:** Who Controls the Narrative? Mass Media Has Been Wielded in Negative Ways
- **Family:** “The Village” Is Frayed, Traumatized and Tired
- **Mainstream Society:** Mainstream Society Does *Not* Want to Be Inclusive



THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

MEE's three decades of research in low-income inner-city communities has found that the social determinants associated with living in poor urban areas have set young Black men up for failure. This confluence of major health disparity factors, including mental health issues, means that for many low-income African Americans, failure is built in. (See Appendices for more details on how the social determinants of health disparities impact urban youth and communities.)

- “We know that Black Americans fare worse than other groups on virtually every measure of health status, and it has become all too common to blame this on individual behaviors when in fact the science is clear: The root cause of health inequities is racism and discrimination and how it limits access to the very opportunities and resources each of us need for optimal health and well-being.”⁴¹ – Barbara Ferrer PhD, MPH, MEd, Director, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

The Role and Impact of Mass Media

As outlined in the above model, media is one of the eight variables that impact the lives of inner-city, marginalized, and underserved populations. Media coverage and portrayals both reflect and influence people's opinions and perceptions of socio-economic groups, genders and issues. What people read, see, and hear daily about Black people shapes identities, informs (or misinforms) opinions about the value of Black life, fabricates xenophobic fears, and influences policies and laws.

MEE's prior research on the “hip-hop generation” has shown that urban youth are bigger consumers of television, music videos and movies than any other demographic group, and are exposed to negative, conflicting and often destructive messages about Black males at alarming levels.⁴² African American men and boys are seen by many as “a danger to society” or an “endangered species,” depending on point of view. Images in the news media and in popular entertainment reach deep into the public psyche and shape awareness, attitudes, and behavior.

In the *Perception vs. Reality* research report, MEE set out to explore and document how the media – both in Philadelphia (MEE's headquarters) and nationally – impact how Black males are perceived by a variety of audiences.⁴³

- A quantitative content analysis alone cannot completely identify and help with understanding the likely impact and effects of media images on various audiences. The MEE report goes beyond simple media monitoring. MEE delved deeper by talking directly to Black men to gain first-hand insights into *their* perspectives and to understand the impact of media images of them.
- The goal was to change the deficit framing that is often used to discuss the successes and challenges facing African Americans. The African-American community must demand action and accountability from media regarding their portrayal.
- “We've had such a disintegration of the institutions that taught values and that perpetuated the cultural memory...kids are not learning who they are through the family [or] in any kind of institutionalized way. Now it's media and peers teaching what the family used to teach.”⁴⁴ – Dr. Maisha Hamilton-Bennett

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

Direct Effects of Mass Media

Youth consume huge amounts of exploitive entertainment media, extolling subversive values and depraved character. The direct impact of violent, sexist, and negative imagery is influencing attitudes and behaviors. Dr. Asa Hilliard, a prominent educational psychologist and expert on Black child development, warned, “You can’t objectify or thing-ify a girl or dog-ify a boy for decades and think it’s not going to show up in the culture.”⁴⁵

While entrenched media executives may trumpet the noble intention of the occasional release of uplifting content, a paramount issue is the contrast between the supply of healthy fare, as compared to abject renditions of the human experience.

- Dr. Robert Raleigh says Black urban youth are significantly impacted by mass media, primarily because it is easily accessible and ubiquitous.⁴⁶
- The late media critic Dr. George Gerbner, who devoted more than 40 years to studying the effects of television on its viewers, said the results can be disturbing: “Mass media affects young people and Black people more than others because they watch more. They are more dependent on television [for information] about the world and about all kinds of knowledge. They get most of their education from television. Unlike school, television starts in infancy and goes on throughout life. By the time they go to school, they’re pretty well embedded and pretty well absorbed in the world of television.”⁴⁷
- Dr. Gerbner: [In movies and on television] minorities are more likely than not to be involved in representations of violence. That shapes the attitudes of children, to say not just that violence is all right, but it’s not very risky, nobody gets hurt, nobody dies, there’s no pain. Television shows a lot of violence, but no pain, because the sponsors don’t like pain. They want to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a mood to buy and not go south by painful and otherwise distasteful scenes.⁴⁸
- Romer: The display of guns in social media may also have increased leading to favorable norms for gun carrying in violent neighborhoods.⁴⁹

Indirect Effects of Mass Media

According to educators and social service providers in MEE audience research, the indirect impact media has on African Americans is even more damaging than the direct impact. Media affects Black male youth indirectly through its impact upon the perceptions of society at large (including educators, healthcare providers, and potential employers). These distorted views penetrate settings where white adults deal with Black youth – schools, courts, and employment locales.⁵⁰

When we consider the messages that adults in the mainstream receive about young Black people via the news and other media outlets, there is an insidious effect on popular perceptions. These stereotypes make it possible for adults to believe that the negative messages they see and hear are accurate. When adults buy into the myths and stereotypes about Black youth, they lower expectations, retreat toward fear, and alienate Black youth, or in more severe cases choose not to communicate with youth, even those within their own communities.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

- The “real” lives of the average Black urban youth are not what mass media depicts regularly. Rather, we get a series of stereotypes of people of color, easy mischaracterizations that bear little resemblance to reality. For example, says Dr. Maisha Hamilton-Bennett, “White youth use drugs and alcohol more than Black kids, but the media has flipped this.”
- Former *Moesha* syndicator Dr. Robert Raleigh says the issue of peer pressure around sex is also presented within a different context: “In white culture, it’s perceived as a dilemma for the white kids and for Black kids it’s considered promiscuity.”⁵¹ This is an example of risk predicting outcomes. The dilemma represents a problem to be solved, while promiscuity predicts a preordained or predictable outcome.
- Adults can also be affected by media perversions, impacting perceptions of Black youth. Distorted views (such as sex-crazed or criminal-minded tendencies) penetrate settings where adults interact with Black youth – schools, courts and employment locations, among them. These media stereotypes make it possible for adults to believe that the negative messages they see and hear are accurate. After all, “It was right there on the evening news!”⁵²

Not ONLY Did Hollywood Miss the Opportunity to Reframe the Conversation on Drugs; It Was Complicit (.... with the Criminal Justice System)

Case Study #5: Moving Beyond “Just Say No” in Media Portrayals of the Opioid Crisis versus War on Drugs

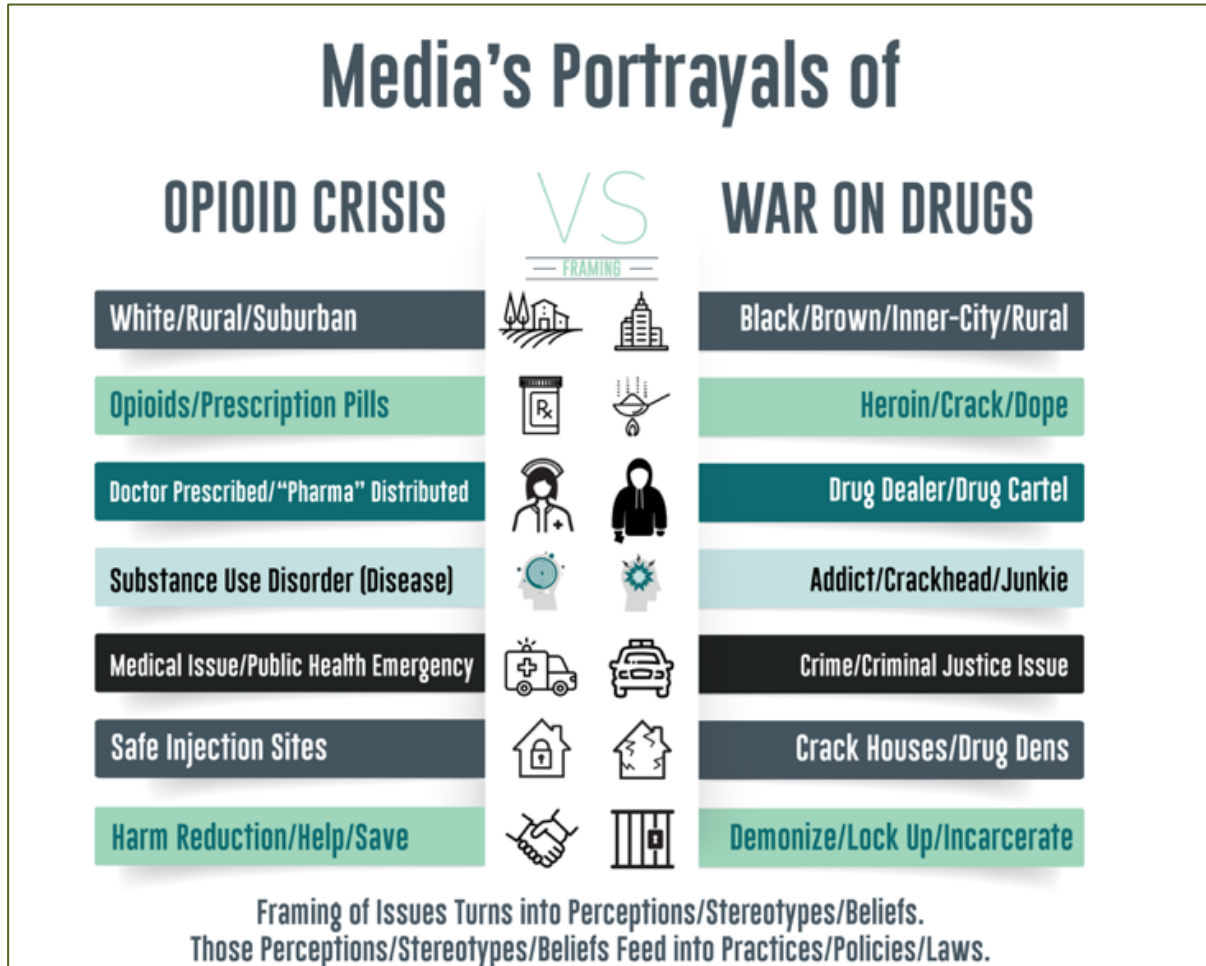
MEE has documented the many ills and challenges that engulf low-income youth in the hardest-hit communities. Media (both news and entertainment) led the public conversation about crack cocaine, marijuana and other illegal drugs (largely disregarding tobacco and alcohol – the *real* killers). MEE’s audience research found that the “Just Say No” television public service announcements, produced by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America didn’t work. Based on an overly simplistic remedy offered by a former First Lady, the campaign failed to dissuade young people from using drugs. The programming interstitials, print ads, billboards, and bus posters were also counter-productive and insulting to entire communities. The sources and causes of drug abuse are multi-layered and complex schemes deserving sophisticated and in-depth analysis, not shallow attempts to impose a one-dimensional panacea. Content espousing these missives was repeated in a slew of Hollywood movies and TV dramas, but many Black people felt there was an implied presumption of Black culpability. The community felt it was being “talked down to,” and that their realities were being ignored.

For the last 50 years, drug addiction has been framed as a criminal-justice issue that required swift and punitive responses. Each cycle of the recurring “War on Drugs” in America has disproportionately harmed those with the fewest resources to fight back against discriminatory policies, practices, and portrayal of the poor and people of color. The “War on Drugs” also unleashed racial disparities in prison sentencing for cocaine versus crack possession and use. Poor Black and brown people arrested for possession of crack were demonized and jailed in droves, devastating entire swaths of communities.

Though it is not widely acknowledged, Hollywood serves as an ancillary tool of systemic racism in action, as the industry promotes negative stereotyping, thereby rationalizing the overt

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

aggression of the criminal justice system toward the Black community. Over decades, these complicit measures have aided a campaign of mass incarceration of Black people and the expansion of a profitable prison-industrial complex.



In recent years, opioid misuse (and thousands of related overdose deaths) has been re-framed and deemed a critical public health crisis. Expanding the focus on drugs beyond the inner cities, thousands of rural, suburban, and higher-income families have been ravaged by opioid addiction, overdoses, and deaths. There is more talk these days about not being able to arrest our way out of this widespread epidemic. As the demographic profile of those affected has changed, the national media dialogue is more focused on empathy, compassion and recovery from the "disease of addiction," rather than stigmatizing and criminalizing users.⁵³

Witness the different tone of the Netflix series *Ozarks* and Amazon's *Dopesick* and the complexities with which their characters are portrayed (victimization, public health crisis) compared to the typical inner-city drug dealers, "crackheads," and criminality in popular media fare. (*The Wire*, *Power*, *Snowfall*, etc.).

Clearly, race and class play into the tonal distinctions and the depictions we see. Even impoverished, Appalachian coal town, blue-collar whites struggling with opioid addiction are

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

pictured as multi-layered individuals, while by contrast, Black drug culture depicted as if endemic to the community.

Missed Opportunity

There are serious, life-and-death implications of drug addiction and misuse. The power of entertainment media can be leveraged to address these issues in ways that are respectful to suffering communities, irrespective of their ethnic composition, rather than stereotyping or demonizing. If TV and movies can depict the daunting social determinants of health and the many stark disparities evident in the lives of our most vulnerable populations, then the industry can also lead to authentic portrayals of the resilience and inherent strengths that can inspire viewers to overcome and transcend these challenges.

In what is hopefully a turn toward progress, one interviewee noted that his department has eliminated several projects from consideration because of how they portray African Americans or Black culture: “My department has killed [several projects] over the years — whether it was a storyline or just a negative portrayal or a stereotype that was perpetuated over and over again...because that could be in comedy, that could be in drama. And we do that quite often, whether it's just not historically accurate, or if it's not culturally competent.”⁵⁴

It is necessary to emphasize the dysfunction caused by the presence of illegal drug use within the Black community is presented here as a mere illustration of the dichotomy in media portrayals. Like all other communities, Black America is comprised of an amalgamation of interests, expression, and behaviors. Pathologies stemming from drug use represent a miniscule portion of the behavioral choices prevalent within the community. The prevailing lifestyle choices are upstanding and productive. This disclaimer, while obvious, is necessary, so as to not lend more weight or credibility to the cancerous consequences of media's ill-informed and inaccurate attempts at Black verisimilitude.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

There Is a Need for Something More

The nexus between the media environment and the often-deadly social determinants of health must be addressed. This is a long-term goal requiring the focused attention of our brightest minds, sustained resources, political will, and an entertainment industry willing to acknowledge its complicity in nurturing our current predicament.

We can directly impact health and life outcomes by creating entertainment programming that operates as a protective factor, rather than a risk factor. Imbuing authentic Black stories with messages of resilience and hope, along with conveying meaningful life skills, will empower young people to cope better with whatever circumstances and challenges they face in their environment.

It is not just the entertainment industry and broader media that are going through a transformation. For 50 years, our economy has been obsessed with focusing on profits as the primary metric for success. Noticeably absent from this perspective has been a sense of fairness that would equally benefit the communal needs of workers, as they sacrifice to fulfill their obligations under the social contract, ultimately making corporate profits possible.

Now, in the aftermath of the upheavals that followed the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and the global disruption brought on by the COVID pandemic, the business community is forced to look at ways to incorporate issues that are personally important to workers into their business models. As industries adapt to these issues, Hollywood must also look at adjusting to uplift fairness and equity, especially for those most inclined to both support and be injured by its harmful aspersions.

Hollywood must improve its narratives about the capabilities of Black people, by delivering truthful and aspirational images and narratives. All of society must be exposed to a strength-based framing of the African American experience. Movies and television shows must be populated with well-rounded characterizations of Black dreams, talents and resilience, to cause others to reconsider their assumptions about how and why present-day circumstances exist. This is an entry point to begin grounding mainstream America's views and perceptions in realism, not contrived concepts, borne of manipulation and propaganda.

All young people, not just young Black Americans, will benefit from modeling positive messages. Many of the protestors of George Floyd's horrific murder were young, progressive white Americans who were unsettled and appalled that something so brutal happened in broad daylight, on a well-traveled city thoroughfare. These concerned citizens are predisposed to recognize the humanity of Black men like Floyd and the indifference of his assailant, despite the police uniform and badge he wore.

Although the wanton act was plain and obvious, the worldwide indignation it generated may also be due to the power of Black art, particularly hip-hop music and culture, as an apparatus capable of penetrating the psyche and raising consciousness toward more inclusion. Hip-Hop has been confronting racism, police brutality and other inequities for decades. Despite the detachment of its themes from the actual lived experiences of hip-hop's primary consumers, white enthusiasts have supported the art form to a greater degree than the Black community that gave it birth. It can be argued that hip-hop music, following the earlier generation of Motown, has done as much, if not more to influence hearts and minds, as compared to the very effective tradition of Civil Rights

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

marches and protests. Perhaps the reaction to the George Floyd incident was predetermined by nearly fifty years of honest and raw recorded renderings of Black life through hip-hop culture.

