

Ellis Cose: Well maybe I should just say Amen to the Reverend Doctor Reynolds and I actually knew the Reverend Doctor Reynolds before she was a Reverend Doctor Reynolds and I was saying Amen back then as well.

Now we have been asked to answer a question, which, quite frankly, has no simple and perhaps no good answer. But, it certainly -- and the question is how do we get back, in essence, to the good old days when the media cared about the things that most people in this room obviously care about. And so why don't we just go back to the good old days for a second because for me the year 1968 is very evocative because that's, it's the year that I decided to be a writer, at least, and perhaps decided to be a journalist.

And it came about for a very simple constellation of reasons. I happened to be a kid growing up in Chicago on the West Side and my community went up in flames. And, I remember walking along Madison Street, one of the main commercial quarters at that time, and feeling the heat radiating from the buildings that had been burned. Those were a couple days after the initial conflagration and the aftermath -- the death of Doctor Martin Luther King.

But what I remember probably even more clearly was my impressions of coverage, because my community for the first time -- actually the second time, because it also went up in flames 1966 but my community for the first, one of the few times I should say, in my young experience at the time #NAME? portrayed in the news and seeing what I knew as a community portrayed as a caricature, portrayed as cartoonish, portrayed as people who had no humanity, portrayed as, to repeat Barbara's phrase, a bunch of thugs who were burning things up.

And I remember thinking, well, maybe there's a space for me in this institution called the media or at least this group of people called writers because they clearly don't have anybody who understands my community. And it was not too long after that that I managed to get myself, and Barbara may recall these times, I managed to get myself hired as a boy columnist at the Chicago Sun Times and initially starting in their school edition, which went out to their Reading the Schools Program, writing a column called On Being Young and Black and then within a year got jumped to the real newspaper.

I mean, I go into that background to make a point and, to make a couple of points. Why is it harder now than it was then? Well, the cities aren't burning now. People had no choice but to care about what was happening in the inner cities back then. There was a sense, and Barbara talked about this story of folks invading the suburbs, there was a sense that the country was burning and had been burning for almost two decades and one way or another, this was the story and that's why it was covered.

Moving forth a few years, quite a few years actually, part of what the Kerner Commission also wrote about, and I'm sure you've talked about this earlier -- my plane was delayed so I didn't hear part of the earlier conversation of that -- but, part of what the Kerner Commission obviously talked about was, were the failings in the media. And that discussion inspired the Ford Foundation to fund a program, that initially started at Columbia University, and then ultimately ended up at Berkeley and ultimately elsewhere but, that I had the privilege of running for a while. And the program was designed to get more people of color into the news industry and particularly into the newspaper business. And, I was present during a lot of those discussions when newspaper editors talked about

this goal of getting more minority representation. It was actually a cause for a good many people. And I was also present as what was a cause gradually became a chore and there was this sense that what was a necessity was no longer all that important.

So, I think that happened. I think something, some other things happened as well. And Celinda talked a little bit about attitudes, but I don't think you have to be a poster to know that we went from an American sense that something needed to be done about poverty, something needed to be done about race to a set of attitudes which essentially say, There's no problem that isn't caused by the people themselves.

I mean, my God, we do have Oprah, we're talking about Barack Obama for President. We have black people running multi-billion dollar corporations, we have Ph.D.s and M.D.s and all kinds of people of all colors, we have more Asians at the University of Berkeley than any other race. How in the world can there be a problem? How in the world can there be a problem that's not created by the very people that now are making special pleading? So that has happened and the media itself has changed.

Everybody who works in the media institution these days knows that the media is under economic fire. They are, and the way that the media, the mainstream media have responded to this -- and I'm not making too much of an exaggeration here -- is by becoming more sensationalistic and more superficial. And there's something that hasn't changed with this that just has a different reality in the context of today's times, and that is when we talk about the major media in this country, we're obviously talking about the white media .

And as Celinda made very clear, white Americans and people of color tend to see this country and its issues quite differently, and what that means is that in virtually any major newspaper, any major magazine, any major TV network in this country you have a lot of white people sitting around a table with one or two people of color, deciding what other white people want to see or want to hear. It's just that simple.

And in a time when the streets are no longer burning, in a time when it's no longer considered a problem that black folk, Latino folks, are not receiving the same kind of education or not receiving the same kind of economic benefits as white people, and then a lot of stories that would have been covered in the good old days just aren't getting covered any more. So that's why I say, I'm not sure that this question has a good answer.

It has answers. I mean, I think there are people who are doing extraordinary work, many of them in this room, Barbara, you know. Kevin has done great work, the series on black men in the Washington Post, there's been a great example of splendid journalism. Charlotte Duan in the New York Times has done some great stuff, particularly coming out of Katrina. There are wonderful examples of relevant journalism even in the mainstream media, but they tend to happen for a couple reasons. You have extraordinary individuals who decided to try to do something or you have extraordinary events that demand it to be covered or you have a confluence of both of those things.

So what can someplace like the Eisenhower Foundation do? Well, I suppose one thing you can do is support those extraordinary people and find ways to support them by saying, You're doing a good job , number one. But, perhaps beyond that, by helping to do more of a good job and I won't be more specific than that.

And journalist institutions love to get attention, love to get awards, love to be honored. It certainly doesn't hurt to figure out some way to honor those institutions when they do some good work.

Unfortunately, there was a death a few weeks ago, Gerald Boyd, former managing editor of the New York Times. And there was both a funeral and a memorial service in New York and I attended both and I was struck by many things about those services. One thing I was struck with, struck by, was the fact that there was a lot of anger expressed in both of those services. Not just at the fact of a man who had been prematurely taken, but a sense that this was a man who the New York Times had betrayed. That it was the first person of color, the first black person who had become, who ascended to the heights of being a managing editor of the New York Times. And he got taken out not because of some mistake that he made, but because of some plagiarism that somebody else did. There was a lot of anger about that. It wasn't just about Gerald though.

And I should also mention in this parade of people that I'm talking about who are doing good work. The series that won the New York Times on Race in America probably would never have appeared if not for Gerald Boyd. But where I'm going with this is that it's probably going to be another generation before there's any person of color in position to take a role like the one Gerald had at the New York Times. And that was one of the reasons where there was a whole lot of anger in this room, in that room.

So as I began, I'm not going to go on much longer. There's other people that want to speak, but I'll sort of end where I began. I'm not sure if this question has a good answer, you know, and maybe instead of trying to answer that question maybe I should put another question on the table. Which is, in this age where you have an explosion of what's been called new media, where you have all kinds of things starting in various kinds of broadcast media and on the web, maybe one of the questions that the Eisenhower Foundation ought to be asking itself is, in an era where the major media is not going to give consistent and serious attention to these issues, is there a way to give them consistent and serious attention without the major media?