

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

“Black men are the least cuddly people in our society,” states Joe Jones, president and CEO of Baltimore’s Center for Urban Families. Jones’ comment speaks to the stereotypical perceptions of black men and boys held by the larger public and reinforced by mainstream media. Indeed, research by The Opportunity Agenda shows media depictions of African-American men and boys tend to be distorted. Black males are overrepresented in media depictions of poverty, crime, and violence and underrepresented as fathers, workers, users of technology, and problem solvers.⁸ Trabian Shorters, founder of BMe, observes, “In the public theater, black males are cast as detrimental to America’s future—a threat that must be dealt with lest it ruin things for all of us. That infectious lie must stop being told.”

A major component of improving life outcomes for black men and boys, then, is changing the narrative to one that lifts them up as assets in society. Indeed, several foundations—the California Endowment, Heinz Endowments, and Open Society Foundations among them—have prioritized shifting perceptions as a core part of their strategy for supporting black men and boys. The Heinz Endowments’ African American Men and Boys initiative, for example, has conducted an audit of local Pittsburgh news reporting and has funded documentaries that challenge common media images of black males.

ASSETS-BASED FRAMING

Shorters describes assets-based framing as a fundamental shift in approaching this work, one with wide-ranging implications. Assets-based framing is about opportunity, rather than crisis, he contends. Describing crisis frames as

“old and tired,” Shorters argues that an assets frame “lets you imagine and literally turn on the part of your mind that’s creative.” That frame was essential to the development of BMe, an organization that aims to foster caring and prosperous communities by recognizing and supporting the work of engaged black men in those communities. Says Shorters, BMe “doesn’t start with a problem we want to fix but with a vision we want to build towards.”

As foundations and their nonprofit partners develop their strategies and programs, these nuances matter because of the larger shifts in perception that can result. Despite the difficult life circumstances many black males face due to lack of opportunity and structural racism, Bob Ross, president of the California Endowment, says we as a society ultimately need to believe that “black males are needed for our future rather than [being] throwaway and disposable.”

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Trabian Shorters, founder, BMe

MEDIA TRAINING AND OUTREACH

To advance an assets-based frame, more attention needs to be paid to engaging journalists, who play a large role in influencing how the general public views black males. At the forefront of this effort is the Maynard



QUESTION BRIDGE: BLACK MALES uses video to capture the reflections of black men about their identities. Since the project's inception, more than 1,500 men have participated across geographic, economic, generational, educational, and social boundaries. The project invites the public to explore and engage via multiple live and virtual platforms, including an interactive website, a mobile app, gallery kiosks, live events and dialogues, and a Question Bridge Curriculum for high schools.

Institute for Journalism Education, which is creating a framework to help journalists develop accurate, balanced, and humanizing stories about black males.

The Institute's president, Dori Maynard, says that even well-meaning journalists who want to cover issues of disparity with sensitivity can present stories in ways that immediately lose their audience. She suggests leading with a story of success or finding an area of commonality, rather than the stark disparity, to engage an audience more effectively. Alexis McGill Johnson, executive director of the American Values Institute, agrees and states that such stories "help bring black men and boys into the fold of the national community, so that we care about them [and] we see our fate as linked to theirs."

To this end, those working in the field of black male achievement must be trained to communicate their message effectively. Terms such as "targeted universalism," "social determinants," or even "resilience" pervade the field and do not resonate with journalists trying to tell a compelling story. Efforts to support the field in its communication efforts are emerging and include a messaging memo released by The Opportunity Agenda. The memo lifts up ways to change media coverage and public perceptions of black males.

With the increasing prevalence of multimedia and digital platforms, Maynard and others describe the media world as ripe for disruption, one that provides an opportune moment for

creating new paradigms for engagement. Potent examples of using media creatively to project more complete and humanizing portrayals of black men include Question Bridge: Black Males, a transmedia project to represent and redefine black male identity, and the *Washington Post's* multimedia feature called BrotherSpeak (see sidebar on p. 40).

IMPLICIT BIAS

Closely related to changing the narrative is the issue of implicit bias and how we as a society process and understand race and racism. As McGill Johnson puts it, "However many young black men you educate and help build out their life opportunities, those opportunities diminish every time they walk down the street, because there are so many micro-aggressions against them. If we really want to change their lives, we have to change perception."

