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Tyler Perry and Black Cyber-Activism in the 21st Century

By Dr. Robin R. Means Coleman, PhD

Guest Commentator

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On October 1, 2007, Tyler Perry and Janet Jackson began a whirl-wind, two week media tour (9 states, 25 private screenings, TV and radio appearances) to promote their new film, "Why Did I Get Married." The film turns its attention to a population and to a subject that rarely makes it to the big screen — members of the Black middle-class negotiating love and family, while drawing on their spirituality for strength. The message of the film seemed to speak to Perry's mostly African American audience, as it earned over 21 million dollars in its opening weekend, making it #1 in box office earnings. However, Perry and Jackson's satellite link appearance on CBS affiliate KMAX in Sacramento, California, served as a reminder that mainstream media would rather ignore the inroads being made in offering up diverse and complex representations of Blackness. Instead, KMAX reporter Mark S. Allen chose to badger Jackson about the now three year-old "nipple-gate" Super Bowl XXXVIII incident, and to cast her as a devious Jezebel against a helpless Justin Timberlake. When Perry and Jackson refused to talk about the incident, opting to focus on the movie, Allen pressed Jackson harder to explain her Super Bowl behavior. When the interview had concluded, and Perry and Jackson's satellite link severed, Allen engaged his fellow in-studio reporters in still more ridicule of Jackson. The movie was not mentioned.

Tyler Perry maintains a [blog](#). (If you click on "message board" and/or "Why Did I Get Married," you will see the hundreds of thousands of messages. If you click on "Tyler's Latest Message," you will see all of his

archived messages.) Its purpose is to keep fans up to-date on his projects. Those who “subscribe” can get Perry’s blog sent directly to their email inbox. In his October 14th blog, Perry recounted how he and Jackson were badly treated by Allen. The next day, at his fans’ urgings, Perry included a video clip of the interview as evidence (KMAX has since removed the interview from its site). Perry wrote, “for all of you who asked here is the link to what I was talking about in my last email... You can see the blatant disrespect and rudeness of this guy.” Perry then took things a step further — he included the email address of the reporter and of the station’s general manager, writing: “If you want to complain, you can email Mark S. Allen directly at: gooddaymarks@kmxatv.com or you can email his boss at: generalmgr@kmxatv.com.”

You see, in the first 24 hours of the release of “Why Did I Get Married,” Perry received 602,000 posts to his blog by fans using the “comment” feature, praising him for a job well done on the movie and its mounting box office earnings. I know, because I am a Perry blog subscriber. It was my estimate that if even half those people would email KMAX about the troubling interview, we would have a new record for the number of email protest letters sent to a station about their poor quality in reporting around a single story. I know this because I am also a scholar who studies media activism.

We will never know if a record was set. KMAX’s computer servers crashed when the first approximately 45,000 emails were sent to them from angry Perry supporters. To stem the tide, and when the servers were operating again, on October 17th, the station’s general manager sent an auto-response out to those who emailed: “We have reviewed the many comments we have received regarding our interview with Tyler Perry and Janet Jackson that aired on October 11th. As a result of the numerous comments received, we have carefully reviewed the segment and have reassessed the approach taken by Mr. Allen. While we certainly did not intend to offend anyone during this interview, we do sincerely apologize to anyone who may have been offended, including Ms. Jackson and Mr. Perry. We take seriously the feedback we receive from our viewers and thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.”

News of Perry and Jackson’s treatment hit websites such as EURweb.com and BlackAmericaWeb.com on the 17th. On October 18th, Allen halted the morning news show to offer a lengthy (for television) apology to Perry, Jackson, and their fans. Allen repeatedly referred to himself as “a jerk” and reaffirmed that he, too, was a big fan of Perry and his work.

There continues to be debate about the lingering effects of the digital divide in Black communities. For those without access to the Internet, the possibility of them quickly having their say, and being heard, is severely limited in this age of new technologies. To be connected, one needs electricity, a phone line or cable connection, a computer and software. The initial setup and maintenance can be expensive. However, for those with access, be it at home or through work, school, public libraries, and community centers, this technology has proven to be particularly empowering. The Internet is the 21st century equivalent of a “Bat signal” alerting people to all sorts of news, including incidents of racial injustice. It can be used to inform us, instantaneously, on how to take action to remedy problems. For example, syndicated radio talk show host Michael Baisden not only used the radio airwaves to organize a rally in Jena, Louisiana on behalf of the Jena 6 youth, he also ably exploited his radio show’s website and web links to enlist members of Black organizations and institutions. Importantly, students at our nation’s HBCUs took up Baisden’s electronic call to action and similarly used the Internet to rally old and young from all corners of the country to march on Jena. The new technology facilitated a more traditional communicative effort — a protest march. Similar new technology campaigns have been mounted successfully to get rapper Nelly’s concerts cancelled, due to their misogynistic content, and to flood the BET network with complaints regarding their stereotypical programming. Black folks on the Internet have learned how to exploit this technology with good effect, and there is little anyone can do to stop it. Missing Black children alerts, the racist sexual

attack on a Black West Virginian woman, and the sexual violence perpetrated against a Black woman and her young son in a Florida housing project all recently have hit our email inboxes and kept bloggers busy. The hope is that by getting the word out, one or some of us can help get justice for these people. The Internet is the new grassroots movement, and it is working.

What Perry figured out, and what KMAX has come to understand, is that the power of new technologies should not be ignored just because they are relatively convenient. Tens of thousands of emails crippled the station's communication networks. Unlike Jena, where protestors eventually had to go home, KMAX will never be able to fully halt the electronic traffic of protest. Stories live in cyberspace forever, and there is the potential that there will always be a moment when this television station will have to deal with its mistake. Weeks, months, and even years from now, the station may get an email reminding them of the standards of quality journalism and about how to treat its guests.

This lesson of protest can be transferred to other situations. We should commit to communicating with those individuals and organizations that are withholding our equality, until our concerns are attended to. Media personalities such as Perry and Baisden, as well as our Black citizenry, have already shown us how the Internet is one very effective activism and change agent tool.

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