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Black Voices, White Power: Members of the Black Press make Meaning of Media Hegemony

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BLACK VOICES, WHITE POWER: MEMBERS OF THE BLACK PRESS MAKE MEANING
OF MEDIA HEGEMONY

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University
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in
Communication Studies

by
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Marshall University
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APPROVAL OF THESIS

We, the faculty supervising the work of Robert "Rob" Redding Jr., affirm that the thesis, *Black Voices, White Power: Members of the Black Press Make Meaning of Media Hegemony*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Department of Communication Studies and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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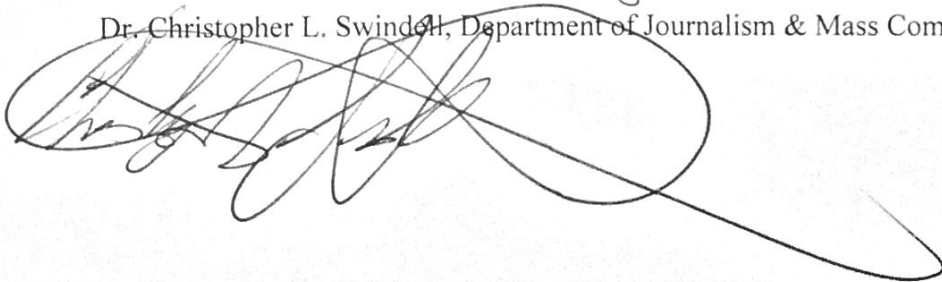
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CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Method and Procedure.....	4
The New Orleans Radio War.....	8
The Role of the Griot in the Black Community.....	12
The Modern Griot.....	14
Sound without Substance.....	17
Discussion.....	22
References.....	26
Appendix A: Letter from Institutional Research Board.....	30
Appendix B: Questionnaire.....	31

Abstract

When a former black editor says he was told that blacks do not care about news by his white boss and a black deejay is told that his commentary is too hard hitting and not to go to an event featuring a black militant leader by his white boss, these personal accounts could be extrapolated to mean that there may still be a world filled with white privilege and an ensuing hegemonic bifurcation in a Communication Studies context. This study utilizes Afrocentricity and the agency that is denied to these two individuals to provide insight into a world where these black media/newsroom personnel describe how they lost ground to their white media owners. Those interviewed said this world does not promote the agency that comes with Afrocentricity, which is utilized as a critical cultural studies lens to interpret these 18-question qualitative interviews. The environment that those interviewed described is a world not often viewed in the context of white media ownership and the black-focused content that is produced within them, but is a phenomenon which may be better understood by utilizing an Afrocentric lens in a Communication Studies context.

INTRODUCTION

Almost 30 years ago, a front page report on the state of radio titled “Black Radio Stations Face Balky Advertisers As Competition Rises” was published in *The Wall Street Journal* (Davis, 1987, p. A1). The sub headlines were: “Station in Louisiana fights a white-owned outlet” and “Will FCC deal a new blow?” (Davis, 1987, p. A1). The article published in September 1987 explained that black owners were being outgunned in Philadelphia by “white-owned WUSL-FM,” which was wooing black teens from “black-owned WDAS-FM by playing more hits and less news” (Davis, 1987, p. A16). The same was happening in Dallas as KDLZ-FM slid from number 3 to number 17 when its competitor gave away a Mercedes. These historically black stations were in a fight for black loyalties along with James Hutchinson, a black Dartmouth College sports star with a degree in business. He too was in a fight for the future of his radio station. Hutchinson was determined to inform his listeners of news relevant to the black community. He tried to inform them of such through ownership of radio stations across the country, with his crown jewel WYLD 98.5-FM, a 100,000 watt full-market signal in New Orleans (Davis, 1987, p. A16).

It is not often that these types of full market signals reach an entire city and beyond, given the FCC’s restrictions on the number of such powerful stations. WYLD could be heard from Biloxi, MS to Baton Rouge, LA and it lead the market with its ability to cover the entire metropolitan region’s suburbs. WYLD was also not typical for full market signals to be owned by a black “pushy” 39-year-old entrepreneur (Davis, 1987, p. A1). Hutchinson had owned the top radio station in the city since he purchased the outlet in 1981. He began his reign in 1982 and it lasted for six years until the better financed white-owned WQUE-FM chipped away at his lead. WQUE was owned by Clear Channel, a majority white-owned company. Hutchinson would lose

this war along with other black owners, who opted for platforms with more black news content, rather than solely music and advertisements (Davis, 1987).

Scholars argue that black ownership of black media is significant because it serves as the representational voice of the black community to those whites who are listening to its content (Larson, 2006). When black media communicates that blacks are only interested in music and sports, many white listeners with limited contact to black people will conclude the same. Harris and Sanborn (2013) observes that when the black personae is represented by bragging rappers and spoiled athletes, white listeners with limited cultural contact will conclude that the black community has overcome the confines of racism. Sparks adds that violent rappers and athletes “are overrepresented as criminals in the news” (2015, p. 247). Rivers and Dennis conclude that editorial bias leads to media frames that emphasize “black loss - bad news for and about blacks” result in a negative perception of the community (2011, p. 43). What is more, Gandy summarizes that general television portrayals of black people “are not sympathetic” and the high level of violence on television means that heavy viewers are likely to see the world as a mean and dangerous place, caused by black people (2001, p. 602, 605). Finally, there seems to be a consensus that media ownership is one-sided. Surlin (1973) argued that white media owners who air black formats routinely turn in required need statements to the FCC that misinterpret the black community. White-owned “black-oriented stations are not, in most cases: listening to community needs, perceiving needs as they specifically relate to the black community, listing ‘racial harmony’ as a predominate need of the community” (p. 192).

