

**UCLA**

**National Black Law Journal**

**Title**

*BLACKS AND WHITE TV: AFRO-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION SINCE 1948* by  
J. Fred MacDonald

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8qb4373k>

**Journal**

National Black Law Journal, 9(1)

**Author**

Anderson, Donna Wade

**Publication Date**

1984

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1984 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

**BLACKS AND WHITE TV: AFRO-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION SINCE 1948.** By J. Fred MacDonald. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers. 1983. Pp. xvi, 288. \$25.95.

*Blacks and White TV* is an historical account and analysis of the relationship between white television in America and black Americans. This effort by J. Fred MacDonald has its problems, however, overall it is an excellent source of information. This is an exposé of the television industry which has been blackballed by the networks. For just that reason, as well as for the information that it contains, information that is seldom heard outside of the industry, this book is highly recommended for any reader—black or white—who is interested in the evolution of the world of television.

Television, in MacDonald's opinion, had a chance to reverse the centuries of ridicule, hostility, and misinformation about blacks, but the medium did not live up to those expectations. MacDonald compares the relationship between blacks and white television with the overall history of blacks in this country and concludes that they have the same end—separation into two nations, one black and one white. Furthermore, he concludes that white network television can never present blacks in a fair, accurate manner because to do so would condemn and destroy the sociopolitical system of which it is a vital part. It should also be noted that the author is white, and probably became privy to some information that would not have been revealed to a black writer.

MacDonald discusses the roles that black performers played in early television when producers were hungry for black singers and dancers to appear in their shows. This seemingly colorblind attitude brought the likes of Bill Robinson, Clarence Muse, and the Ink Spots to television. Furthermore, MacDonald says, television was coming to life in the shadow of World War II, when there was a push by the government and citizens to stamp out the kind of racism that surfaced in Nazi Germany. In this atmosphere, a new black self-awareness manifested itself in performers like Lena Horne, Paul Robeson, Katherine Dunham, and Canada Lee. Also during this time the radio series "Destination Freedom" was launched by Richard Durham in Chicago. MacDonald feels that Durham's contribution in this series was not matched in American television until Alex Haley's miniseries, *Roots*, in the 1970s.

In 1951, both the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) adopted policies against demeaning presentation of racial or ethnic groups. Ed Sullivan, then the host of the CBS show, *Toast of the Town*, proclaimed that television would bring the civil rights struggle straight into the hearts and homes of America. MacDonald concludes, however, that it soon became apparent that television would simply perpetuate the stereotypes of radio and motion pictures. In fact, many of the mammys, coons, and other stereotypical radio characters moved directly into television. Those characters included: Rochester, the butler from the *Jack Benny Show*, played by Eddie Anderson, and *Amos n' Andy*, portrayed on radio by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men. Here, MacDonald relates the bizarre story of the casting of the television version of the show, and the nationwide search for black ac-

tors to fill the shoes of the white radio announcers who made the show famous. The show lasted for two seasons. Strangely enough, the televised version did not do as well as the radio series.

MacDonald attributes the perpetuation of these stereotypes to the fact that the same radio executives and producers were controlling the fledgling television networks. They felt that blacks in serious roles did not "sell," and they took those ideas with them into television.

The author briefly discusses the African documentaries and jungle films produced between the 1930s and 1960s and the bad effect that they had on white America's perceptions of blacks. The focus on tribal customs, such as scarring faces, ornamenting lips and earlobes, were conducted in a demeaning manner, he said. These films soon became sideshows, and even in dramatic shows, white actors were perceived as intelligent saviours of the native Africans, who were portrayed as being savage and ignorant. Television's treatment of the relationship between Africans and black Americans is so important that it probably warrants more attention and analysis than it is given in this book.

A good portion of MacDonald's book is devoted to the discussion of the "color line" in television and the successes of the few black performers who were able to cross that line. To this end, MacDonald touches on the careers of Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Bill Cosby, and Leontyne Price. He highlights Poitier's appearance as Tommy Tyler in the Philco Television Playhouse production of "A Man Is Ten Feet Tall," as the most poignant and artistic work in the mid-1950s. He also cited Bill Cosby's role of Alexander Scott on the *I Spy* series as probably the most significant, most daring and beneficial toward the ailing perception of blacks held by white America.

In some detail, MacDonald compared the careers of Nat King Cole and Paul Robeson. These two black performers would seem to be opposites at first glance, but they met similar defeats in their battles with white television, as MacDonald reveals. He presents Robeson as being defiant and proud; but that defiant attitude led the networks to ban Robeson from American television. Cole, on the other hand, got his own variety show in 1956; but it failed. MacDonald attributes this failure to the lack of support from the network and a sabotage of sorts by Madison Avenue advertising executives.

MacDonald's story recounting these two very different struggles is striking. The Robeson story suggests a martyr, fighting against the odds, while the story of Nat King Cole concludes with a wimper. MacDonald presents Cole as a man who went along with the establishment, but became a victim of his own success. Both men were in similar situations, but while Robeson blamed southern prejudice and cowardice for his demise, Cole refused to fault the public. He instead blamed the advertising industry for failing to sponsor his show.

