Chapter 5
The History of Black Journalism Is the Future for All Journalism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how journalism programs at historically Black colleges and universities inform the future of majoritarian media programs. Only after a series of highly publicized cases of police abuse were caught on camera did many mainstream journalism schools reconsider whether students should be more skeptical of the official stories of police encounters with the public. Because more people of color lack an interest in maintaining the status quo, HBCU students can more effectively interrogate elected officials and investigate/report on institutional racism than journalism programs at primarily white mainstream universities. The chapter intersects with the George Floyd case and weaves through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on its way to wondering whether all future journalists who report on police would be better served being trained by outsiders.

IMAGINE . . .

There was a time when Frank Matera thought all this new technology would mean being a multi-platform news reporter would be easier on him. When his predominantly white institution (PWI) partnered online with Benson College, a small, Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in Columbia, South Carolina, the union qualified for a significant government grant to purchase the latest in augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) digital systems for both journalism programs.

As he was trained in J-school, Frank could see real-time, "heads up" data displays through his fully integrated smart glasses at crime scenes that allowed him to record everything in the highest resolution. Frank's video stream from his smart glasses flowed directly onto his personal server to be cut up later for broadcast news and digital packages. Just by waving his two fingers in the air, Frank used a

controller-glove to scroll through the options on his smart glasses to augment his reality with data features such as online videos and available public document information pertaining to the victim and the alleged perpetrator. More importantly, Frank opened video and text files concerning the past professional behavior of the police officers investigating the scene to get a better gauge on their trustworthiness.

Growing up in a post-George Floyd era, Frank thought he was appropriately suspicious of the ability of police authorities to give an unbiased report of any incident but that changed after journalism program partnered with an HBCU. The more he studied journalism with his fellow virtual students at Benson College hundreds of miles away, the more he appreciated an African-American's "outsider looking in" perspective with regard to the law enforcement.

Because his PWI's faculty was five times the size of Benson's, in the beginning, Frank just assumed that Benson would be the primary beneficiary of the partnership. The rumor was his administration agreed to teach HBCU students online simply to qualify for a government grant, and he felt okay about that. In hindsight, Frank cringed at how readily he accepted this "great white father" model and casually viewed his new African-American colleagues as somehow "less than."

Not long after the partnership program started, Frank realized that the PWI perspective on journalism claimed to be about challenging the status quo, but in the end, didn't really understand what that meant. While all journalists are taught to be responsible and ethical in their reporting, the way they are trained to report on police incidents can shape the sources they rely on and trust the information they choose to report. Frank had been taught to use police reports as they would other fact-based sources of information. However, years after George Floyd, and despite Congress' "Police Transparency Act" which made it criminally punishable for any law officer to turn off the dash cam on their cruiser or their body cam's audio or video, investigations into police brutality reports and bystander cell phone videos showed the increased surveillance of police forces had not yet fully dissuaded some officers from thinking of themselves as administrators of street justice instead of collectors of testimony and information to turn over to prosecutors.

Forced transparency allowed the questioning of events that had eluded critical perspectives, but Frank knew the majority of PWIs were still refusing to ask the key question that HBCU journalism programs had been centered on for decades: To what extent does traditional, commercially conscious journalism contribute to systemic racism? How students are taught to report on crime is vital because most first-time journalists begin as crime reporters and they may not be equipped to understand a given situation's nuances. Inaccurate or incomplete reporting of an event by mass media provides an imprimatur to the news consumer on false, self-serving governmental narratives thereby fortifying the perpetuation of systemic racism, sometimes even when the professed intention was to expose it.

As a young professional, Frank used his insights gained by studying with African-American journalism students at Benson to create a point of differentiation from other PWI job applicants who were not familiar with issues that minorities in the United States face when dealing with law enforcement. The HBCU exposure taught Frank how to actively question and evaluate the signs of underlying systemic racism in the behavior and response of the legal system. While the AR and VR innovations Frank learned in school provided data support and indeed made the downstream packaging of video, audio, and print

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