This qualitative informational interview narrative project selected two former media workers to interview about their time at their respective outlets. The first was BB Davis, a deejay at Hutchinson’s white-owned competitor WQUE (personal communication, August 2, 2015).

Davis was one of the first blacks hired to help reach into the black community when the station was staffed by nearly all-white deejays (personal communication, August 2, 2015). He says that his voice was constrained in how he wanted to disseminate consciousness to the black community during his time at the white-owned station, which would ultimately defeat Hutchinson's black-owned WYLD (personal communication, August 2, 2015). Gary Dauphin worked as the top editor at *Africana* before it was merged into *AOL Black Voices*. Dauphin says that the once black-owned publication was limited to arts and entertainment soon after the merger (personal communication, June 15, 2015). He also said that his white manager professed to know more about being black and what blacks wanted to read than he did (personal communication, June 15, 2015). While these men were valued for how they could uniquely perform and represent blackness for the white media-owners and to their respective black audiences, they were made to exclude the communalism essential to their cultural roles as griot. Both of these participants no longer work in the media field. They spoke on the record about their time at their respective jobs.

The voice of the modern griot is examined as a continuing contributor to Afrocentric thought. The griot was at the center of West Africa society, and is recognized as a helper who provides agency to members of the black community. The story of Dauphin is that of an editor who was pushed out because he did not fit a preconceived racial stereotype, an experience shared by Davis. Both were precluded from the consciousness-raising that they wanted to provide as griots. In this qualitative informational interview narrative project, these men are given voice through qualitative interviews, where they were asked to discuss the hegemonic influence that ruled their lives. Finally, theories of Afrocentricity are used to evaluate their perspectives as griots who lost their standing when white owners bought their respective black outlets. Like Hutchinson's WYLD, these men would have their griots confined, restrained, and forced out by

forces wielding white privilege. This study will explore the narratives of two black journalists utilizing an Afrocentric lens, take a look at the history of how the journalists came to arrive at a point of conflict with their white managers, and explain how this conflict subverts the message of what is truly black versus what is dictated to these black staffers in the eyes of white people.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

The study utilized two interviews with former personnel which were analyzed through Afrocentric cultural lenses. Three other planned interviewees ultimately declined to participate. One of the participant's story had been previously reported but gave only skeletal and unusable answers, while declining to reflect back on the previous job. The two others declined to speak about their experiences without explanation. Silence about the conditions of losing employment in the black press by personnel who still work in the field is understandable. Hegemonic dominance is evaluated as a concept that impacts these black employees both in and outside of work and was clear in the level of participation with continuing implications and restraints. "Hegemony" is described by Antonio Gramsci as when what was once considered coercion becomes a "crisis of authority...[the] masks of consent slip away, revealing the fist of force" (Gouriévidis, 2014, p. 78).

This dominance is illustrated in the consolidation of media ownership, which follows the pattern of white domination in society (Ball 2014). From a historical organizational standpoint, the mainstream media are run by white men who consider themselves "super elites" who are "notoriously difficult for social scientists to study first-hand" (Bogart, 1974, p. 586). Many mainstream newsrooms are not the typical labor realm. Wilson (1991) wrote that there is an "assumption of incompetence of black journalists" and

“mind games” are often played against black employees by white managers (p. 145). Newsroom “history is one of grudging accommodation to unpleasant circumstances” for black employees (Solomon, 1995, p. 112). As a result, black journalists were twice as unhappy as white journalists due to what is perceived prejudice (Solomon, 1992). These continued perceptions are also not helping blacks go into journalism. Black women are preferred because they are seen as less militant than black men in the newsroom - as the newsrooms move toward the middle (Rockmore, 1995). Black journalists are reluctant to consider working in the mainstream press because the job has little credibility in the black community (Tipton, 1986). Black journalists are seen inside the newsroom as tools of the white press and as not being able to write balanced stories (Newkirk, 2002). It does not get better when blacks make it to the level of management. Wilson (1991) wrote that a study by Charles E. Swanson “found that top-level newspaper executives selected editors and reporters who shared their own policy beliefs and who met certain criteria” (p. 122). Serrin (2000) agreed:

“It is important to keep in mind that color and gender diversity is not the same as diversity of ideas, diversity of perspective. I know black editors who know less about Harlem than white folks do and could care less about how, or whether, it is covered ... the white boss will argue that there can be no problem because there is a black editor in a key position ... They don't realize that their favorite black editor, wanting to please the bosses and be just like them, is perhaps wary of pushing for too many black stories and doesn't want to be seen as an advocate for black reporters and editors” (p. 67).

The aforementioned newsroom environment is considered relative to members of the black press. The two cooperating participants were recruited from the aforementioned pool of former newsroom employees at black-focused outlets. The participants were former *Africana.com* and *AOL Black Voices* Editor Gary Dauphin and former Clear Channel personality

BB Davis. Davis was laid off and Dauphin quit his job. These black journalists were in managerial positions or made commentary decisions over black-focused news content at their respective outlets. They have articulated the belief that their voices were silenced by white managers wielding a great amount of hegemony and resulted in their eventual ouster.