While corporately funded hip hop music has provided a wealth of misguided musing about sociopathic obsessions and behaviors, its occasional cycles of underground “conscious rap” stand as incontrovertible evidence of the redemptive power Black content creators can have on the psyche of the community. The effects of exhilarating music synchronized with uplifting lyrics serve to arrest the spirit in a rapture of pride and cultural connectivity. Profit-driven record labels demonstrate little empathy for the plight of the indigenous circumstances that generate the art they monetize, yet they consistently employ natives of that same environment to identify, develop, and market artists that have captured global acclaim and redefined the sound of pop music.

Film and TV content can be even more impactful, as reactions to graphic imagery is visceral. Figurative descriptors in music are dependent on individual capacities to imagine a circumstance or experience. But film and TV programming reflects an undeniable intention. Viewers join in the journey of a protagonist’s arc. Carefully crafted Black stories provide a window into the actuality of Black life and expose the malignant mythology of purposeful misrepresentations.

The Case for the Black Executive

Black Hollywood executives are the most qualified to cultivate and harvest the emerging crop of talented Black storytellers. Cultural synchronicity and career perseverance amid daunting adversity are valuable assets in honing the skills to identify visionaries and material that will both touch and nourish the community.

The Black Hollywood executives considered in this study represent a special brain trust. They are representatives of a large group of Black executives who have worked hard over the years to rise in the ranks of an industry that continues to marginalize decision makers of color. Decades of experience, toil, and mentorship provide them with a nuanced understanding of how the industry works. Their day-to-day grind to navigate obstacles designed to obfuscate their value is exhausting and remarkable, especially considering the incalculable value they offer Hollywood.⁵⁵

Black executives often serve as cultural ambassadors, ideally positioned to interpret projects from multiple perspectives, thereby increasing the likelihood that a final product will successfully connect with larger, more diverse audiences. But interviewees also described industry marketing processes as being disconnected from Black influence, despite qualification and availability to contribute insights of profound usefulness and merit.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the challenges associated with being Black in America regularly remind Black Hollywood executives of their shared humanity with other marginalized peoples. As one interviewee put it, “We have to know about everyone else.” The sensitivities Black executives bring to the room because of this empathy, when appreciated, can greatly help media companies avoid the dissemination of offensive stereotypes and dehumanizing tropes. Again, this special contribution provides considerable value in a 21st century world.⁵⁷

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

What Are the New Horizons and Possibilities?

There is a need for a top-to-bottom, seismic shift in the way Hollywood engages, appropriates, mischaracterizes, and exploits Black cultural assets. This reorganization must be done with consideration for the benefit, health, and wealth of the Black community.

African Americans generate considerable and consistent revenue for the industry and deserve acknowledgement and respect. Instead of being taken for granted, this audience deserves to be both credited and exalted for its trendsetting leadership and reliable propensity to instill economic vibrancy and vitality into the marketplace. There is clear and extensive evidence that Black youth have consistently influenced popular culture, and over the past fifty years, even redefined mainstream sensibility.

More importantly than the over-sized role in building financial success for industry barons, Black people should be freed from the onslaught of harmful messaging that has inflicted psycho-social trauma for generations, doling caste assignments that cement in minds and hearts. The community deserves new, healthier, community-strengthening content, conceived, nurtured, produced, and distributed by fresh new participants, with genuine dedication to the need for recovery and repair. The industry must now replace the vacuum being filled by toxic, conflict-laden storylines, replete with tedious tropes and stereotypes, with high-quality, well-produced material that lifts up and supports the community. The public health benefits will lead to an even greater embrace and contribution toward the ultimate Hollywood motivator – profitability.

This kind of change will not happen overnight. Hollywood will want to see proof that its bottom line will not be adversely affected by “going high” instead of low. But continued mass media manipulation and promotion of propagandized perspectives will only further destabilize the delicate balance that supports civil society and sustains social order. It is time to build a pipeline for a steady stream of affirming messaging.

The NAACP Hollywood Bureau is assessing a range of immediate options and business models for such an endeavor, including:

- Conduct a “deeper dive” into the issues outlined in this report, to gain greater quantitative insight into the extent of Black influence in mainstream consciousness, and how Black consumption of media is powering the economics of the entertainment industry. This research will help to clarify and define the intent of the “E” in the ever-present corporate assertion of a commitment to DEAL (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility). The community has earned an equity interest in Hollywood’s fantastical interpretations of its real-life circumstances. At a minimum, a dividend of cultural sensitivity must be paid.
- Conversely, more research is also necessary to fully measure the extent to which entertainment and digital media are directly and indirectly affecting the Black community. In depth understanding of the causal relationship between messaging on screens and behavior in society is a critical area for analysis. Both intra-community behaviors and external degradations plague the community. Each privileged generation of Hollywood captains must appreciate the overwhelming power of the media and the public and mental health consequences that result from irresponsible indifference and the absence of accountability.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

- Create a system that allows Black gatekeepers to assess and flag more resonant entertainment content for the pipeline. Models can be created to review and protect the interests of the community. Industry institutions must accept Black guidance in order to prescribe nutritional stories, which serve their economic interest and the community's need for healing, especially those communities facing the greatest disparities.
- The industry needs direction and guidance on how to develop and execute real diversity initiatives that disperse power and control beyond the homogenous batch of white males that have dominated the industry since its inception. The NAACP will continue to explore new models that place underrepresented people in seats of power in Hollywood. We are encouraged by the emergence of a bold new generation of executives and storytellers who recognize the value of their contributions and position themselves as invaluable conduits to a wealth of talent and rich, resonant material. The NAACP will work with responsible industry leaders to assess the strengths and capabilities of new players in the field and advise on best practices for applying new thought processes toward serving the black community in meaningful and measurable ways.
- We must also address fair hiring practices at the mid-management and C-Suite levels. The industry has not formally quantified or “defined” what the pre-requisite criteria or skills are needed to be successful. Hiring decisions often come down to vague terms like “fit” (comfort levels) with studio management or team members. There are ways of quantifying these vagaries of the hiring process to be fair, equitable, and measured for success.

Conclusion

Public health considerations invoke a moral imperative for Hollywood to “do no harm.” Communities already marginalized by systematic inequity should not be further subjugated by injurious media renderings that deepen the severity of their wounds, by instilling and reinforcing skewed notions of identity and revisionist historical inaccuracy. Loyal and overly invested consumers of noxious media fare deserve more and better from those that serve their malnourished appetites.

The NAACP will remain vigilant of the industry's responsiveness to the needs of our community. As we have before, the NAACP will continue to address failures to depict the full dimension of our constituents and confront the refusal to integrate worthy Black executive leaders into the entire process of conceptualizing, developing, producing, marketing, and distributing stories. While the traditional social justice concern of fairness is sufficient to warrant our dedication to this cause, the psycho-social vulnerabilities that stem from media assaults on perceptions and behavior, further complicate the consequences and intensify our resolve.

The Black Lives Matter mantra roared to the surface after centuries of oppression provoked the clarity of the call. Severed from the origins of our true essence, African Americans have always excavated the treasures of our synthesized culture as a natural resource, and the most precious of our assets is our stories. We must determine the arc, climax, and resolve of the tales that define our lived experience.

Hollywood's response to the murder of George Floyd is still unfolding, but initial gestures to support Black projects and personnel are encouraging. Virtually every Hollywood entity has established a DEIA plan and hired executives to implement various initiatives. However, the

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

investment in defaming Black identity has been deliberate and sustained, since D.W. Griffith used his lens to provoke earlier lynchings of Black bodies. The undoing of that legacy will require a concerted and prolonged commitment, with equal emphasis on Hollywood's supply and reconditioning of our community's demand for counter-productive media stimuli. Profitability should remain a priority, but community health must also command the attention and resources it deserves.

Black entrepreneurs, financiers and creative professionals are prepared to play frontline roles in achieving more equitable results. The entertainment industry is encouraged to reconstitute its practices and modalities to include and accommodate those capable of making a difference. Ultimately, the future of Hollywood depends on this recalibration, as consumer demographics evolve, along with the market influence to concretely demand appreciation for the need for Black executives to address the psycho-social consequences of media distortions.

THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

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THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

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THE BLACK EXECUTIVE: A Partial Solution to Psycho-Social Consequences of Media Distortions

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Appendices

The Challenges and Trauma Low-Income Urban Youth Experience Directly from Their Social Determinants of Health



When You Live in Poverty, Poverty Makes You Angry

Crushing Poverty and Few Paths to a Living Wage and Affordable Housing

High unemployment levels, lack of jobs with a wage that allows people to support themselves and their families, housing insecurity and other challenges make it seem that there are few ways up or out.



Community Life – A Matter of Day-to-Day Survival

The Streets, Systems and Physical Environment

Too often, violence has to be navigated because it has become normative behavior to resolve conflict in the neighborhood, at school and even at home.



The Miseducation of Black Youth

Education/Public Schools

Providing poor quality education negatively impacts all of society. Educators' "motives" – good or bad – are apparent to low-income urban youth.



The Injured Mind, Body and Soul – Healthcare Isn't a Major Asset Because of Mistreatment

Healthcare and Public Health

Negative treatment and experiences at healthcare facilities continue to fuel a well-founded lack of trust within the community. Treatment is often unacceptable, and it is unrealistic for practitioners to expect clients who have negative experiences to return for care.



Government Systems Make the "American Dream" a Nightmare for Many

Government (The System)

Perceptions are that government systems are primarily meant to target (profile) and punish poor people, rather than "protect and serve" them. These are perpetuated by police brutality and criminal-court injustices.



Who Controls the Narrative? Mass Media Has Been Wielded in Negative Ways

Mass Media/Digital-Social Media

Low-income urban audiences over-consume huge amounts of largely negative, stereotypical entertainment media and social media that promotes conflict, undermines healthy relationships and adds to other forms of urban stress.



"The Village" Is Frayed, Traumatized and Tired

Family/Community

A disappearing "village," as reflected in unhealthy, disrupted or unstable relationships with family and the community, can lead disconnected urban youth to engage in negative and/or risky behaviors.



Mainstream Society Does Not Want to Be Inclusive

Mainstream, Dominant Society

Mainstream society often excludes people of color. Systemic racism – embodied by profiling and discriminatory practices – exists widely, both overtly and covertly.

**“Should I Be the One Making These Decisions?”
A Study of What Black Executives Do for Hollywood**

**Darnell M. Hunt, PhD
Dean, UCLA Division of Social Sciences
Professor of Sociology and African American Studies**

**Commissioned by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
February 2022**

Executive Summary

During the summer of 2021, 55 top Black Hollywood executives responded to an on-line survey about the work climate at their companies, as well as their roles in the greenlighting, development, marketing, and staffing of television shows and motion pictures. A subset of 22 of these Black executives consented to in-depth telephone interviews in which they explained in greater detail how these processes work at their companies, providing examples of their own involvement in the decision making. The bottom-line finding is that Black executives — despite Hollywood’s underutilization of their talents — are making **essential contributions** to an industry that remains ill-equipped for meeting the needs of its diverse audiences.

Work Climate

As Hollywood responded to a year of civil unrest and a national reckoning around race, Black executives expressed **cautious optimism** about the prospects for diversity and inclusion at the studios, networks, and production companies for which they worked. Most respondents felt they “belonged” at their company, could “relate” to the leaders of their company, could bring their “whole self” to work, and were “comfortable” speaking up about problems at their company. Due to their prior experiences in the industry, however, a sizable minority of respondents remained skeptical about their companies’ true commitment to moving beyond Hollywood business as usual on the diversity and inclusion front.

Project Greenlighting

Despite the underrepresentation of Black women and men in Hollywood’s executive suites, most Black executives in the study reported having a **meaningful impact** on their companies’ greenlighting processes. This included successfully advocating for Black-led or Black themed projects that would not have gone forward otherwise, and effectively eliminating from further consideration projects that depicted Black people and/or culture in disparaging ways. Still, many respondents lamented the fact that Black executives, with very few exceptions, did not have final greenlighting authority.

Project Development

Most Black executives also reported having considerable influence over the project development process because of the formal roles they play in their studios, networks, or production companies. The in-depth interviews revealed several ways in which the Black executives brought a **unique perspective** to the development process that was beneficial to their companies. Nonetheless, many respondents complained that the inclusion of diverse voices remained uneven in the project development process, particularly at the most senior levels.

Project Marketing

Black women and men — already underrepresented in Hollywood executive suites — are an even rarer breed in industry marketing units. Black executives in the study had relatively little influence over the marketing of television shows and motion pictures, describing a **big disconnect** between the diversity of decision makers in marketing units and the diversity of target audiences.

Creative Staffing

The Black executives in this study report having **uneven influence** over the creative staffing process, which is consistent with the fact that diversity behind-the-camera in Hollywood significantly lags diversity on-screen. While many Black television executives reported playing central roles in the selection of showrunners and staff writers, relatively few Black executives reported having any influence over the selection of film directors or screenwriters. Though most Black executives reported having some impact on below-the-line staffing, anecdotal evidence suggests that this employment arena may be one of the least diverse in Hollywood.

Background

The brutal, in-your-face murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May of 2020 was just the latest in a long succession of Black killings captured on video. Following closely on the heels of the shooting death of Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery by white, self-professed vigilantes in Georgia, and the killing of Breonna Taylor in her own home by Louisville police, Floyd's murder revealed, yet again, the precarity of Black life in America.

But this time, amid a once-in-a-century pandemic, Americans of all races took to the streets, risking their own health, to demand the overhauling of police practices and to insist that Black lives do matter. Notably, prominent Hollywood powerbrokers responded to this moment of racial reckoning with public promises to do their part in helping to move the nation in a more just direction. The question remains, as the Committee of Black Writers put it, whether this was just “another strategic, virtue-signaling performance deemed necessary to survive the times.”¹ Indeed, more than 300 Black artists and executives signed a letter in late 2020 calling out Hollywood for its “lack of a true commitment to inclusion and institutional support,” rooting this failure in the industry’s “legacy of white supremacy.”²

Since its founding in 1909, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been a staunch advocate for the integration of people of color into a more inclusive and just American society. From its early media campaign challenging dehumanizing,

¹ Immediato, Linda, “Black Screenwriters Are Demanding that Hollywood Take Action to Diversify,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.lamag.com/article/black-screenwriters- diversity-letter/>.

² <https://www.blackenterprise.com/over-300-black-hollywood-artists-and-executives-demand-change-with-new-initiative-hollywood-4-black-lives/?test=prebid>.

racist imagery in the *Birth of a Nation* (1915), to its condemnation of the regressive, “separate-but-equal” world of television’s *Amos ‘N Andy* (1951-53), to its more recent role in the early 2000s in leading a grand coalition of advocacy groups demanding greater inclusion of people of color at the major television networks, the NAACP has understood the role Hollywood media can play in either advancing or hindering our progress toward a more just society. Indeed, its annual NAACP Image Awards (established in 1967) was conceived not just to celebrate the achievements of Black talent often overlooked by Hollywood but also to honor people who have worked hard to change African American images in the industry.

More than 100 years after its first media campaign — during a time in which the on-screen presence of African Americans and other people of color has reached unprecedented (if not proportionate) levels — the NAACP commissioned this study to better understand the obstacles that stand in the way of further progress for the Hollywood industry. Specifically, the NAACP aims to shine a spotlight on the executive suites of Hollywood’s major and midsize film studios, television networks, and production companies to advance our understanding of the racial dynamics at work in these industry-defining spaces. How, specifically, are Black women and men positioned relative to Hollywood’s most powerful decision makers? To what degree have Black women and men been able to make a difference in shaping the African American images circulated by Hollywood?

The Disconnect

People of color collectively constitute about 42.7 percent of the U.S. population today,³ and their share is increasing by nearly half a percentage point each year. Demographers now project that the nation’s population will become majority minority sometime around 2044.⁴ Indeed, early findings from the 2020 U.S. Census reveal that most Americans under the age of 18 are already people of color (53 percent).⁵

Recent studies of diversity and inclusion in Hollywood clearly show that the industry has made considerable strides in key employment arenas, echoing, if not matching, the increasing diversity of America and its audiences. As UCLA’s 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report documents,⁶ people of color saw their share of film leads nearly triple from just 10.5 percent in 2011 to 27.6 percent in 2019. Blacks, in particular, were overrepresented among top film roles in 2019, claiming 15.7 percent of the roles compared to their 14 percent share of the population.

³ CNN, August 12, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/12/politics/us-census-2020-data/index.html>.

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⁶ “2020 Hollywood Diversity Report: A Tale of Two Hollywoods (Part 1 Film),” UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2020-Film-2-6-2020.pdf>.

