

Shedding a Tear for JET Magazine: A Missed Opportunity to Improve the Health of African-Americans

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June 23 marked the final press run for *JET Magazine*, which, according to its publisher, Linda Johnson Rice, has been, since its founding in 1951 by her father John H. Johnson, "a staple in African-American households and considered the go-to, Black bible for current events, spawning the quote, 'If it wasn't in *JET*, it didn't happen.'"

In *JET*'s last print issue before it goes exclusively digital, an article on the history of the *Readers Digest*-size magazine notes that "Before there was a radio or television in every home during the era of separate and decidedly unequal, *JET* reflected the lives of African-Americans transcending the boundaries of racial oppression. From the very beginning, *JET* spread the gospel of economic success and upward mobility. But none of it could have been done without the strength and courage of one man's dream."

One can hardly argue with the significance and impact of *JET* on the African-American population for more than 60 years. With all due respect to the researcher who was awarded \$8.5 million earlier this month to set up a model program in 20 Los Angeles barber shops to reduce uncontrolled hypertension in African-American men (<http://www.cedars-sinai.edu/About-Us/News/News-Releases-2014/Hypertension-Expert-Awarded-85-Million->

[to-Enlist-African-American-Barbers-in-Fight-Against-Hypertension.aspx](#)), he is but the latest to rediscover what John Johnson knew all those years ago. As a result, *JET* has been as much of a fixture in barber shops and beauty parlors patronized by African-Americans as a comb and scissors.

But unlike the cardiovascular researcher, Johnson Publishing Company never exerted its influence to reduce the most avoidable cause of heart disease, cigarette smoking. To the contrary, *JET* (and its sister publication *EBONY*) promoted cigarettes in almost every issue, including its final one, in which a laughing woman and two smiling men playing pick-up basketball appear beneath the headline "Newport pleasure" and above the claim, "Rich & Refreshing. The Perfect Menthol." The ad also invites the reader to "Visit us at Newport-pleasure.com (Restricted to Adult Smokers 21 or Older.)"

I have been tracking *JET* and the print media in general since the 1970s and, amid well over 1000 pages of cigarette ads in this magazine during the past 35 years (quite often on the premium-space back cover or centerfold), I do not recall seeing a single article on cigarette smoking in African-Americans, not even during the tenure of Surgeons General Joycelyn Elders, David Satcher, and Regina Benjamin.

When 96 of the nation's leading black newspaper publishers convened in New York City in 1986, hosted by Philip Morris, they rejected the American Medical Association's call for a ban on cigarette advertising. And when these black publishers were accused of accepting money from cigarette makers to be silent on the subject of smoking and cigarette advertising, they in turn tried to deflect this criticism by openly wondering why there was not similar outrage expressed at *TIME*, *Newsweek* and other publishers with a predominantly white readership.

But those of us who were critical of the black (and non-black) press at the time were not alone. James Muhammad, editor of *Muhammad Speaks* of the Nation of Islam, was also criticizing black publishers who accepted cigarette money, as were some black clergy and a handful of health officials such as San Diego's Jim Forde. Meanwhile, civic leaders such as Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP and Christopher Edley of the United Negro College Fund rejected criticisms of the morality of accepting cigarette money in the face of the disproportionately high rate of lung cancer among blacks. Edley even told me in 1985,

"This is the first time I've heard of it [the moral issue]. Philip Morris gave to black colleges long before there was a cancer scare...We get several hundred thousand dollars a year from cigarette companies. I am not about to lead a crusade to get that money removed...It may be 50 years from now, or even 25 years from now when we will look closer to our contributors and question some of them, but for now we won't turn down a reception or a donation."

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was not unusual for *JET* to have several cigarette ads in each issue, though still not nearly as many as in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, *Glamour*, which could contain between six and a dozen. And the response of these non-black publishers was just as defensive and offensive.

For instance, Gloria Steinem, publisher of *Ms. Magazine*, was asked by a caller to a radio show on WNYC in 1986 how she could justify the acceptance of cigarette ads [even in its annual women's health issue]. She first replied by saying that she knew of no one in the United States who doesn't know the dangers of smoking but then added: "When we first started the magazine we debated, rather naively I confess, but anyway sincerely, about whether or not to take cigarette ads. And we decided that we would take them only if the health warnings [were] put on the ads. Because, again, we thought our role was to be, you know, to give information, not to replace paternalism with maternalism, so to speak....On that basis, because five companies did put the health warnings on the advertisements, we took the ads. But frankly, we could not survive without those ads at the moment, and I don't know any other magazine--there are very few magazines of our size or seriousness that could survive without it." And like the black publishers, Steinem said she found it "sort of suspicious [that] women's magazines get more criticism for running cigarette ads than men's magazines or general interest magazines and that we as a feminist magazine probably get more criticism than any other women's magazine."

Ultimately, Steinem's rationalization for taking cigarette ads is no different than those of publishers of *Cosmopolitan*, *VOGUE*, and the other women's magazines. Many if not most in tobacco control do not realize that *The New York Times* continued to accept cigarette ads until 1999 and remained the principal media outlet for Philip Morris' corporate sponsorship of the arts advertisements throughout the 2000s. Today, under new ownership, *TIME*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Entertainment Weekly* continue to run one or two cigarette ads in almost every issue. The tobacco companies can thus now buy editorial silence on the cheap (though one could legitimately ask if anyone under 30 actually reads

these magazines any more). And as little regard as I have for Johnson Publishing, one could argue that *Mother Jones*, which once crusaded against cigarette makers, now runs ads for Reynolds-American's American Spirit cigarettes ("Made with 100% organic tobacco") and hipper-than-thou *WIRED Magazine* runs cigarette and smokeless tobacco ads in most issues. My son Sam noted a few months ago an issue of *WIRED* guest-edited by Bill Gates (who has given millions of dollars to organizations aimed at stepping up action against smoking) included a cigarette ad. Sam did not receive the courtesy of a reply when he wrote a letter to *WIRED* pointing out such hypocrisy.

In short, we should shed a tear for *JET*--but less for its demise than for Johnson Publishing's deliberately missed opportunity to help prevent cancer and heart disease among its faithful readers. And what does the July issue of *EBONY* offer? Two inviting ads for Camel Crush Menthol and Newport pleasure! as well as a QVC.com Shopping Network ad for "Super Saturday LIVE" on July 26, when a percentage of every purchase will benefit the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund. There's also an item on *EBONY*'s lone health page about a Mayo Clinic app for individuals undergoing cardiac rehabilitation after suffering a heart attack.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. When it comes to the print medium, then, the Master Settlement Agreement was little more than a piece of paper.

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