

Part I: Preliminary Information

Title: Producing Diversity: Transforming the Image of African Americans in Television Programming

Names:

Abstract: Existing research shows that negative representations of African Americans have tangible effects that create stigma and institutionalized discrimination against African Americans. This project aims to address this issue by performing a content analysis that examines African American representations in the popular programs of third party subscription services, and a series of focus groups featuring African American Elon students. After determining the ways that African Americans are being misrepresented overall, transformational leadership theory and knowledge gained from media conferences will be used to create content that challenges African American misrepresentations in an effort to eradicate African American stereotypes, and create a movement that encourages media diversity.

Part II: Problem Description and Personal Statement

1. Problem Description

“Unarmed Black Teen Shot in the Chest in Front of His Mother.” “NYPD Slays Unarmed Black Teen.” “Missouri Police Shooting of Unarmed Black Teen Sparks Days of Protest.” Headlines like these have become far too common in the last five years. These headlines may be dismissed as isolated incidents as they scroll across television screens, but the list is much longer: Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, Kendrec McDade, Timothy Stansbury Jr., Sean Bell, Orlando Barlow, Aaron Campbell, Steven Washington, Ronald Madison, James Brissette, Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, John Crawford and Travares McGill. Each name represents an African American person murdered by police, security guards, or neighborhood watchmen around the country. Together, they are evidence of a culture that systematically devalues the lives of African Americans. The loss of these lives has awakened protesters around the country. Communities are demanding accountability, politicians are advocating gun reform, and citizens are crying out against militarization of local police forces. However, there is a larger problem that is not being addressed: media misrepresentation of African Americans.

For decades, African Americans have been depicted negatively in popular media (Drummond, W. J., 1990). A 2000 study found that African Americans were portrayed negatively more than any other ethnicity in prime time television. They were most often depicted as lazy, least respected, and provocatively dressed (Mastro and Greenberg, 2000). African American men have been stereotyped as violent and impulsive sexual predators (Watson and Elwood, 2009). African Americans are portrayed negatively not only in reality TV and scripted television shows, but in news outlets as well. They are more consistently shown as being poorly dressed and being restrained by figures of authority (Entman, 1992). Overall, media outlets create a narrative that displays African Americans as lazy, violent individuals who are prone to crime (Entman, R.M., 1990). Despite the inaccuracies of these stereotypes, prolonged exposure to them can create an environment that perpetuates them (Entman and Gross, 2008). Media misrepresentation has been shown to cause cultural stigma, and is actually capable of causing members of stereotyped groups to model behavior that was not originally present (Dong & Murrillo, 2007).

According to communications researcher, George Gerbner’s cultivation theory, “The more time people spend ‘living’ in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television (Gerbner, 2000).” Americans watch over 250 billion hours of television annually, and over 99% of households in America have at least one television. (A.C. Nielsen Co). Therefore, it stands to reason that when the mass media portrays people of color as derelict, sub-

human, violent, and criminal, consumers of that media believe such depictions, resulting in negative treatment of African Americans. These beliefs are even more significant in areas where direct interaction with African Americans is lacking (Fujioka, 1999).

There is extensive documentation of the effects of misrepresentation of African Americans. Research shows that the distorted portrayals of African Americans found in the media cause general antagonism toward African American males, lack of identification or sympathy with African Americans, and exaggerated views related to criminality and violence in the African American community (Kang, 2005; Ramasubramanian, 2011; Entman & Gross, 2008). According to a 2000 study published in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, regardless of conscious reports about racial attitudes, whites were shown to have increased activity in the regions of their brain associated with experiencing fear when they saw unfamiliar African Americans. (Phelps et al, 2000) A 2014 study determined that United States citizens support harsher laws if those laws are advertised to imprison more African Americans (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014).

These negative effects translate into institutional consequences. (Dong & Murrillo, 2007). Media misrepresentation has been linked to African Americans receiving less attention from doctors, harsher sentencing by judges (Rachlinski et al., 2009), lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, shorter life expectancy (Entman, 2006), lower odds of getting loans, and higher likelihood of being shot by police (Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

These portrayals also cause African Americans to have reduced self-esteem (Tan & Tan, 1979), low expectations for themselves (Martin, 2008), and implicit bias against members of their own race (Schmader et al., 2008). It has also been proven to increase domestic abuse rates of African American women (Gillum, 2002), and cause African American men to underachieve on standardized tests and in job interviews (Schmader et al., 2008).