In television,⁷ similar trends are evident: People of color more than quadrupled their share of broadcast scripted leads between the 2011-12 and 2018-19 television seasons (from 5.1 percent to 24 percent), nearly tripled their share of cable scripted leads over the same period (from 14.7 percent to 35 percent), and nearly tripled their share of digital scripted leads between the 2013-14 and 2018-19 seasons (from 9.1 percent to 24.1 percent). Meanwhile, Blacks achieved or approached proportionate representation among all roles in broadcast (18 percent), cable (18.2 percent) and digital (11.9 percent) for the 2018-19 season. Much of this change is undoubtedly due to the growing body of evidence that on-screen diversity sells,⁸ particularly as increasingly diverse audiences in America (and around the globe) demand characters and stories that resonate with their own experiences.

Behind the camera, however, the progress has been much slower. The representation of people of color among film directors has bounced around over the years, up slightly from 12.2 percent in 2011 to 15.1 percent 2019. As a result, people of color would have to more than double their 2019 share of film directors to reach proportionate representation in this critically important space. Considering Blacks separately, the group's 5.5 percent share of film directors in 2019 would also have to more than double for the group to reach proportionate representation.

Similarly, there remains much work to do behind the camera on the diversity and inclusion front in television. Though people of color more than doubled their share of show creators between the 2011-12 and 2018-19 seasons in the broadcast scripted space (from 4.2 percent to 10.7 percent), they would have to nearly quadruple their 2018-19 share to reach proportionate representation. By comparison, the trend was a little better for show creators of color in cable (from 7.4 percent to 14.5 percent) and slightly worse in digital (from 6.2 percent to 10.3 percent).

The industry employment arena that may have the most influence on the trends cited above — but which has received the least amount of study — is Hollywood's studio, network, and production company executive suites.⁹ In early 2020, UCLA's report documents that film studio CEOs were 91 percent white and 82 percent male, while studio senior management teams were 93 percent white and 80 percent male, and studio unit heads were 86 white and 59 percent male.¹⁰ The statistics for television networks were similar in 2020, if not a little more inclusive with respect to gender: Network CEOs were 92 percent white and 68 percent male, network

⁷ "2020 Hollywood Diversity Report: A Tale of Two Hollywoods (Part 2 Television)," UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2020-Television-10-22-2020.pdf>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For a discussion of the importance of executive suites in setting the tone necessary for diversifying every level of an organization, see "By All M.E.A.N.S. Necessary: Essential Practices for Transforming Hollywood Diversity and Inclusion," UCLA Division of Social Sciences, September 2019, <https://socialscience.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/UCLA-By-All-Means-Necessary-Report-9-18-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ See UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report (Part 1, Film).

senior management teams were 84 percent white and 60 percent male, and network unit heads were 86 percent white and 46 percent male.¹¹

It should be noted that there were no Black CEOs or members of the senior management team at the major studios in early 2020, and only 3.9 percent of major studio unit heads were Black.¹² The numbers were better for Blacks at the networks but still well below proportionate representation: 6.8 percent of network CEOs, 2.9 percent of senior management team members, and 7.5 percent of unit heads.¹³ Hollywood did not welcome its first Black head of a major television network until 2016, when Channing Dungey was promoted to president of ABC Entertainment.¹⁴ At the time of this writing, she was Chairman of Warner Brothers Television Group.

In short, while Hollywood's studios and networks have worked to appease audience demands for more diverse, on-screen content in recent years, it appears as if they have done so without fundamentally altering the way the industry is structured — *without also diversifying who is making the decisions behind the scenes.*

The Costs of the Disconnect

The costs of the disconnect between who calls the shots in Hollywood and America's increasing diversity comes into sharp focus when we consider issues of *representation*. Representation is a multi-dimensional concept that involves at least three interrelated problems. The first problem concerns how to achieve equitable representation for people of color and women who seek employment opportunities across a range of lucrative industry positions that have traditionally been dominated by white men.¹⁵ The second problem is how to maintain and enhance the vitality of an industry whose bottom-line is increasingly dependent on the equitable representation of diverse talent in front of and behind the camera.¹⁶ And the third problem involves how to ensure that the representations (i.e., images) circulating in Hollywood storytelling work to affirm and celebrate America's cultural diversity — as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes about marginalized groups and unwittingly (or wittingly) promoting narratives that work against the ideals of a more inclusive and just society.¹⁷

¹¹ See UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report (Part 2, Television).

¹² 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report (Part 1, Film).

¹³ 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report (Part 2, Television).

¹⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-07-01/hollywood-diversity-corner-offices-black-executives-black-lives-matter>.

¹⁵ For an example of the costs to Black television writers, see: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-06-24/black-writers-are-getting-hired-but-they-arent-getting-promoted>.

¹⁶ For example, a recent study from McKinsey & Company estimates that the industry is leaving \$10 billion on the table by undervaluing Black-led projects: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/black-representation-in-film-and-tv-the-challenges-and-impact-of-increasing-diversity>.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the cultural and political implications of media representations for race in America, see Hunt, Darnell. M. (ed), 2005. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Solutions to each of these problems will necessarily involve the engagement of Hollywood's executive suites. Decisions about what types of films to make, how large a budget to assign to them, how they will be marketed, and who will be at the directorial helm are all made by the people who occupy the studios' executive suites. Similarly, network executive suites are where pivotal decisions are made about which television projects to greenlight, who will run them, and for how long. These important decisions all have a direct bearing on the types of stories Hollywood tells and who will fill the key creative roles in telling them. While we know that Hollywood's executive suites profoundly shape what the industry produces, there is relatively little documentation about how these spaces are handicapped by the absence of Black voices or how the inclusion of Black voices might add value in an industry whose audiences grow more diverse with each passing day.

This study is motivated by two core research questions:

1. How does the presence or absence of Black voices in studio and network executive suites shape key greenlighting, project development, marketing, and creative staffing decisions for film and television projects?
2. What costs are associated with executive suites that are almost exclusively white and overwhelmingly male?

The Data

The data for this study consist of the survey responses and in-depth interviews of key Black Hollywood executives working in film and television. In May of 2021, the NAACP developed a list of 120 Black executives working at major and mid-size Hollywood studios, television networks, and production companies.¹⁸ The NAACP invited these executives to participate in an on-line survey¹⁹ that included questions about their experiences related to:

- the work climate at their company
- the project greenlighting process
- the project development process
- the project marketing process
- the creative staffing process

¹⁸ The number of "Black Hollywood executives" varies considerably depending on how the population is defined. UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Reports identify 57 top Black executives but includes only the top studios and networks while considering positions at the chair/CEO, senior management group, and unit head levels. By contrast, the *Los Angeles Times*'s 2020 analysis of Hollywood "C-suites" is more restrictive. It identified only 23 Black executives among "nearly 230 senior corporate executives, division heads and other senior leaders." <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-07-01/hollywood-diversity-corner-offices-black-executives-black-lives-matter>. The group considered in this study is more inclusive than the groups considered in earlier studies and thus offers a fuller view of Black executive involvement across multiple levels of decision making.

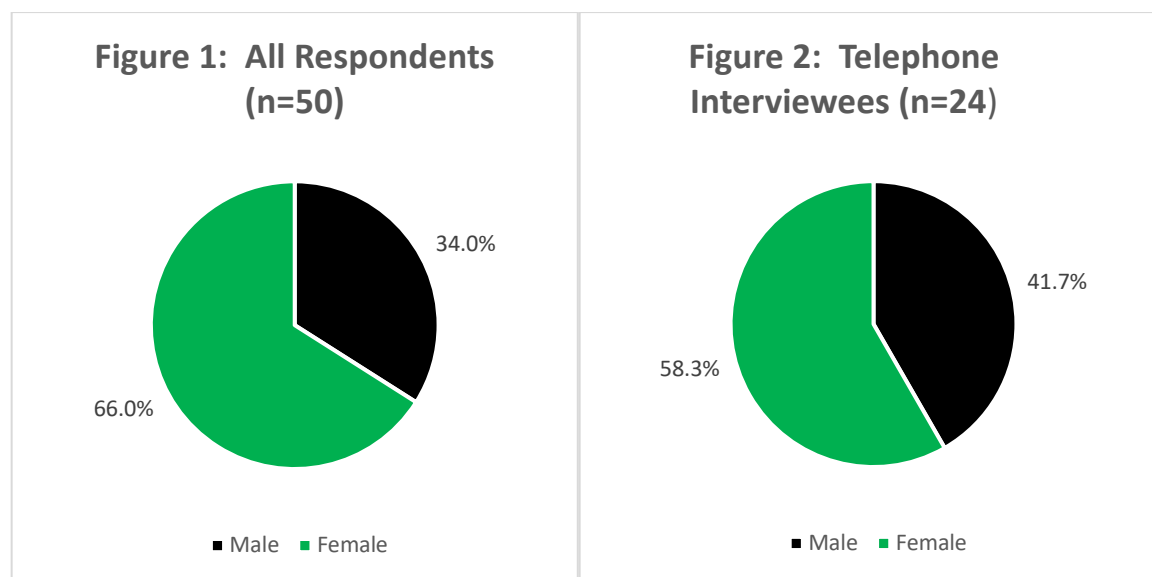
¹⁹ The survey was hosted by SurveyMonkey.com and responses were received between June 30, 2021 and July 24, 2021.

The survey also included questions about executives' backgrounds in the Hollywood industry and their demographic characteristics. Fifty-five²⁰ of the executives responded to the survey (45.8 percent), including 24 executives who also agreed to participate in follow-up, in-depth telephone interviews.²¹ The telephone interviews of these respondents were recorded, and clean verbatim transcripts were produced from the recordings.²²

To encourage responses that are as frank as possible, considerable care was taken in the drafting of this report to protect the identities of interviewees. For this reason, references to specific projects or companies are omitted from the quotes pulled from the verbatim transcripts, and other identifying characteristics of certain interviewees are disguised in the discussion below.

The Executives

The Black Hollywood executives whose experiences inform this study are a very accomplished group, holding titles such as unit Director, Vice President, Senior Vice President, President, and CEO. Consistent with the gender distribution of the 120 executives identified by the NAACP, survey respondents were nearly two-to-one female, 66 percent (**Figure 1**). But as **Figure 2** reveals, males were overrepresented in the subset of survey respondents who agreed to in-depth, follow-up telephone interviews (41.7 percent)



²⁰ Total numbers vary in the charts below because a few respondents chose not to answer some of the questions.

²¹ Telephone interviews were conducted between July 23, 2021 and September 1, 2021. Two executives who agreed in the survey to be interviewed could not be reached.

²² One of the interviewees declined to be recorded during her telephone interview.

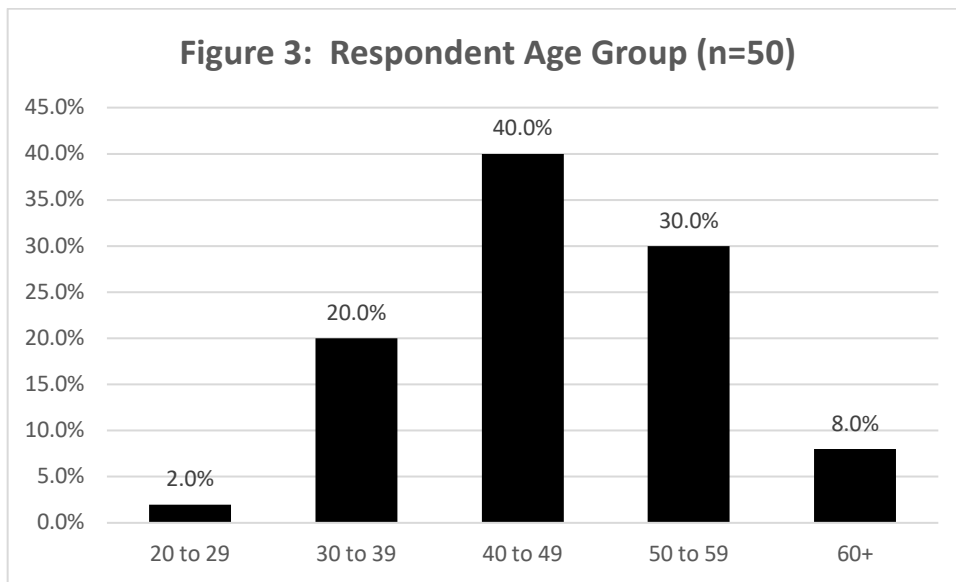
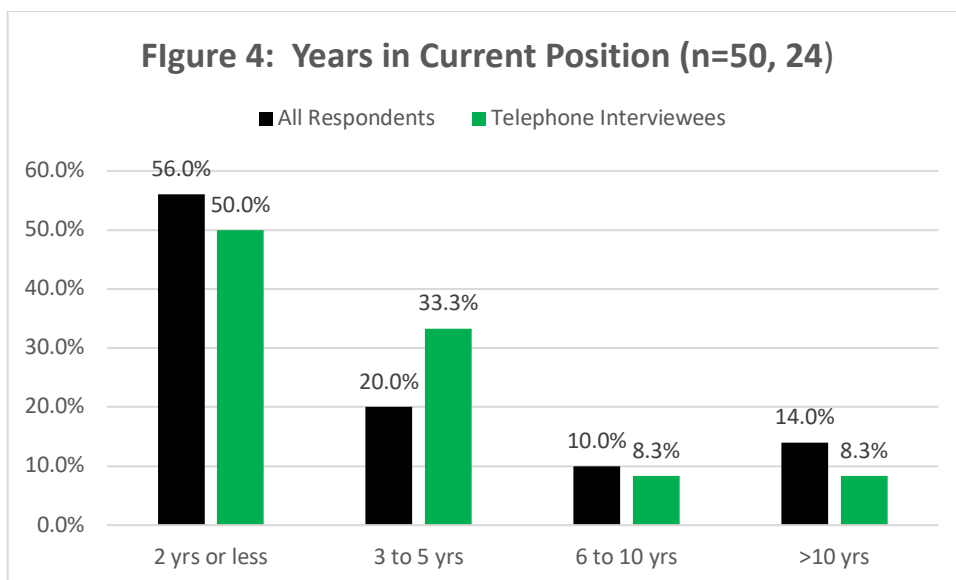
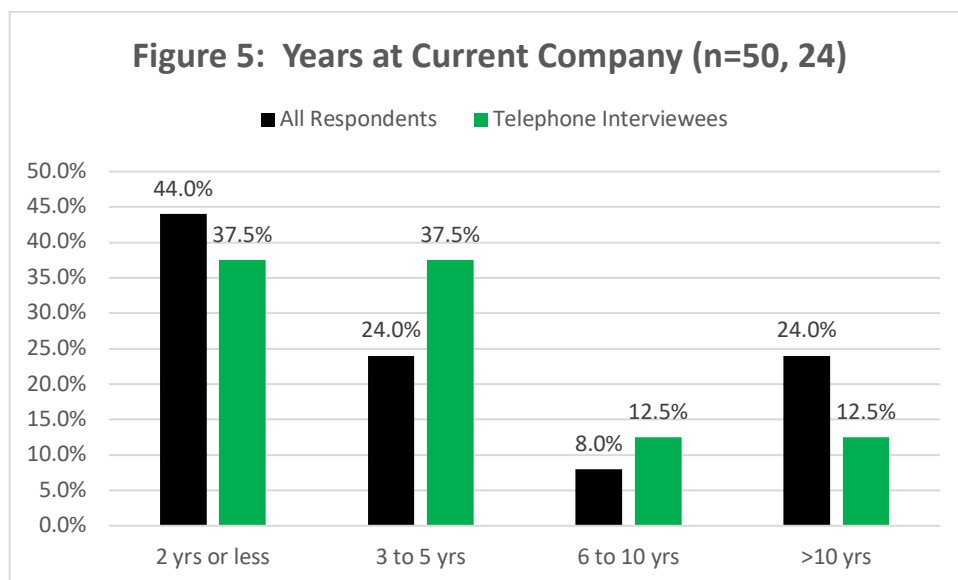


Figure 3 shows that most of the executives fell into the 40 to 49 age group (40 percent), followed by those in the 50 to 59 age group (30 percent). The remainder were aged 30 to 39 (20 percent), 60 and over (8 percent), and 20 to 29 (2 percent).

