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Reaching the Black Press with the Land-Grant Message

Linda Foster Benedict

One type of media outlet often overlooked by land-grant universities in their media relations efforts is the black media. Consequently, black newspapers, for example, provide little coverage of these universities and the issues they espouse, including food safety, nutrition, the environment, health, and consumer issues. This article presents some helpful information about the black media—history, status, and stories likely to get used—along with guidelines for media relations people at land-grant universities to do a better job of reaching this market for the benefit of both parties.

Introduction

One group of media which news departments at land-grant universities often overlook is the black¹ media. This is my conclusion after regularly reading a dozen black newspapers from across the country and three national black magazines over a period of six months from October 1995 to April 1996. In the nearly 60 publications I read, I saw only three instances of press releases from land-grant universities being used in any of the publications. This paucity is alarming considering the need to reach more diverse audiences. Although public information departments at land-grant universities, including those in schools of agriculture, take pride in getting positive coverage in the mainstream media, it is also important to get usage in the black media. Black media are defined as newspa-

¹The terms "black" and "African-American" are used interchangeably in this article. Many Americans of African descent prefer the adjective, African-American. However, in my research the media owned by and targeted at an African-American audience were referred to as black media.

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pers, magazines, and radio stations owned by African-Americans with African-Americans as their target audience. Reaching the black media with land-grant information is one way to reach an African-American audience:

1. The African-American community needs educational information developed and packaged at land-grant universities. For example, there are few places where African-Americans can turn for expertise on health and nutrition issues specific to them. This type of information is available from land-grant universities.
2. African-Americans need to see their place within the agricultural fabric of this country. Even though the number of black farmers has shrunk to fewer than 23,000, they still are a vital part of the economy (McGraw & Taylor, 1991). Many African-Americans have played key roles in shaping agricultural policy in this country and continue to do so.
3. The agriculture profession has need of a more inclusive and less exclusive talent pool. However, African-Americans do not readily enroll in agriculture schools nor readily look into career opportunities within this profession (National Research Council, 1988).
4. The land-grant community needs the support of the African-American community. Land-grant universities cannot afford to overlook any population group, especially a group so profoundly a part of the land-grant heritage.

Why Black Newspapers?

Black newspapers became an integral part of this country's history about 50 years after the country's founding. The primary reason for these newspapers initially was to give voice to the antislavery movement, and the primary audience was white. The first black newspaper was *Freedom's Journal* published in New York City with its first edition on March 16, 1827 (Emery, 1984). Two men—John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish—pooled their resources and founded the paper, which was heavily religious and antislavery (Boyd, 1991). Mr. Russwurm is believed to be the first black man to graduate from college in this country, graduating from Bowdoin College in 1826. Mr. Cornish was a Presbyterian clergyman. Neither was an experienced journalist, and their different philosophies led to a split six months after the first edition. Mr. Russwurm was an ardent colonizationist believing in a return to Africa. Mr. Cornish thought

such an idea folly. Cornish left the paper. Two years later Russwurm also left the paper, went to Africa, and helped the founding of newspapers there. Cornish went on to start and work for other black newspapers (Boyd, 1991).

The most famous of the black newspaper editors before the Civil War was Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave who became an internationally acclaimed spokesperson for the abolition of slavery. Douglass founded the *North Star* in Rochester, New York, in 1847 (McFeely, 1991). The paper was later renamed *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and still later it evolved into *Douglass' Monthly* (McFeely, 1991).

Another noteworthy African-American editor from the 19th century was Ida Wells-Barnett. During the 1880s, she was co-owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech*. However, her stand against lynchings created a backlash, and her paper's facilities were sacked and destroyed in 1892. She went on to work for other black newspapers including the *New York Age* (Boyd, 1991).

The *New York Age* was one of the most famous black newspapers at the turn of the century. It was widely read by national political figures, including Theodore Roosevelt. The driving force of the newspaper was T. Thomas Fortune, its editor, who has been called the "dean of black journalism" (Boyd, 1991).

The *Chicago Defender*, founded in 1905 by Robert Abbott, is another pioneer newspaper. Its success began in 1909 with its first muckraking campaign against vice in the black community. By 1916, the *Defender* was sold in 71 cities. And by 1921, it was distributed across the nation by a network of 2,359 agents (Davis, 1992). The *Defender* played a major role in encouraging the migration of Southern blacks to the North. Because of this, a judge and the governor of Arkansas both tried to get it banned from that state (Davis, 1992).