The participants were contacted via phone or e-mail. They were asked for an hour of time. The interviewer used Google Voice exchange, a free recording service. They were contacted again one day in advance of the interview to confirm their continued availability for the interview. The researcher was contacted by the participants at the scheduled interview times. The participants provided consent to participate and to be recorded. The researcher then asked the participant 18 open-ended questions and four demographic questions. (See Appendix section entitled “Questions”). All the questions speak to how these former black-media personnel may have felt that their voice and views were limited and how they view themselves now. A focus was placed on the dialog that occurred between white managers and these employees. Emphasis was placed on how that fractured relationship may have impacted black-focused news coverage. Each interview took approximately one hour. The interview was recorded until all questions were asked and answered. The researcher asked the participants’ permission to contact them for a follow-up interview if needed. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for Afrocentric themes. The coding focused on narratives, experiences, language, and the timing of when these things happened.

Narrative analysis was utilized to focus on members of the black press. Qualitative inquiry emphasizes the “personal narrative” and listening to “people who have specific experience with some system [which] can be very helpful in isolating problems of the system” (Capaldi & Proctor, 2005, p. 265). Giving voice to marginalized blacks in the press is an

important project because these types of studies provide “narrative power and possibility” (Bruner, 1987, p.702). The narrative that qualitative inquiry provides is particularly important to all muted groups to be able to communicate their views to “others” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 427). It has been argued that when done in a business context, qualitative research provides a “timeliness relative to official surveys” (Lui, Mitchell & Waele, 2011, p. 345). In-depth interviews are the pre-eminent method to gather narrative data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). These interviews provide an important look into the person’s worldview, ideologies and experience utilizing a symbolic “universal” method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 174).

This study also utilizes a cultural studies lens to interpret interview transcripts. Cultural studies analysis was selected as one of the best forms of inquiry to help explain current and past events. From this tradition, focus was placed on perspectives of white privilege, Afrocentricity and its emphasis on the African oral tradition harmony, and rhythm. Hill (2008) observed that white privilege is a central part of the system of racism in America, noting that it is “achieved by recruiting both material and symbolic resources from the racial hierarchy, Color, to the top, Whiteness, is one of the most important projects of White racist culture” (p.158). Scholars of Afrocentricity define collective rhythm and harmony as an arrangement that places the needs of the group before the self (Asante, 2003; Hecht et al. 1993). Williams (2011) elaborated that harmony is a “sense of interconnectedness, interrelatedness, sharing, and interdependence” which is a central unifying concept among black people. She wrote that this harmony is achieved by “African griots or story tellers” who are “responsible for the performance of rituals, entertainment and education of the community” (p. 260, 264). Scholars observed that black radio hosts provide such orality (Baraka, 1963; Cummings & Roy, 2002; Floyd, 1995; Williams, 2011). It can be said that what is considered a major part of the black tradition may be the very

sharing of ideas through a griot-tradition, or story telling framework from Africa that is thousands of years old. In the analysis that follows, the aforementioned framework is utilized as a lens to interpret the narratives of former members of the black press.

THE NEW ORLEANS RADIO WAR

Black businessman James Hutchinson purchased WYLD-FM in New Orleans in 1981. The city was 55 percent black at the time of his purchase so his black-focused station quickly reached number one status within a year (Davis, 1987). The station began a five-year reign that seemed impermeable as it amassed “one of the largest market shares in the county” (Woods, 1988, p. B1). WYLD had the full market covered with a heavy dose of adult black music hits, and news and information provided by an all-black staff. Hutchinson, who based his business out of Chicago, had patterned the station after one he listened to in Chicago which was responsible for electing the city’s first black mayor when it conducted radio-station-sponsored voter registration drives (Davis, 1987). Numerous studies and sources suggest that the strategy was much like how black radio stations used the AM dial to help inform their communities during the 1960s civil rights movement (Newman, 2000; Walsh, 2001; Ward, 2004).

Although Hutchinson’s station became highly rated in just one year since he bought it, the station never lead the market in revenue. Hutchinson quipped that he did not “know of much progress without confrontation” when it came to his aggressive sales strategies outside of the black community (Davis, 1987, p. A1). He confronted companies that explicitly stated, “Please do not submit black/ethnic or heavy teen stations” for advertising consideration (Davis, 1987, p. A1). Terse statements like this one were why his station lagged in revenue by an estimated “\$500,000 to \$1 million” a year (Davis, 1987, p. A1). He resisted. Hutchinson protested to

administrators at a mall in New Orleans after they refused to advertise on his station. Even Delta Airlines declined to buy more ad space when the airline suggested that his rates were too high for a black station before the Atlanta-based business renegotiated its contract after he lowered the rates. The airline then threatened to switch what little they were spending to his “arch-rival, white-owned WQUE” if he continued to be obstinate about the decision (Davis, 1987, p. A16). Following the dispute, Hutchinson told the *Wall Street Journal* that because he had to fly to the airline’s Atlanta headquarters twice that he ultimately had to pay “a cost of doing business that white businesses don’t have” to pay (Davis, 1987, p. A16). He had such trouble even though his station’s signal was stronger than 165 of his black competitors who over the previous ten years had signals “so weak they [could not] reach suburban listeners” (Davis, 1987, p. A1, A16). Many of these other minority owners had been largely contained to the cities or areas that were black or nonwhite. Hutchinson’s station defied such suburban containment. He was an ideological force in New Orleans.

