

walter velez

Blacks & Public TV

As squeeze play misfires, blacks challenge white control of tax-supported medium

There was probably no way the Corporation for Public Broadcasting could have anticipated the intensity of the reaction it would arouse when, in late 1972, it began to tinker with the future of two long-running black-produced and -oriented programs on national public TV. Before it knew it, it had drawn the combined wrath of the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Business League, PUSH, the National Urban League, the black press and an impressive number of other organizations and individuals, black and white.

If the Corporation had been better at crystal-ball reading, elementary logic would have told it to avoid giving the impression that it had taken unto itself complete responsibility for deciding what black programs would be shown on its medium. If it had not given that impression, it almost certainly wouldn't be worrying now about massive criticism from the black community. As it is, the Corporation has done an impres-

sive job alerting black Americans to the raw deal they have been getting on public TV.

When it comes to blacks, logic has never been the strong suit of the almost all-white Corporation. Created by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 to promote and help finance non-commercial radio and television, the Corporation has never been notable for displaying any real concern for blacks. Its own staff has no blacks in policy-making positions, and there is only one black, Dr. Gloria L. Anderson, chairman of the Chemistry Department at Morris Brown College, on the 15-member board of directors.

Blacks themselves made it easy for the Corporation to maintain its indifferent posture by their failure to be concerned about what was being shown on public television and whether the medium was dealing fairly with the black community. This attitude is explained, to some degree, by the fact that, compared with commercial television, public television comes off second-best. It simply

does not have the glamour or the resources of its commercial counterpart. As a result, it is often dismissed as relatively unimportant.

And why not? It has no blockbusting shows like "Sanford and Son," no entertainment spectaculars, no major league sports. It accounts for only 15 percent of the television programming in the country, spending less than five percent of the money that goes into television broadcasting.

Public television is a nonprofit operation, does not carry advertising, and depends for financial support on limited funds from public treasuries and the private sector, including businesses, foundations and individual contributors. In 1972, the operating budget for all of public television was some \$140 million.

In sheer weight of outlets, public television is also badly outdistanced. There are 700 commercial stations in the country but only 233 public stations. Still, with an audience in excess of 51 million viewers a week, public

television is not to be lightly dismissed as of no consequence at all.

Further, the basic purpose of public television is not to compete with the commercial product but to provide alternative programming that does not depend upon a mass audience for survival. Most important, since public television derives two-thirds of its financial support from tax monies, it is under a legal and moral obligation to provide the public with what it wants rather than with what some functionary decides it should have.

Blacks have never taken advantage of this latter fact. Where they have attempted to influence television, it has been commercial television that has received their attention. Public television has been left to go pretty much its own way, and that way has not been very good for blacks.

What brought this inattention to an abrupt end in December 1972 was the Corporation's announcement of the programs it intended to fund—with government money—in the 1973-74 television season. Missing from the list were the only two national black programs: "Black Journal" and "Soul."

The outcry was immediate. The Corporation protested weakly that it had not reached a final decision on the two programs but was studying the entire question of what form black programming should take. The damage was done. For the first time, the basic question of whether public television was treating blacks equitably was out in the open.

Several weeks earlier, Commissioner Benjamin Hooks, the first black member of the Federal Communications Commission, had charged that the question had to be answered in the negative.

Hooks accused public television of both "covert and overt" racism, noting that of 1,500 hours of national public TV programming, only 89 had been devoted to blacks. He warned, "I can never be the friend of public television that I would like to be until you get your own house in order."

As serious as these charges were, there was no response from the industry and no reaction from the public. It was as if Hooks had never opened his mouth. Presumably public television would have sailed on just as before had not the issue of the two black programs surfaced and opened up the door to a searching examination of the racial attitudes prevalent in public television. What emerged was a disturbing picture of a tax-supported institution operated as a white-male-dominated plantation with a shocking lack of concern and sensitivity about racial matters.

A demonstration of the manner in which the medium handles the allocation of broadcast hours is given by the "Special of the Week" and one-time-only special programming categories of public affairs programs aired over national television from October

1971 to October 1972. In 143 hours, there were only two programs that dealt with blacks. One featured a hairdresser, a singer, a singing group and a congressman. The other was on the Black Political Conference in Gary, Ind. That was it for blacks.

In the matter of employment, a recent survey by the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, disclosed that public television had been lagging behind commercial television with minority levels of 9.2 and 10 per cent, respectively. In the upper four categories of television employees (officials and managers, professionals, technicians and sales workers), minority people accounted for eight per cent of the total in the commercial ranks but, excluding the non-applicable category of sales workers, only for seven per cent in public TV. "In most instances, public television licensees appear to have made only minimal progress in improving the employment opportunities for minority group members," the survey commented.

Just as discouraging is the level of minority membership on the local boards of directors for the public stations. These boards are required by the Federal Communications Commission and are presumed to reflect the communities being served. But very rarely was this true of any of the stations studied by the Office of Communication. Across the board, minority membership averaged only seven per cent.