Black newspapers continued to be established in just about every city with a sizable black population (Davis, 1992). They continue to exist because African-Americans read them. Despite desegregation and more coverage of blacks in white newspapers, African-Americans still will support newspapers that give primary coverage to their community. Black newspapers still influence the black community (Hatchett, 1991).

Today's Black Newspapers

Today's black newspapers still tend to be more cause-oriented than their white counterparts, although some are produced purely

for profit. The exact number of black newspapers is difficult to determine. The 1995 *Editor & Publisher Yearbook* listed 184. However, the list of black newspapers in Louisiana that I am compiling includes at least two not in that yearbook. Some lists of newspapers are not segmented by race, such as the listing by the Louisiana Press Association. Some black newspapers, as with some white newspapers, have had a short life span, such as the *Baton Rouge Chronicle* and the *Baton Rouge Tribune*, each of which lasted less than a year.

Another source for a list of black newspapers is the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), which is an organization of black newspaper publishers. However, that list included only four in Louisiana, and so far I have found nine.

As with white newspapers, the major black newspapers are in the major metropolitan centers, such as the *Houston Forward Times* and the *Amsterdam News* in New York City. Although the *Amsterdam News* is published Monday through Thursday, most black newspapers, even the major ones, are weeklies and not dailies.

Black newspapers are a specialty or niche publication. Though each is unique, they tend to share these traits:

1. They feature achievements of African-Americans.
2. They provide the African-American perspective to the news.
3. They present articles that offer advice aimed specifically at African-American readers.
4. They present community news not mentioned in the white press.

There is community appeal to black newspapers. These newspapers include lists of people attending events or students on honor rolls, announcements of upcoming local events, opinion pieces from local African-American columnists, group portraits, and small ads from local businesses. Here is a sampling of the content from four black newspapers:

The *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 7, 1995: This issue featured Associated Press stories but only about African-American people. Only one news story was locally produced and it was about a business conference aimed at African-Americans. This issue also included a two-page spread of several local columnists commenting about local and national issues.

The *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 23, 1995: This tabloid-style publication is one of the larger of the black newspapers. This issue included 28 pages; the last four provided sports coverage. The dominant stories were produced by *Defender* reporters, including one that emanated from Haiti.

Of note in this issue was inclusion of four press releases from the University of Illinois Extension Service: "Redefining the natal relationship" (adult children and parents); "Managing the monthly budget" (warning signs of financial troubles); "Grandparents and grandkids can cope with pain of growing older" (when grandchildren reach puberty); and "Check lease before buying pet" (pets in apartments).

The *Atlanta Inquirer*, Nov. 11, 1995: This publication has the broadsheet rather than tabloid format. Of the six stories on page 1 of this 10-page issue, three stories were produced by *Inquirer* reporters: a ribbon cutting for a new building, a crime story, and three photos with cutlines about the Atlanta Braves' victory parade. The other three were press releases: changes at a local health care facility, students at a local college named to a who's-who publication, and an upcoming meeting sponsored by a local human services agency.

The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Jan. 18-24 and Jan. 25-31, 1996: This newspaper uses full-color photos on the front page. Unlike the other newspapers examined, this newspaper featured a crime story as the lead story in these two issues. The international news department only featured stories from Africa, including Zambia, Zaire, and South Africa.

Black Newspapers in Louisiana

In Louisiana, the nine black newspapers found so far include the *Alexandria News Weekly*; the *Post and Weekly News* in Baton Rouge; the *Dispatch* and the *Free Press* in Monroe; the *Tribune*, *Data News Weekly* and *Louisiana Weekly* in New Orleans; and the *Shreveport Sun*.

These newspapers vary in quality. At the low end are the papers run by business people with no journalistic training. For example, the *Baton Rouge Weekly News* is operated from the home of its owner. He has no staff other than a part-time advertising salesman and assistance from his wife. The editorial content consists of press releases, local commentaries, and photos used if accompanied by a \$5.00 fee.

On the other hand, the *New Orleans Tribune* is a high quality, attractive, well-written newspaper with an editorial staff. This paper

just celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1995. It began as an attempt to offer another view of the news. New Orleans has only one dominant newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*. The founders of the *Tribune* took offense at the preponderance of negative coverage of the black community by the *Times-Picayune* (Allman, 1995). Blacks comprise the majority of the population in the city, 65 percent. The three mayors of New Orleans since the *Tribune* started in 1985 have been black.