There is not a clear solution to media misrepresentation. Though current research on African Americans and media representations is informative, there is still a gap in information. After their study in 2000, communications researchers Dana Mastro and Bradley Greenberg suggested that immediate work be undertaken in order to address representation issues. (Mastro and Greenberg, 2000) However, according to a replication of that study performed 10 years later, African Americans are still being misrepresented and negatively stereotyped in the same ways. (Turner, et.al, 2010). There is also a lack of research that reflects the new ways that consumers are presently viewing media, and that research fails to address the programming presented by third party subscription services consumers are using to access their media like Netflix. Despite extensive documentation of negative effects, no research offers a clear in depth solution. Based on aforementioned data, I believe that the solution must involve media literacy, an increase in diverse African American perspectives, and explanations of underlying social constructs that lead to media misrepresentation in the first place.

In 2012, when speaking about the effects of the media on African American perceptions, communications analyst Darron Smith said:

“The social control and physical discipline of Black males in contemporary U.S. prisons, public schools, and other social institutions is a reality made possible through the language and reasoning of pseudoscientific theories of race and masculinity perpetuated through mass media.”

This project seeks to gain a greater understanding of media misrepresentation in a modern context, and implement a solution that will be effective not only on Elon’s campus, but around the country.

2. **Personal Background and Motivation:**

During my first year at Elon, I volunteered at Harvey R. Newlin Elementary School, where I met an African American fourth grader named Nazir. Whenever we spoke he loved to tell me about the main characters and plots of all of his favorite television shows. Halloween was approaching, and when asked if he would be dressing like his favorite hero, he told me. "I can't, I don't look like them. I'm going to dress as CJ from Grand Theft Auto." I was surprised; a child that spoke with excitement about superheroes and helping people felt he was forced to dress like a felon. Due to the misrepresentation of African American males in the media he saw, he didn't think he was capable of being a hero. He felt that his skin color not only disqualified him from being a hero, but automatically made him a criminal. My interaction with Nazir made me think of the media in an entirely new way because when I looked at him, I didn't just see a little boy, I saw an entire generation; I saw myself. Youth like Nazir are why media misrepresentation of African Americans is so important to me.

I feel that I'm qualified to work toward a solution to this problem because I am experienced in leadership, media, and African American art. For four years I traveled around the United States with the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta, a performing arts group focused on creating content to address issues in the African American community. During my time with the ensemble I wrote art pieces that chronicled the African American experience and performed in local theaters, sports arenas, and at charity events. During my senior year of high school, I led a campaign that raised over \$100,000 to keep my high school open. I have seen firsthand the positivity that can be created with passionate leadership and creativity.

When I arrived at Elon I declared a double major in acting and strategic communications with the intention of continuing to use media and the arts to make a positive change in my community. During my time at Elon, I have researched underrepresentation of females in children's cartoons, used media literacy techniques to analyze the effects of television shows, and studied effects the media has on establishing cultural norms. I have led as director of public relations for four organizations on campus, and worked as head producer and director of my own original content.

My experience in the performing arts and communications has given me a strong work ethic, and the ability to solve problems creatively. I am passionate about leading the fight against misrepresentation of African Americans because I see its effects not only in television and children, but firsthand on Elon's campus. I see the effects of misrepresentation when students cross the street when they see me at night. I see them when female students clutch their purses as I walk past them. I see them when I enter Elon buildings and I am questioned about my status as a student of the university. I saw them when I was called a "Nigger" on move-in day my freshman year.

The consequences of media misrepresentation are real and severe. However, they are not unstoppable. The Leadership Prize would allow me to use primary and secondary research to form creative solutions that challenge and change the traditional narrative that is presented in popular culture, proving to Nazir that all of us can be heroes.

