

# The message behind the medium

By Dwight Whyllie

Commenting on the state of Canadian media, a researcher once said if a visitor to Canada turned on the television in a hotel room, he or she might easily conclude that the country had no racial minorities except for the odd Black athlete or entertainer, and the occasional Native banging a drum.

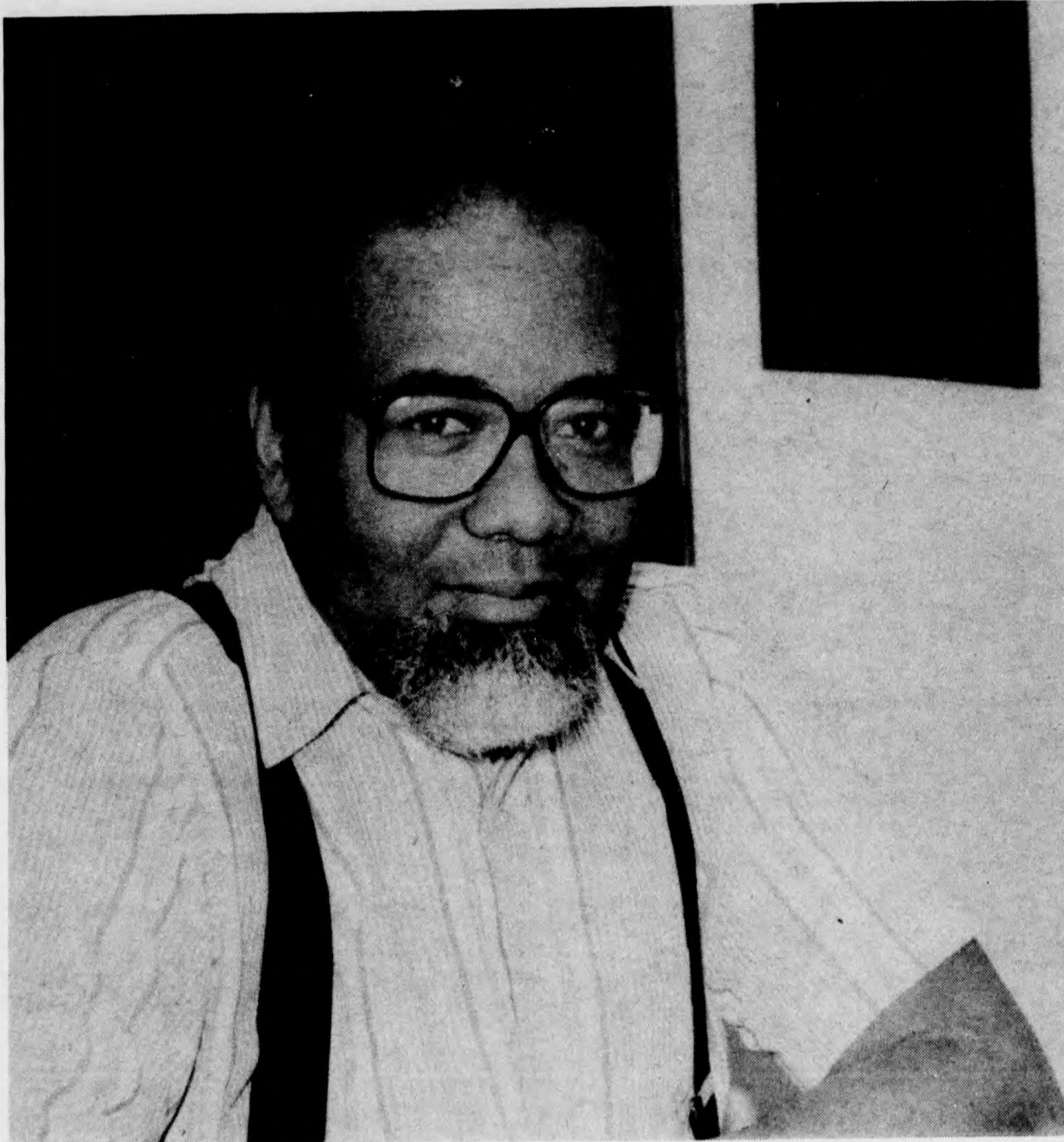
Six years ago, when the comment was made, none of the news readers on television were Black or Chinese or anything other than white; only the occasional reporter had a face or voice which looked or sounded different from southern Ontario English or southern Quebec French.

