

**Teaching Media & Journalism at an HBCU:
Composing a Resounding Cultural Chord**

by

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In his study of mass communications and journalism departments at Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs), Jeter (2002) reports that approximately 40% of HBCUs have mass media majors. He also found that most of those programs were not accredited by ACEJMC, a national media and journalism accreditation body. Jeter's article from over a decade and a half ago raises some questions: Where are we now and what other helpful information can be gathered regarding the state of journalism and mass communication degree programs at HBCUs?

In our paper we update and expand on Jeter's work and seek a better understanding of what it means to be a journalism and media department at an HBCU. We do this especially in the current social context of #BlackLivesMatter, social justice and social injustices. We do this also in the context of (1) the U.S. Education Secretary saying HBCUs were "pioneers" in "school choice," (2) Corey Booker, a U.S. Presidential candidate, saying that HBCUs are not just for African Americans and (3) the current U.S. President finding good people on both sides of the tragedy in Charlottesville. This current context suggests that we should revisit and ask what is the role of a mass communications and journalism department at HBCUs and in American society today?

History and Definition of HBCUs

Even before the Civil War, historically black colleges had their beginning. "The story of the historically black college began in 1837, when Northern philanthropists and black Church leaders established what is now Cheyney State University" (Newkirk, 2014, p.13). After decades concerning the shameful conclusion of the American inheritance of slavery that ultimately culminated with the multitude of immeasurable horrors found within the American Civil War; the Northern notion of educating all *men* invaded the South. "At the close of the Civil War, the number and diversity of black colleges exploded as blacks and their supporters established hundreds of schools to educate the freedmen" (Newkirk, 2014, p.13).

The formulation of this early ambitious endeavor was not void of varying complications. However, "despite their limitations, early HBCUs provided an invaluable service to freedmen by educating the first generation of post-emancipation black leaders" (Newkirk, 2014, p.14). This education germinated throughout the newly freed American culture and "by 1950, HBCUs were responsible for educating 90 percent of the African-Americans in college" (Newkirk, 2014, p.14).

A U.S. Department of Education website references *The Higher Education Act of 1965* when defining HBCUs. An HBCU is "...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal **mission** was, and is, the education of black Americans..." The site follows this definition directly with the comment that "HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Mission Statements and Curricula

As in the corporate world, mission statements also guide educational institutions. A considerable amount has been published on educational mission statements from elementary education to higher education (e.g., Bebel and Stemler, 2013). Studies of HBCU mission statements are more rare. One such study, Augusta-Dupar (2008) is helpful, but focuses only on 10 HBCUs and has no coverage of mass communications programs. The study presented in this paper is of 106 HBCUs. We also offer a more critical analysis in the form of ideological criticism. As for studies of mass communication departments at HBCUs, those, too, are rare. The aforementioned Jeter (2002) article is the only publication and is restricted to determining how many mass communication programs are at HBCUs and the accreditation of those 40 programs. In this paper we study 80 mass communication programs at the 106 HBCUs. Since mission statements in academic departments are not standard, we study the curriculum of each mass communication program.

Color Blind Ideology: Theory

Bonilla-Silva (2017) asks “How is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant?” His short answer: color blind ideology. White Americans, he argues, do not see or are aware of the prejudice and systemic, institutional discrimination for which he provides ample evidence in his book. Many whites, and some blacks, are shaped by this ideology. While some minorities in U.S. American society may be aware and fight against it, at some point they “become resigned to their position,” he says. “Rather than totally controlling blacks’ field of ideas and cognitions, color-blind racism has confused some issues, restricted the possibility of discussing others, and, overall, blunted the utopian character of blacks’ oppositional views.”

According to Bonilla-Silva, the color blind ideology is expressed in frames, styles and stories. For our purposes here we will focus on frames and styles. Frames are “set paths for interpreting information.” One of the key frames identified by Bonilla-Silva is minimization of racism. It is a “frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances (‘It’s better now than in the past’ or ‘There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there’).” A color blind style is the “linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (or race talk)...” Race talk is often careful, hesitant and sometimes expressed in a coded language. “Color-blind racism’s race talk avoids racist terminology and preserves its mythological nonracialism through semantic moves such as ‘I am not a racist, but, ’...” Is it possible that these frames and styles of a color blind ideology, exhibit themselves in HBCU mission statements and curricula?