Eventually, ad revenue was not his only battle – his audience ratings soon began to dwindle, too. His station had for the first time been badly beaten in the audience ratings by the nearly all white WQUE-FM. The marginal performing WQUE went from playing to “mostly white audiences” who liked “Top 40” hits to playing some “rap” and “raunchy rhythm,” which took it to the top of the ratings (Woods, 1988, p. B1). WQUE also followed its songs with a barrage of promotions that ranged from “\$1,000-a-day” giveaways to a “\$5,000 scavenger hunt” (Woods, 1988, p. B1). Critics quickly claimed that WQUE was trying to “bribe” listeners and did not care about the black community with its predominantly white on-air talent team (Woods, 1988, p. B1). WYLD disc jockey Jeffery Trepagnier was among those who denounced the challengers as being white-owned and pleaded to an audience at a Kool & the Gang concert to

stay loyal to his black-owned employer (Woods, 1988). Love (1987) reported just how much focus there was on the complexion of the station's staffers in November of that year, when he wrote that WQUE "finally" integrated its staff with one black hire named Derek Monet from its black-focused AM station to the midday shift "after a year" (p.52). The *Wall Street Journal* reported the next year that only "two" of its nine staffers were black (Davis, 1987, p.16). WQUE would win the ratings competition for a few more months, but WYLD regained the lead shortly afterward when it capitalized on their black deejays and focused on the hits (Love, 1989). WQUE countered this move when it went all black with its on-air staff and stopped playing white music, which toppled WYLD. BB Davis would be part of the new all black staff at WQUE. Davis was hired to work the night shift and placed on the streets to work for the station's promotional team. He would report to Derek Monet, who was given the title program director. Together, they helped WQUE appeal to the black radio audience.

Gary Dauphin's black-owned website *Africana* also understood racialized economics. His portal to the black community employed some whites who intimately understood the political tensions within the black community. *Africana* was originally founded by Harvard University professors Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, until it was sold to white-owned Time Warner in 2000 to keep the website "alive" (Kilpatrick, 2000). Kilpatrick noted that the website had a "uniquely pedagogical approach" (p. C2). He also wrote that although Time Warner was aware that the traffic was not equal to other black websites which focused more on entertainment, "the company hoped to use the portal to exploit its extensive library of film, television and music of interest to African-Americans" (p. 1). About five years after the purchase, Dauphin was elevated from editor of *Africana* to Director of AOL African American Programming, where he managed the merger of *Africana* with *AOL Black Voices*. Six months later, however, Dauphin and his assistant exited the newly formed publication. Dauphin did not

say much about his departure at the time. All questions about his exit were referred to AOL's corporate communication department (Prince, 2005). He was more conversant afterward when he said that a black news website is only as good as the power of the "non-black people you're working with" (Prince, 2011, p. 6). He added that black-focused, white-owned web sites that emphasize entertainment were not as closely scrutinized as the ones which carried harder black news reports. He concluded that "Quality news and commentary calls for either black ownership or thoughtful white ownership" (Prince, 2011, p. 6).

Interviews with BB Davis and Gary Dauphin offer an experiential perspective about the black voice in white-owned media. There has been much written in the area of blacks being limited through language theories like Muted Group. Still, what happens when black employees are able to communicate directly to their community using their own language but are told what to say and how to say it by their white employers? These two men tell similar stories of how their messages were limited and contained to fit a narrative of people who did not look like them to cultivate an outcome that they say did not reflect the community's reality or promote consciousness. Dauphin spoke about what happened behind the scenes at *Africana.com* once it was folded into *AOL Black Voices*. He talked about being limited by a white manager who felt he knew more about being black. Davis spoke about how he was given a job as a deejay at WQUE and charged with defeating WYLD. His commentary, his participation in the black community, and even how he dressed was scrutinized and limited by white managers.

This is an evaluation of how Afrocentricity can be controlled or restrained in a white-controlled corporate context. From print to broadcasting, how white privilege impacted both these men is evaluated and dissected. From the story to the story teller, the study of these two men's powerful stories starts with the griot and their tradition within an Afrocentricity

framework.

THE ROLE OF THE GRIOT IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

The history of Hutchinson's radio war defeat is also a dual defeat that coincides with the BB Davis and Gary Dauphin narratives. With Hutchinson absent, Davis was expected to lure people away from more critical consciousness being promoted by griots at WYLD. WQUE's triumph and eventual purchase of Hutchinson's WYLD informs the inside world of Clear Channel. Once in place, both BB Davis and Gary Dauphin illustrate how the griot is faced with new challenges posed by white media conglomeration. Whereas, the griot's traditional role cast black media personalities in a cultural place that expected them to organize black communalism, white media owners see such media personalities, instead, as cash cows of conglomerated parent companies. This clash chokes the griot and transforms the black journalist into a face for white hegemonic forces that can reach into the black community. From their experience of commodification, they learned that communalism is stripped away and the black press is reduced to the promotion of mass culture. These men would have their cultural roles questioned and confined by established, white privilege.

The griot is a respected voice of West African society (Diop, 2006; Williams, 2011). Black people in America still utilize this voice in everything from music to mass mediated situations (Asante, 1998; Baraka, 1963; Cummings & Roy, 2002; Floyd, 1995). The griot is facing new challenges where fluency in "European languages" is utilized (Diop, 2006, p. 130). The griot "counters the dominant European view that marginalizes the African American experience. It highlights the importance of knowledge rooted in African history and culture in

language...” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010, p.45). Kemet (1990) believed that in Africalogy, “language” is one of the “canons of proof and the structures of truth” (p.10).

Asante (2003) said that the language of the griot provides “first consciousness” to blacks, gives “liberation,” and allows blacks to construct society based on their “values” and “reality” (p. 8, 41, 42). He wrote: “Rhetoric is art and art is as much a way of knowing as science” (p. 42). He concludes: “The language of the oppressor is vile, corrupt and vulgar” and its use makes the “victim the criminal” (p. 43). In contrast, he asserts that the unchecked language of the griot should be “straightforward, blunt and uncompromising. It should say that one does not have to give up his or her heritage, ancestry, or color in order to exist in the world” (Asante, 2007, p. 137).