Despite the considerable industry experience the Black executives in this study possessed, most (56 percent) occupied their current positions for 2 years or less (see **Figure 4**), and this was also true for the subset of survey respondents who agreed to telephone interviews (50 percent). By

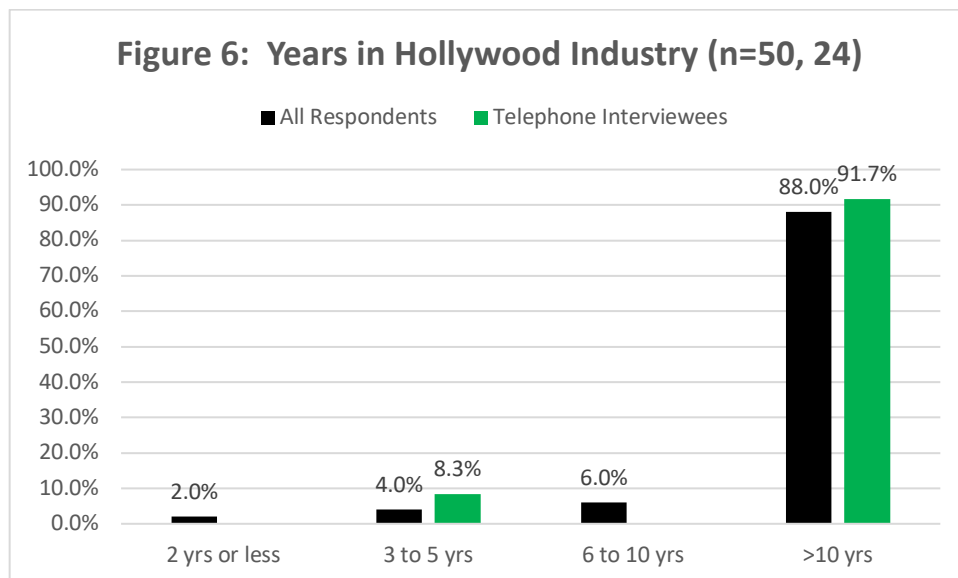




contrast, only 14 percent of survey respondents and 8.3 percent of telephone interviewees held their current positions for more than 10 years.

Similarly, **Figure 5** shows that the largest group of respondents (44 percent) worked at their current companies for 2 years or less, while the remainder worked at their current companies from 3 to 5 years (24 percent), from 6 to 10 years (10 percent), or for more than 10 years (24 percent). By comparison, 37.5 percent of respondents who agreed to be interviewed worked at their current companies for 2 years or less or for 3 to 5 years, compared to 12.5 percent who did so for 6 to 10 years or for more than 10 years.

Consistent with the high-status positions held by the Black executives considered in this study, 88 percent of respondents worked in the Hollywood industry for more than 10 years (see **Figure 6**). Meanwhile, 6 percent of respondents worked in the industry between 6 and 10 years, 4 percent between 3 and 5 years, and only 2 percent for 2 years or less. The subset of respondents who agreed to be interviewed were slightly more senior: 91.7 percent of them worked in the industry for more than 10 years.

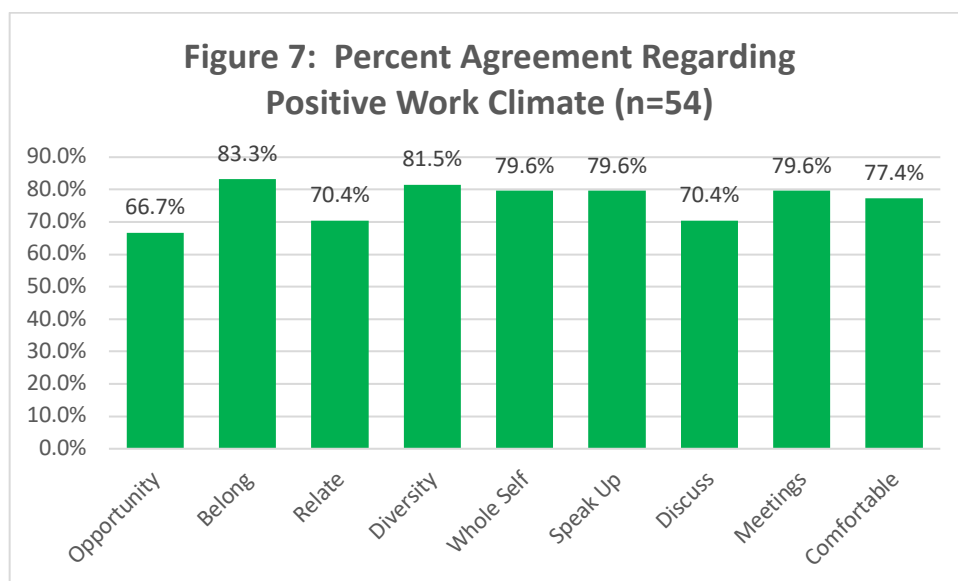


Work Climate: Cautious Optimism

To gauge Black Hollywood executives' perceptions of the work climates at their current companies, the survey included nine measures frequently employed by practitioners who work with companies to advance diversity and inclusion efforts.²³ As **Figure 7** shows, most respondents in this study perceived the work climates at their respective companies to be more positive than not. That is, at least two-thirds of respondents said they agreed to varying degrees (i.e., "somewhat agree," "agree," or "strongly agree") with each of nine positive statements about work climate.

Specifically, 66.7 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "all people have an opportunity to succeed at my company." More respondents agreed with the statement "I feel that I belong here at my company" than any of the others (83.3 percent). The statement "I relate to the leaders at my company" was agreed to by 70.4 percent of respondents. "Workforce diversity is valued at my company" elicited agreement from 81.5 percent of respondents. "I can bring my whole self to work" was agreed to by 79.6 percent of respondents. "People with different ideas and opinions are encouraged to speak up at my company" garnered agreement from 79.6 percent of respondents. The statement "we are able to discuss difficult/uncomfortable topics, including race and social justice issues, in company meetings" was agreed to by 70.4 percent of respondents. "During staff meetings, all members are encouraged to speak up and share thoughts and ideas" elicited agreement from 79.6 percent of respondents. Finally, the statement "I feel comfortable speaking up about problems/issues at my company" was agreed to by 77.4 percent of respondents.

²³ For example, see Maltese, Anne, "Diversity and Inclusion Survey Questions to Improve D&I at Work," October 29, 2020. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/diversity-and-inclusion-survey-questions>.



Several telephone interviewees described a palpable shift in their companies' cultures with respect to diversity and inclusion following the George Floyd killing and the ensuing unrest. One Black executive, for example, spoke of a shift at her company from just "conversation" about diversity and inclusion to "action:"

I feel that it has definitely [improved] since George Floyd. Everyone has been awakened. So, there is no longer just a conversation [about diversity and inclusion]. There's now action implemented towards it.

Another Black executive expressed his optimism about the state of diversity and inclusion at his company, despite acknowledging that much work remains to be done:

I feel optimistic. That would be the best word to describe it. We are, you know, working towards change and seeing some incremental change and doing some really foundational, strategic work to make sure that it's sustainable...But [there's] still a lot of work to do.

Though most respondents agreed that diversity and inclusion was valued at their companies, a sizable minority were less optimistic about the prospects for real progress on the diversity and inclusion front. One Black executive, for example, complained that he and other executives of color were largely invisible to his company's top leadership, despite his company's public pronouncements about diversity:

Concerned. Well, I think concerned is a little bit mild. Troubled. And the reason for that is because I work for a [company] that is promoting itself as a leader in diversity. And I feel like an executive who is generating a lot [but who] remains invisible to

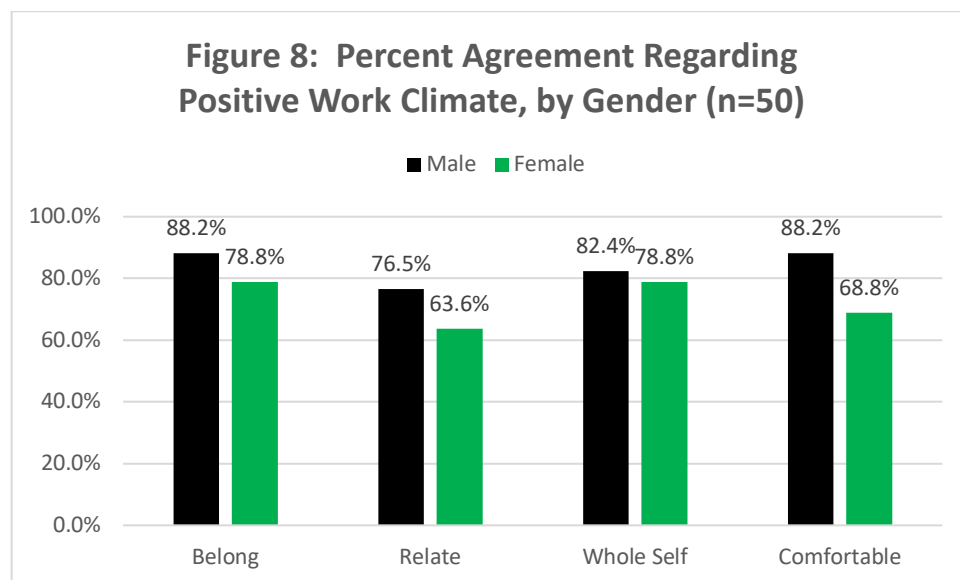
leadership at the very top. And I also think that other executives of color junior to me or on the same level, for the most part, are equally as invisible and unheard. Even when we're trying to be heard and respected and included.

Another Black executive was more direct about the problem at her company:

I don't think that the desire is authentic. I think it's done for optics to look good, to not lose sponsors. I don't think that the Caucasian powers-that-be actually look to share the top level. I don't think they do, and I think that's the problem.

Despite the overrepresentation of women among Black Hollywood executives, male respondents were more likely than their female counterparts to agree to varying degrees with four key positive statements about work climate (see **Figure 8**). That is, male respondents were more likely to feel that they belonged at their company (88.2 percent versus 78.8 percent), that they could relate to the leaders at their company (76.5 percent versus 63.6 percent), that they could bring their whole selves to work (82.4 percent versus 78.8 percent), and that they were comfortable speaking up about problems/issues at work (88.2 percent versus 68.8 percent). One Black male executive who felt particularly positive about his company's work climate, had this to say about the prospects for a more inclusive Hollywood:

We have taken this extremely seriously. And in response to the events of 2020, I think we've made enormous strides in that direction. How do I think the industry views all of this? I think last year was a watershed moment.



It should be noted here that some of the (cautious) optimism respondents expressed about work climate seems associated with the fact that nearly half of respondents (44 percent) were

in their current positions for two years or less. That is, many of these respondents were likely hired or promoted in the aftermath of the Floyd killing, when “everyone was awakened,” as one respondent put it, to the nation’s (and industry’s) burning issues of race and social justice. Indeed, an analysis of respondents by time in their current position shows that those in their current positions for less than two years had rosier views regarding work climate than other respondents.²⁴ It remains to be seen if optimism across respondents will level out as the novelty of the positions held by the recently hired or promoted begins to wear off.

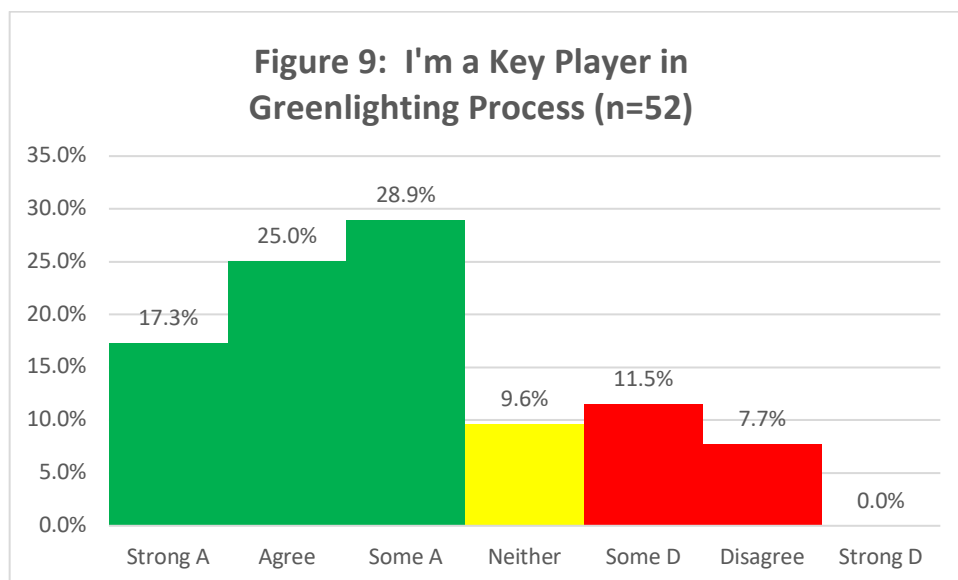
Project Greenlighting: Meaningful Impact

The subset of respondents who agreed to in-person interviews were asked to describe the greenlighting process at their respective companies. Descriptions varied depending on whether respondents worked in television or film and whether they worked for a television network, studio or production company. Eight of the 12 interviewees who worked in television described greenlighting processes that generally involved a team or committee of executives that reviews projects under consideration, in some cases voting on them, before the company’s CEO or chairman makes the final call. The 10 interviewees who worked for a studio or production company also described greenlighting processes in which the head of the company usually has final say, but this process was more complicated for television projects. In the case of a studio or production company project under consideration by a television network, the network’s greenlighting process ultimately determines whether the project moves forward.

Though Black women and men are severely underrepresented in Hollywood’s executive suites, those who are present appear to have a considerable impact on their companies’ greenlighting processes. **Figure 9** shows that most respondents (71.2 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I’m a key player in greenlighting decisions at my company.” This figure includes 17.3 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 25 percent who said they “agree,” and 28.9 percent who said they “somewhat agree” (green area). By contrast, only 11.5 percent said they “somewhat disagree” and 7.5 percent said they “disagree” with the statement (red area). None of the respondents said they “strongly disagree” with the statement. It is also worth noting that there were no apparent gender differences in how respondents answered this question: males and females were about equally likely to view themselves as having a significant impact on the greenlighting process.²⁵

²⁴ For example, 88.2 percent of those who had been in their positions for two years or less agreed that they could bring their whole selves to work, versus 75.5 percent of those who had been in their current positions longer. Similarly, 88.2 percent of the recently hired or promoted also agreed that their companies valued diversity, compared to 78.4 percent of those who had been in their current positions longer.

²⁵ That is, 75 percent of female respondents and 70.7 percent of male respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees.



As an example of the impact Black executives can have, one interviewee described how her presence in the executive suite made the difference in whether a television show was ultimately greenlighted, and whether it was produced in a manner that maintained the integrity of the original idea:

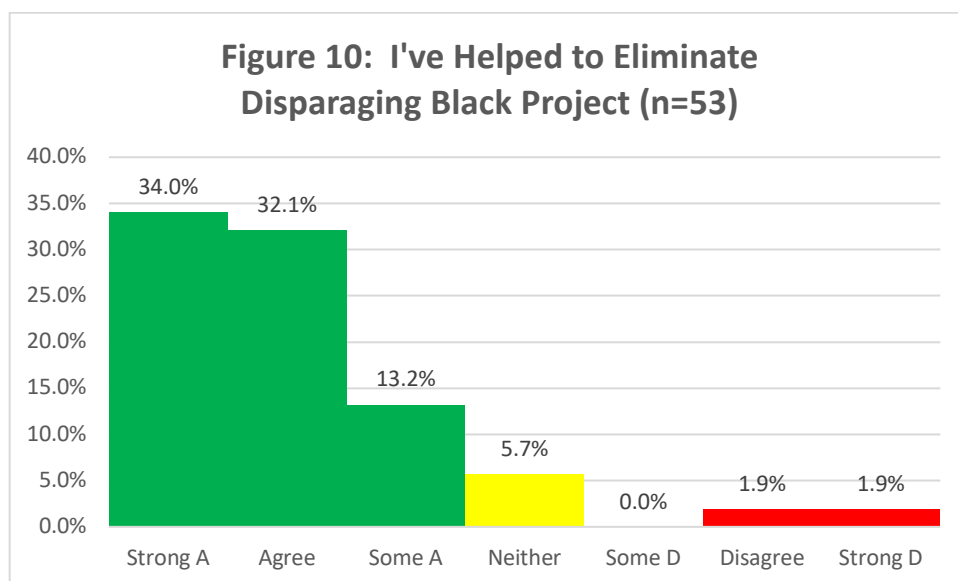
I rallied for [the project], brought it to us for us to do. And I fought for us to keep everything in place that the producers had in mind, from casting to every single detail of the show. I'm really, really proud of it.

Another Black executive spoke of his “huge voice” in the greenlighting process at his company:

I have a huge voice in what we do. So, I can't act like I'm not, you know, a big part of it...I'm going to just say my department has been responsible for greenlighting several projects.

Black executives also play an important role in putting the brakes on projects under consideration at their companies that depict African Americans in problematic ways. As **Figure 10** shows, 79.3 percent of respondents agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I have successfully revised or eliminated a project that I felt would portray African Americans or Black culture in inaccurate or disparaging ways” (green area). This figure includes 34 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement,” 32.1 percent who said they “agree,” and 13.2 percent who said they “somewhat agree.” Only 3.8 percent of respondents said they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the statement (red area).²⁶

²⁶ Figures do not sum to 100 percent because the chart omits respondents who answered “not applicable” (11.3 percent).