The *Tribune* has provided the following coverage:

- A report that the legal services contract awarded for the convention center went to a firm that had never hired an African-American lawyer;
- A report of the disproportionate number of jobs lost by blacks in the city; and
- In-depth articles about successful black figures in the city.

Strategies for Working With the Black Press

The first step in developing a media relations plan to reach the black press is to find them. As with any specialized publication, they may not appear on newsstands. I have found the Louisiana black newspapers by asking members of the black community, including black newspaper editors, and checking lists from the Louisiana Press Association, the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook*, and the NNPA.

The next step is to visit the editors, reporters, and other gatekeepers either at meetings or at their offices. Karen Smith Green, who handles media relations for the Chicago Cooperative Extension office, said she has developed a rapport with the *Defender* over a period of years. She has made visits, sent press releases, and sought out *Defender* editors and reporters at gatherings of journalists. Her impression is that black newspaper gatekeepers, as with many white newspaper gatekeepers, are unaware of the valuable resources that the extension service and land-grant universities provide (Green, K., December 1995). The *Chicago Defender* was the only black newspaper in my search that included articles from the extension service at a land-grant university.

My experience in meeting with the editors of black newspapers is that they are more open about their need for advertising dollars than editors of white-owned newspapers (Campbell, Y., September 1995; McKenna, B., October 1995; & Payne, I., October 1995; personal communications). The editors have to be extremely frugal with overhead expenses. At this writing, none of the editors in Louisiana

had the computer equipment necessary to receive press releases on-line. One editor did not want press releases faxed to him because of the cost of fax paper. To expedite usage in one newspaper, I send my press releases camera-ready, matched for the font and column width, so the editor can paste them into his layout.

The types of press releases preferred by the African-American-owned media are similar to those preferred by the white-owned media. Black newspapers are most interested in press releases that show news through people.

Based on my reading of black newspapers and talking with editors, I put forth the following types of stories as best bets for usage in black newspapers:

1. Entrepreneurial opportunities with specific details from people who have succeeded

Minorities look to small business opportunities because of discrimination in white-dominated institutions. For example, the *New Pittsburgh Courier* gave full-page coverage to a seminar on business opportunities for blacks.

2. Advice on health, especially concerning heart disease, strokes, obesity, diabetes

African-Americans suffer disproportionately from the major lifestyle diseases that threaten all Americans. *Ebony* magazine has a department, "House Call," in which readers' health and fitness questions are answered by experts, although none were from land-grant universities in the issues I read. However, Laura Randolph, who writes the "Sisterspeak" column for *Ebony*, quoted a University of Arizona study on the differences in body image between black and white female adolescents in the November 1995 issue.

3. Personal finance

A disproportionate number of African-Americans are below the poverty line, and average salaries are lower for this population than the white population. There is a keen interest and need for information on managing money and optimizing limited resources.

4. Career opportunities and guidance

The October 1995 issue of the *New Orleans Tribune* carried a feature story on assessing whether it is time to look for another job and how to look while holding on to the job you

have. These types of stories are critical for today's economy and need to be generated for all types of media, including the black press.

Notably missing from black newspapers are examples of careers in agriculture. Land-grant universities can provide the information to help overcome a stigma of few career opportunities in these fields. One way to do this is to feature successful people with rewarding careers who received their education at land-grant universities. Following up with black graduates and disseminating features about their careers and how they reached them will ultimately help with recruitment efforts and enlarge the pool of talented people who are seeking higher education and professional careers.

5. Family relationships

The family and the church play strong roles in the lives of African-Americans. These two institutions similarly play a strong role in the content of black newspapers. These newspapers tend to carry a lot of church news. Many columnists advise seeking God's help and quote scriptures. There is also a heavy concentration on senior citizen news and achievements of school children. The Oct. 23, 1995, issue of the *Chicago Defender* used two press releases from the University of Illinois Extension Service that discussed family relationships—adult children and aging parents and the grandparent/grandchild relationship when the grandchildren reach puberty. The *Herald-Dispatch* in Los Angeles ran a column by Marion Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund called "Child Watch."

6. Good news about African-Americans

A common mission of all black newspapers is to offer more positive coverage of the African-American community since the preponderance of coverage of blacks in the white media is negative (Dates & Barlow, 1993). There are many achievers within the ranks of agriculture, natural resources, and consumer and family sciences that can be highlighted in informative press releases.