Today, the cultural studies tradition of Afrocentricity “embraces the diversity of the oral tradition and other African American communication characteristics” (Williams, 2011, p. 261). Afrocentricity informs black consciousness and non-western forms of agency in problem solving and communication (Asante, 2003; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Mazama, 2001). Littlejohn & Foss (2009) explain that Afrocentricity is a “rejection of historical marginality and racial otherness often presented in the ordinary paradigm of European racial domination” (p. 24). They suggest that “Afrocentrists articulate a counterhegemonic or domination-resisting view that questions the application of epistemological ideas rooted in the cultural experiences of Europe to Africans” (p. 24). They conclude that no “one can very easily engage in communication study of Africans without some appreciation of the authentic voices of Africans” (p. 24). These historic voices of the old griot get a modern feel both in dissemination and content in this study.

THE MODERN GRIOT

Both Davis and Dauphin played the role of modern griots in the cultural tradition of Afrocentricity but are not exempt from the stresses emanating from white managers. From a verbal and literary perspective they gave voice to their community. “Griot” is an African term for a respected information source in the community (Williams, 2011). Davis was a voice in broadcasting. As Williams suggested about the black community and where they look for leadership, some “folks turned to the church, other folks turned to the radio host” (2011, p. 261). Dauphin was a voice via print on the Internet. They both utilized their voice to positively impact their respective audiences in the black community.

As modern griots, Davis and Dauphin see themselves as grounded in the black cultural tradition. Asked about his background, Dauphin described himself as a black man from Haiti (personal communication, June 15, 2015). He said he had previous bosses while working at *Africana* who were white who had the approach “I don’t know anything about this. Teach me.” (personal communication, June 15, 2015). Davis described himself as a proud “product of the black community, a very pro-black family, a child of the civil rights movement” while working at WQUE (personal communication, August 2, 2015). Both Davis and Dauphin were proud of the media products they produced and how those products related to the harmony in the black community. Williams (2011) elaborated that harmony is about “interconnectedness, interrelatedness, sharing, and interdependence among black people.” (p. 260, 264). Harmony seeks to build emotional connection between audience members and create a more invested community. When asked what motivated him to take the job, Dauphin said that *Africana* provided “African-American-focused editorial as an act of service to that community” (personal communication, June 15, 2015). Gates’ and Appiah’s *Africana* once served as a channel to

culturally unify black readers and keep them informed in a scholarly context.

Like a black spiritual leader does for the community, the deejay ministers to the spirits of listeners. Davis' motivations were similar, performing the griot with a focus on community and his place within it through his orality in his broadcasting job. "We gave the community that we served, the African American community, we gave them a polished" work, he observed, "we gave them good product. We sounded good when we were out" in public appearances and contests in the community around the city (personal communication, August 2, 2015). With their presence came responsibility. "There were certain things we needed tell people," Davis observed, "like the best course of action to take" about emergencies facing the community. Radio is a channel with particular cultural resonance within the black community. It punctuates other parts of Afrocentricity that are not available to the written griot like rhythm and orality (Diop, 2006). This oral tradition is important to reaching the black community since slaves were forbidden from reading and had to communicate orally leading to a tremendous reliance on the spoken word (Williams 2011). Davis' performance of the griot embodied the rich history of the spoken word within the black community, and the responsibilities that went along with it.

Although both were capable of working with white managers, both men who are no longer in the industry, hungered for more control over the media landscape to dialogue with the black community. Dauphin said "black ownership is important," because "a lot of these organizations treat their black brands as ghettos within the organization." According to him:

You need mission. I find the black press to be a mission based press. I'll give you an example: I worked for a while at NPR. NPR is an amazing organization, but it's very difficult for NPR to do ethnic - NPR doesn't do advocacy. The black press's role as an advocate for its audience, if you have a certain definition of the journalism enterprise that's wholly focused on objective, transparent, non-ideological content, then if you come in here and you're like 'I'm here to help the black community,' you're actually at a fundamental point of conflict with the organization (G. Dauphin, personal communication, June 15, 2015).

Like Davis, Dauphin's written-griot also sought to inform the black community of problems that face it. In spirit with the oral tradition, these voices are utilized to tell those stories of people who cannot speak for themselves (Diop, 2006; Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003; Williams, 2011).

The griot functions best when interacting directly with the community in an attempt to achieve harmony, a role that Williams observes in black radio (2011). Whereas the broadcaster in white-targeted music radio is "discouraged from involvement with political issues," griots work to create and sustain the Afrocentric ideal of harmony. This ideal encourages action such as "call and response, humor, banter, vernacular use of language, and desires to share in the struggles and success of community members" (Williams, 2011, p. 264). Accordingly, Johns (2015) reported that "Nielsen's most recent study showed 87 percent of African Americans felt that ethnic recognition was important when it came to how companies spoke to the Black community" (p.1). When asked about how race influenced his company's culture, Davis suggested that he was hired by WQUE to perform this function; he was hired to be a more credible voice. He reflected:

Basically they were playing prominently black or urban music, but would not hire any black air personalities, and they eventually had to change that attitude when the time came for them to go out and do remotes and street presence type of things, they couldn't go everywhere. I won't say that they can't go everywhere but the black community resented that, and they understood, they got an understanding very quickly and hired a black program director who brought in a black staff (B. Davis, personal communication, August 2, 2015).