Part III: Plan for Intellectual Inquiry

A. Researching the nature causes, and consequences of the problem

In order to create a solution that adequately addresses media misrepresentation of African Americans, I must know specifically how they are being misrepresented in a modern context. Recent research has analyzed the images presented in news broadcasts, reality shows, and prime time television. However, it has neglected to evaluate the images presented in new places consumers are finding their media. Services such as On Demand, Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBOGo are attracting viewers due to their convenience and large variety of content. In order

to understand what images are being perpetuated by these media channels, I will use the knowledge from my Strategic Research Methods class to perform a content analysis of their most popular programs. Following my content analysis, I will conduct focus groups with African American Elon students to understand their perspectives and their experiences on campus. By triangulating the results of my content analysis and focus group with secondary research, I will have a clearer understanding of the impact of the media images being presented. With this information I am confident I will be able to create a potent solution.

The results of my research will inform the solutions that I will create; therefore I cannot declare exactly what they will be. However, based on the research that I've done thus far, I know that my solutions should include writing, producing, and filming content that combats the stereotypes. The form of this content, the messages that it communicates, and its subject matter will all be directly influenced by my research. I have written and produced my own content before, so I am certain that I will be able to complete this process. However, in order to learn more about creating diverse content there are various conferences I plan to attend:

- **The Urban World Film Festival:** The Urban World Film Festival is the largest competitive festival for African American film in the world. In order to advance diversity in the film community, it offers film screenings, panels led by successful African American film makers, and opportunities for aspiring screenwriters and students to network and connect with industry executives. Attending this conference would allow me to learn more about the content production process, and gain helpful information for trying to circulate content as an African American.
- **SXSW:** SXSW (South by Southwest) is the leading exhibition for ideas and visionary film makers. They offer panels on film making, digital branding, business establishment, and content promotion. Attending this event would allow me to connect with other leaders in the field, and ensure that the solution I implement remains on the cutting edge of the industry.
- **The American Black Film Festival:** The American Black Film Festival is an annual event dedicated to celebrating African American achievement in media, and provides master classes on subjects ranging from acting, to television writing, to production pitfalls. Attending the ABFF would give me the opportunity to learn firsthand from a plethora of industry professionals about the difficulties with producing media content and the specific issues that African Americans face.

In addition to attending conferences, I also plan to familiarize myself with literature about African American film making and artistic entrepreneurship. The book, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, written by Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson, will be my essential reference. In the text, he discusses the importance of African American artists and the influence that art can make in American culture. Before his death in 2005, Wilson was a leader and trailblazer for African American artists. Learning his personal insights and ideology would give me a great amount of wisdom for developing my solution.

The possibilities for solutions to this issue are endless. It could take the form of a short film, a web series, or a public service announcement campaign. I could partner with the Multicultural Center to hold a series of seminars about diversity and media literacy. I could partner with The School of Communications to hold film screenings and discussions. If my research yields that African Americans need outlets to express their perspectives, my solution could be founding an organization that gives minority students on campus a place to create content that expresses their culture. My research will give me the proper foundation for solution development, and my attendance and involvement in film maker conferences will allow me to establish relationships with industry professionals and help me create a compelling solution. In addition, my experiences

as an actor and a writer have given me creativity to address the problem in a way that nobody has before. Through a combination of these experiences, I am confident that my solution will have a positive and significant impact.

B. Researching the ways leadership theories and examples inform solution implementation.

The inclusion of content produced by and featuring African Americans will create more diverse and accurate portrayals, and combat the negative effects of media misrepresentation. Though I can't accomplish this task by myself, I can be the individual who starts the movement, the ripple that starts the wave, the leader that sets the standard for everyone to follow.

In 1985, researcher Bernard M. Bass introduced the theory of transformational leadership, an approach in which a leader inspires change in individuals and social systems. With passion, hard work, and dedication, a transformational leader serves as a role model that inspires and motivates followers to work toward a universal vision. In its ideal form, transformational leadership encourages followers to join a movement, and eventually become leaders themselves, who will, in turn, inspire more followers to join the movement. Due to its ability to attract followers, its ability to change social systems and its compatibility with my leadership style, transformational leadership will be essential in the formation and implementation of my solution. In order to increase my leadership understanding and capabilities, I plan to read the following books:

- *Transformational Leadership* by Bernard M. Bass: This book was written by the researcher who developed transformational leadership theory. It discusses transformational leadership tactics, and uses research to provide empirical evidence on how to successfully be a transformational leader.
- *Uprising: How to Build a Brand and Change the World by Sparking Cultural Movements* by Scott Goodson: This book was written by the founder of a global marketing firm, and focuses on the use of creativity to influence people and create movements. It examines leadership from a marketing perspective, and explains effective methods for innovation and challenging the status quo.

