

Black press: friend of tobacco industry or Black people?

by James Muhammad
Asst. Editor

"We are under attack," charged Dr. Lovell Jones, a physician at Houston's M. D. Anderson Hospital. "It's time for the Black media to get involved in getting the information across that we're dying because of cigarettes instead of standing on the fence saying you're attacking an industry that supports us."

It's true. The Black press, or at least a large number of Black newspapers that support a monthly magazine insert for Black newspapers called *The National Black Monitor*, are encouraging Black people to protest "discrimination" against the tobacco industry, which must place health warnings on their products.

In an article which emphasizes in bold headlines that the tobacco industry is "A Friend of Black America," the question is asked, "Is the Tobacco Industry ... Being Unilaterally Attacked?"

"As prime victims of inequity and discrimination in many forms, we, as Black Americans, must take a firm stand against inequity and discrimination wherever and whenever it exists," the article encourages.

The clearer message of the article, however, was praise for the tobacco industry's financial contributions to the Black press and other Black institutions. And the author adds: "We should be supporting the tobacco industry because of what they have done long-term in a positive way for our people."

Observers, like Dr. Jones, argue about the "positive" contributions the tobacco industry has made to Black America.

The industry indeed has contributed thousands of dollars to scholarship funds and has become the dominant sponsor of events for the Black press and even the Congressional Black Caucus. But, the article does not mention, and health officials argue, that the Black press is reluctant to print the harmful effects of smoking, considering

Is the Tobacco Industry—"A Friend of Black America"—Being Unilaterally Attacked?

"Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps"—A Series

This article which appeared in the January issue of the *National Black Monitor* reigniting the debate concerning the tobacco industry's influence on the Black media.

the high number of deaths in the Black community attributed to smoking.

In 1985, 13,009 Black people in America died of lung cancer,

according to the latest statistics from the American Cancer Society (ACS). The ACS notes that over the last several decades the "cancer rate for Blacks is

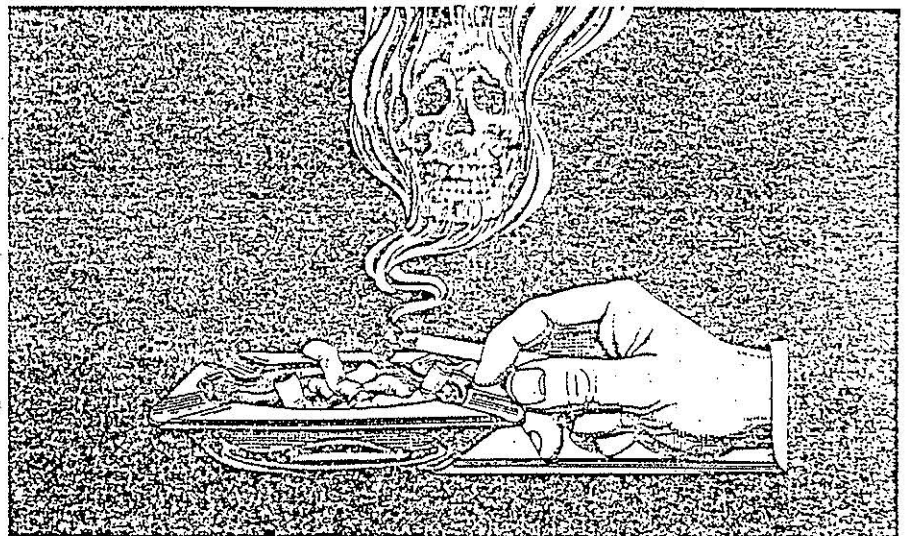
higher than for whites" and that the "Black male cancer death rate rose by 38 percent compared to a 7 percent increase for Black females."

Jones has offered the Black press an opportunity to give balance to their messages regarding the tobacco industry. Last year he held a conference on the Realities of Cancer in Minority Communities. Jones invited members of the Black press to the four-day affair attended by 500 people from 35 states and Puerto Rico, but got "very little response."

One magazine sent a reporter, the doctor recalled, but the editors found the article "too controversial." *Ebony* magazine, he said, simply thought the subject was something their readers wouldn't be interested in.

But a review of the February 1988 issue of *Ebony* reveals that it may be the disinterest of the tobacco industry in the negative coverage which motivated

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Ebony's decision not to cover the conference, than concern about reader interest.

More than 10 percent of the magazine's full page ads were purchased by tobacco companies, including the inside front cover and the back cover in the February issue alone. That translates into roughly \$250,000 in ad revenues.

Additionally, two of the four full-page ads in the 12-page *Monitor* were for cigarettes.

Jones argues that Blacks would become more interested in the dangers of smoking if the message and the statistics were carried to them through the press. Statistics show that 16,600 new cases of lung cancer were recorded among Blacks in 1986, while an estimated 152,000 new cases of lung cancer are expected for 1988. Other forms of tobacco-related cancers run high among Blacks, including cancer of the pharynx, pancreas, larynx and bladder.

Particularly high among Black males is cancer of the esophagus where the incidence rate is 14.7 cases per 100,000 population as compared with 4.3 cases per 100,000 population among white men.

"The problem for us is that the rates for Blacks are going up and these figures are only the tip of the iceberg," Jones asserted. He explained that very few SEER (Surveillance Epidemiology and End Result) survey data bases, which collect cancer statistics, are located in the South, which is heavily Black populated. This prevents an accurate picture of cancer rates among Blacks from being accumulated.

Dr. Alan Blum, founder of Doctors Ought To Care, a community action group of physicians and medical students, calls lung cancer "the single most preventable cause of death" among Blacks, but he warns, "it's going to be a long battle to even begin to make the community aware because we can't get our message out there."

