



January 5, 2009

President-Elect Barack Obama
Transition Team Headquarters
451 6th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Dear President-Elect Obama:

We want to congratulate you on your historic presidential election victory as well as being a strong advocate for greater media diversity.

We want to thank you, once again, for attending our convention in 2007 in Las Vegas as well as attending the UNITY: Journalists of Color convention this past July in Chicago. NABJ is one of the four minority journalists associations that make up the UNITY coalition. We were honored by your attendance.

We look forward to working with your administration on critical media issues to ensure that the African American community and communities of color have greater access to media.

We are writing you to express our urgent concern about the current crisis in the news media industry and the impact it is having on diversity in our nation's media system. We are also writing to offer a few recommendations that we urge your administration to support to increase media diversity.

NABJ was founded in 1975 and is the oldest, national minority journalism group in the country. We currently have more than 4,000 journalists and media professionals in the United States and abroad on our membership roster.

Since our founding, we have advocated for an inclusive media system that serves the news and informational needs of the African American community as well as all communities of color. But too often, the news media has failed to reflect the communities they serve in their coverage and work force employment.

Our first recommendation is to prevent further media consolidation in the broadcast and telecom industries.

We understand firsthand the impact that consolidation has had on the quality of the news and information the community receives. We also understand how it has prevented greater diversity in the media. In recent years, we have been active in taking policy positions that foster greater media diversity while preventing further consolidation. We have spoken out because of the irresponsible policies that Congress and the FCC have pursued despite the harm to the public interest.

Last year, we opposed the FCC's decision to lift the newspaper broadcast ownership regulations. After its unfortunate passage, we visited several congressional offices, including your Senate office, to urge



Congress to pass a resolution of disapproval to overturn the FCC's decision.

With your election, we are now encouraged by statements you have made that your administration will begin to remedy the harm caused by more than a decade of deregulation:

“Minority owned and operated newspapers and radio stations play a critical role in the African American and Latino communities and bring minority issues to the forefront of our national discussion. However, the [Federal Communications Commission] has failed to further the goals of diversity in the media and promote localism, and as a result, it is in no position to justify allowing for increased consolidation of the market....”

Recommendation 2: Appoint an FCC chair committed to the public interest.

In recent years, media companies have laid off thousands of journalists to cut costs in an attempt to please the misguided expectations of Wall Street. Too often, what is good for Wall Street, however, is terrible for the media industry and for media diversity. Deregulation helped these companies get bigger but less accountable to serving the public interest. Now, they have scaled back their news gathering operations and laid off a disproportionate number of journalists of color even though these very companies have historically struggled to diversify their newsrooms.

We are also concerned about the lack of diversity in our nation's cable systems. When cable operators expanded into cities in the 1970s and 1980s, they promised to provide diverse programming opportunities for people of color. But that has not happened. Despite a 500-channel universe, African Americans are still hard-pressed to find a network owned by an African American or a channel that features news programs for the Black community. We believe it is time to open up our cable systems to greater programming diversity.

The appointment of the next FCC chair is critical to addressing the destructive policies that have harmed journalists of color and the media profession. We urge you to nominate a chairperson who has a committed and distinguished record of serving the public interest over corporate interest.

Recommendation 3: Our third recommendation is to support policies that will provide people of color with greater opportunities to gain access to the airwaves and other means of communications.

Restoration of the minority tax certificate program is a critical first step to achieving this goal. The FCC implemented the tax certificate program in 1978. It was the most successful government effort to increase minority ownership. The percentage of owners increased from one percent in 1978 to three percent in 1995. More than 300 tax certificates were granted during this period. But Congress attacked government affirmative-action programs in 1995 when it revoked the program. Since then, minority ownership has declined. People of color own just three percent of all TV stations and eight percent of all radio station in the country. Incredibly, the number of African Americans TV owners declined by 60 percent from 2006 to 2007.

In addition, there is a direct nexus between minority ownership and employment. Minority-owned stations are more likely to hire people of color as well as air a nightly newscast.

To improve minority ownership, it is critical for the administration to require the FCC to conduct a regular and accurate census on minority and female broadcast ownership. To date, the FCC has never conducted an accurate study on minority and female ownership because it has poorly managed the data it collects from license holders.



Since the late 1990s, the make-up of journalists of color working at local TV stations has remained stagnant as a result of a federal court striking down the FCC's Equal Employment Opportunity regulations. The FCC adopted the EEO rules in the late 1960s to ban discrimination in the broadcast industry and require broadcasters to recruit people of color for job openings. The rules were adopted following the release of the landmark Kerner commission report that found the news media contributed to the racial divisions that were tearing apart our country.

During the late 1960s, people of color at local broadcast stations were virtually non-existent. The adoption of the EEO rules resulted in a steady increase in the presence of people of color at local stations. Since the court struck down the original EEO rules, however, the FCC has implemented new watered-down rules that fail to hold license holders accountable. The representation of journalists of color has remained stagnant ever since.

Recommendation 4: Support a robust public media system.

Our fourth recommendation is to meet the crisis in the commercial newsroom by furthering the goals of a robust public media system that can support independent journalism. However, public media has never been adequately funded to realize its original mission. Its programming has often failed to serve our nation's diverse communities. We support public media and believe the government has a critical role in providing the funding needed to hire journalists to produce more news programs, including local newscasts.

Finally, we ask that you provide greater access to journalists of color who are covering you and your administration. Journalists of color are underrepresented in the White House press corps. Our members are far more likely to ask questions that address the concerns and issues affecting the Black community.

Once again, congratulations on your historic election. We hope to see you soon at an upcoming NABJ convention or event.

Sincerely,

Barbara Ciara
President, National Association of Black Journalists
Vice President, UNITY: Journalists of Color, Inc.