Those seeking to fight African American misrepresentation have often had a difficult time gaining financial backing. Though African American content creators such as Shonda Rhimes and Tyler Perry have found success in gaining support, they are rare cases and not the norm. Even acclaimed director Spike Lee was forced to use the crowdsourcing platform Kickstarter to raise a budget for his most recent film. The media industry is suffering from a lack of diversity due to a lack of supporters. Through The Leadership Prize, I am confident that Elon would be my first supporter. With the support of the university, I am certain that I will be able to use research and leadership theory to promote great social change, and remedy the effects of misrepresentation.

Part IV: Feasibility, Budget and Timeline

Feasibility Statement

My project is a perfect combination of ambition and feasibility. The resources that I plan to use are within the range of the \$10,000 the prize offers, and the 1.5 year timeframe that the prize requires. Of course the overall problem of media misrepresentation of African Americans is not one that can be solved solely within the timeframe of the project. However, it is a sufficient period of time for my solution to be created and take effect on Elon's campus. In the media industry, things move quickly, and once my content is created, it will be easily distributable through both professional outlets such as film festivals, media conferences, and research presentations, as well as casual outlets like YouTube and social media.

The content analysis will have no cost other than the cost to legally view the programming I plan to analyze. The conferences that I would like to attend have varied cost for admission, airfare, and lodging. The American Black Film Festival has an estimated cost of \$1,248, The Urban World Film Festival has an estimated cost of \$1,400, and The SXSW Film Conference has an estimated cost of \$1,700. The books I will purchase have a cumulative cost of about \$125. With a cumulative expense of approximately \$4,473, there would be over \$5,000 left for me to put toward my solution. This amount gives me great flexibility in my solution implementation. I could realistically purchase an appropriate camera, lenses, lights, or any other equipment needed to film content. Elon also offers a wealth of filmmaking resources through the School of Communications and Elon Student Television. Though I cannot calculate the cost of the additional supplies and production cost, I am sure that the \$5,527 left in the prize and the existing resources at Elon will be sufficient for my solution implementation.

The 1.5 year timeframe that the Leadership Prize offers would be sufficient for my research and solution implementation. Of the three conferences I would like to attend, one takes place in the summer, one takes place in the fall, and one takes place in the spring, so there would not be an issue with multiple absences from classes. If I am awarded The Leadership Prize, I plan to conduct my primary research the following winter term. This way, I will have my research results very early in the process, and have a sizeable amount of time to produce content, and take any other sort of action based on what my research says is appropriate.

Proposed Budget

Books

Transformational Leadership	\$96.07
Uprising	\$18.85
The Ground on Which I Stand	\$8.96

Equipment (Tentative)

DSLR Camera	\$3,399.00
Class 10 Memory Card	\$29.99
Camera Battery	\$99.99
Canon EF 50mm f/1.8 II Camera Lens	\$125.00
Tripod	\$500

Conferences

American Black Film Festival

○ Conference Membership	\$550
○ Hotel	\$279
○ Round Trip ticket to New York City	\$290

SXSW

○ Conference Membership	\$525
○ Hotel: \$139 a night for 6 nights	
○ Round trip ticket to Austin, TX	\$300

Urban World Film Festival

- Conference Membership \$400
- Hotel: \$279 a night for 2 nights
- Round Trip ticket to New York City \$290

Timeline

Time	Action
January 2015	Gather Research
February 2015	Analyze research. Create potential solution options and solution implementation plans.
March 2015	Finalize solution and solution implementation plan
April-May 2015	Write, edit, and finalize content that will be produced as a part of solution
June 2015	Attend American Black Film Festival
July 2015	Perform casting, secure filming locations, finalize all production logistics for content
August 2015	Begin implementation of solution, begin filming
September 2015	Attend Urban World Film Festival
October 2015	Complete filming of content
November 2015	Begin distributing of content to relevant groups
March 2016	Share work with filmmakers and entrepreneurs at SXSW.
April –May 2016	Complete solution implementation

Part V: List of sources

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