As example of the impact Black executives can have on the fate of problematic projects, one interviewee noted that his department has eliminated several projects from consideration by his company because of how they portrayed African Americans or Black culture:

My department has killed [several projects] over the years — whether it was a storyline or just a negative portrayal or a stereotype that was perpetuated over and over again...because that could be in comedy, that could be in drama. And we do that quite often, whether it's just not historically accurate, or if it's not culturally competent.

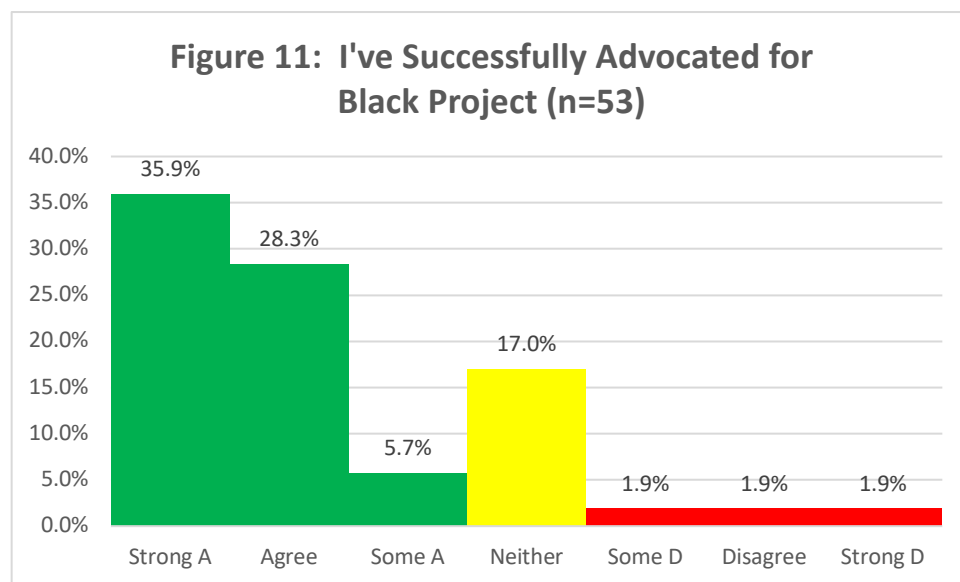
Another Black executive described her usual response when encountering these types of problematic projects:

We'll look at pitch decks and scripts all time and say, you know, “God this is so stereotypical. No, this isn't going to work.” So, as a whole, we do that a lot. Okay? “Yeah, no, this doesn't put us in a good light at all. We’ve got to pass on this one.”

Finally, one interviewee explained why she believes that Black executives, in the end, are better situated than their white counterparts to address these problematic projects when they arise:

The intent is always good — the recognition that there is this big representation issue raised...[But] you can't just download what it means to live in a Black body to a non-Black decision-maker. Not to say that they can't make decisions on this content. They can. But I think the way you really solve the problem is to have more Black decision-makers.

Black executives also play an important role in advocating for promising, Black-themed projects that are unlikely to be greenlighted without their support. **Figure 11** shows that 69.9 percent of respondents agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I have successfully advocated for a project with a Black lead and/or featuring Black themes that would not have been



greenlighted without my support” (green area). This figure includes 35.9 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 28.3 percent who said they “agree,” and 5.7 percent who said they “somewhat agree.” While 17 percent of respondents were ambivalent with respect to their role in advocating for Black projects (yellow area), less than 6 percent of respondents reported varying degrees of disagreement with the statement (red area).²⁷

One Black executive explained how she advocated for a Black project she considered to be outstanding but that was being treated “unfairly” by the network:

I've never heard a pitch this good. And the writing was phenomenal, and it was a team of all Black men who were very passionate about this story...Our counterparts at the network treated the project incredibly unfairly...We just kept pushing, kept pushing, and at the end of the day, kind of just needed to shame them because simultaneously there was another project that had all white men attached about a Black lead that sailed through the greenlight process and wasn't nearly as good.

²⁷ Figures do not sum to 100 percent because the chart omits respondents who answered “not applicable” (7.6 percent).

Another Black executive explained how she successfully framed her support for a Black project in terms of strategic considerations she knew would be persuasive with the rest of the greenlighting team:

There was something that I [recently] presented to the [greenlighting team], describing it as a project that would bring a lot of African Americans to our platform, which is something that is needed...While it made sense for this particular project, it was also presented to this group in a way that actually makes strategic sense because it was building towards something even bigger. So, it kind of checked all the boxes, and in these greenlighting meetings it's sometimes very challenging to get things greenlighted. And it was one of those things that when I was done with my pitch, the first response was, "Well, this sounds like a no-brainer." It was like checking all the boxes. And the fact that it was something that was checking the diversity box made it even that much better.

Given what we know about the underrepresentation of Black women and men in Hollywood's executive suites, it should not be surprising that most respondents believed their companies' greenlighting teams suffered from a lack of diversity. **Figure 12** shows 58.5 percent of respondents disagreed to varying degrees with the statement that "the greenlighting process at my company includes the right balance of diverse voices and perspectives" (red area). This

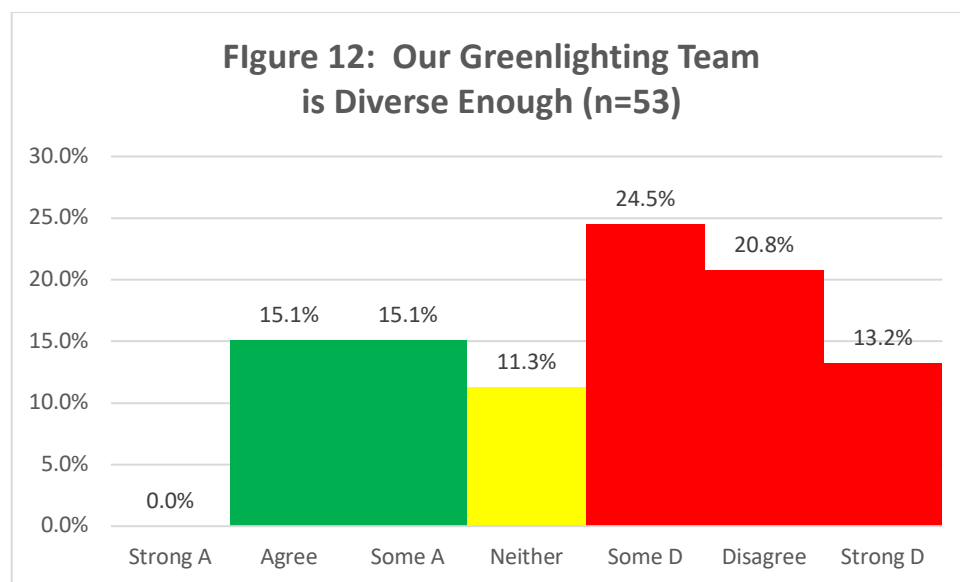


figure includes 24.5 percent of respondents who said they "somewhat disagree" with the statement, 20.8 percent who said they "disagree," and 13.2 percent who said they "strongly disagree." By contrast, 15.1 percent of respondents said they "somewhat agree," 15.1 percent said they "agree," and none of the respondents said they "strongly agree."

Much of respondents' frustration with the greenlighting process was rooted in the simple fact that — with one or two exceptions — Black executives did not have final say on the fate of a project. One interviewee put it this way:

[T]he closer a project gets to being programmed, the higher up the ladder it needs to get approved. And the higher up the ladder you go, the less diverse the industry is overall.

Even at companies with a greenlighting team that holds some sway with the final decider, Black executives were severely underrepresented. One Black executive described the kind of greenlighting process faced by most interviewees:

There are about twelve people that get into a room, twelve to fifteen people that discuss it. But a greenlight decision is not arrived at yet in that room. The chairman takes all of those inputs and then the chairman makes the decision. That's really one person deciding and fifteen people opining.

Another Black executive argued that greenlighting teams should reflect the diversity of the audiences for the projects under consideration:

I also think even among the people who are currently in the room, you know, greenlighting should be more of a collective decision as opposed to simply the decision of the one, the sole chairman...We should really think about how we need to construct the leadership team in order to ensure that the people greenlighting the film look more like, look representative of the people who attend the film.

There was considerable ambivalence among respondents regarding whether — at the end of the day — their companies' greenlighting processes produced the right outcomes (see **Figure 13**). The largest group of respondents (30.2 percent) said they "somewhat agree" with the statement that "as a result of diverse collaboration, the greenlighting process at my company generally results in the right decisions about which projects should be supported." The next largest group of respondents (22.6 percent) said they "disagree" with the statement, followed by 15.1 percent of respondents who said they "somewhat disagree." Meanwhile, 13.2 percent of respondents said they "neither agree nor disagree" (yellow area).

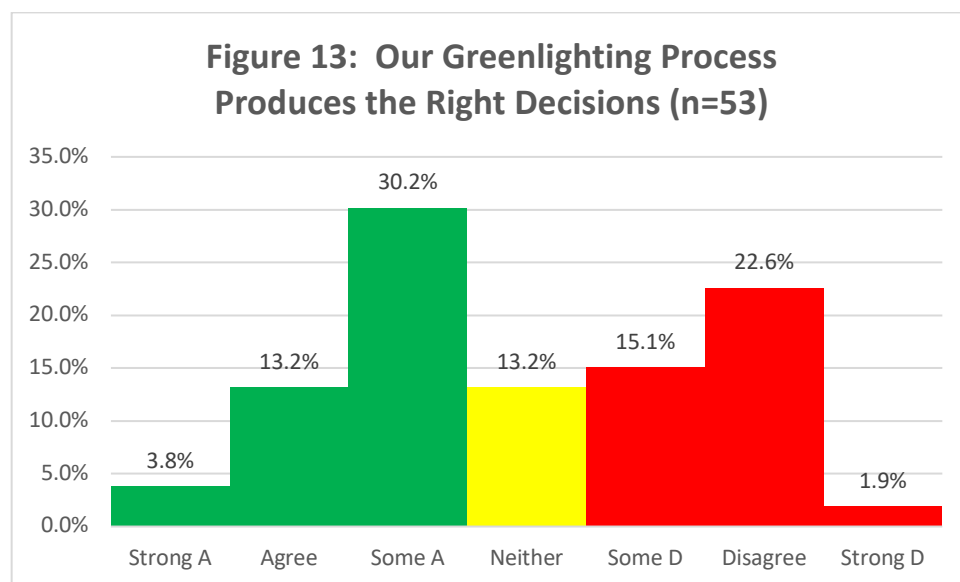
Consistent with this ambivalence, some interviewees were outspoken about the ways in which they think the greenlighting process could be improved at their companies. One Black executive took aim at the steps leading up to the consideration of a given project:

What could improve greenlighting is the step before someone ever gets in the room. And that step, number one, is to make sure that we have an inclusive group of development executives. That's number one. And even before that, who gets the

opportunity to get into the room?²⁸ So, if you're talking to the same people, you're going to get the same results.

Another Black executive boiled the solution down to the need for industry leaders to ask themselves two simple questions:

Everybody's going to have to start asking themselves the question, “Should I be the one making these decisions? Or do I have the right people here to caucus with to make decisions?” These are the hard things, right? So, what can be done better? Let's just start with those questions.



Project Development: Unique Perspective

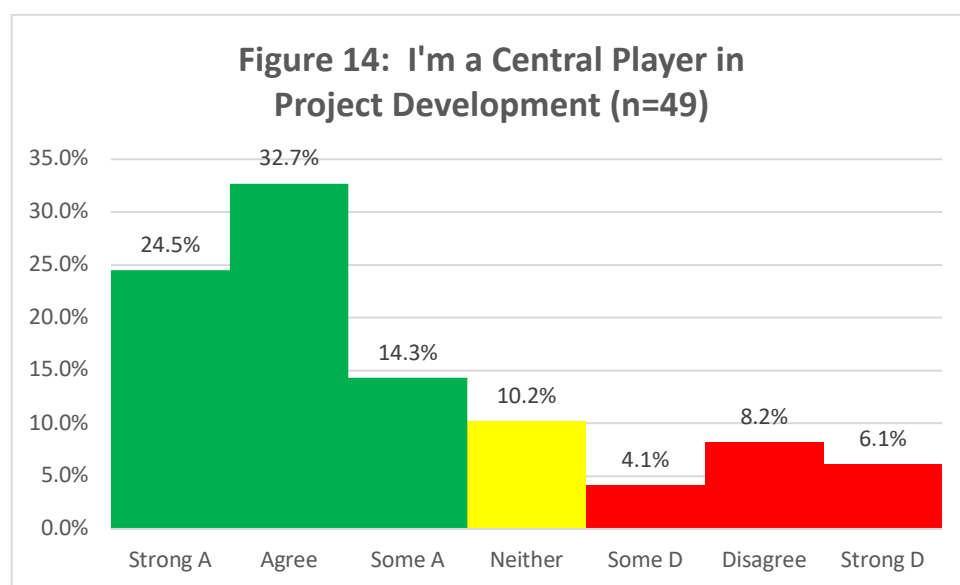
Project development is the process by which studios and networks acquire creative content and then work on these properties with their creative teams to refine them for possible production. Six of the 24 Black executives who agreed to be interviewed for this study were vice presidents who headed the development units at their respective companies. The other interviewees

²⁸ This point raises the issue of talent representation. Studies show that the largest talent agencies play a critical gatekeeping role by packaging film and television content that favors the talent already on their rosters, thereby providing this talent with a clearer path to “get[ting] in the room.” Moreover, like Hollywood’s executive suites overall, the agents and partners at the major agencies are overwhelmingly white and male (2016 Hollywood Diversity Report, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA). For a discussion of a recent initiative to diversify the pipeline for talent representation, see <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/diverse-representation-organization-launches-black-entertainment-executives-pipeline-initiative-exclusive-4100752/>.

nonetheless all described working closely with their companies' development units as part of their regular responsibilities.

As **Figure 14** shows, survey respondents generally considered themselves to have a significant impact on the development processes at their respective companies. That is, nearly three quarters of respondents (71.5 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that "I am a central player in the project development decisions at my company" (green area). This figure includes 24.5 percent of respondents who said they "strongly agree" with the statement, 32.7 percent who said they "agree," and 14.3 percent who said they "somewhat agree." By contrast, only 18.4 percent of respondents said they disagree with the statement to varying degrees (red area). Female respondents, it is worth noting, were little more likely to view themselves having an impact on the development process than male respondents.²⁹

One Black executive who headed her company's development unit explained her role in what she described as a very "fluid" and "entrepreneurial" process:



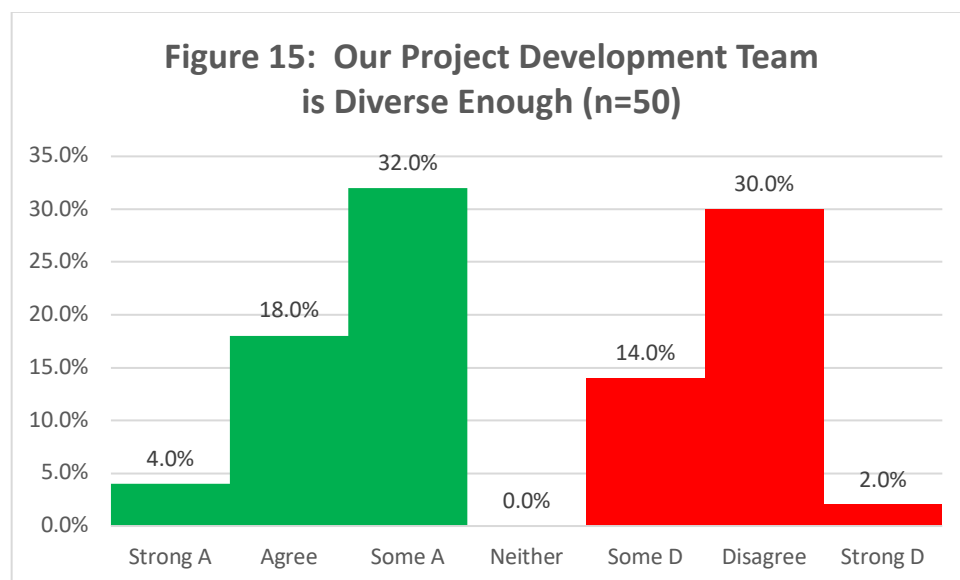
Sometimes we are sent scripts or books or foreign formats or articles from management companies and agencies. We decide if we want to option them and then we are working in lockstep with producers to find a writer and then put together a pitch and then sell it... [Sometimes] something will come in a package where there's already a writer and a director attached — that hardly ever happens...And we say that if it feels like it could be something [successful], we start developing with them...It's a very fluid system. It's very entrepreneurial.