MacDonald also analyzes the power that the South had over the look and nature of American television. Because of the desegregation of high schools, buses, restaurants, and public places throughout the South, networks were afraid to air shows like *Gray Ghost*, which was popular during its short run with southern whites. Network executives were afraid that these shows would offend southern blacks, thereby aggravating the racial

ension during that time. But at the same time, they knew that southern affiliates would not air shows which featured black actors in serious roles.

MacDonald theorizes that regardless of the wave of popular opinion, television programming is controlled by the powers that be—those in the White House, on Capitol Hill, in the Federal Communications Commission, and especially on Madison Avenue. MacDonald surmises that the advertising industry responds only to the voice of the national majority. Meanwhile, the networks are caught between the advertising business and the wishes of the current Administration. The preferences of the minority do not figure into this formula unless those demands happen to coincide with those of the Administration, according to MacDonald.

This was especially the case during the Kennedy and Johnson years when Kennedy appointee, Newton Minow, then Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, leveled threats against station owners who did not operate in the "public interest." Television executives responded to those threats with, what MacDonald calls, the Golden Age.

During this Golden Age, black Americans were portrayed in a better way than ever before on American television. But even then, stations in the South continued to preempt programs like: *The Bill Cosby Show*, *I Spy*, *Julia*, and *The Outcasts*. In these shows, blacks were presented as aggressive, positive, self-sustaining, and independent characters. MacDonald qualifies the motivation for this positive programming, however, by saying that it was as much in reaction to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the publication of the Kerner Commission's Report on black America as to pressure from the Administration.

At the heart of MacDonald's analysis is his conclusion that television is insensitive in its portrayal of blacks and other minorities because that is the way the general public wants it: "If the Uncle Toms, coons, mammies, and pickaninnies still abound, it is not because the general public still likes its blacks presented in a minstrel-show style?"<sup>1</sup> Even if the general public does not feel this way, as long as the advertising industry and network chiefs believe this, MacDonald says, these stereotypes and the erasure of blacks from serious roles on television will persist. MacDonald feels that television has abandoned its early aspirations to lead and teach the public and will instead, maintain the status quo until that becomes unprofitable.

According to MacDonald, as long as the advertising industry feels as it did during the late 1950s and early 1960s, that blacks in dramatic television do not "sell," and if there is no pressure from the government to show more blacks on television, blacks will continue to be absent from prime time television. This is the case regardless of FCC regulations like the Fairness Doctrine<sup>2</sup> and the overall duty of each broadcaster to operate in the public

---

1. J. FRED MACDONALD, *BLACKS AND WHITE TV: AFRO-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION SINCE 1948* 236 (1983).

2. The Fairness Doctrine was formally recognized as such by the courts in the leading case of *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 395 U.S. 367 (1969). In that case, the Court held that broadcasters had a duty to devote air time to discussion of the most important controversial issues in their service areas. *Id.* at 380. This duty also requires broadcasters to afford reasonable opportunities for the presentation of opinions which conflict with those aired. *Id.* at 378. This rule often affords radio and television air time to minorities because the "controversial issues," such as zon-

interest.<sup>3</sup> The public interest duty of broadcasters requires that they provide fair and equal representation of racial minorities on television. However, to fulfill this requirement without offending viewers who do not want to see blacks on television, many broadcasters simply use black newscasters and talk show hosts, rather than using black actors in prime time where they would reach the largest viewing audience and make the greatest impact.

In television, everything is a business venture between the advertiser and the network. MacDonald hailed Alex Haley's *Roots* and *Roots: The Next Generation* as rays of hope during a period of white backlash. But he sees these as money ventures. Although the producer, David Wolper, may have been well-intentioned, MacDonald says, the network decided to air the miniseries *only* because of its financial potential in the wake of the success of the *Rich Man, Poor Man* miniseries.

The outlook is bleak for black actors who wish to perform in dramatic roles and for viewers who wish to see positive black role models on prime time network television—if the reader is to believe what MacDonald says. He does, however, seem to point to cable as an avenue through which black programs can reach the public. "Narrowcasting," as opposed to broadcasting, holds hope for the black and minority viewing public.

The few problems with the book lie in the writer's style and presentation of the topic. He sometimes seems unsure whether he wants to refer to blacks as Negroes, blacks, or Afro-Americans. But that may be a simple reflection of the change in the use of those labels through the years. There is also a lack of continuity at times. The book is not entirely chronological, and that can be confusing to the reader.

The author divides his book into three chapters entitled: "The Promise Denied, 1948-1957;" "Blacks in TV in the Age of the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1970;" and "The Age of the New Minstrelsy, 1970-Present." The book is well footnoted and the notes section in the back can be valuable for further research. The illustrations are especially valuable for readers who might not remember the shows or performers mentioned in the book. This writer wholeheartedly recommends *Blacks and White TV*.

DONNA WADE ANDERSON

---

ing, gerrymandering, health care, state aid and criminal justice, often have their greatest impact on minorities.

3. 47 U.S.C. § 303 (1976). See *Red Lion*, 395 U.S. at 380.