



channel mastery

148: Aaron Foley, Black Media Initiative Director at
Newmark J-School's Center for Community Media

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Kristin: Welcome back everybody. To another episode of the Channel Mastery podcast. I have actually kind of a different format today to share with you. I have my colleague from Verde, Alice Baker here with me today because we are kicking off a special series of the Channel Mastery podcast with an awesome guest Aaron Foley, who is the Director of the Black Media Initiative at the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. Welcome to the show, Aaron, we are delighted to have you with us.

Aaron: It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Kristin: Well, I'm just gonna go right into it because you have such an awesome background and so much for us to learn from. Can you give my awesome audience a great introduction of yourself with some background of your professional career and just how you got into this amazing role?

Aaron: Sure. So I'm originally from Detroit and I've been a working journalist in several capacities there and that's my hometown. And so I've written extensively about the city, about its people. But I've also held roles as Editor, As manager. I was appointed as Chief Storyteller for the City of Detroit government.

We were working directly in the mayor's office in which we incorporate storytelling into municipal operations. It was the first time something like that had been done in terms of not quite doing communications or public relations, but really just doing exactly what the role entails, which is telling stories about people, places and interesting things about Detroit and hosting it on our city government platforms, our social media, our cable channels. We started a podcast, we started a photo series. It was very similar to humans of New York, that sort of platform, but it was done in the mayor's office.

So we got a lot of attention for that. And I did that for a while and I left that position to do a fellowship at Stanford in the Bay area. And right after that is when I approached the City University of New York here in Manhattan about a new role, they had come open which is where I am now, which is the Director of the Black Media Initiative. I've always worked in journalism, but I've always told stories whether I was working for the

city in the mayor's office or freelancing or editing a magazine, which I did briefly, I'm working in digital. I've always told stories about black Detroiters and their contributions to our city, our world, what have you, but I've also been on the administrative managerial side of that. So I'm bringing a lot of those skills to this new role. I started it in June. I moved to Brooklyn earlier in August, so it's just been a lot of change very quickly for me, but I'm excited to be here and really think of strategies and develop our programming for black media outlets across the country.

Alice: Awesome. And you've said before that you are a product of black journalism, can you share what that means and how that's influenced your career?

Aaron: Yeah, absolutely. So my mother used to work for an African American newspaper in Detroit called the Michigan Chronicle. And she did that when I was really young. So I watched her as a kid be a reporter and editor or a photographer, almost every role you can have at a small newspaper. And I got really interested in journalism myself, but what was special about what she did was the Michigan Chronicle was one of the oldest black news is the oldest black newspaper in Michigan, but it's also one of the oldest black newspapers in the country. And it specifically targets the African American community, not to say that your regular daily paper doesn't, but this, you know, these publications definitely center the African American experience. So there's a lot of history behind that. These papers chronicled, as you know, the name is right there in the paper sometimes.

These papers, Chronicle history, daily events day to day happenings her you know, different perspectives on civil rights and racism and into most of those events that affected the black community and their respective cities. And it was one of those things where as a kid, I didn't realize the impact of it, but as I grew older and realized that, you know, these are documentaries of history, I really realized the importance and the significance of black media. So that's why I, you know, that's why I sort of caught myself. I'm a product of this. It's something I strongly believe in and it's something that I grew up in.

Alice: Yeah, definitely. That seems so important. Especially, you know, this week and this month seeing how that representation matters in the media.

Kristin: Absolutely. and kind of riffing on that. I was hoping you could also explain for our audience, what do you believe the state of black media is today?

Aaron: It's definitely a genre that has unlimited potential being that we have a lot of younger millennial perspectives that want to bring their experiences, their values to journalism. What you're seeing now is newer startup outlets. There's one in North Carolina called Q city news. There's another one in Chicago called the tribe. Lot of blogs, a lot of podcasts and like Very Smart Brothers and, and another round that used to be hosted by BuzzFeed which is a podcast. You're seeing a lot of digital revolution with with black journalists and are entering this space that has historically been characterized by newspapers. That said black newspapers are still very much vital and relevant in this space because they are, as I mentioned before, they are the documentarians of history where we're seeing some trouble is the fact that that like meaning newspapers daily, weekly, or otherwise, whether they're mainstream or whether they're targeting a

specific audience they have been affected by the economic changes in the journalism industry, the digital transformation in the journalism industry.