An example of this type of press release appeared in the Nov. 5, 1995, issue of *Louisiana Weekly*. Entitled "African American Enrollment at LSU Multiplies," the article discussed the jump in enrollment of African-Americans in graduate programs at Louisiana State University.

Another strategy to help with usage of press releases is to send photos. These publications tend to use lots of photos of posed people. This is part of their mission to counteract negative images in the mainstream media (Dates & Barlow, 1993). Land-grant universities would be helping these publications meet one of their goals by sending to them good quality photos that presented positive images of African-American people. Photographs of successful blacks within the agriculture, natural resources, and consumer and family sciences framework also would help spread the word about the value and opportunities inherent with land-grant universities.

National Black Magazines

In addition to black newspapers, the leading black national magazines should be included in a media relations plan. Prominent national magazines in the black community include *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence*.

Ebony is the oldest of these magazines, founded by John H. Johnson in Chicago in 1945 (Emery, 1984). Johnson was a friend of Henry Luce's and patterned his magazine after *Life* (Emery, 1984). In 1951, he also founded *Jet*, a magazine that has the smaller dimensions of *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest*. *Essence*, a black women's magazine, was founded in 1970 (Emery, 1984).

Black Radio Stations

Black radio stations, like black newspapers, may also be overlooked by communications offices at land-grant universities. However, these stations may be quite receptive to press releases and taped messages from these institutions. Following is an example from Baton Rouge:

Example

A local bank occasionally funds projects aimed at helping black youth in the community. I wrote a proposal to this bank to fund a year's worth of radio spots promoting career opportunities in agriculture and home economics at Southern University. The advantages to the community included helping steer more youth to higher education. The bank funded it for the advertising costs, about \$10,000. I wrote a series of 18 spots that were then produced by the radio station with appropriate sound effects. In addition, selected faculty, students, and alumni were featured in some of the spots. The spots aired every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning during a popular call-in program called "Question of the Day."

No formal evaluation of the effects has been done so far. However, enrollment in two of the featured departments doubled during the time these spots aired.

Creating More Diversity in the White Media

By no means does getting usage in the black media mean that is where news about African-Americans at land-grant institutions should be funneled. An important aspect of media relations for land-grant universities is to reach the white media with stories of blacks in agriculture. It is important for both the black community and the white community to see positive coverage of blacks in the white media.

When the white media try to give positive coverage, they should be prepared for a negative reaction. For example, I arranged for three agriculture students from Southern University to appear on a local television show called *"Live at Five."* This half-hour show with features about the community precedes the regular news show at 6:00 p.m. The students were part of the format in which one of the hosts does a live five-minute interview. The news angle was that the three students had completed internships at Colorado State University whose officials had arrived in Baton Rouge that week to sign agreements formally linking the two universities in an exchange arrangement.

The show's producer had written the questions ahead of time, which were approved by me, the dean, and the three students. One of the questions was, "What was it like to attend a predominantly white university?" The students unanimously considered this a positive experience and quite eloquently described that even though they were among few African-Americans, they felt comfortable, were accepted, and made good friends while there.

After the show, several members of the black community called to complain that the question was racist and should not have been asked. The show's producer and the host were quite upset by the accusatory calls. Fortunately, the producer let me know; and I arranged for my boss, the dean, to write a letter of support for the show and the way it was handled.

Some gatekeepers may use this kind of criticism as an excuse not to cover events in the black community. The only answer I know to this is persistence. Communicators at land-grant universities must continue to feed stories about African-Americans to the mainstream media.

Conclusion

A media relations plan to reach the black media is basically the same as the plan to reach any group of media. News writers at land-grant universities have to make the effort to identify and contact the black media in their territories. They then have to make the commitment to supply these media outlets with the types of information the editors will find useful in meeting the goals of their product, whether it is a newspaper, magazine, or radio station. However, because I found so little mention of land-grant universities in the black press, my conclusion is that public information offices at land-grant universities, including the departments within the schools of agriculture, are not doing this.

Land-grant universities cannot afford to overlook any means for getting their message to communities that wield potential influence over the future of these universities. Working with the black media requires effort above and beyond working with the mainstream media. At stake is the relationship of the black community to land-grant universities. Because 1890 universities are historically black, they may have more access to contacts in the black community. However, both the 1890 and 1862 universities need to evaluate and probably update their strategies for reaching the black press.

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