"The Black press is the equivalent of runners for the tobacco industry in the Black community," charged Blum, who is white and has written several articles about cancer among Blacks. "They (tobacco industry) are not being unilaterally attacked, they're just being exposed for what they are." Blum said it is "offensive" to compare the cigarette label with one the *Monitor* urged to be placed on chickens because chickens can cause

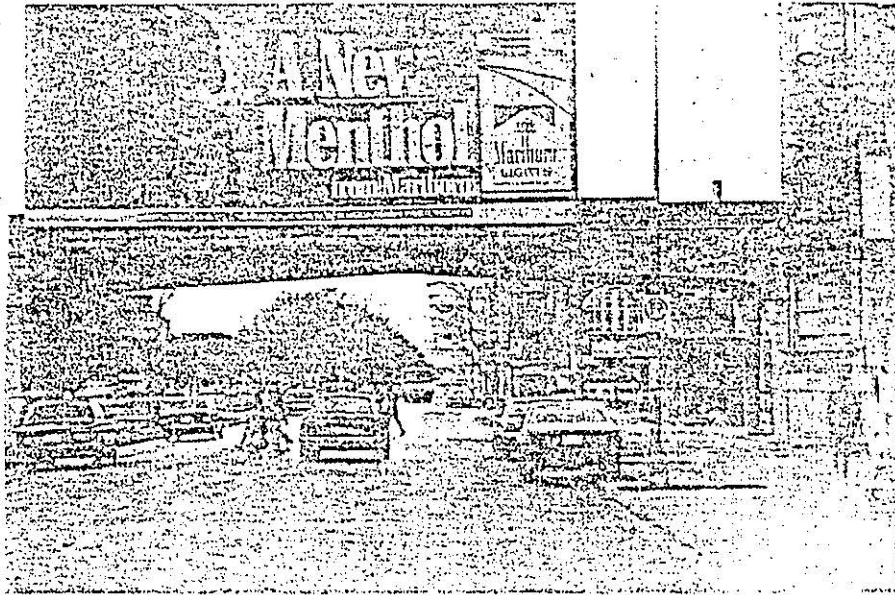


Photo: James Muhammed

Tobacco company advertisements flood billboard space in the Black community in the same manner as such ads predominate space in Black publications.

salmonella. He labeled alcohol and tobacco the "number one and two parasites on the Black community."

The author of the *Monitor* article, Dr. Betty Mansfield, told the *Final Call* that "from time to time we write articles in support of our advertisers. People are free to use or not use the products."

She maintained that the article was not saying the tobacco industry shouldn't be attacked, but "it merely pointed out the discriminatory element of the government's attack on the tobacco industry."

The tobacco industry began heavily advertising its products in the print media in 1971 when access to television advertising was cut off by an act of Congress. But Steve Weiss, manager of public relations for Phillip Morris USA, said his company has been "supportive of Black causes since the early 1900s" and he rejects the claim that the tobacco industry has "bought silence" from the Black media.

"That's a serious racist argument," Weiss said. "The critics are saying that minority communities can't make an

autonomous, rational decision of whether to smoke or not. They're saying that minorities are too dumb and need paternal guidance."

He added that many of the Black organizations solicit support from his company and that "if the Black press is silent on the tobacco issue, it's only because they choose to be."

Steve Davis, the executive director of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, agrees: "There is no policy or ethical violation if a publisher accepts advertising and doesn't write critical articles

of the tobacco industry," he said. "But I don't know if that's a fact (that not much appears in the Black press critical of smoking). I wouldn't make such a blanket statement."

Davis added that the Black press doesn't receive a proportionate return in advertising dollars from any industry, including the tobacco industry, when considering the dollars spent by Blacks for nationally advertised products.

Still other newspaper professionals question the influence of the tobacco industry on the Black press. "The tobacco industry has taken the same attitude toward Black people as all other institutions," declared Howard University journalism professor Raymond H. Boone. "They never did anything for Black people. The only reason they are so concerned now is because of their attempts to continue to exploit the community. They are not returning to the Black community what Blacks are contributing in terms of sales."

Boone, a veteran journalist and former editor-in-chief of the *Afro-American* newspaper chain, said there is as much of a need for the Black press to be committed to Black people as it was in 1827 when the Black press emerged in America with the *Freedman's Journal*.

And although the Black press has a difficult time receiving advertising from dominant in-

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dustries other than alcohol and tobacco, "if you serve the people, then the people will support you and other advertisers will find your product appealing."

Don L. Roberts, general manager for the Amalgamated Publishers, which handles advertising for 90 Black newspapers broke the issue down into simple terms.

"I'm in the business of getting ads. I'm not here trying to be a social advocate. If the tobacco industry pulled their ads, the Black press will have to tell their reporters they can't pay them. There are certain things you have to do to publish

a paper. And until you do that, then you can go on a crusade," he said. Although members of the tobacco industry would not reveal how much of their advertising budgets go to the Black press, Roberts called the percentage "substantial" compared to other forms of national advertising.

Realizing the situation of the Black press, health officials say they only want an equal voice to add a balance to the message coming through the advertising. Until that time comes, Houston's Dr. Jones who warns, "the Black press isn't doing Black America any good by withholding information."

Final Call editor Abdul Wali Muhammad suggests that Black

people should use their buying power to leverage the other industries who reluctantly advertise in the Black press to increase their purchase of advertising to offset the undue influence of the tobacco industry.

"If we don't see their advertisements in our newspapers and magazines on a regular basis, we should not spend a dime on their products," said Muhammad. "But the first line of offense should be to approach all the major Black businesses, and community businesses, who also don't support the Black press as much as they should."

"Nevertheless, there is no excuse for placing the interests of tobacco companies over the interest of the health of Black men, women and children."