With such a dismal record, the Corporation—the most important single entity within public television—was hardly in a position to counter the storm of criticism over its high-handed treatment of "Black Journal" and "Soul." If those two programs disappeared, blacks would be left with nothing.

Particular interest was focused on "Black Journal." Unlike "Soul," which was primarily an entertainment vehicle, this program dealt on a substantive basis with controversial issues from a black perspective. Its producer, Tony Brown, had become a thorn in the side of the establishment with his often bitter

Who Watches Public TV?

A very classy audience, it seems. According to a survey commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, public TV attracts 55 per cent of all Americans who make more than \$15,000 and 69 per cent of the nation's college graduates but only 28 per cent of those who didn't finish high school and only 29 per cent of the people who earn less than \$5,000.

About "Black Journal," the survey showed that it has a larger black audience than any other program on public TV. Some of the statistical snapshots of black viewers of "Black Journal" viewers were: Their median income is \$9,393, or almost half again as much as that of black Americans generally; 64 per cent of them graduated from high school; 69 per cent are married; and 74 per cent are employed.

attacks against what he described as racism in public broadcasting.

It was no secret that powerful forces in the White House were critical of "Black Journal" over what they regarded as its anti-administration attitude. With the membership of the Corporation's board recently changed to give the Republicans an eight-to-seven majority and a Nixon appointee Henry Loomis as its new president, the stage was set to dump the program.

Where the Corporation made its major mistake was in underestimating the ruckus it would stir up when it began to ease "Black Journal" off the air. It did not realize the importance blacks attached to "Black Journal," nor the even greater importance to them of the threat that a white-dominated, publicly-funded institution might get away with deciding, all on its own, what was best for black people.

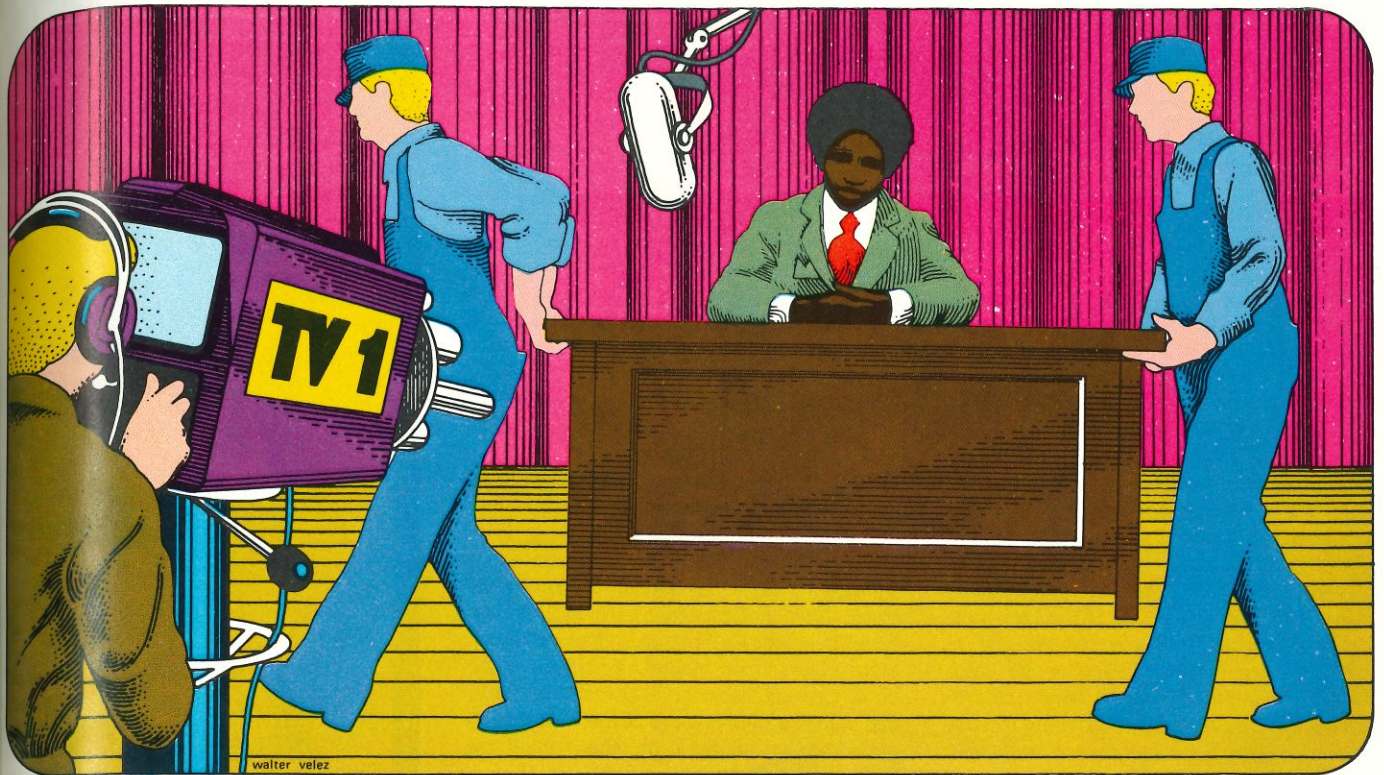
From such diverse sources as the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Newspaper Publishers Association, the Urban League, local chapters of "Friends of Black Journal," other organizations and scores of irate individuals the voice of the black community was heard, questioning, for the first time, the racial policies practiced by the Corporation. Under heavy public pressure and with a picket line outside its headquarters in Washington, D. C., the Corporation announced last February that "Black Journal" would be refunded for the 1973-74 season at its former level of \$345,000. Hard on the heels of this reversal the Corporation made a commitment that in the future a cross-section of the black community would be approached to determine what directions black programming should take. It also announced that an additional \$305,000 was available for such programming.

