

Testimony of
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On

“From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images.”

Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection of the
Committee on Energy and Commerce

On

Tuesday, September 25, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images. My name is Lisa Fager Bediako, and I am the President and co-founder of Industry Ears.

Industry Ears is a nonprofit, nonpartisan and independent organization which has focused on the impact media has on communities of color and children since 2003. My co-founder, Paul Porter and I have, collectively, more than 40 years of experience working for media and entertainment companies including Black Entertainment Television, Clear Channel Communications, Emmis Communications, Discovery Communications, CBS radio, Capital-EMI records, Def Jam Records, AOL, NBA Entertainment, Radio One, Discovery.com, and Inner City Broadcasting. Using our insiders' knowledge, we created Industry Ears and industryears.com to address the myths and misconceptions about how media and the entertainment industry operate; and, more importantly, to develop effective means to combat the negative consequences of harmful media messages and images on children, particularly children of color.

My testimony today will focus on the following: 1) the fallout following the Imus incident, including the identity of the real culprits, and their roles in perpetuating stereotypes; 2) the disproportionate impact of negative media on the African American community; 3) the beneficiaries of negative and stereotypical media messages; and finally, some Industry Ears recommendations to address these problems.

The now-infamous “Imus Incident” is intriguing in that it has created strange bedfellows: it has unified both conservative and liberal media in invoking Hip Hop music as the veritable poster child of all that is wrong with society. That is, a popular argument made in the throes of Imus’ oft-repeated “nappy-headed hoes¹” comment is that such language pales in comparison to the content of most commercialized Hip Hop music. The idea is that if radio stations and Viacom music channels can play the “bitch, ho, nigga” content of gangsta rappers, then what is so bad about Imus’ comment? If the Black community apparently accepts such language from its own, then why get upset when Don Imus says it?

It is easy for me to understand why Black folk would be in an uproar over a White man referring to young Black women as “nappy headed hoes” on a nationally syndicated radio show, as a Black woman, that part should be intuitive. However, what appears to be more difficult to understand – especially to our friends in the news media – is that there exists a large cadre of individuals and organizations that represent communities of color that *also* are in an uproar when media permits content that is degrading to women and people of color to be broadcast. Note that, unlike the conservative and liberal media hypes, our concern is not simplistically directed at the artists who produce such material; our concern is also directed towards the record labels, radio stations, and music video channels (*i.e., the corporations*) that are profiting from allowing such material to air.

This is the fact that often gets overlooked in the mainstream media. Not all Black people and not all lovers of Hip Hop endorse the materialism, violence, and misogyny that

¹ As educators, Industry Ears takes the position that, if music with profane or obscene lyrics is played during the hours that our children are listening, we should not shy away from quoting those lyrics in order to raise awareness.

characterize commercial rap music. Organizations and campaigns such as Industry Ears, Enough is Enough, Social Action Coalition, Youth Media Council, Third World Majority, Woman's Coalition for Decency and Dignity, REACHip Hop, Free Mix Radio and many individuals have been challenging such content for years, but their visibility has been blocked by the mainstream media. For example, during the week in which Imus was suspended and subsequently fired by CBS, I was called by three national news outlets to speak about the hip hop music issue. However, each outlet only wanted me to defend the commercialized Hip Hop industry; no one was interested in the fact that I also agreed that "bad" content applies across the board and should also be dealt with. The message is clear: If you do not fit the "role" media has created for ratings you lose your opportunity to be heard.

It is time to wake up and see the real issue – that media conglomerates are the gatekeepers of content and in essence control what opinions receive airtime. The deletion of the Fairness Doctrine and passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act helped to create incredibly powerful, big media corporations by eliminating the requirement that balanced viewpoints be presented, and by relaxing rules placing limits on how much media a single corporation could own. Further, by repealing the tax certificate program, which successfully – if temporarily - increased ownership of media outlets by people of color, we have ensured that these big media corporations do not represent the diversity of society. Then, with control of so much media concentrated in the hands of the very few, we are at the mercy of big media and rely on companies to serve in the best interest of the public while also serving their bottom line.

As might seem obvious, what best serves the public, and what best serves the bottom line are not always the same. This is evidenced by the fact that CBS fired Imus only when corporate sponsors started to pull out; Imus has made offensive and derogatory statements before. Commercialized Hip Hop has flourished in this environment, giving public perception that what you see and hear on radio and TV has been set as community standard. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) states that it is a federal violation to broadcast indecent or sexually explicit content between the hours of 6am and 10pm. However, songs that discuss explicit sexual situations including oral sex, rape, casual sex and gang sex receive daily spins on radio stations and video music channels that cater to the 12-17 year old demographic.

