

# Opinion

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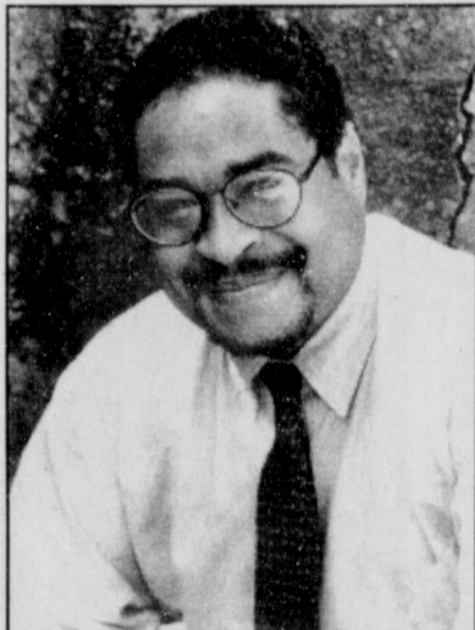
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## BET and Viacom: The New businesses of America

By FRED MCKISSACK

In the 1976 movie "Network," talk show host Howard Beale tells his audience that the world is neither in the post-industrial



Fred McKissack

age nor the information age.

"We are now a corporate society, a corporate world, a corporate universe," he says. "This world is a vast cosmology of small corporations orbiting around large corporations orbit-

ing around larger corporations who, in turn, revolve around giant corporations, and this whole endless, eternal, ultimate cosmology is expressly designed for the production and consumption of useless things."

Some 24 years later, BET Holdings II, a small corporation that owns several entertainment-related brands, including 20-year-old Black Entertainment Television, will now be orbiting around Viacom, the world's third largest media company. Viacom paid \$3 billion for BET in early November.

BET Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Robert L. Johnson and Summer Redstone, Viacom's CEO seem to be all smiles and love about the deal. Johnson says that BET has found a perfect home at Viacom, whose roster of brands includes CBS, MTV, UPN and Simon & Schuster.

Some black leaders—including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and

NAACP President Kweisi Mfume—have expressed angst that BET was swallowed by Viacom. This is laughable on several levels. First, Johnson sold the company to Viacom; fellas, this wasn't hostile takeover. And, for all the carping about black independent television vanishing because of the merger, let's face facts about what BET is and is not.

While 90 percent of African Americans who watch television know the brand name BET, Nielsen ratings show BET's prime time shows garner around 1 percent of the black population, or a little more than 350,000 people. This despite the fact that BET can be seen in more than 60 million homes.

Why so few viewers? Simple: The network stinks; and it has stunk for a long time.

Well, not everything has smelled. The news division (especially Tavis Smiley and Ed Gordon) has been the high point. And in mid-November, the network announced that its film division, in association with PBS,

had begun production work on

"A Huey P. Newton Story."

The film is being directed by Spike Lee, who will bring to it a level of cinematic expertise the subject matter and audience so richly deserve.

Generally, however, BET has been the king of black mediocrity in the corporate-entertainment complex. Let's not forget that earlier this year BET Holdings II killed Emerge, a truly independent and intellectual magazine.

In his 1999 book, "Color Bars: Television's Diversity Dilemma," former BET executive Tom Jacobs scolds Johnson for building and maintaining his empire on the electronic equivalent of junk mail.

From sexually explicit videos, featuring epic levels of misogyny and violence, to near endless comedy showcases and celebrity infotainment, BET has never lived up to the promise that people believed was inherent in its charter, a network where blacks could see reflections of themselves in mirrors not controlled by media outlets that were overwhelmingly white

male and tacitly unsympathetic.

"Bob Johnson has made it abundantly clear that he feels no responsibility to use his business a vehicle for delivering positive messages or socially responsible programming to Black America," Jacobs writes.

Johnson apparently also feels no responsibility to the people that work for him, as witnessed in his insistence on not paying equitable wages to comedians who whooped it up on one of the network's staples, "Comic View."

These brothers and sisters were making \$150 per appearance, while BET was making millions in ad revenue. This should have caused a ruckus among black leaders and the masses, yet there wasn't a peep. If this had been a white-owned network, there would've been a boycott.

BET is proof that the business of business is the production and consumption of useless things.

Fred McKissack covers culture for The Progressive magazine. He can be reached at pmproj@progressive.org.

## Area Residents Urged to Speak Out Now

"Now is the perfect time to get involved," said State Sen. Margaret Carter, regarding proposed laws that would positively and negatively affect all Oregonians, especially those in North and Northeast Portland. With the Oregon Legislature in its opening days, citizen input in Salem is needed now to make informed choices, Carter said.

Sen. Avel Gordly, D-Portland, also wants to emphasize how crucial this stage of the legislative process is for people in contacting their representatives and senators.

"The legislature convenes only six months, every two year cycle. Now is the perfect time during the session for citizens to get involved in these important issues," Gordly said.

Near the top of the list of concerns are proposed cuts in senior and disability services. All told, the state's long-term care system would be reduced by more than \$93 million. Thousands of senior and people with disabilities would lose the assistance that helps them remain independent in their own communities.

"What the legislators in this building need to hear from their constituents is to bring back continuing service levels for these programs so that we can provide essential support to seniors and those with disabilities," Carter said.

A proposed Oregon Children's Plan has also received a great deal of attention. The program spends over \$60 million to screen all first births in Oregon for an identifiable set of risks that can negatively affect a child's life.

Another important initiative would require insurance com-

panies to provide coverage for birth control expenses.

Women pay significantly more in health care costs than men, mainly because of the cost of contraceptives.

Another important health care initiative is a proposal to increase insurance coverage for mental health issues to a level equal to funding for physical health problems. Included in the category of mental health issues are alcohol and drug dependency.

Carter continually has stressed the importance of this issue.

"We need to recognize that mental health problems are just as vital to address and take care of as physical health problems," Carter said.

An excellent source of up-to-date information on the Legislature is available from Oregon On-Line at [www.state.or.us](http://www.state.or.us).

Comments can also be left for any legislator at no cost by calling 1-800-332-2313. In order to speak directly with a senator or representative, call 503-986-1950 for Republican lawmakers and 503-986-1700 for Democrats.



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