The Canadian picture has changed somewhat in the past few years. We see someone like Noelle Richardson anchoring CBC News from Toronto, or Ian Hanomansingh reporting from Vancouver for the National, and JoJo Chinto on City TV. Or you may hear me on CBC Radio News. But we are still the exceptions.

With print media, the story is even more discouraging. Because there is anonymity, it is difficult to know what the racial and cultural mix is. In fact, there are proportionately fewer minorities working at newspapers or magazines in Canada than in electronic media.

I remember six years ago covering the Grenada elections, after the coup and intervention, for *Macleans*. Out of curiosity I asked about minority editorial staff. I was told rather sheepishly that there were some Italians and Jews and the odd Greek or Eastern European. So I made the question more specific by asking about visible minorities. There were none. But there were quite a few on the clerical and service staff.

What this means is that minority Canadian children see few people looking or sounding like themselves in the media. The message is clear: people like you don't matter in this society. It also means most journalists and broadcasters have little knowledge about the multiplicity of other races and cultures that make up this society. Consequently stories



Distinguished vocal stylings of journalist Dwight Whyllie can be heard on CBC 740 on your AM dial. photo by David Sutherland.

about them are seldom covered. And when they are covered, it is usually a crisis story about violence or some unusual cultural event.

When one minority group tried to redress the imbalance by seeking a radio station it collided with the same mindset. Milestone Communications, of which I was a director and investor, had its bid for a Black/African/Caribbean station turned down in

favour of a country music station. This happened just after the only existing country music in the Toronto market changed its format because it was losing money. The justification was that country music represents Canadian content. Nonsense. Most of the music is American. In contrast, the Milestone proposal would have given major airplay to a wealth of local Canadian talent. The talent is

Black, Caribbean and cross-cultural but the powers that be don't see it as Canadian.

It looks like a bleak picture, but it has brightened somewhat in the past few years. Most broadcasters now have policies of employment equity and are looking for minority people to produce, report and announce.

The CBC established an employment equity office four years ago, and

a task force on equity two years ago. Out of these came a powerful policy to make the national public broadcasting system more reflective of a multiracial and multicultural Canada.

But the change hasn't been as fast as it could have been for a number of reasons. The lingering excuse -- which has some truth in it -- is that they can't find qualified minorities, or even competent minorities interested in learning the job.

And because of the lack of role models in media, few minority young people consider radio, television and print as careers.

The time has come to test the policies and push the doors. There are enough proven minority professionals now practising the media skills to break the old stereotypes of incompetence or unsuitability. And official hiring policies are in place. But make sure, if you are a minority who makes it through the front door, to work twice as hard and perform twice as well to overcome a secondary level of scepticism that still sees those minority professionals as exceptions.

There are people who expect you to fail and who will only acknowledge your competence grudgingly. But the rewards, if you succeed, are great. Not only does the media offer stimulating and challenging careers, by being in the public eye you give your minority brothers and sisters role models and a sense of belonging to this society, and make it easier for them to choose careers in communications.

Peace and love.

## Strange Misunderstandin'

Strange  
 those who  
 mis-under-stand  
 me  
 have not yet  
 found the time  
 or made the effort  
 to  
 know  
 what  
 I  
 am about

— Wayne Salmon

## Now is the time to stop the stereotypes

by Carol Higgins

Since slavery, the colour of our skin has defined us as a group to be placed at the bottom of the social ladder. This oppression exists on a global scale. I know of no country, city or community where Blacks are held in high esteem.

