

California Newsreel's African American Media Needs Assessment Summary

Overview

In November 2010 California Newsreel launched a national listening campaign to assess the media needs and preferences of our stakeholder network - educators, public service providers, community organizers and students. The thirty question survey asked these frequent media users to describe their current media use and future needs in the areas of African American history and culture, civil rights organizing and racial equity. We intend to share their feedback with film producers and their funders in the hope of influencing what films get made and distributed. At the least, this survey has proved invaluable for helping Newsreel set clear priorities for our own African American Perspectives collection.

Who Participated

The survey sampled a broad range of experienced users of African American themed documentaries. It included recent purchasers of Newsreel titles, subscribers to our e-newsletter as well as to videolib (the video librarians' listserv) as well as H-Afro-Am (academics teaching courses with African American content.)

The survey resulted in 311 complete questionnaires. Over 61% of respondents were college-level faculty, followed by community organizers (17%), secondary school teachers (15%), government service providers and trainers (4%) and public librarians (3%). The educators hailed from a range of disciplines, including the social sciences, history and African American Studies, media studies and American literature.

Patterns of Media Use

Academic use of media varied, but by far the most common use was to explore the roots, structures and effects of race and racism in America. Over 10% of the respondents use media in courses that focus exclusively on social movements, black radicalism and/or the Civil Rights Movement.

When asked to describe how and where they used media in their work, 76% replied in classroom settings to support curriculum, with public or community screenings coming in second (16%). Other uses cited included in-service training and orientation, screenings outside class time and screening from course management software. Thus most of the sample group is still using media in the most traditional and time-tested ways.

At California Newsreel we often hear our customers bemoan the length of most documentaries produced today - hour-long television programs or 90 minute feature films. These often prohibit their use in classroom or organizing settings because they preclude time for group discussion. We asked if the survey-takers used full-length films or excerpts from films; over 72% replied that they used both. When asked if length was the most important factor in using or selecting media, many noted that long films are not prohibitive in classroom or community settings because they can easily screen only relevant excerpts. Full-length films do not present an insuperable obstacle but will stress to future producers that they should always have the end user in mind and the context where they will screen the film, so, at the very least, they offer shorter versions, excerpts ("learning objects") or design the film in self-contained chapters.

Despite advances in digital technology most respondents considered themselves only “somewhat comfortable” with digitally streaming and downloading of content. Twenty of the sample group admitted to having no previous experience using media digitally, but were open to experimenting. When asked what percentage of their media use is currently streamed, more than 73% reported less than 10 % (the remainder is via DVD.). These numbers appear quite low if one considers the popularity of on-demand video streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon or i-Tunes. It is not clear if the respondents were simply unclear about the definition of streaming or if this underscores the fact that despite the array of technologies available educational infrastructure and pedagogical practice lag behind those of commercial users, including their students. Present patterns of media use are, of course, poor predictors of future use, especially in a time of rapid transformation in communications technologies like the present.

Respondents indicated that they thought the most reliable source of information on new releases comes from independent distributors themselves, followed by colleagues, online distributors like Amazon and Netflix and academic journals. This confirms that Newsreel’s current methods for communicating with its stakeholders are responsive to their needs.

Finally, the survey asked about the current status of media budgets in light of the recent political push to slash government expenditures. The average budget available to respondents for media purchase was given as approximately \$300, yet many said they would pay up to \$200 for an individual title, if it addressed a core curricular need effectively. This suggests that present institutional rates (\$195 for colleges and university or \$99 each for five or more titles and \$49.95 for high schools, public libraries and community organizations) is not prohibitive for most potential users. At the same time, 57% reported that their media budgets had been slashed by 25% or more over the last two years.

And the Winner for The Most Effective Media Goes To...

Race: The Power of An Illusion!

We were gratified to learn that survey respondents overwhelmingly cited *Race: The Power of An Illusion* as the most effective piece of media they used in their work. We were equally appreciative that two other Newsreel films were also among the top fifteen titles mentioned: Marlon Riggs’ *Ethnic Notions* and our 2008 release, *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*

Many other excellent documentaries made the list, in addition to feature films and network television programs. The ten most frequently cited titles are below:

- *Eyes on the Prize*
- *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*
- *Life and Debt*
- *People Like Us*
- *Bastards of the Party*
- *Africans in America*
- *WAL-MART: The High Cost of Low Price*
- *Great Debaters*
- Presentations from the annual TED (**T**echnology, **E**ntertainment, **D**esign) Conference
- Online videos from Scenarios USA

When asked what one factor made a piece of media useful and effective (from a list we provided) the 65% chose “*direct relevance to curriculum or organizing program*” and “*useful content or analysis*”. Factors such as strong characters, powerful storytelling, experts interviewed and length were not as important as the relevance and analysis. Unlike story or character driven narratives, the titles above provide in-depth historical background and an analysis of the structural origins and impacts of racism. They emphasize not individual lives but broad social movements and the need for systemic change. One college counselor’s comments were representative; the most important criteria for her was media that “*changed students' minds to see the social construction of race.*” More than one commented on the advantages of using films that feature young people as protagonists for reaching student viewers.

The African American Media of the Future?

The survey asked what concepts and issues its takers felt most urgently needed to be addressed in future media productions. We received over 350 original ideas for new productions. By far the most popular topic mentioned was “the myth of the post-racial society”, which in one form or another garnered 57 votes. We then aggregated the suggested topics into fifteen key themes which might reasonably form the basis for half hour and hour long documentaries. These were (in alphabetical order):

African American Education Policies: A historical overview with special emphasis on the period from Brown vs. Board of Education to the present era of cut-backs.