The griot is expected to have black skin which Davis provided to a recently all-white station. He would soon find that he sold his skin and lost his griot. His skin was a commodity bought by Clear Channel to access black markets. Dauphin and Davis' experience illustrate that there are limits to what can be bought and sold when white owners buy black media because the griot is fundamentally different from the white journalist or deejay.

SOUND WITHOUT SUBSTANCE

Performing what is seen as black-focused culture is not something exclusive to blacks. Broadcast outlets have promoted whites who have operated in the realm of black culture for years. White rappers like the Beastie Boys, Eminem, and Iggy Azalea, for example, mimic what is perceived to be black culture (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). Michael “Mike D” Diamond, Adam “MCA” Yauch, and Adam “Ad-Rock” Horowitz notoriously found the limit of their access to the black community when Ad-Rock said before a crowd at the Apollo Theater “All you niggers, wave your hands in the air!” and got booed off stage (Light, 1998). White rappers would not make this mistake again. Fraley (2009) even notes that Eminem has been called “dangerous” for his success in the black community (p.50). While Eminem argued that he understood the black community and “how the racist system in the U.S. operates,” Iggy Azalea has continually failed to acknowledge the structural problems set against the community that she mimics. Scholars describe her accent as “fake” and assailed white rapper Macklemore for “race mockery,” highlighting that Macklemore and Azalea capitalize on their mimicry of the black community but do not speak out about “systemic racism in the U.S.” (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015, p. 308, 309, 317, 321). How skin color authorizes who is allowed to say what, is a live debate in U.S. culture.

This perception of blackness by whites is manifested as “gangsta.” This art form “works in racist ways for whites” in the way “it helps a white audience to replicate in their heads a number of racist stereotypes,” and “confirms racist attitudes” to whites that black culture is naturally violent, overly sexual, and crassly materialistic (Brummett, 2014, p. 254, 261). This perception ultimately means that white privilege provides the ability to say judge gangsta as bad and what is white as “high and good” and have all too often “silenced” those who may provide

an alternative view (Brummett, 2014, p 260). Indeed, this was the style that Dauphin was expected to replicate. Similarly, Davis was also expected to reproduce these stereotypes as well by mixing critical commentary and playing more gangsta rap on white-owned WQUE. Such tension between commercialism and black consciousness has been in popular culture. Recently, for example, Basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar noted how Michael Jordan promoted “commerce over conscience” when selling his Nike shoes (Howard, 2015, p.1). Instead of condemning racism in political controversy, Jordan notoriously responded that “Republicans buy sneakers too.” (Howard, 2015, p.1). While the griot is supposed to represent the black community, white handlers force the individual to eclipse the consciousness raised by commentary. Davis was expected to hype or promote sports and rap in ways that aligned with Jordan’s perspective.

Such performance of blackness that is devoid of black political commentary eclipses critical consciousness. When Clear Channel flipped WQUE’s format and when AOL bought *Africana* they seemed interested in its form absent its function; they apparently did not want the advocacy provided by Davis or Dauphin. On the contrary, these men were placed into positions to represent white media owners; they said that their attempt to create harmony was constrained. Both men lost sight of how they could focus on what they thought was important for their black audiences. When asked about his perception of power in terms of editorial control, Davis said that he could not give the type of commentary that he wanted. “I got my brakes pumped on that on more than one occasion,” Davis said, when he could not deliver the type of commentary about the “right wing” that would politically resonate with the black community (personal communication, August 2, 2015). Davis found himself to be a prop for his white managers to wave in front of the black audience.

The white-owned black-media landscape is a world of white privilege and is often a place of comfort for white managers and discomfort for their black employees (Solomon, 1992). Managers often assert their dominance through how physical and symbolic resources communicate white privilege (Hill, 2008). White privilege in black radio is the cultural right to dictate blackness. When asked about how power was allocated within this media company, Davis reflected that managers at WQUE and Clear Channel tended to be “white - male whenever possible” and had a “We run this type of mentality” (personal communication, August 2, 2015). White privilege subordinated Davis’ ability to control his own voice. “Everything we did was second guessed,” he lamented. “They wanted to dictate how to handle every situation” even though “we are the ones who lived in the black community” (B. Davis, personal communication, August 2, 2015). The role of griot was eclipsed by an expected, artificial performance of blackness that created conflict. When asked how did he perceive his identity within the organization, Davis and other black staffers had to “stand” their “ground on cultural issues a lot because the general manager at the time was a guy who just didn't understand our culture... That was most of management everywhere except the programming side” (personal communication, August 2, 2015). Davis experienced a transformed world of black media that pitted the role of griot against the commodification of blackness. Davis was clear that the roles of power and dominance were stacked in favor of his privileged white managers. He and his fellow black griots may have had a voice to speak but they ultimately would not be able to dictate a message of harmony that resembled anything close to the Afrocentric ideal.

What would follow is a collision of griot performance and white privilege. When “Louis Farrakhan came to the University of New Orleans to speak and a lot of us decided that we were going to go,” Davis reflected, “we noticed that the word kind of spread and then the general

manager kind of started making snide comments, basically wanted to know, ‘Why we were going to see Louis Farrakhan?’” Davis continued, “I told him, ‘I am going to see him because I was off and wanted to see him.’” Davis said that the more he thought about his manager’s apparent opposition, the more his reaction became, “To hell with you I will see whoever I want to see after I am off.” In this conflict, Davis told of “one guy, in particular, who came back and told us that he was actually putting pressure on (the fellow employee) not to go. Of course we became defiant after we heard about that. We started to wear kuntas around the station” (B. Davis, personal communication, August 2, 2015). His reference to “kuntas” was shorthand for a traditional cloth worn by blacks which can be linked back to *Roots* (1977), a popular miniseries about the experience of a slave named Kunta Kinte. This reference highlights his experience with the commodification of black culture in which his public and private identities were expected to conform to Clear Channel’s white, corporate identity.

