

Improving Media Coverage and Public Perceptions of African-American Men and Boys

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This memo offers messaging advice for changing media coverage and public perceptions of African-American men and boys. It is intended to assist those working to reduce stereotypes and expand opportunity for black males as well as those concerned with journalistic excellence and socially responsible entertainment media.

Change is needed in these areas because research (summarized in the sidebar at right) and experience find persistently distorted media depictions of black males that contribute to negative stereotypes, unfair treatment, and unequal opportunity in areas ranging from employment to education to criminal justice and beyond.

Communications to Improve Coverage

We recommend that communications to improve media coverage of black men and boys use the following principles:

- ▶ For news media, focus on “full and accurate” portrayals, not “positive” or “negative” coverage. Values to emphasize include truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability.
- ▶ Highlight exemplary coverage while condemning distorted and problematic content.
- ▶ Use research on trends, complementing national research like The Opportunity Agenda’s with monitoring and examples drawn from specific media outlets.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

In 2011, The Opportunity Agenda examined perceptions of and by African-American men and boys and their relationship to the media, including (1) a social science literature review, (2) a meta-analysis of existing public opinion research, and (3) an analysis of black men’s media consumption. The research revealed important trends, including:

- ▶ Media over-represent black males in depictions of violence, crime, and poverty.
- ▶ Important dimensions of black males’ lives, such as fatherhood and work, are largely ignored.
- ▶ Depictions of the systemic barriers facing members of this group are largely absent.
- ▶ Distorted media depictions can lead to negative attitudes toward African-American males, such as increased public support for punitive approaches and tolerance for racial disparities.
- ▶ Inaccurate depictions can also affect African-American males’ self-perceptions and lead to diminished self-esteem.



- ▶ Call for coverage of systemic causes of, and solutions to, unequal opportunity for African-American males.
- ▶ When editors, producers, or executives are unresponsive, target media advertisers and shareholders on economic and social responsibility grounds.

Communications to Expand Opportunity

We recommend that communications to promote black men and boys' opportunities emphasize the following themes:

Lead with values, especially expanding opportunity for all: *Everyone deserves a chance to achieve his or her full potential. What we look like or where we come from should not determine the opportunities that we have in life.*

Highlight community: *We're all in it together, and we share responsibility for the common good. Our nation and everyone in it benefits from the vibrancy, cohesiveness, and success of our diverse population.*

Lift up systemic causes. Explain the role of systems and structures as obstacles to opportunity, thereby helping people see beyond "personal responsibility" and "individual bigotry" as the sole causes of inequality.

Highlight clear, concrete solutions to help overcome "problem fatigue" and build support for change: *We have it within our power as a society to topple barriers to equal opportunity for everyone, including African-American men and boys who often face steep obstacles.*

Acknowledge the progress: Noting the progress that our country has made toward equal opportunity, while documenting the persistent challenges that remain, helps persuadable audiences to "hear" evidence of discrimination and unequal circumstances.

Themes to Avoid

Avoid leading with historical appeals. Beginning conversations with a focus on past discrimination, racism, and slavery tends to alienate persuadable audiences. Many younger audiences, moreover, have no frame of reference for historical appeals. Unless you have a receptive audience and enough time for detailed discussion, these arguments are unlikely to persuade in the short-term.



Avoid a racial competition mindset. Framing the debate in “us vs. them” terms tends to turn off audiences of all races and ethnicities, and amplify opposition to reforms. Avoid arguments—as well as metaphors like “leveling the playing field”—that imply competition between ethnic groups. Instead, focus on our shared goals and values, and how we all win when opportunity is expanded.

Sample Messages to Media Decisionmakers

In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message, we recommend structuring opening messages in terms of **Value, Problem, Solution, Action**. In particular, leading with shared values instead of dry facts or hot rhetoric helps start a conversation and provides a foundation to transition into more complex messages.

Value: Principles of accuracy, impartiality, and fair play are core to the journalism profession. The American Society of News Editors’ Statement of Principles, for example, requires that “[e]very effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly.”

Problem: But a decade of research shows that too many news organizations are falling short of that standard when it comes to coverage of African-American men and boys. Trends include over-representing black males in stories about crime, violence, and poverty—far beyond their actual association with those problems—and under-representation in their roles as fathers, workers, and problem solvers. Those patterns paint a picture of black males that is inaccurate, biased, and harmful, contributing to racial stereotypes, discrimination, and other barriers.

Solution: Journalists must strive for greater accuracy and authenticity when it comes to coverage of black men and boys. The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, for example, recommends “dealing with specifics” and including “context to provide a more complex picture so that people honestly and fairly become visible to the audience.”

Action: News outlets should update and apply these ethical principles more rigorously and across bodies of reporting as well as individual stories. Just as individual stories must be fair and accurate, patterns of distorted reporting must trigger changes in story assignment, reporting, and editing practices. Greater in-depth reporting on systemic obstacles, prevention, and success stories are notably missing and important.

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Value: If broadcasters want to compete for audiences in a more diverse America, their programming has to both reflect and respect our nation's diverse communities; their hopes, aspirations, struggles, and experiences.

Problem: After studying your network's programming over many months, we're not seeing adequate respect or understanding when it comes to depictions of African-American men and boys. Black male characters on your network are more likely to be depicted engaging in anti-social, dysfunctional, and violent behavior than other groups, and more so than in reality as well. That's irresponsible and harmful, and it's also bad business for a network struggling to build an audience in the 21st century.

Solution: What we want and expect is balance and fairness. Show the spectrum and fullness of black males' lives, just as you do with white characters on your network.