Stereotypes have been un-

justly attached to us because of the colour of our skin. We are frowned upon, loathed and even feared by the rest of humanity because we are Negro, colored, of colour, African, Afro-Canadian, African-American, Jamaican, Bajan, Trinidadian, Caribbean or Black. We have been labelled criminal, pimp, junkie, athlete, entertainer, learning

disabled, unwed mother, token, troublemaker, welfare recipient and government housing resident.

And we have labelled other Blacks, who have stepped outside the imaginary boundaries of Black achievement, Uncle Tom, white-washed, sell-out. We have even adopted, and in many instances accepted, the labels forced on us by non-Blacks and unthinkingly referred to ourselves as butu, jigaboo, nappy and nigger.

The media has failed us and continues to do so as it reinforces the stereotypical roles of Black people. Blacks are never doctors endorsing Crest or fortunate stay-at-home mom singing the praises of new Tide with bleach. Instead, we are the comic or the superstar athlete uttering a monosyllabic one liner endorsing the latest in active footwear after doing what we do best: running, jumping, slam-dunking or making touchdowns.

Except for a few Spike Lee joints, Blacks are never at the forefront on the big screen.

The education system also fails us. Our children are not given an accurate portrayal of

their history. African and Caribbean history is not taught in our schools. Africa is seen as a place where Westerners got slaves. Everything positive about African culture, people and accomplishments has been dismissed by the education system as unimportant.

It is time for us to fight the system that is responsible for developing and maintaining these stereotypes.

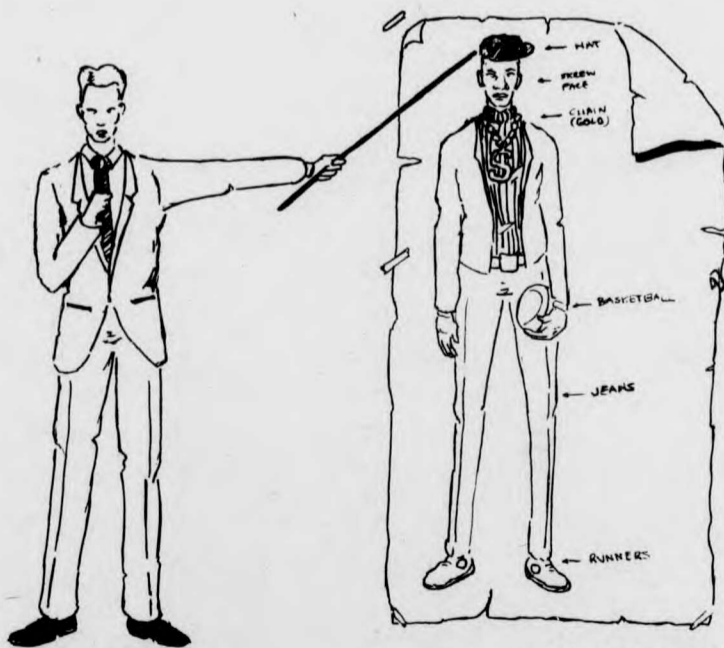
We must stop patronizing stores such as Benetton which claim to have a multicultural theme but blatantly reinforce stereotypes about Black people in their advertisements.

We must dismantle the phenotypic hierarchy of skin shade, hair texture, eye colour, nose and lip size that exists within the Black race. It serves no purpose but to divide the community.

And most of all we must educate our children. We must instill in them love, respect and acceptance of themselves as Black people. And we must teach them their past so they can make their future. As Black people we are full of life and history. We are intelligent, loving, admirable, passionate and beautiful. Our children should be proud.

“Many intelligent Black men seem to look uncivilized when on the screen, like I guess I figure you to play some jigaboo. On the plantation what else can a nigger do? Black women in this profession—as for playin’ a lawyer, out of the question. For what they play Aunt Jemima is the perfect term. Even if now she got a perm.”

— Big Daddy Kane



graphic • Leo Campbell