White privilege over the black press is often vituperative and unforgiving. When asked how race influenced power distribution in conflict, Dauphin said that he was stripped of agency and creative control. “So we got a new warlord and that warlord was interested in entertainment and that’s what it was supposed to be,” he reflected. The term “warlord” connotes a person who exercises more power than is offered by title or rank. Warlords appear in failed states after central governments collapse. This spirit captures how *Africana* changed in the wake of its merger with AOL. Dauphin elaborated on how he perceived his supervisors role within the organization:

White managers who think that they understand the black market and the black audience are incredibly dangerous. I’m not calling this person a racist- there’s no racist in the country who doesn’t think they don’t have a black friend who’s authorized their racism. So this is somebody who thought his entire worldview about black content, black market, black audience, had been authorized by his experiences making and producing hip hop, or working in that environment. This is somebody who is going to never be told, ‘hey maybe

you should just try something different or this audience might be different' (personal communication, June 15, 2015).

The scholarly culture that the Harvard University professors established for *Africana* collapsed. When told why he was selected to be interviewed he gave a view into what he saw his mission as the griot to be. "I wanted to do something that was just a little bit different" than arts and entertainment, Dauphin reflected, "and AOL and that manager just really thought the future of the black market business for AOL was entertainment and lifestyle, and not in news or commentary" (personal communication, June 15, 2015). Armed with white privilege, new management coerced a cultural shift that silenced black intelligentsia and substituted it for more vacuous content.

When white privilege appropriates black culture it lacks the consciousness of the black experience; it is noncritical and mimics the perception of black sound without its substance. White media owners are wary to access more critical black markets. Dauphin, for example, recaps his experience with the warlord:

I thought that he was just, excuse my French, an ass about it. So really, the conflicts were really around that. They had a specific point of view of what the voice [of the merged properties] should be, and my voice or sensibility did not fit that. So I was constantly being accused of not having the right sensibility for that product. This is case in point, the folks at [AOL] had a better line up with that sensibility because they were not necessarily news people. They were more lifestyle people. The ad sales folks in [AOL], they also were not interested in selling news or news products, they wanted to sell lifestyle and culture...It's like I was working at *Rolling Stone* or something with a bunch of white people pontificating about black music, or whatever (personal communication, June 15, 2015).

Dauphin's blackness was reduced to only the hollow performance that is perceived by privileged whites in control of black media. Privilege includes the leisure to selectively purchase what can be commodified for profit and what can be stripped away to maximize the largest and most lucrative markets.

DISCUSSION

Cultural studies is utilized because it presents itself as a moral discourse that promotes honesty in the Communication Studies inquiry in as far as issues of race, sex and ethnicity are concerned. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach that is easily applied in a Communication Studies context for this study and more than 19,000 others to date (Google Scholar, 2015). The cultural studies inquiry into the events around the fall of Hutchinson's WYLD to white-run WQUE provides an insight to the loss of Afrocentricity and most importantly the noteworthiness of that loss. Afrocentricity brings about agency and that is what griot-facilitator Hutchinson lost to the world of white privilege. Modern griots Davis and Dauphin would also be subjugated into the same world of white privilege and would ultimately lose. The cultural studies lens gives the reader insight into the narratives and helps us comprehend the scope of the decisions that were made by both men and the continuing bifurcation between black and white people. From a cultural studies lens, the black community is one that should be operating in the Afrocentric world. This is a worldview which is typically implied when black people say that they have pride in their community.

Davis and Dauphin said they were proud black men who are from proud black families. As media personalities, the fulfillment of their roles was a part of a long African tradition. Many of these traditions come out of West Africa. This is a rich tradition spanning thousands of years. This is a tradition of the griot being vocal in their community, providing voice to the community – through concepts like politics or economics; triumph and hardship; direction and truth – in a vernacular they feel that their community can understand. With this understanding comes an Afrocentric-based agency that empowers the community to be better and to act for itself in its own interest.

Instead, the white media conglomerates wanted Davis and Dauphin to promote their own interests with gangsta and sports-hype. In these crassly materialistic worlds, black women are routinely disrespected with undignified language. Black men are reduced to the roles of pimps and players. Black people live a life of drugs and are drug dealers, according to the gangsta style. There is nowhere safe in the inner city and blacks are always in trouble if found encroaching upon the white hinterland. This nightmare incites fear in white American suburban spaces when people of color are seen. No one wants these black gangstas around because the only habits they have are bad ones, non-white ones. Although rappers say they often rap what they see, the industry rewards those who live out their lyrics. They rap the wrong that they do. They glorify the power of preying on the weak. The gangsta is seen as almost acultural and amoral.