²⁹ That is, 75.1 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees, compared to only 64.7 percent of male respondents.

A Black executive who worked in television described the basic function of the development unit she headed this way:

It's working with writers and producers with notes on the different steps and stages of getting to that first draft. And then more notes on that first draft, and subsequent drafts until we have that really strong indication that we've got a series on our hands that has legs to it.

While survey respondents generally affirmed that they play important roles in their respective companies' development processes, they were less likely to perceive their companies' development teams as diverse enough. **Figure 15** shows that the largest group of respondents (32 percent) said they only "somewhat agree" with the statement that "the project development process at my company includes the right balance of diverse voices and perspectives." The second largest group of respondents said they "disagree" with the statement (30 percent). Indeed, respondents were nearly evenly split (54 percent versus 46 percent) between varying degrees of agreement (green area) and disagreement (red area) with the statement. No respondents occupied the middle ground of "neither agree nor disagree."



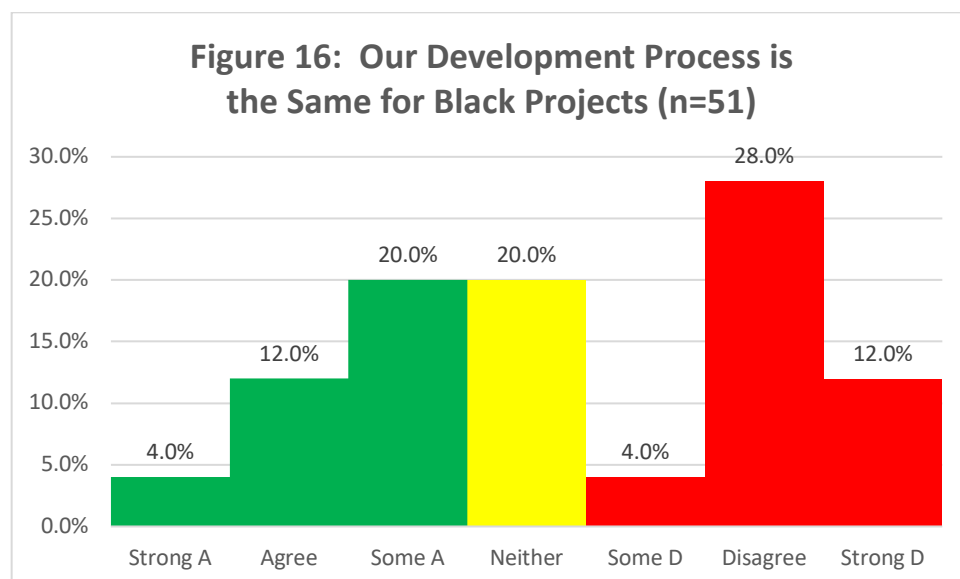
Respondents' divergent views on the diversity of their development teams are likely a product of the nature of the companies they worked for (a few worked at companies that cater primarily to Black audiences) and the degree to which they considered seniority and status in their assessments. As one Black executive noted, the development team at her company was quite diverse "boots on the ground," but not as you move up the hierarchy:

Boots on the ground, it's really diverse. I think if you look at assistants and coordinator-level folks, you know, the support staff is very diverse. As you climb that ladder — I'm a vice-president — there's not a lot of people of color. And then the higher up the worse it gets in terms of SVP, department heads, and president, and chairman.

Another Black executive concurred, and explained why it is so important to have diversity at “different levels” of the development process:

There's a paucity of diversity, particularly at the more senior levels. You know what is very clear? You need senior voices of color in the room to help advocate for projects and, actually, also help develop them with a clear authentic voice. So, it's an issue that all media companies are focused on and need to address...Whether you're junior or mid-level or senior, you play a really important role in the development process. So, having diversity at all those different levels, I think, will drive more inclusive programming, which again, is what our audience wants.

One specific issue that motivated respondents' calls for more diversity in the development process was the perception by many that the process treated Black-themed or Black-led projects unfairly. **Figure 16** shows that the largest group of respondents (28 percent) said they “disagree” with the statement that “at my company, the process for developing projects that have Black leads and/or that feature Black themes is essentially the same as the project for developing projects in general.” Meanwhile, equal shares of respondents (20 percent) either said they “somewhat agree” with the statement or that they were ambivalent on the issue. Finally, the same share of respondents said they “strongly disagree” with the statement as said they “agree” with it (12 percent).



As an example of the concerns that many respondents had for how Black projects are treated in the development process, one Black executive explained that there is “just a lot of scrutiny” that other projects do not have to endure:

I think there's just a lot of scrutiny and a lot of explaining... So, if you have a show that has a pretty diverse cast, it's like their antennas go up and it's really poured over.

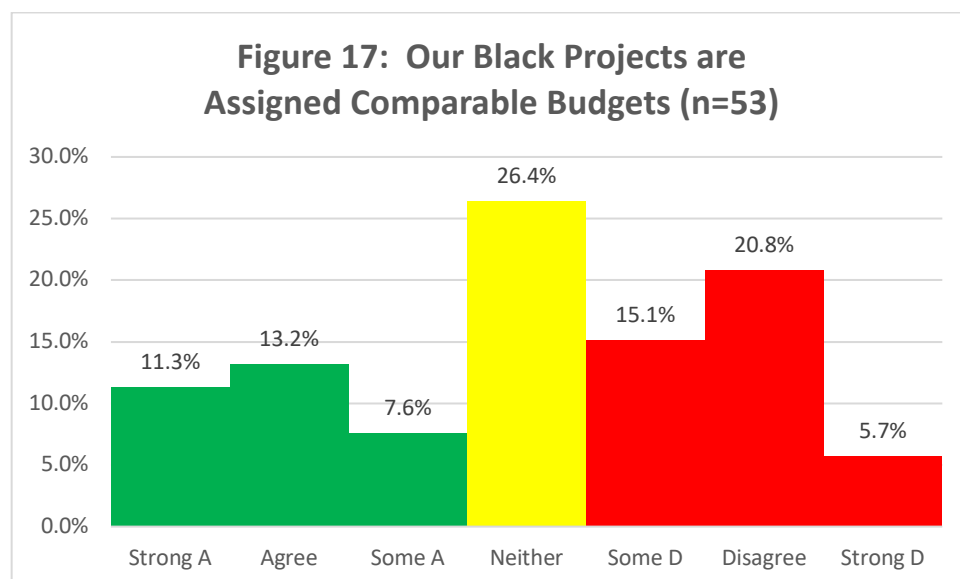
Another Black executive noted that while the process is “functionally” similar for Black projects, outcomes tend to favor certain kinds of “regrettable” and “disappointing” content:

I think the process functionally is the same...But I think that sometimes what we look for is different and sometimes regrettable. Where this has been really disappointing to me is that shows that have to do with crime have thrived.

Among those who perceived the development process as more-or-less fair for Black projects was an executive who extolled his company’s tendency to “stand back” and let projects “flow” through the process. Still, he acknowledged a common and often limiting perception that top Black talent is in relatively low supply:

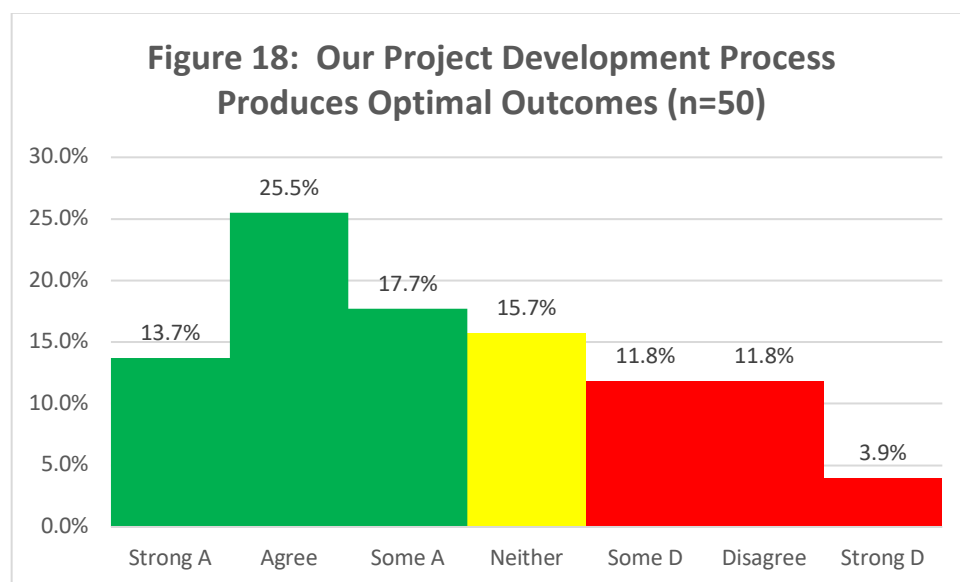
I'm sure there are differences, but once the project is in flow, we tend to stand back. You know, we do very well marketing for all of our shows. Talent-wise, we are very sensitive to pay equity as it relates to all of our talent. But I think that there's still the perception that there's a dearth of black A-list talent out there maybe. [But] I wouldn't say that. I think we treat our shows pretty similarly as it relates to that.

One of the issues this final quote invokes with its reference to pay equity is the question of whether Black projects are assigned comparable budgets. **Figure 17** shows that most



respondents were not very optimistic about the prospects of budget equity for Black projects. Nearly half of respondents (41.6 percent) disagreed to varying degrees with the statement that “the projects greenlighted at my company featuring Black leads and/or Black themes are assigned budgets comparable to those generally assigned to projects” (red area), and more than a quarter (26.4 percent) were ambivalent on the issue (yellow area). By contrast, less than a third of respondents (32.1 percent) agreed with the statement to varying degrees (green area).

Despite Black executives’ concerns about how fairly Black projects are treated in the development process, a slim majority of respondents perceived that the processes in place at their companies are nonetheless effective. **Figure 18** shows that 56.9 percent of respondents agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “the project development process at my company generally results in projects that are as good as they can be” (green area). This figure includes 13.7 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 25.5 percent who said they “agree,” and 17.7 percent who said they “somewhat” agree. A notable group of respondents (15.7 percent) were ambivalent with respect to this statement (yellow area), while just a little over a quarter (27.5 percent) disagreed with it to varying degrees (red area).



One Black executive who had the authority to oversee the development process explained how she routinely “reinforced the business case for inclusion” in her efforts to ensure that the process produced the right outcomes:

One of the things that I tell my team, I constantly reinforce the business case for inclusion. And I say, “You know what we’re trying to do is, we’re trying to develop shows that speak to our core audience but reach a much broader audience as well

because we're being more inclusive. And that means greater reach and that means greater success at a time when there are so many content choices out there.”

Indeed, the case for having a Black executive in charge of the development process was made more succinctly by another interviewee:

I'm kind of running this, so I think it's working. I think it's working pretty good.

Finally, another interviewee summed up a view expressed by several interviewees about the unique perspective and understanding Black executives can bring to the development process:

Black people, we have to know about everyone else. White people don't have to know about us, you know? That's the general rule that people that are not Black do not understand.

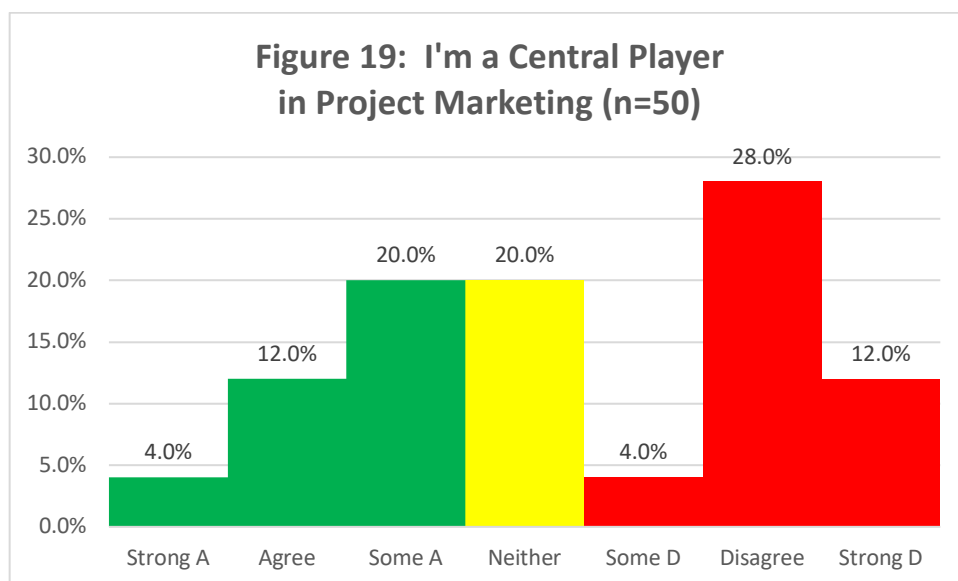
Project Marketing: Big Disconnect

Once a Hollywood television show or motion picture successfully clears greenlighting and development, marketing contributes significantly to how well it ultimately connects with audiences, as measured through ratings and box office revenue. By most indicators, Black women and men are not well represented among the ranks of Hollywood’s marketing executives.³⁰ Only four of the top 120 Black Hollywood executives identified by the NAACP had the term “marketing” in their titles (3.3 percent), though the titles of four other executives on the list included the terms “brand” or “strategy.” Moreover, none of the 24 Black executives who agreed to follow-up interviews were a part of their company’s marketing units, and nine of these executives indicated that they either played no role at all in marketing or did not know much about it.

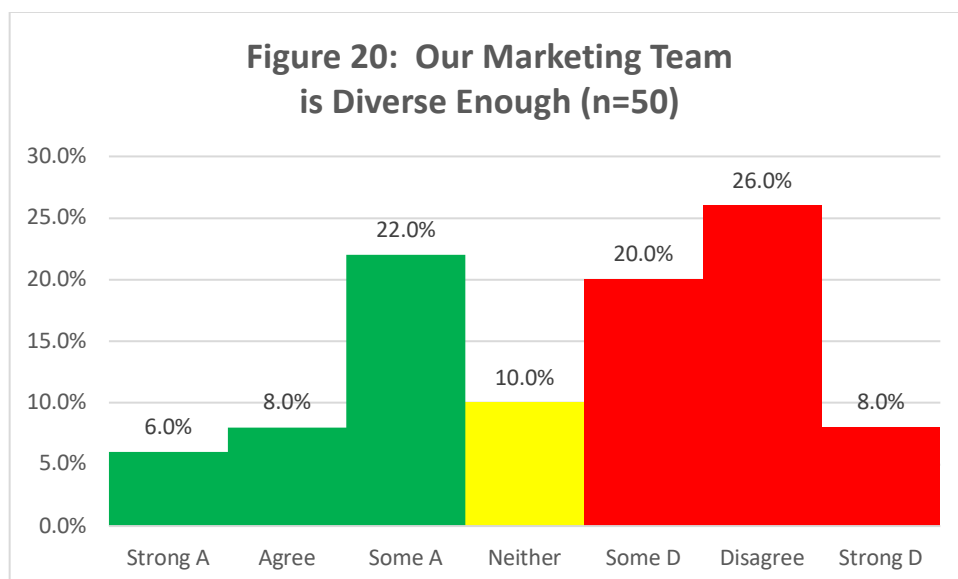
Thus, it should not be surprising that the largest share of survey respondents (28 percent) said they “disagree” with the statement that “I am a central player in marketing projects at my company” (see **Figure 19**). Another 12 percent said they “strongly disagree” with the statement, and 4 percent said they “somewhat disagree.” Meanwhile, 20 percent of respondents were ambivalent regarding the importance of their role in marketing and 20 percent said they only “somewhat agree” that they are a central player. Just 16 percent of respondents said they “agree” or “strongly agree” they play a significant role in marketing their companies’ projects.

Consistent with Black executives’ general disconnect from the marketing process, most survey respondents felt that their companies’ marketing teams lacked sufficient diversity. As **Figure 20** shows, 54 percent of survey respondents disagreed to varying degrees with the statement that

³⁰ For example, Black women and men constituted only 7.5 percent of the top marketing executives in television in film, according to data collected for UCLA’s 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report.



“the project marketing process at my company includes the right balance of diverse voices and perspectives” (red area). This figure includes 20 percent of respondents who said they “somewhat disagree” with the statement, 26 percent who said they “disagree,” and 8 percent who said they “strongly disagree.” By contrast, 22 percent of respondents said they only “somewhat agree” with the statement, while just 14 percent said they “agree” or “strongly agree.”



