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The Role of Media in Improving the Perception and Standing of African Americans

Throughout American history, media has been used to sway public opinion one way or another in the scope of racial issues. Specifically, media has been utilized to perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans. This is problematic not only because of the racist behavior being exercised by these media members, but it is also because many people’s exposure to African Americans (along with other people of color) comes strictly from the content they consume in the media. Thus, to dispel the myths and stereotypes that have been communicated to the general public, African Americans have had to represent themselves in a positive light through film and television, news outlets, and sports.

In the past, the entertainment world provided misguided or even false portrayals of black life to its audiences. Eventually, African Americans targeted this issue in their fight for equality by providing their own, more accurate portrayals of their lives for individuals and households who may have never met a Black man or woman in their life. Look at the late Oscar Micheaux, for example. Writer and director of around 40 films from 1919 to 1948, Micheaux was a pioneer of black independent film. Among his body of work is *The Exile*, the first feature film with sound that had a black cast, which followed an interracial romance along the western frontier. A few decades later, at the end of the ‘60’s, the TV show, *Julia*, featured the first Black woman in a leading role. The actress, Diahann Carroll, was a widowed mother and nurse that was depicted glamorously. This portrayal of Carroll’s character broke stereotypes in terms of how Black women were historically represented. *Julia* as well as *The Exile* and other works in film and television helped to counteract the negative depictions that were rampant in entertainment throughout American history.

Due to the frequent negative depictions of African Americans in the mainstream media, Black journalists took initiative to provide the general public with an insight into African American life that was missing from news outlets. In the mainstream media, journalists would regularly show African Americans in a negative light, usually through the emphasis and exaggeration of the frequency of crime in Black communities. To counteract this, Black newspapers emerged to report on issues and events related to the Black community that would not be reported by mainstream news outlets. A prime example of this is the Chicago Defender, which condemned racial injustice and encouraged African Americans to flee the racially hostile South for the more tolerant North. It became the first ever African American publication to surpass 100,000 copies in circulation.

Through sports, African Americans have been able to provide themselves with a platform where the presence of Black athletes on televisions in American households has become hegemonic. During Michael Jordan’s rise to prominence, for example, his brand blew up to the point where countless Americans wanted to “be like Mike.” Before Michael Jordan, though, there was Jesse Owens, who singlehandedly invalidated the idea of White supremacy on an international stage by winning four gold medals at what is considered to be the “Nazi Olympics.” More recently, athletes like Colin Kaepernick and Lebron James have used their platforms to bring attention to issues facing the African American community, namely police brutality. While Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem to protest the actions of police against Black Americans in general, James, prior to one of his games, wore a shirt that read “I can’t breathe,” echoing the final words of Eric Garner before being killed by the police. Black athletes like the ones mentioned have helped African Americans make significant strides in legitimizing their standing as equal Americans.

Following my exploration through the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I unsurprisingly found myself to connect and relate the strongest to the sports section of the museum. After all, I have been involved in sport practically my entire life, whether it be through playing or spectating. When I walked through the sports region of the museum, I was taken aback by the various displays of incredibly important athletic figures. Although I already knew it in the back of my mind, I found myself ruminating about how integral Black athletes have been in the history of sport, specifically in America. A noteworthy example that comes to mind is Venus Williams, who successfully led the push for equal pay at major tournaments in tennis. Outside of athletes like Williams who orchestrated significant changes in their respective sport, I have looked up to many different Black athletes through the years such as Torrey Smith and Derrick Rose.

African Americans’ presence in film and television, journalism, and sports have played an integral role in not only improving the perception of African Americans, but they have also helped progress the standing of Black citizens in The United States closer to equality. To be fair, African Americans still face many struggles today associated with the historic oppression they have experienced like the poor standard of living in many majority-Black neighborhoods. However, I argue that without the Black presence in various forms of media and entertainment, the perception and position of African Americans in the U.S. would be nowhere near as high as it is now.