Ideological Criticism (of Artifacts/Texts)

Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist, provides the theoretical perspective applied in this paper, but we turn to communication scholars, specifically in the field of rhetoric, to provide guidance on how to do an ideological critique of ideological texts. In the present study the mission statements and curricula (course titles and descriptions) are the texts in which we look for ideology. Foss (2017), in her book on rhetorical criticism, includes coverage of ideological criticism. She first lays out key terms. An ideology is “a system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (Foss, 2017). Foss also draws upon the work of Cloud (1996) who defines hegemony as “the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people” (p. 117).

Foss then provides guidance on how to do ideological criticism. Ideological criticism has an overall purpose. “The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and ideologies that are being muted in it” (Foss, 2003). With this in mind, the common research questions that guide ideological criticism are (1) “What is the ideology manifest in this artifact?” (2) “Who are the groups or voices whose interests are represented, served, or favored in the ideology?” and (3) “What are the implications of the ideology for the world in which it participates?”

Questions and Answers

The research questions that guide this present study are:

RQ1: Do mission statements explicitly mention African Americans (history, culture, etc.)?

RQ2: Also, to what degree are African American oriented courses offered in the curricula (explicit vs. implicit)?

RQ1: Do mission statements explicitly mention African Americans (history, culture, etc.)?

Of the 106 HBCUs, only about half (51%) explicitly mention being focused on African Americans. Examples in mission statements include:

- “Grambling State University is a comprehensive, historically-black, public institution...”
- “...continuing to facilitate the empowerment, enhancement, and full participation of African Americans...” – Benedict
- “Building on its heritage as a historically black college...” – Delaware State

Of the 106 HBCUs, about half (49%) do not mention being focused on African Americans, thus making them indistinct from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) mission statements.

As Bonilla-Silva’s theory would predict, four universities seem to use terminology in their mission statements that Bonilla-Silva would call coded language. For example, “Norfolk State University, a comprehensive *urban* public institution, is committed to transforming students’

lives...” While technically the word *urban* is defined as something related to a city, it is also a word that denotes “popular black culture in general” (Oxford Dictionary).

RQ2: Also, to what degree are African American oriented courses offered in the curricula (explicit vs. implicit)?

First, it should be noted that we make a distinction between explicit coverage and implicit coverage of African Americans and African American culture in media courses. At an HBCU it is assumed, whether it is explicitly stated the course description or not, discussion of African Americans in the context of the course will come out, at least in classroom discussion. For example, there may be mention of Gordon Parks in a photography course or Ida B. Wells in a journalism course. While this implicit nature of this type of coverage is important and to some extent happens, what we are especially interested in is the explicit, planned coverage of African Americans in the curricula of media departments.

Of the 80 HBCUs with media programs **only about a third** (33%) had at least one diversity or intercultural course. It is assumed that African American culture would be covered as a part of these diversity and intercultural courses. Common titles for these courses are intercultural communication and diversity in the media. Of the 80 HBCUs with media programs **only about a third** (35%) had at least one course that focused on African Americans. Examples include:

- “The Black Press” – Alabama A&M
- “Blacks in the Media” -- Grambling State
- “African American Media” – Kentucky State
- “History of Black Cinema” – St. Augustine's

Discussion and Proposal

When doing an ideological critique one must ask: “What are the implications of the ideology for the world in which it participates?” (Foss, 2017). So, what does it mean that nearly 50% of HBCU mission statements do not mention African Americans and are thus indistinguishable from PWI mission statements? What does it mean to see that only about one-third of HBCU mass communications programs include a course that focuses on African Americans in media? As Foss notes the “primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and ideologies that are being muted in it” (Foss, 2003). The results presented above suggest an encroaching dominant ideology and muted voices. In harsh terms, there appears to be a move to white-wash HBCUs. Perhaps this is an incorrect interpretation of the data, but one worthy of some concern.