African American Politics in the Obama Era: The dilemma of the black politician; the limits of black political power in the absence of black economic power; how to leverage the first to achieve the second.

Black Feminists: The historic role of women in the African American struggle for equal rights from Sojourner Truth to the present.

Black Student Retention and Success: African American college students and counselors discuss the special challenges they face in the present educational environment.

Campus Racial Awareness: An updating of films like “*Skin Deep*,” “*Color of Fear*,” “*Eye of the Storm*” and “*What’s Race Got to Do with It?*” set in a contemporary, multi-racial college student environment.

The Criminalization of Black Youth: The “criminal injustice system,” disproportionate sentencing and incarceration rates; the structural causes of youth crime; and the “cradle to prison pipeline”.

Digital Divides: The challenges and opportunities for using digital media to promote social activism and solidarity within the African American community and beyond.

The Future of Black America: Probing interviews with a cross-section of five to ten black public intellectuals on their strategies for the African American community today and tomorrow.

Is There Just One Black Community? Common and divergent economic and political interests and experiences in African American life; the role of a black middle class.

The Myth of the Post-Racial Society: What the mass media shows and doesn't show about African American life. Today's "Ethnic Notions."

Nationalists and Integrationists: An overview of two intertwined strands in African American thought and politics from the Abolitionists to the Black Power Movement and beyond.

The New Majority: Coalitions and conflicts between communities of color: immigration, political power and economic opportunity.

Race: The Power of an Illusion Update I: Carrying forward the analysis through an investigation of structural racism as it is reflected in the growing economic gap between African Americans and whites in income, employment, home-ownership, credit, etc.

Race: The Power of an Illusion Update II: Carrying forward the analysis through an investigation of structural racism as it impacts the educational resources and opportunities available to African American students.

Student Activism Today: A cross-generational encounter between African American student activists today and from the '60s.

These possible themes have been submitted to the original respondents who have been asked to select the five they think would be most useful to their colleagues and themselves. We will then share a list of subject areas which score consistently well to producers and media funders in the hope that they can help establish a kind of "production agenda" for future African American production.

Suggestions for How California Newsreel Can Serve Its Users More Effectively

Finally, the questionnaire asked for feedback on people's experience with the California Newsreel website and other services. We were pleased to learn that over 83% of you feel that the website's navigation and content was "adequate" or "above average." Some comments pointed to area for improvement. For example one user noted, "I would classify the site only 'middle of the road'." Another user was more critical, observed, "It looks crowded but does have lots of good info. I feel any media site should feel and look innovative - cleaner, more elegant graphics and fonts and layout." Another suggested that the "the search function could be improved and the site is very text heavy and it's hard to find necessary info." One went farther, describing it as, "time-consuming" and "confusing- I went there to read about a specific video, its cost, and how to obtain it but there was no clear path to the title." Newsreel finds such comments invaluable and indeed it confirmed our concerns about the site's limitations. A major site redesign is already underway.

Unfortunately, only 20% of respondents had participated in our free monthly previews. This new feature offers educators and organizers an opportunity to screen each month a film in its entirety at no charge from our website so they can determine if it is a good fit for their professional needs. We will continue to provide this service and hope that more

users of African American themed media will visit the site to take advantage of this free service.

Lastly over eighty individuals offered helpful and imaginative ideas on services which could make Newsreel's films more useful resources. Here is a summary of the most frequently mentioned ideas:

1. Discounts – More special offers and discounts for specific groups (eg. conference attendees or family reunions), as well as rebates for referring colleagues
2. Increase Accessibility – Despite the lack of use of streaming video use at present, respondents wanted to be able to subscribe or license titles for remote or local password protected streaming. Suggested subscription terms included for just a course, a year or five years, as well as short digital rentals for home consumers and students. Newsreel has been offering local streaming licenses for the past two years but has apparently not promoted this option sufficiently. In addition, digital rentals of selected titles are available from Amazon's Create Space and we are creating our own proprietary remote delivery platform. Unfortunately older titles are often not available for streaming because digital rights clearances were not originally paid and their cost is prohibitive.
3. Add Value to the Content – Some respondents indicated that they would like a speakers bureau, a nation-wide list of people who they could call on to discuss different titles. Along these lines, they also wanted teaching guides for more of our releases.
4. Archive – Others suggested building an archive of presently unavailable titles or compiling a filmography of lesser known, independent or public domain films with social/economic justice themes.
5. Convenings – Respondents also felt a need for increased resource-sharing among themselves. They thought Newsreel should coordinate regional teacher workshops where educators could come together to discuss film use. One suggested an annual conference on the state of independent Africana film where users, funders and producers could come together to better understand each others' needs.
6. Expanded Promotion - There were several suggestions for using social media more effectively; for example, participating in professional development sites and relevant Facebook groups which they had joined.
7. Broaden Newsreel's Catalog – Many naturally wanted us to offer more titles: more films by African American producers, more on international themes, more films under 55 minutes, more films on other African Diaspora cultures. Newsreel shares these ambitions but has found it increasingly difficult to find new releases on these topics which we can in good faith recommend to our stakeholders.

We are grateful for these promising ideas and will make every effort to incorporate them in our future work.