This was followed by the unveiling of a project under which 15 minority people will be employed in upward-mobile positions at local public TV stations, with the Corporation paying half their salaries for a year and the local outlets picking up the other half. Additional internships of this nature have been promised for the future.

Finally, the Corporation was directed by its board of directors to take positive steps toward instituting an "affirmative action plan" for equal employment opportunity. As a first step, W. Clinton Powell, a former senior Foreign Service officer whose last assignment had been deputy chief of mission in Niger, has been named a special assistant to the head of the Corporation with specific responsibility for implementing such a plan.

This does not mean that the struggle for an effective black presence in public television is over. Indeed, the battle is just beginning.

The future of "Black Journal" is still in doubt. In each of the past three years, the Ford Foundation provided an additional



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\$496,000 for the program, but it has not made this sum available for the current season, following a decision that it would no longer fund specific television programs. The Corporation has refused to add to its original commitment of \$354,000; as a result, "Black Journal" will be able to produce only about one-third of the programming that it offered last season.

"Soul" is no longer a regularly scheduled program, having received only a Corporation grant of \$175,000 for two one-hour specials. Thus, out of a total program budget of \$13 million, the Corporation has allocated \$520,000 for black programming. An additional \$345,000 has been allocated for a new and yet-to-be-seen program, "Interface," which will explore the relationship of blacks and whites. This, however, can hardly be called black programming, since it is not designed to present a black perspective.

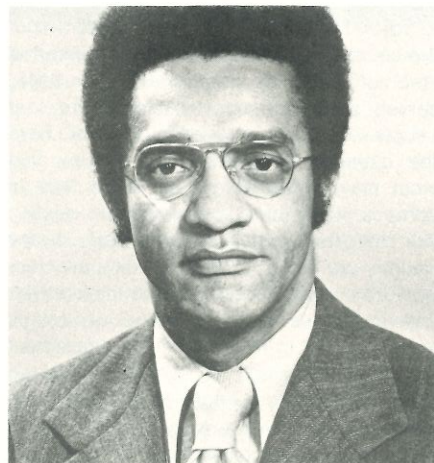
If the past months have taught us anything, it is that blacks are going to have to keep the pressure on public television if the medium is ever to be responsive to their needs and wishes. A step in this direction was taken last November, when a number of black spokesmen—including Rev. Jesse Jackson, of Operation PUSH, Berkeley G. Burrell, president of the National Business League, Tony Brown, Richard Kennard, president of Capital Formation and Congresswoman Yvonne Burke—addressed an open meeting of the board of directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to criticize the handling of black programs.

When it was over, the weary board members went into private session to emerge a short time later with the announcement that they had set up a new committee to obtain funds for minority and other programming.

Whether anything will come out of the committee, whether the Corporation will "get the message" and move to correct its faults, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the opportunity clearly exists for local groups to apply pressure on their own hometown stations to reform their ways.

Business interests concerned with the de-

Because 'Black Journal' insists on first-class citizenship in television, we are a threat
Tony Brown



velopment of stronger communities should take a more active role in insuring that public TV serves all people equally. Acting in concert with other groups, these interests could play a key role in opening up a medium that has the potential to become a powerful and effective method of communication for minority people. It is somewhat ironic that, while in many communities blacks are wrapped up in the still developing world of cable TV, they continue to ignore a medium that is already operative. Cable TV is important, of course, and blacks should be concerned that they receive their just share of the bonanza it promises to produce. But to allow public TV to exist as it has in the past is a waste of available resources.

Finally, some minority business firms might consider the possibility of funding specific television programs. It is highly probable that within local communities there are minority issues and institutions that deserve the kind of attention television can focus on them. With most local stations hard pressed for programming funds, the chances are excellent that they would be receptive to additional sources of programs.

The opportunities are there, and the future is clear. Unless blacks act in their own interests, public television is going to continue to be the almost all-white affair it has been so far. □

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