So a lot of the legacy black newspapers are, have, have much smaller staffs to produce the kind of journalism that they were used to doing many years ago. They're not capable of producing that volume like they once were. So part of my role is to think of strategies, whether it's getting grant funding or steering more resources through the through the, through the school, like CUNY to these digital outlets so that they can continue to thrive. And that, so all the black media outlets, whether it's a newer one that just started like a podcast or a legacy newspaper, that's been around for a hundred plus years, how do we ensure that those perspectives are being heard and that representation continues to matter?

Alice: Definitely that that actually ties into my next question, which was if you could tell us a little bit more about your new position as the Director of the Black Media Initiative at the Newmark graduate school.

Aaron: Sure. So I work within a center called the center for community media and our goal collectively at CCM is to increase the potential for community media. That's defined as a Latino media, indigenous media, Asian media media that is geared towards immigrant communities. It can also include Jewish media, Muslim media, Catholic media all of those niche papers that I describe it as whenever you're in a major city and you're walking through a busy intersection and you see a bunch of news stands, and then you might see your regular daily paper, but then you see those news boxes that have like different languages and different things and, and whatnot, all of those outlets are defined or what we define as community media. We have a specific initiative for black media in terms of how do we make black media outlets more sustainable?

How do we provide training opportunities so that black media outlets can compete with mainstream outlets? And how do we elevate the stature of black media to that of a mainstream newspaper within the industry too often community news reporters and community news staff are often marginalized. They do not get the same kinds of industry accolades or recognition or contribution for their work, as you know, your journalists that may work at like a CNN or New York Times or places like those. What happens though, is that when you do have a lot of tension or a race related situation comes up like the many incidents of police brutality sometimes those larger outlets can get it wrong when we're not, when they're not writing or reporting from the nuance perspective of race.

This is where those community outlets have always been there. Not only have some of these outlets always been reporting on race-related incidents and can, can provide that nuance in that context that a larger paper can't, but when they do those sorts of things, they get overlooked. So what my role is being that CUNY the Newmark school at CUNY is very connected in the world of journalism, with different organizations, with different grant funders, different foundations and things like that. What kind of things can we, you know, what kind of infrastructure can we build so that we can be sort of a clearing house or a, or a support system for black media outlets to lean on so that they can get the resources that they need to thrive and survive.

Kristin: It sounds like reach and resources are two primary challenges that black journalists and, and black media outlets face. So I was wondering, what do you think success looks like maybe in the near term, and then maybe a little bit of a longer term, like in a year?

Aaron: I think in the near term term, we have to just create something that shows that black media is here and it exists. I'd like to see situations where we see black journalists working within those outlets get the same kind of speaking engagements and opportunities. Those panels slots on the big cable networks on and so forth as, as their peers in mainstream media, once the way we do that is right now where our department is in the midst of producing a directory of black media outlets. There are several lists and spreadsheets and outdated directories out there. They're mostly incomplete, mostly outdated. We're trying to create something comprehensive so that we can, at the very least build a network between black media outlets that are smaller and independent and do not have as much reach and connect them with organizations, other media outlets that do, once we do that, I think that will be a short term success measure for us.

A long-term measure I like to see is black media outlets beginning to think about innovative ways of survival. Many of these outlets are still operating on a very outdated model of business when it comes to media. We're talking, you know, they're, they're selling ads and selling space in the newspaper in 2020 the same way they were doing in 1990 and 1970, 1950 where, whereas other digital startups other more forward thinking media outlets are getting towards better ways of creating revenue. I think the law, I think if I were to have any sort of long-term measure of success, it would be for black media outlets to innovate in that regard and look at their financials or their balance sheets for the next couple of years and say, we don't have to struggle as much as we were. We're actually bringing in the type of revenue that we're capable of bringing in.

Alice: Definitely. Yeah, it sounds like there's a lot of long term change that that all outlets need to work towards. And so, so we work with, you know, outdoor brands and outdoor companies. And do you have any thoughts on how those brands we work with can be considerate of some of the challenges you mentioned when they're choosing to work with black journalists and black media outlets?

Aaron: Absolutely. So one thing there's always been talk about companies that advertise in black outlets in companies that don't one thing that historically black press outlets have always struggled with is getting non traditional advertisers. When you look in the classified pages or look in the back pages of a black newspaper, it's typically stuff coming from local governments, politicians, churches, your local grocery store, your independent boutiques and clothing outlets and stuff like that. And rarely do you see big national brands who would normally advertise in a larger newspaper or nor, or, or normally have commercial airspace on a, on a mainstream TV channel. If there are companies out there that would like to diversify their customer base or diversify their audience a good first step would be placing an ad in a black newspaper.

