

"Don't Look this 'Gift Horse' in the Mouth"

By B. B. Robinson

African-Americans must view the arrival of the new TV One cable channel as, at best, a "gift horse" with mixed blessings.

The new cable television network recently began broadcasting nationwide primarily on cable networks in urban centers with sizeable African-American populations. Developed mostly by the largest African-American radio network (Radio One) and the leading cable television company (Comcast Corporation), TV One will operate 24-7, presenting a mix of all the African-American programming that its \$135 million in start-up capital can purchase.

The downside to this gift is that the programming TV One has to offer isn't good enough. The Washington Post magazine TV Week reports the following about the new network: It will feature reruns of former network series, new programs of the comedy and talent-search variety and no news programs. It also will avoid covering political issues with a passion.<sup>1</sup>

We should welcome a new African-American television network. However, rather than following in the footsteps of Black Entertainment Television by providing programs that do not elevate, this new network should compete with BET for the African-American audience by providing high-quality programs that produce optimal outcomes for African-Americans and don't have deleterious effects.

In her 1994 book, *Television's Imageable Influences*, Dr. Camille Cosby discusses the adverse impact of African-Americans imbibing the stereotypical images of characters such as J.J. from the program "Good Times" - a show which will be featured prominently on TV One.<sup>2</sup> These types of programs do more harm than good.

Do African-Americans really need more African-American comedy and talent-search programs? The networks should be able to use the creative minds of African-Americans to produce new, high-quality and interesting programs that entertain without focusing on comedy or music.

Why will there be no news and no politics on the new network? We live in an information society. Without news and other forms of information, the African-American audience will be absolutely lost - out of the picture. No political coverage is absurd. African-Americans have achieved so much through politics and government. Ignoring these important vehicles of progress is a huge step backward. Is it TV One's goal to create a headless and strategy-less African-American populous?

TV One's likely response is that African-Americans have a record of viewing the programs that it plans to broadcast, and that this programming must be offered to attract sufficient advertisers so it can remain afloat. They might also say they don't have the resources to present the best programs for African-Americans.

TV One executives should realize the 25-to-54 African-American female audience it is targeting is changing. African-American females with significant discretionary income are increasingly rejecting stereotypical images of the J.J. variety and they don't seek entertainment from ridiculous comedies and music talent-search programs. They enjoy news, and they have strong political interests.

If TV One does not have the resources to present quality programs, then maybe it should consider the approach used by BET when it was first launched - broadcasting only evening programs. TV One could conserve considerable resources, which could be directed toward acquiring higher-quality programming, if it backed off on its plans to broadcast 24-7.

Given BET and TV One, African-Americans must remain aware of the increasing attempts to fragment and segment media audiences and the related implications.<sup>3</sup> Remember that African-Americans advocated for a desegregated nation for much of the last century, and significant progress has been made on this front. Care should be taken to prevent the spread of segregated TV, especially if the networks to which African-Americans are steered offer mainly pernicious programs.

In the case of TV One, African-Americans should be cautious not only about "looking this 'gift horse' in the mouth," but also about looking at it at all.

Footnotes:

1 See Michael E. Hill's article, "TV One Debuts on Cable, " in the January 18-24, 2004 issue of *TV Week*, pp. 6-7.

2 See *Television Imageable Influences: The Self-Perceptions of Young African-Americans*, published by University Press of America, Incorporated, Lanham, Maryland.

3 See a discussion of this topic in Joseph Turow's 1997 book, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*, published by the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.

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