Davis and Dauphin were valuable to Clear Channel and AOL, respectively, because their past work gave them experience with the black community but in ways that respected the role of the griot. Because they both know how to cultivate black audiences, and thus markets, their labor was a commodity to the white-owned black media. They were both disappointed, however, to have their performances scripted by white managers who encouraged them to exploit their culture cache. Exploitation worked on two levels: first, the performances that the white managers expected to purchase from the workers, and secondly, the product that these former griots pushed onto their audiences before they departed because they sold it with the authority of the griot. This betrayal leads to two unfortunate outcomes. Gangsta-consciousness is reproduced in black listeners, and white consciousness reduces black people to the gangsta stereotype. Since young white men are the primary purchasers of gangsta music, it is no surprise that the genre reinforces racist stereotypes in the white psyche. Gangsta becomes the definition of what is black. When white men control the imagery of the black media and fill it with racist stereotypes, gangsta is

juxtaposed to whiteness and white supremacy is reinforced. Of course, this perspective is reinforced when young black men perform these crassly materialistic roles in public life which frequently is the substance of sports hype. The image of gangsta is normalized between communities.

Finally, the danger of the gangsta to the black community is all too obvious. The betrayal of the griot is now seen as the gangsta for the community. The gangsta is not about the betterment of the community. The gangsta becomes the destabilization of the brand of what black is. The performance of what gangsta is becomes the new black and when the griot dies the conscious community dies right along with it.

While the study does not have generalizability, it should be noted that there were as many as three other black media professionals who have similar stories who declined to speak on the record about their experiences. Although there are news accounts of their stories, they seemed reluctant to elaborate on those previously disclosed narratives because of fear of losing their current jobs or not being able to find new employment. Despite their reluctance, this study should be of interest to qualitative researchers because what is being communicated by seemingly black voices is inauthentic, given the trend of how mass consolidation impacted black-focused outlets. When black-focused news outlet are white owned, it is more likely that the mediated performances are pseudo presentations of blackness. The unauthentic communication is misleading and dangerous because it distorts public perceptions. In a communication context, it propagates falsehoods that the blackness we are seeing is in fact “real.”

Despite the ability to be able to generalize these results, this study is also important because blacks who work in communication must be careful what types of images they portray at the behest of white managers and their white privilege. Davis and Dauphin took different roads.

Dauphin quit AOL when it became apparent that he had lost his role of griot. Davis, however, became a version of the black stereotype. Though one may need the income that comes from having the job, sometimes it is better to quit. Sometimes difficult ethical decisions are required if black people are to change how their images are propagated in the media.

Finally, despite the ability to be able to generalize these results, much can also be learned from Hutchinson and loss of the radio war in New Orleans. Hutchinson was also a griot in his own right. His loss is not just one of a black Ivy League-level businessman to a white media conglomeration in broadcasting in a southern city. His was a loss of an informed black media culture of New Orleans to a white media conglomeration that sought dominance through gangsta entertainment and won big, while the black community lost its conscious voice, and with it the fight against the gangsta stereotype. Though he was not an on-air deejay, Hutchinson seemed to know what the griot meant to the black community. He appeared to try to give voice to the modern griot and therefore the black community. His voice offered community agency and respect. He promoted consciousness over commodification of black culture. Still, not only did he lose the radio war he also lost his station to his competitor— Clear Channel's WQUE. What Hutchinson's story should communicate is that white-run media companies, like Clear Channel, should be continually scrutinized for their media content. They should be especially scrutinized for their ethnic media content.

Many scholars have focused on diversity in the newsroom and even diversity in ownership, but not enough have focused on what happens when that diversity in the media is a black front for what is white run. What gets reported, what does not get reported and the way conscious black voices in media are muted should be further explored.

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APPENDIX A

Letter from Institutional Research Board



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board
One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

June 2, 2015

Jill Underhill, PHD
Communication Studies Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 749513-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Underhill:

Protocol Title: [749513-1] Perceptions of black journalists

Expiration Date: June 2, 2016

Site Location: MU

Submission Type: New Project APPROVED

Review Type: Expedited Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Vice Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire June 2, 2016. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Robert Redding Jr.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire

Demographic Information

What is your race?

What is your sex?

Where do you live now?

How long have you been working in the press?

Questions

1. I would like to have you first talk about the values and ideals that made you want to work in the black press. What motivated you to take a position with <publication>?

2. Can you describe your perception of the values that guided (name of periodical)?

- How were these values evident in the culture at (name of publication)?
- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

3. How do you think issues of race influenced the culture at (name of publication)? How did your own views on race intersect with the values and culture at (name of publication)?

- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

4. How did you perceive your identity within the organization?

- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

5. How did you first perceive your role(s) within the organization?

- Did this perception change?
- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

6. How did you perceive the identity of the publication that you worked in relation to its parent

company?

- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

7. How was power allocated within <publication>? Can you please discuss how you understood power dynamics within the work environment?

- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

8. What was your perception of your power in terms of editorial control and content decisions?

How was your power influenced by your position and your identity at <publication>?

9. How did you manage conflict related to your editorial decisions?

10. How do you think issues of race influences conflict about editorial content and decision-making?

11. How do you think issues of race influenced power distribution and conflict resolution at <publication>?

12. How did you first perceive your supervisors' role(s) within the organization?

- Did this perception change?
- Can you give a metaphor of how it was communicated?

13. I asked to interview you in particular because I already knew that you left (name of publication) because of a fallout with your supervisors. Walk me through one or more conflicts at (name of publication).

- What are your thoughts about how the stories or issues you were focused on influenced the conflicts you were having with others?
- How did your story angles influence the conflict?

14. Recreate the environment for me that led to your departure from (name of publication).

15. How do you think white media ownership influences the communication dynamics at black-focused publications?
16. What do you believe is needed for the Black press to thrive in the United States?
17. What advice would you give young professionals who will work for white-owned black publications?
18. Tell me about the situation you are in now, how does it compare or contrast to your experience at <publication>?