Freedom of speech has been spun by industry conglomerates to mean the *b-word*, *n-word* and *ho* while censoring and eliminating Hip Hop music that discusses Hurricane Katrina, the Iraqi War, Jena 6, dangers of gun violence and drugs and songs that contains words like “George Bush” and “Free Mumia.” In 2005, MTV and radio stations around the country self-regulated themselves to remove the words “white man” from the Kanye West hit single *All Fall Down*. The lyrics demonstrated the far reach of capitalism by exclaiming */Drug dealers buy Jordans, crackheads buy crack/ And a white man get paid off of all of that/*. When asked why they decided to dub “white man” from the lyrics the response from MTV was “we didn’t want to offend anyone.”

Today, Hip Hop is bombarded by the demeaning images of the black male thug and the sleazy video vixen. Record labels and their executives choose to support and promote these images for airplay solely as if these are the only images that represent black people.

I understand that payola is out of the scope of this subcommittee, however I think it is important to mention, because it is a major contributor to how music receives radio and video airplay.

Former Attorney General Elliott Spitzer, now Governor of New York made deals with four major record labels – Sony BMG, Warner, Universal and EMI totaling \$30.1 million as well as with two broadcasters, CBS and Entercom, for another \$6.25 million in his state-wide payola investigation that also implicated many outside of New York.

Meanwhile, the FCC settled with a consent decree that stopped the federal investigation of payola and allowed broadcasters to avoid a finding of liability for this violation by entering into a settlement agreement costing them a measly \$12.5 million in combined fees.

All over the country you have identical playlists from station to station no matter what the radio format and it's no coincidence. Payola is no longer the local DJ receiving a couple dollars for airplay; it is now an organized corporate crime that supports the lack of balanced content and demeaning imagery with no consequences. Broadcaster claims that this is what listeners want to hear is not honest. Radio stations only research the songs that are currently being played on the radio (*i.e. songs that are paid for*). New artists with new songs do not get tested. This explains the identical playlists and the exclusion of local and regional artist airplay on radio stations.

Stereotypes and degrading images in both radio and television disproportionately impact the African American community. There are a wealth of shows on networks like Viacom that capitalize and profit from demeaning women and black people, including the following examples:

- *Flavor of Love* , which stars former Public Enemy artist Flavor Flav, as a modern buffoon, focused solely on the objectification of women
- *Where My Dogs At* is an animated program which includes an episode where a rapper leads black women on leashes, like dogs, down a red carpet, where one of the women defecates on the floor.
- *Yo Momma* pits teens against each other to yell disrespecting and sometimes racist insults, and
- *We Can Do Better aka a Hot Ghetto Mess* demeans and makes fun of every day people all in the name of entertainment. The cumulative effect suggests to the targeted audience that this is the way things are and how they should act.

A good example of records, radio and corporate partnerships includes a song on Virgin Records label called, “Ms. New Booty.” This song, performed by a white rapper was silly and tasteless, but the promotion by the record label and partnership with *Girls Gone Wild* was truly offensive. A local Washington DC DJ at 5pm promoted the tune by suggesting he likes to visit the MsNewBooty.com website to masturbate. The website created by Virgin Records asked girls to enter a contest for the “best new booty.” Girls were required to take photos of their butts and post them online. Each week people would vote for the best “booty” of the week with the winner receiving a chance to be in a

music video. It was obvious that girls under 17 were entering the contest (some even listed their Myspace accounts making it easy for child predators). The *Girls Gone Wild* partner was listed at the top of the website and linked making it easy for pre-teens and others to access. I wrote an open letter to Virgin Records and Jermaine Dupri, President of urban music responded by saying, "it was all in fun and it wasn't about sex." Later that same month Jermaine Dupri appeared in an article in *Billboard* magazine and stated "Southern Hip Hop is inspired by strip clubs."

It is important to note, that African American children listen and watch more radio and television than any other demographic. Although Top 40 and Hip Hop radio stations claim to target the 18-34 demographic their largest audience share are the 12-17 year old segment. Recording companies, radio stations and Viacom networks are aware of their audience but have chosen to put the bottom line above the welfare of their audiences. In the documentary, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, a group of white teens are asked what they think about Hip Hop. They explained, "Hip Hop gives a better insight into black culture and what it's like to grow up in the ghetto," as if all black people had the same experience. Bakari Kitwana, professor and author of several books dealing with Hip Hop and politics said when he was researching information for his next book he asked white women from all over the country what they felt about rappers who used the b-word to describe women? The overwhelming majority responded by saying, "they were not offended because the rappers weren't describing them, they were only talking about black women."

These perpetuated stereotypes and demeaning images are reflective in the behavior and attitudes of children and specifically children of color. We see an increase in risky sexual behavior – black girls 15-24 years old represent the fastest growing segment of HIV patients, devaluing of education and rise in the dropout rate – reports show as high as 75% dropout rate among black 9th grade boys, unhealthy interpersonal relationships, increase in aggression, a normalization of criminal activity and materialism.

In sum, because I'm sure the industry will shrug at the notion that their actions have led to or influenced any of this behavior; I strongly suggest that a research study look at the direct impact of degrading and stereotypical images on children and adults. This study will help us understand the direct implications and back up the policy and regulations that need to be implemented and enforced.

Thank you, I will be happy to answer your questions.