They have rates, they, they have salespeople to handle that sort of thing. It would probably be a very similar conversation as with their sales rep, as it would with any other sales rep. So that's one way.

Another way is when folks are pitching media outlets, I would one be cognizant of, of diversifying your pitch pool, right? You know, when you're sending out those email blast understandably working on both sides of this, I've been a journalist and I've also been in a position where I've tried to drum up interest in, in getting something, someone to cover something that we're doing. I do understand how overwhelming it is for journalists right now when they don't respond to every pitch when they don't you know, take, you know, take every story that's that comes at them. And it's frustrating for the, for the marketing folks as frustrating for those, those respective clients.

And then there's just constant unhappiness and tension. But I would say that there, there might be opportunity in pitching some of those same stories to black media outlets in terms of if there was an angle of those stories of those stories about black customers or black enthusiasts or, or, or just getting more black people interested in in, in certain things oftentimes those outlets are looking for those kinds of pitches. I know as someone who is an editor of a magazine that center of the African American experience, I was always frustrated when I knew that there was a hierarchy in how some of the PR agencies pitched out local outlets in Detroit. They always did the business publications in daily newspapers first, you know, they would stagger out a press release if there, if it was time sensitive and the dailies would always get at first, then the TV stations, then the community news outlets.

And those would include the suburban papers, the weekly papers, and then the black media outlets. That was very frustrating to me in one regard, because there was a specific incident where there was some breaking news around a black museum in Detroit, but this museum had contracted with the larger PR agency and they used that same staggered strategy of staring out the press release. And I'm thinking to myself, you know, this is a real publication that has supported this museum for a very long time, both us and the museum target black audiences, but we were last on the list. So we missed this breaking news. That to me should not happen. And so that's why I would encourage folks working on the PR side. So be thoughtful when it comes to that sort of strategy.

Kristin: That's great advice. And we've seen, I think over the summer of 2020, a lot of the companies have, you know, tried to expand their reach into human resources and found different places to post jobs. And one of the things that I think we can provide through this channel mastery podcast would be a place for our audience, the outdoor specialty markets, to be able to discover where they could pitch. Is that something they could find on your website, or can you direct us to a resource?

Aaron: Not quite. Because my job is so new and because a lot of the things I'm working with are so outdated, we have yet to build a website, like all of the, how tos and tips and tricks and FAQ and all of that. However, I would encourage people to contact me. I'm pretty

accessible all over Twitter. My email inbox is always open. I respond to pitches because I do know the struggles sometimes. I'm pretty accessible, so yes, we can definitely talk more about it until that time when we have that solid resource to go to.

Alice: And one last question is how social media fits into your new role?

Aaron: There is definitely something to be said about how black news consumers spread new share news and consume news through Twitter and through Facebook. One thing we'd like to analyze it in, in, in my role is, you know, is Twitter itself a news outlet, even though they are not classified as one, but because they are quite with black audiences? How do we classify Twitter as a news source? But also so much as they are a wealth of information, they're also a wealth of disinformation and misinformation.

So what I'd also like to see is us doing more analysis and research around how folks with the worst intentions are intentionally misleading, black audiences into believing certain things or, or believing certain hashtags or things like that through the spread of misinformation and disinformation. It's pretty ambitious for a J school, a school of journalism to be thinking of this. But when it comes to the knowledge and susceptibility of marginalized audiences it's definitely something we should be thinking more about.

Kristin: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much. And obviously we were able to get in touch with you and have you on the Channel Mastery podcast, right at the beginning of your tenure here, we can't wait to see what you do.

And just so everybody knows who's listening, we will have links in our show notes. Basically I think examples of some of your work, you have a Ted talk, you have an amazing book. I love the title of, we share the title of your book, please?

Aaron: Absolutely, the title of my book is, How to live in Detroit without being a jackass.

Kristin: Yay, I personally am excited to check that out. And once your website is launched, you can count on us to promote that to our markets far and wide. So I just wanted to say thank you so much for joining us here on the channel mastery podcast.

Aaron: Absolutely. And thanks for having me

Kristin: And thanks Alice for being my co-host here today.

Alic: Of course, thanks both of you.