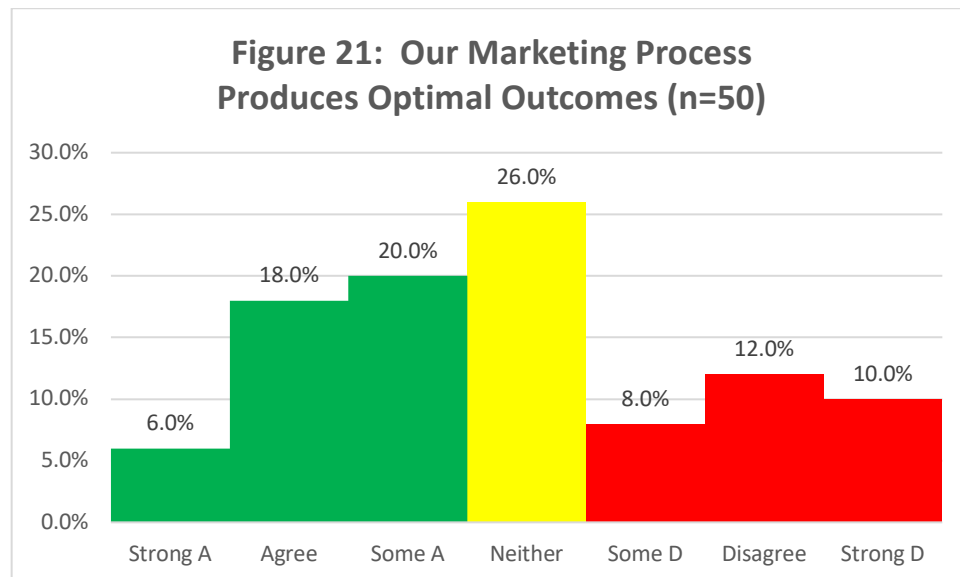
One Black executive echoed the observations of several other interviewees when she described her company’s rather large marketing team as inclusive in terms of gender but not in terms of race:

There are very few senior people of color on the marketing team. Holistically the marketing team’s probably about fifty or seventy people. There's not many people of color — and definitely more women, actually, than men — but not a lot of racial diversity.

Another Black executive explained how his company’s “huge [marketing] operation” has “run into issues” due its lack of diversity:

There's an entire marketing team. And that is going to be both indoor and outdoor marketing, and digital marketing. So, there's a huge operation. But that particular department is not an inclusive team. Therefore, they don't know normally how to market a show [to audiences of color] and that's where we run into issues.

Overall, respondents expressed mixed views regarding the effectiveness of their companies’ marketing processes. **Figure 21** shows that the largest single share of respondents (26 percent) said they “neither agree nor disagree” with the statement that “the project marketing process at my company generally results in projects receiving as much attention and consumer demand as possible” (yellow area). Meanwhile, 44 percent of respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees (green area), and 30 percent disagreed to varying degrees (red area).



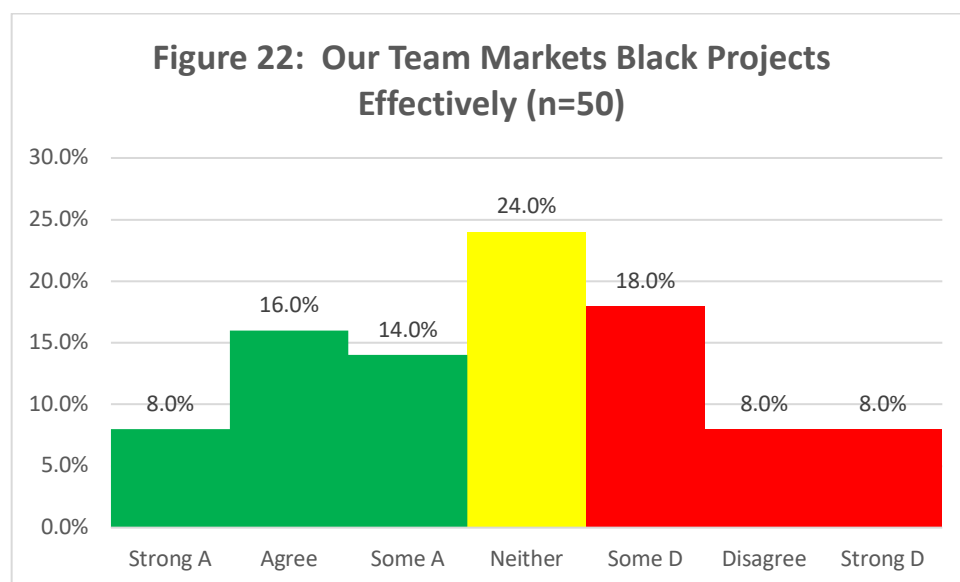
One of the Black executives who thought highly of his company’s marketing team applauded its level of commitment to fostering a heightened awareness of diversity issues throughout the marketing process:

They set up their own weekly task force to discuss issues of diversity and inclusion as it relates to marketing, and what they can do, and how they can do things that are not just related to a show, but [also how] it relates to our brand and the things that we want to bring awareness to. So, this is a victory. They want to do things of impact, and they believe that their marketing reaches people in a real way.

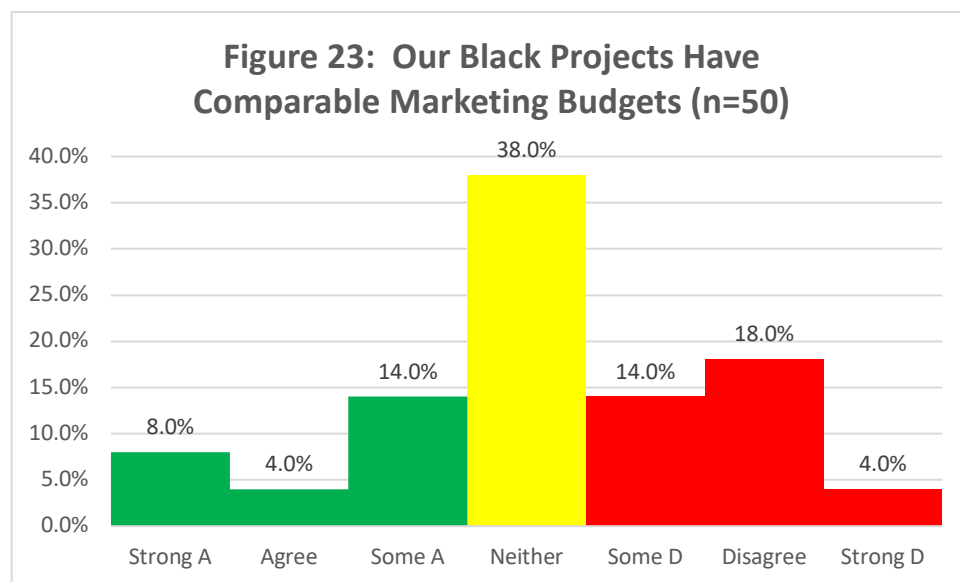
But another Black executive, who was less enthusiastic about the outcomes produced by her company’s marketing team, rooted the problem squarely in the lack of diverse talent, particularly among the executives responsible for recruiting team members:

We've all heard this: “No one's available. Can't find anyone. They don't exist.” And my biggest question back to them, that I’ve asked every recruiter is, “How do you know they're not available — they don't exist — if you don't even know where to look?”

Perhaps Black executives’ general disconnect from the marketing process also prompted survey respondents to offer mixed views regarding how well their companies’ processes serve Black projects. As **Figure 22** shows, the largest share of respondents (24 percent) said they “neither agree nor disagree” with the statement that “projects which have Black leads and/or that feature Black themes are marketed effectively by my company” (yellow area). Meanwhile, 38 percent of respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees (green area), and a comparable 34 percent of respondents disagreed to varying degrees (red area).



Survey respondents were also largely agnostic regarding whether Black projects developed by their companies were treated equitably with respect to marketing budgets. **Figure 23** shows that the largest share of respondents (38 percent) said they “neither agree nor disagree” with the statement that “projects which have Black leads and/or that feature Black themes have



marketing budgets comparable to those assigned to projects in general at my company” (yellow area). Meanwhile, 36 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement to varying degrees (red area), and just 26 percent agreed to varying degrees (green area).

One Black executive suggested that a possible, short-term solution to the diversity problem burdening Hollywood’s marketing space is for companies like hers to support outside, minority-owned agencies that otherwise “can’t scale” due to the industry’s reluctance to hire them on a regular basis:

We need to start employing more diverse-owned marketing agencies and PR agencies — and not just on movies that have people of color in them. But like on every movie, so that we're actually allowing those marketing companies to scale. Because right now, diverse-owned marketing and PR agencies can't scale because they are only hired to work on the one or two, quote-unquote, diverse titles that every studio makes.

Creative Staffing: Uneven Influence

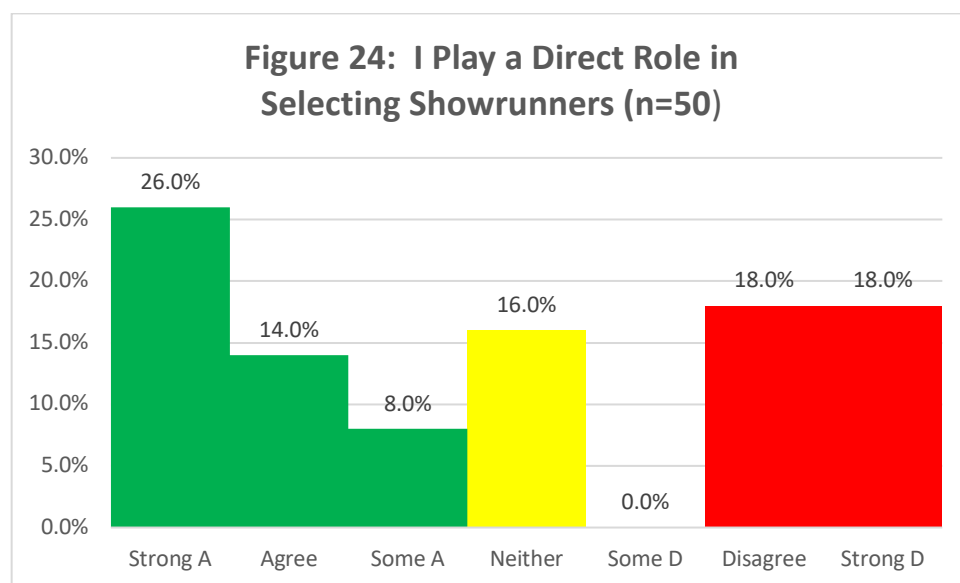
The creative staffing process varies depending upon the type of project being developed and type of company that is in control of the process. For film projects, a property often comes with a producer and writer attached, but the studio usually makes the final decision about a director. For television projects, a writer/producer (often the creator) is usually attached to the

project, but the network will have final say regarding the showrunner, and typically has influence over writers room staffing and major casting choices. In some cases, however, talent agencies bring packaged projects to studios and networks with the major above-the-line talent already attached. The process for selecting below-the-line staffing appears to be more variable. Because most of the Black Hollywood executives considered in this study work in television, their impact on the creative staffing process is more evident in this sector. One Black television executive explained the process for creative staffing at his network as a back-and-forth process with the showrunner that necessarily involves a consideration of diversity and inclusion:

There's a current executive assigned to every single show, and they work with the showrunner. And they will both go back and forth on, "Okay these are the writers that I'd like to hire. These are the directors I'd like to hire for the season." And that's the way it works. And we go back and forth, and that's when a showrunner would say, "Hey, here's a list of twelve directors," and they're all men. Then, it ain't going to happen. Then the current exec would be like, "No, that's not how it's going to work."

Meanwhile, a Black studio executive described the process for staffing motion picture projects at her studio this way:

Generally speaking, a project comes in with a producer attached almost always. So, that [staffing] is not being driven by relationships that people have with different producers that allows them to get pitches. Sometimes [the project] comes in with a writer, and usually then it's a writer that the producer attached. But if it needs a rewrite, the development team will decide and hire a new writer. And then the studio's always the one that attaches the director, unless in the rare case of a project that comes in with a director. But that only really works or happens for directors that are already of note,



you know, that have name recognition. So, generally how they're attaching directors to projects is [the studio] is talking to agents about what they have available.

Figure 24 shows that nearly half of all respondents (48 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I play a direct role in selecting showrunners for my company’s television shows” (green area). This figure includes 26 percent who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 14 percent who said they “agree,” and 8 percent who said they “somewhat agree.” It is worth noting that female respondents were more likely than male respondents to view themselves as having significant influence over the hiring of showrunners.³¹

One Black executive who has influence over the selection of showrunners spoke of her network’s “concerted effort” to hire diverse showrunners, despite the obstacles that experience and financial considerations often present:

[W]e are making a concerted effort. If it is diverse subject matter, we're specifically looking for diverse talent to helm it in the showrunner space. There are not a lot [of diverse candidates] because there are not a lot of opportunities that have been given in the past. So, we're making a concerted effort, but that can be very difficult when you're spending, you know, six to ten million dollars on an episode and you're going to entrust it to a first-time director or first-time showrunner. And that I think is the is the real hurdle.

Similarly, the Black executives in this study also report being engaged in the all-important process of writers room staffing. **Figure 25** shows that half of all respondents agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I play a direct role in approving staff writers for my company’s television shows” (green area). This figure includes 20 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 16 percent who said they “agree,” and 14 percent who said they “somewhat agree.” By contrast, a little over a third of respondents (34 percent) disagreed with the statement to varying degrees (red area). As was the case with the selection of showrunners, female respondents were a little more likely than male respondents to report that they had influence over staff writer selection.³²

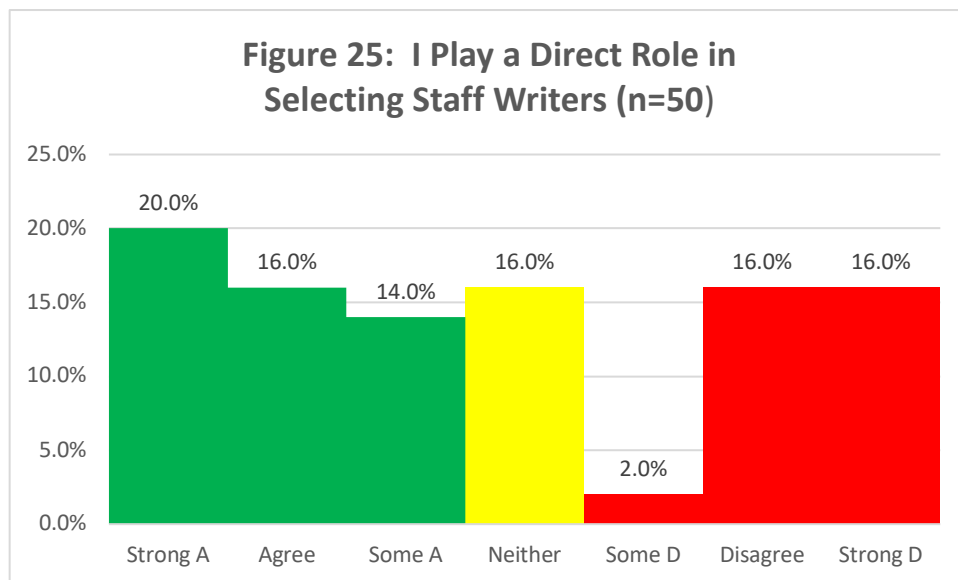
A Black executive who reported having considerable influence over the selection of staff writers explained how the process goes through her, even as her network strives to empower a show’s creator:

So, it's generally through me in terms of our showrunners and writers. And, you know, we try to empower the creator. But once you get into the production staff, that goes

³¹ That is, 54.6 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees, compared to only 35.4 percent of male respondents.

³² That is, 54.5 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees, compared to only 41.2 percent of male respondents.

