

3Qs: The power and press of black celebrity

July 2 2014, by Greg St. Martin

In her new book *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press*, Sarah Jackson, an assistant professor of communication studies in the College of Arts, Media, and Design, examines how the mainstream and black press have covered controversial political dissent by African-American celebrities. Here, Jackson, whose research and teaching interests center on how social and political identities are constructed in the public sphere, discusses what she found in her research and which African-American celebrity became her unlikely inspiration for the book.

What inspired you to pursue this research and write this book?

Believe it or not, my inspiration was Kanye West. In 2005, I was working on a research project at the University of Michigan taking a closer look at media coverage following Hurricane Katrina. One of things I looked at was what got journalists talking about the role that [racial inequality](#) played in the aftermath and response to the victims. Mainstream journalists weren't talking about this at first. But then came that moment during a telethon when Kanye West broke script. Most people only remember him saying, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." What is often forgotten is that he laid out several critiques about racial inequality and poverty in America. The next day, all the lead stories in the mainstream media were about race's role in the response to Hurricane Katrina.

West wasn't then and isn't now a political activist. But he used the space he had available to him as a celebrity to voice the concerns coming from

the African-American community. That inspired me to look at other African-American celebrities in history to see what role black celebrity has played in national conversations about political issues, inequality, war, and many other topics. For many it's now easy not to take Kanye West seriously, but you can't ignore the power of celebrity.

What were some of the primary findings of your research?

I examined a diverse group of celebrities, both men and women as well as well-known activists and others who were thrust into the spotlight. I looked at what challenges they faced, how much agency they had, and how African-American celebrities' ability to challenge the status quo evolved over time. First, I must say there has been major progress in American society in terms of opportunities for African-American celebrities and for discussions of issues like inequality and race. But what I found is not as rosy as many people would like it to be. There are still strict, unspoken rules about African-American celebrities' behavior. Today, when these celebrities say or do something politically controversial, they may not be formally reprimanded or threatened with violence like Paul Robeson, who in the 1940s was stripped of his passport and blacklisted for his stances on political issues. But they still are reprimanded in mainstream narratives. Some politicians and commentators call them troublemakers, accuse them of playing the race card, or demand that sports and entertainment should be apolitical.

Another example dates back to 1996, when NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf of the Denver Nuggets refused to stand for the national anthem. As both an African-American and a Muslim he felt he shouldn't have patriotism forced upon him, especially given the country's history of racism and discrimination that continues to affect people like him. He was immediately traded, received death threats, and suffered the wrath

of sports journalists. He was previously a well-liked player, but the narrative quickly changed—suddenly he was depicted as out of control and ungrateful for the opportunity to play basketball. His career stalled after that controversy.

Contemporarily, black celebrities have a lot more power to effect change. But even today there are still consequences for some who engage in controversial political speech, particularly for those who aren't very famous.

In your book, you examine the difference between the mainstream press and alternative, African-American publications. How have they compared and evolved over time?

The black press, starting with Freedom's Journal in 1827, came about from African-Americans feeling they were excluded from and misrepresented in the [mainstream media](#). They wanted an outlet to speak for themselves. There's always been an activist component to the African-American press. I was curious to see if these publications were more sympathetic to black celebrities. Interestingly, I found that while many black journalists were supportive, many others were very critical of the political dissent of black celebrities. But it was a different criticism, a more practical criticism. The mainstream press often criticized them for pointing out inequality and challenging and status quo in any way, while the black press would often offer critiques challenging their methods. For example, when athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, some members of the black press, while affirming the need to fight racism and inequality in America, argued that their so-called "black power salute" wasn't the best method for garnering sympathy on these issues.

Since the late 1970s, the black press has been in sharp decline. But in the conclusion of my book, I note examples of celebrities speaking out in non-traditional spaces, including Twitter and blogs. More celebrities are turning to the Web to engage in political commentary. After the shooting death of teenager Trayvon Martin, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the drummer for The Roots, wrote an online post that went viral about his own experience being racially profiled. Miami Heat players also posted photos online of players wearing hoodies and some played a game with messages like "Justice for Trayvon" written on their sneakers.

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