Action: We ask that you update your Standards and Practices system to periodically review, identify, and avoid harmful stereotypes and one-dimensional portrayals as themes in your programming.

A Model Call to Action

The online activist group ColorOfChange.org successfully rallied its members to oppose an offensive reality show, *All My Babies' Mamas*, that Oxygen Media planned to air. Oxygen cancelled the show before the first broadcast. ColorOfChange.org's call to action integrated value, problem, solution, and action in a concise and effective form:

"Tell Oxygen and its advertisers: Don't exploit Black families

Shawty Lo, an Atlanta-based rapper, has 11 children by ten women, a girlfriend the same age as his oldest daughters, and — if Oxygen Media executives have their way — a provocative new reality show. Join us in calling on Oxygen and its advertisers to put an end to this degrading reality show. If you act now by signing this petition, together we can prevent this show from gaining traction before it even airs."¹



Sample Messages to Expand Black Male Opportunity

Value: Our justice system depends on equal treatment and investigations based on evidence, not stereotypes or bias.

Problem: But, too often, police and others engage in racial profiling, which is singling people out because of their race or accent instead of based on evidence. In many cities around the country, police too frequently target young African-American men for invasive and humiliating “stop and frisks” based solely on stereotypes. In New York City, for example, although they account for only 4.7 percent of the city’s population, black and Latino males between the ages of 14–24 accounted for 41.6 percent of the stops in 2011, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union.² The number of stops of young black men exceeded the entire city population of young black men. That’s against our national values, and it reduces public safety.

Solution: Law enforcement officers need clear rules and proper training to avoid racial profiling and focus on evidence and public safety. Congress should pass the End Racial Profiling Act to ensure fair and equal treatment in our justice system.

Action: Tell your members of Congress to pass the End Racial Profiling Act and to support proper rules and training for law enforcement officers.

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Value: Our future depends on educational opportunity for all children in our community. Access to quality schools with well-trained teachers and adequate resources is crucial to helping kids succeed and contribute fully as adults.

Problem: Unfortunately, our schools are falling short of standard, and African-American boys are facing particularly high obstacles to educational opportunity. In our school systems today, black boys are disproportionately suspended and expelled, often for minor behavior that in-school approaches could address. Too often, these educational decisions are based on stereotypes and over-reaction instead of best practices and valuing the potential of all children.

Solution: Some school districts are adopting more productive policies that expand the opportunity of all kids to learn. Under a new Arkansas law, for example, the state Department of Education will submit a report each year to the State Board of Education with district-level data on suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement, and the Department will provide districts with strategies and resources for implementing positive discipline policies that keep kids in school.

Action: Our Parent Teacher Association should push the Board of Education to adopt best practices like Arkansas’ that prioritize education for all children.

Sample Op-Ed

Black Men and Boys: In Focus

Recently, executives at the Fox Broadcasting Company decided to cancel one of their longest running programs: the crime “reality” show *COPS*. Canceling the show results in a more responsible use of the airwaves—which belong to the public—whether or not that was FOX's intention.

COPS has never been a responsible program, with its overrepresentation of African-American and Latino perpetrators, underrepresentation of minority police officers, a one-sided law enforcement perspective, and—disclaimers notwithstanding—presumption of guilt. But the case against *COPS* has grown much stronger since the show first aired in 1989.

We now know much more about the harmful effects of distorted programming like *COPS* than we did two decades ago. A large body of research from the last decade, assembled by The Opportunity Agenda, finds that mainstream media associate black males with crime, violence, and poverty far in excess of reality. Conversely, black men and boys are under-represented in positive depictions of responsible fathers, problem solvers, and other roles like police officer. Although the majority of black males lead responsible lives as fathers, students, and workers employed in a wide range of occupations, our media culture—across news, entertainment, video games, and other platforms—paints a very different picture.

These distortions, whether intentional or not, reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to discriminatory treatment and public tolerance of racial inequality. While the media are not solely responsible for the perpetuation of stereotypes and bias, they do have a special responsibility to get it right.

Another important change in the United States is the increase in black men and other young people of color. Programming that demonizes people of color and parades old, harmful stereotypes is more and more unacceptable to an increasingly diverse and racially sophisticated viewership.

The organization that led that effort, ColorofChange.org, had previously mounted a similar campaign against Oxygen Media, which cancelled its ill-conceived “reality” show, *All My Babies’ Mamas*—about a rapper with 11 children from 10 different mothers—after deafening protests from the black community.

To be sure, alongside our national commitment to equal opportunity and freedom from bias is a commitment to freedom of expression that, correctly, protects the right to produce distasteful media. The solution to harmful shows like *COPS* does not involve government censorship. But it does involve informed media consumption, continuing media literacy, and aggressive media activism like the efforts of Color of Change. That includes targeting the show’s advertisers and potential viewers.

Media have long contributed to negative stereotypes through limited, sometimes sensationalistic content. But change is possible. Cancelling *COPS* is a start, but not enough. There must be a commitment and plan to replacing shows like *COPS* with programming worthy of a diverse and dynamic America, particularly producing programs showing the full range of the lives of black men and boys. Doing so is not only the right thing to do, but it can help Fox and other networks build new audiences for the 21st century.

References

The Opportunity Agenda, *[Opportunity for Black Men and Boys: Public Opinion, Media Depictions and Media Consumption](#)* (2011), analyzes over 100 studies on media depictions and public opinion, as well as original data on media consumption.

The Opportunity Agenda, *[Ten Lessons for Talking About Racial Equity in the Age of Obama](#)* (2010), provides further guidance for a robust and positive conversation about black males.

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*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America*

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¹ <http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/oxygen>.

² <http://www.nyclu.org/files/stopandfrisk-factsheet.pdf>.