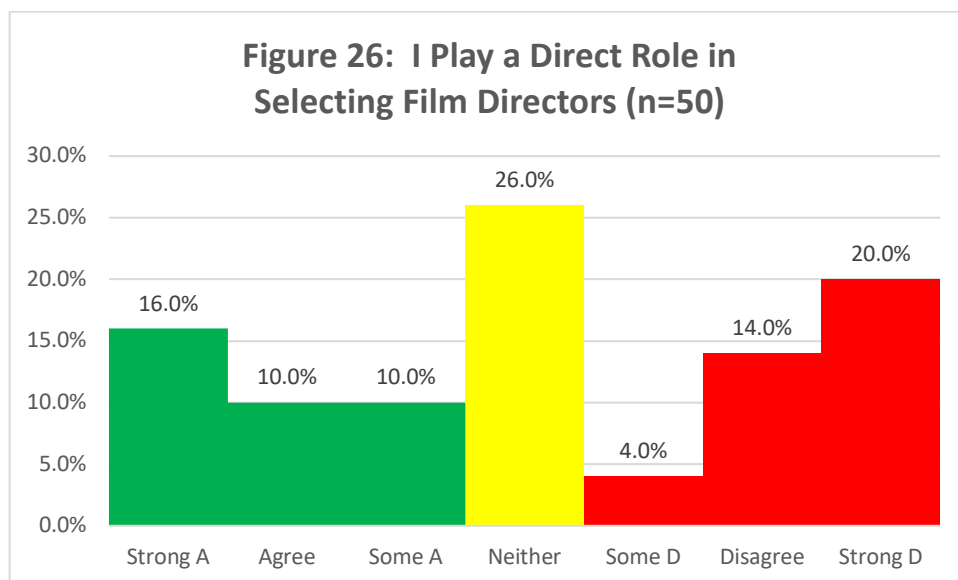
through our production department. So, I guess maybe you can see that above-the-line stuff is more sitting with me.



Among the smaller group of respondents who felt they had little influence over the selection of staff writers was a Black executive who described the process at her network this way:

The showrunners for my shows are usually the creator of the show. So, that part of it is not really chosen, and then it just trickles down from there and people usually just hire their friends. So, if the person that is hiring doesn't have a diverse friend group, then the production is not going to be very diverse, because it's really about..."I want to work with who I worked with before, or who my friend is." That's usually how it's done. And then a lot of people end up on a production. They don't actually know how to do the job. They're just friends with that person.

Compared to their influence over the selection of showrunners and staff writers, the Black executives in this study were less likely to report that they had substantial influence over the selection of film directors. **Figure 26** shows that just a little more than a third of all survey respondents (36 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that "I play a direct role



in selecting directors for my company's theatrical films" (green area). Female respondents, it should be noted, were a little more likely than male respondents to view themselves as having influence over the process.³³

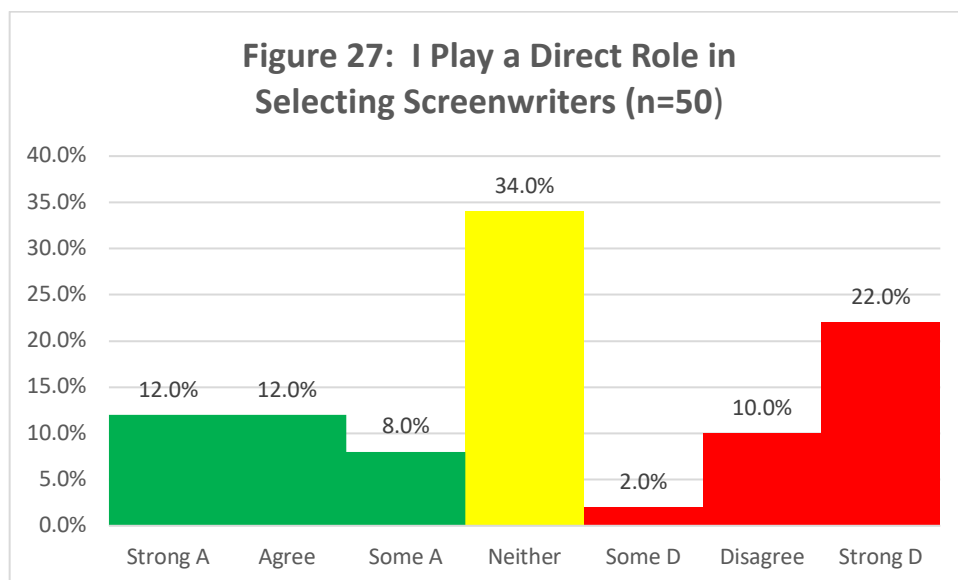
One Black film executive described how people of color typically have little influence over the selection of directors at her studio:

[There are] maybe three people of color out of the twelve or so that are in that team. And the people of color are more junior, so they are usually not the ones making the decision. Usually, it comes down to the heads of development, which are two white people, or our chairman.

No doubt a function of both the concentration of Black Hollywood executives in television and the fact that many film properties arrive with a writer attached, relatively few respondents also reported having much say in the selection of screenwriters. **Figure 27** shows that less than a third of all respondents (32 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that "I play a direct role in selecting screenwriters for my company's films" (green area). This figure includes 12 percent of respondents who said they "strongly agree" with the statement, 12 percent who said they "agree," and 8 percent who said they "somewhat agree." Again, female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to report having influence over the process.³⁴

³³ That is, 39.4 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees, compared to just 29.4 percent of male respondents.

³⁴ That is, 39.4 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement to varying degrees, compared to just 17.6 percent of male respondents.



A Black studio executive who stood out as one of the few respondents with influence over the selection of screenwriters, described how the “needs” of his projects and diverse staffing are interconnected:

It's such an individual thing. Because it's like, do I like this piece of content? If I do, I'm going to buy it. Now, I'm going to try and staff it in the way that I think it needs to be staffed. And I look at my slate — It is diverse because that is the goal of my slate.

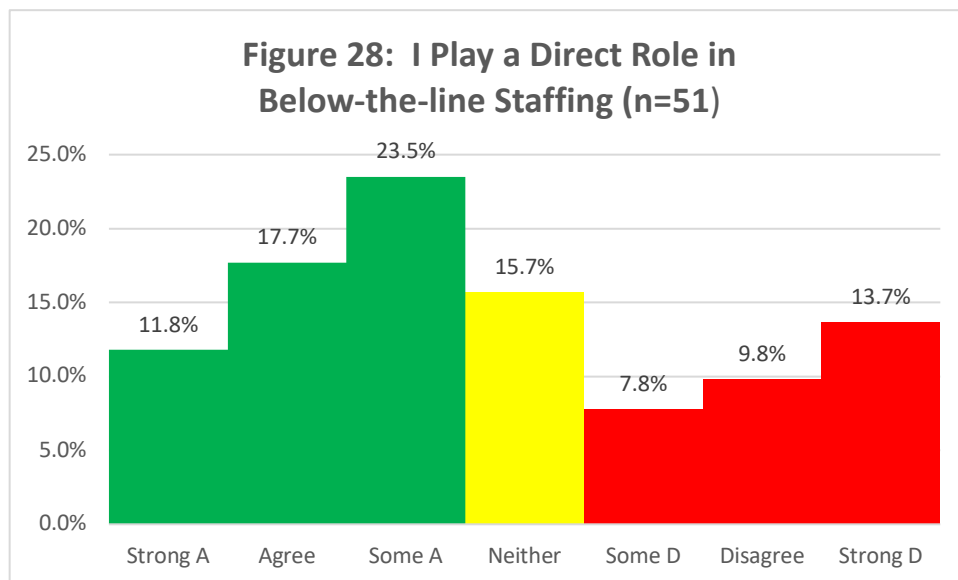
The area of creative staffing where Black executives reported having the most influence is in below-the-line staffing. **Figure 28** shows that more than half of all respondents (53 percent) agreed to varying degrees with the statement that “I play a direct role in below-the-line staffing decisions for my company’s projects” (green area). This figure includes 11.8 percent of respondents who said they “strongly agree” with the statement, 17.7 percent who said they “agree,” and nearly a quarter (23.5 percent) who said they “somewhat agree.” These findings are interesting because evidence suggests that below-the-line staffing is one of the most problematic areas with respect to diversity and inclusion in the Hollywood industry³⁵ — likely even more problematic than above-the-line staffing. Perhaps the recent focus on inclusion riders³⁶ has sensitized some studios, networks and production companies to the need, as one Black studio executive put it, for more “staffing on the ground:”

Some of our films have inclusion riders. We are more conscious of hiring, you know — not just writers and directors — but staffing on the ground.

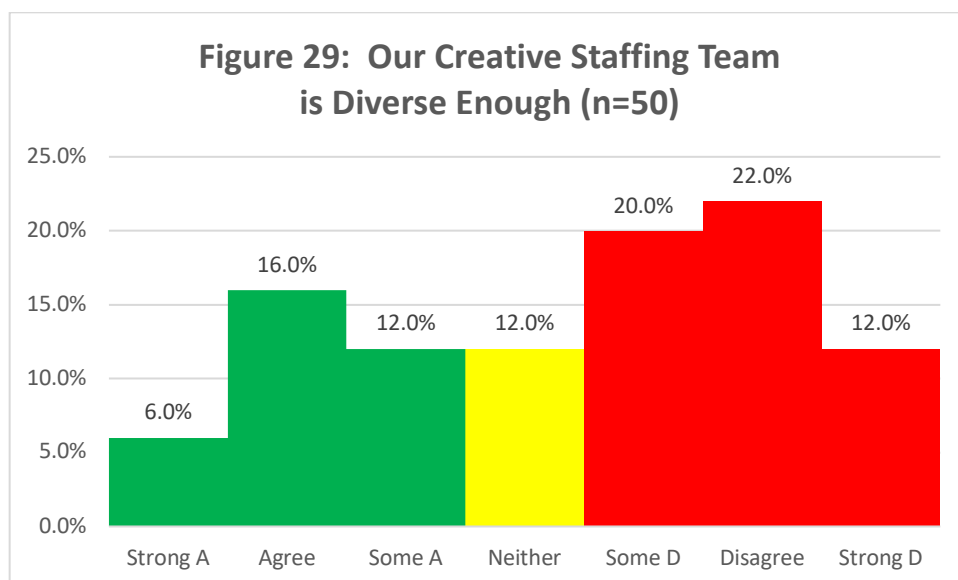
³⁵ See <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/hollywood-unions-guilds-diversity-study-1235024254/>.

³⁶ For example, see <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/amc-studios-new-inclusion-rider-endeavor-content-change-hollywood-4174246/>.

There were no apparent gender differences with respect to how respondents viewed their influence over below-the-line staffing.



Despite the influence Black executives reported having over creative staffing decisions in television and in below-the-line talent, most respondents felt that their companies' creative staffing teams generally suffered from a lack of diversity. **Figure 29** shows that 54 percent of respondents disagreed to varying degrees with the statement that "the team of people at my



company responsible for creative staffing decisions is appropriately diverse and inclusive” (red area). This figure includes 20 percent of respondents who said they “somewhat disagree” with the statement, 22 percent who said they “disagree,” and 12 percent who said they “strongly disagree.” By contrast, only about third of respondents (34 percent) agreed with the statement to varying degrees (green area).

One Black studio executive described the costs associated with creative staffing teams that are lacking in diversity:

We constantly default to a list of mostly the same white and/or male directors and writers, with few exceptions. And the conversation is always around, “We would love to give someone an opportunity, but this is a really expensive budget and we need to go with someone who's tried and true.” The few diverse names on the list are not available or, “And so we tried.” But we're still, you know, not getting it. Or we went out to diverse names and they're not interested because it is a script that's basically white, with mostly white people in it. That's not necessarily going to be the most attractive thing for those [diverse] directors and producers or writers to attach to. So, you end up in like a vicious cycle.

Another Black executive described a similar process at her network, where a lack of diversity among the ultimate decision makers “trickles down throughout the room” to result in staffing that is not as inclusive as it should be:

The people who ultimately call the shots are white. But I think other people do have agency in the process. And I think their voices are heard, but the heads of the groups are white...I think that kind of trickles down throughout the room. Everybody wants consensus, but the people that call the shots are white.

Among respondents who were more positive about their companies’ creative staffing processes was a Black television executive who had the authority to establish “directional targets” regarding diversity and inclusion and to hold other decision makers accountable:

When I started here, I laid out targets very quickly for writers rooms, hitting, you know, 40 percent representation by next season, getting 50 percent by the following season. So, I’m setting those directional targets to sort of refocus, so that showrunners know what's expected of them coming into the process. So, I think part of how you drive this is through accountability and, you know, intentionality. And I think you got to figure out the right way to do it because it's not about creating quotas. It’s about saying that your writers room should reflect your audience. So, here's what we want you to get to. And if you can't get there, you got to have a really strong reason why, and a path forward to get there in a reasonable timeline.

Conclusion: What They Do for Hollywood

The Black Hollywood executives considered in this study represent a special brain trust. They are representatives of a slightly larger group of Black executives who have worked hard over the years to rise in the ranks of an industry that continues to marginalize decision makers of color. Their decades of experience provide them with a nuanced understanding of how the industry works, which they employ on a day-to-day basis to navigate around the obstacles Hollywood business-as-usual puts in the way of creating the content that diverse audiences demand. They create incalculable value for Hollywood.

This study has documented the many ways in which Black executives — despite their underrepresentation in Hollywood’s executive suites — make a difference. Interviewees described in detail how their interventions in the greenlighting process have a meaningful impact, even though they are rarely the final decider. These accounts included compelling examples of how Black executives sometimes breathe new life into the prospects for promising, diverse projects, or put the brakes on problematic projects whose shortcomings are often invisible to other executives. Interviewees also explained how Black executives bring a unique perspective to the project development process. Black executives often serve as cultural ambassadors ideally positioned to read projects from multiple standpoints, thereby increasing the likelihood that the final product will successfully connect with larger, diverse audiences. But interviewees also described industry marketing processes as a big disconnect where Black influence is concerned, despite the insights that additional Black decision makers could bring to the table. And though Hollywood has miles to go before creative staffing behind the camera looks anything like America, the situation would be considerably worse were it not for the uneven influence over the process many interviewees exert.

This study also has found evidence of what may be gender differences in the impact Black executives have on the greenlighting, development, and creative staffing processes. Though male respondents were slightly more likely to report positive views about work climate, their female counterparts perceived themselves to have relatively more influence over decision making in key industry-defining areas. Of course, these perceptions are consistent with the fact that both the population of Black Hollywood executives identified for this study and the subset of actual survey respondents were nearly two-to-one female. To the (marginal) extent that Hollywood has incorporated Black talent into its executive suites, it appears to have had a harder time doing so with Black male talent.

Blackness is not a monolithic experience. But all Black people — regardless of gender, sexual orientation, economic status, generation, or political persuasion — must engage, at least to some degree, with the challenges of being Black in America. On one end of the continuum are the possibilities for life-ending encounters of the kind that befell George Floyd, simply because he occupied a Black body that our society still codes as a threat. On the other end of the continuum are the micro-aggressions³⁷ (micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations)

³⁷ See <https://hbr.org/2020/07/when-and-how-to-respond-to-microaggressions#>.

that even the most accomplished Black people who in work white-dominated spaces endure from time to time.

The Black executives in this study have developed a useful toolkit for surviving the risks of the continuum. This toolkit is born of the “double-consciousness” most perfectly articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois over a century ago:

One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁸

The “twoness” Du Bois famously describes, for example, has driven successful Black Hollywood executives to become masters of code-switching. This transferrable skill allows them to comfortably mix it up in the workplace with colleagues from a limitless range of backgrounds, without losing the ability to connect in meaningful ways with their own cultures as Black people. As such, Black executives are uniquely positioned to bring important perspectives to the executive suite that can effectively balance Hollywood’s tendency to revert to business as usual regarding the types of projects deemed “bankable.”³⁹ They are able to frame a more inclusive vision of excellence and quality, which can open new pathways for storytelling that have yet to be mapped because of Hollywood’s resistance to empowering decision makers of color. For an industry whose market is diversifying at a dizzying rate, this ability is an indispensable asset.

Meanwhile, the challenges associated with being Black in America regularly remind Black Hollywood executives of their shared humanity with other marginalized peoples. As one interviewee put it, “we have to know about everyone else.” The resulting sensitivities Black executives bring to the room because of this empathy, when appreciated, can greatly help their companies stay out of trouble by avoiding offensive stereotypes and dehumanizing tropes. Again, this special contribution provides considerable value in a 21st century world.

As discussed above, Hollywood has made unprecedented progress in on-screen diversity in recent years. The accounts Black executives shared in this study illustrate many of the ways they have served as change agents helping to move things along. The pace of demographic change in America and resulting market realities suggest that the changes we have seen so far must be just the beginning if the industry is to truly flourish going forward. But those changes can only be sustained, in the long run, by an industry eco-system that is structured to empower decision makers from diverse perspectives to make the right decisions. In short, Hollywood’s executive suites must be remade in the image of America’s rich diversity. One Black executive embodied this truth with his reflection on the important role he plays in his company:

³⁸ Du Bois, W.E.B., 2014 (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

³⁹ For a discussion of how assumptions about what is “bankable” handicaps Black-led and themed projects, see Erigha, Maryann, 2019. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. New York: NYU Press.

[Diversity] is very much a business matter to us — as much as it is, you know, a matter of social import. So, we're taking this very much in terms of key performance indicators as well. That's partly why I'm in this role, to kind of make this happen.