The underlying issues of discrimination and racism that contribute to negative perceptions of black males, however, are difficult to tackle. As Rahsaan Harris states, the biggest challenge is "using language that doesn't get people to shut the door in your face." Many of our interviewees believe the growing body of research on implicit bias can help catalyze more meaningful conversations, because it allows individuals to understand the unconscious and subconscious ways in which race, color, and gender influence perceptions and behaviors. Across sectors, such as law enforcement, media, and education, organizations report that an understanding of implicit bias gives people a way to discuss the complicated and difficult experiences with race without feeling

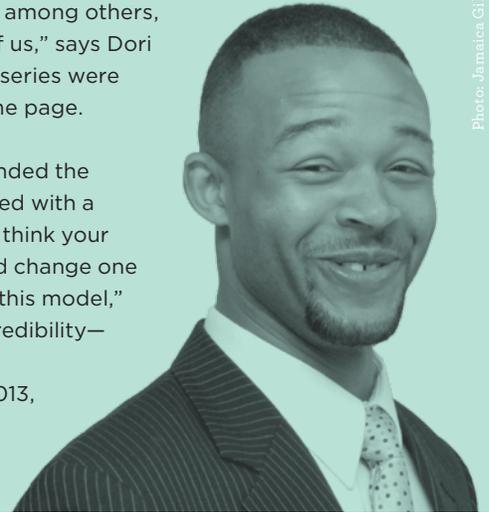
BROTHER | SPEAK

The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education has been working for nearly 40 years to change media narratives about diverse populations. In late 2012 and early 2013, the Institute collaborated with the *Washington Post* on a particularly successful project, BrotherSpeak: a three-part video series “telling the inner lives of black men through the eyes of black men.”

Photo: Jamaica Gilmer & Frontline Solutions, LLC

BrotherSpeak featured the voices of black male activists, artists, and students, among others, around three themes: fear, love, and dreams. “They’re words that apply to all of us,” says Dori Maynard, “but are rarely applied to black men in the media.”¹⁰ Videos from the series were featured on the *Washington Post* website, even spending some time on its home page.

But the impact of the project extended beyond the videos. A Twitter chat expanded the conversation to more than 14 million feeds. The hashtag #brotherspeak resonated with a wide audience that shared responses to questions like, “As a black man, do you think your dreams are different than those of other men? Other people?” and, “If you could change one thing about the media depiction of black men, what would it be?” “We created this model,” explains Maynard, “that married the best of traditional media—its gravitas, its credibility—with the best of social media—its ability to reach out and create community.”¹¹ The hashtag continues to appear on Twitter since the chats began in January 2013, and the video series remains a powerful piece of media portraying black men honestly—with emotions, depth, and their own voices.



defensive. Indeed, Advancement Project, the Association of Black Foundation Executives, and the Oakland Unified School District’s African American Male Achievement program all report using research on implicit bias in their outreach with colleagues and constituents.

MARKET RESEARCH

Changing large-scale public opinion is no easy task, but a couple of interviewees noted that it is in fact possible. Joshua DuBois, a media pundit and former White House advisor, says, “It’s a slow process, but it is one that is very much doable. The negative frames do exist. They are dominant, but that’s not the end of the story.”

As an example of a successful large-scale shift in public opinion, in 1996, polling data showed that nearly 70 percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage; by 2013, a majority of Americans supported same-sex marriage.⁹ This change has been attributed to years of organizing and a coordinated, strategic communications effort by the LGBTQ community.

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Emmett Carson, president and CEO, Silicon Valley Community Foundation

One of the lessons to be learned from the work of the LGBTQ community is the importance of testing which messages resonate with the general public (“marriage equality”) and which do not. Advancement Project, in its work on school discipline, regularly holds focus groups and conducts polling to determine what messages will shift public opinion, help mobilize communities, and advance organizing efforts to change harsh discipline policies.

Emmett Carson, president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, believes this type of communications and marketing research needs to be done more widely in the field. The right messaging, he says, should make people understand why it is in their own

self-interest to oppose policies that negatively affect African-American males. Carson asks, “What are the messages that will enable the broader community to say, ‘That’s not good for America. That’s not good for me?’”

RESOURCES



Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor

National Black Child Development Institute

Report challenges the prevailing discourse about black children by lifting up their strengths and assets.



Black Male Re-Imagined I Black Male Re-Imagined II

American Values Institute, Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, Open Society Foundations

Two summits of artists, media influencers, foundation executives, and advocacy organizations address what it takes to transform negative perceptions of black males.



Messaging Memo: Changing Media Coverage and Public Perceptions of African-American Men & Boys

The Opportunity Agenda

Tool provides messaging advice for changing perceptions of African-American males.



Opportunity for Black Men and Boys: Public Opinion, Media Depictions, and Media Consumption

The Opportunity Agenda

Report presents findings from three studies: literature review on media images of black males, public opinion research review, and media consumption trends among black men.



Portrayal and Perception: Two Audits of News Media Reporting on African American Men and Boys

Heinz Endowments

Report’s findings highlight a media scene in Pittsburgh that underrepresents black males, especially in terms of their positive achievements.



Transforming Perception: Black Men and Boys

Executive summary presents findings from social psychology and neuroscience to explain how emotions about race shape behaviors and biases.

For additional resources, visit: bmafunders.org/beloved-community