Whether this move is intentional or just evidence of an underlying, systemic, color blind ideology, it does not matter. It is something to be opposed. To provide opposition, we propose that mission statements explicitly state being a proponent of African American culture while at

the same time respecting overall diversity. Those are not mutually exclusive concepts. You can do one and the other. We can be a university that celebrates the rich history and current importance of black lives and at the same time be open to people and ideas from around the country and around the world.

We, too, propose a media curriculum that stresses an appreciation of African American culture. There should be more courses like “The Black Press” and “African Americans in the Media,” or even “African Americans on Social Media.” Along with these specific courses in a mass media curriculum, we lastly propose a media curriculum that educates on three tiers: (1) media-related knowledge and skills, (2) media-related theory and (3) media-related activism. We seek to hit all three notes at the same time, a resounding chord. The third note serves to counter the injustices and inequalities that still exist in the world for African Americans as well as others. The media activism component is modeled after the Howard University’s Law School which fought against segregation in the 1950s and 60s. We propose education with a purpose.

The weaponization of mass media within the HBCU curriculum has an extensive history. Notably when Charles Hamilton Houston, then dean of Howard Law School, and one of his most significant graduates, Thurgood Marshall, drove into the Deep-South equipped with a typewriter, still-camera, and a movie-camera in order to document the conditions of Black and White schools during the Jim Crow Era. Their effective use of mass media provided unarguable proof regarding the degree to which Jim Crow Laws were separate but far from equal.

As exemplified by the early success of Howard Law School, mass media can be used as the essential link between an educated/progressive front and the masses not yet directly exposed to certain societal truths. Without mass media communication, the voices of inspiring social-justice activists will fall of deaf-ears.

Fast-forward into the 21st century and you’ll find a diverging concusses regarding the idea that higher education establishments should consider themselves institutions for societal evolution. Pickard and Yang question the present role of the activist-scholar within the growing subfield of media activism. Noting that, “while activist scholarship has obvious virtues, it also brings with it obvious tensions that must be negotiated through radical reflexivity” (Pickard & Yang, 2017, p.4). This ‘reflexivity,’ however, can ultimately be viewed by some as stagnation.

With this historical and present amalgamation in mind rests the potential for HBCU mass communication departments. With the advancing notion that suggests HBCUs will not be able to compete within the competitive world of higher education; there is an opportunity (and a strong societal need) for HBCUs to embrace their past, present, and future prospects of advancing justice within our American culture. HBCUs have a unique historical perspective when compared to PWIs and that should be utilized by every HBCU institution.

However, this ‘utilization’ of perspective will require a new set of skills and theories to propel this form of activism through media. It is perhaps here, with the formation of these skills and theories, where ‘reflexivity’ should be utilized. But, ultimately, these newly

hypothesized skills and theories will germinate from the leadership of a strong departmental philosophical identity.

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EXTRA! EXTRA!

Discussion and Proposal

Let's close by asking a question.

Is this the right thing to do? Do we fall to the political and financial forces that lead to a white-washed mission statement and curricula or do we stand?

Do we accommodate or activate?

Accommodationist

Atlanta Compromise Speech

"Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. **In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.**"

Booker T. Washington

Activist

The Souls of Black Folk

The black men of America have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate,—a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader. So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. **But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds,—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,—we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them.** By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

W. E. B. Du Bois

Among the most pernicious of institutional impediments ingrained within early HBCU doctrine was to what degree (if any) should their institutions mirror that of the advanced White institutions that had been awarded a racially motivated historical head-start.

“Structurally, these (HBCU) institutions were authoritarian in nature with strict regulation of student and faculty expression. However, there always existed a group of student and faculty critics basically dissatisfied with the nature and direction of Black higher education. The substance of their criticism was the futility of the Negro pursuing an exclusively assimilationist philosophy of education. The irony of the Black college in this view was that its assimilationist philosophy was inappropriate for the segregated outside world.” (Rosenthal, 1975)

Such rejection of the assimilationist philosophy can be deemed championed by the leadership of Charles Hamilton Houston who, as dean of the Howard University Law School, established a campaign that ultimately furthered the development of a truly civilized American culture. This was accomplished by challenging paradigms formulated by the previously established hegemonic state. Houston, and his protégés, actively challenged the widely regarded notion that deemed ‘separate-but-equal’ acceptable within a truly advanced society (Nelson & Williams).