The Absence of the Black Sitcom and the Effect on the Black Community

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Abstract

This paper explores the absence of black sitcoms and the rise of reality television shows. Informing the reader about the popular era of black sitcoms ranging from the years 1968 to 2009. The three main sitcoms focused on in this paper are: 1975 The Jeffersons, 1989 Family Matters, and 2014 Black-ish. Comparing and contrasting the change in black sitcoms over years’ time. Discussing how black families are now portrayed on television. Also, the effects that reality television shows have on today’s viewers.
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The Buggles said it best back in 1979, “Video killed the radio star.” Just like that, reality television has now killed family sitcoms. Television is lacking quality entertainment because people would rather watch drama than a show with a message. Sadly this generation will not know or appreciate the past television shows for what they were worth. Back then, it was more than just family sitcoms but an era where black sitcoms reigned supreme with not only one nor two shows on prime time television but multiple shows. With the loss of the black sitcom there are no good representations of blacks on television anymore besides the two current family sitcoms, Black-ish and The Carmichael Show. There are also the reality shows that depict black families in their day to day lives such as Ja Rule’s new show called Follow the Rules on MTV about his life and his family, very similar to T.I. & Tiny’s Family Hustle on VH1 which has had a lot of success so much that Nelly tried his shot at a show on BET called Nellyville. Black sitcoms have now been pushed under the rug by black celebrities showing off their fancy lifestyle with their families. With very few sitcoms that blacks can relate to, this generation is left with only reality shows that push reoccurring stereotypes into their minds and fake lifestyles that they now look up to which makes for a growing concern for the youth.
The Jeffersons premiered on CBS in January 17, 1975. It holds the title of the longest running black sitcom. The sitcom lasted eleven seasons with two hundred fifty-three episodes. What was the reason behind it being so popular and lasting eleven seasons when the majority of black sitcoms only last for one season? This black sitcom was a spin off from the popular television show All in the Family and it out lasted its original show as well. The Jeffersons showed television audience a vocal, smart, and ambitious business man who was black. Main character George Jefferson worked hard from starting out shining shoes as a kid, to opening a dry cleaning store, and then expanding it to a seven chain franchise. Which then helped him to move on up with his family to the luxury apartment in the sky. Besides showing the success of a black man creating his own business, what also appealed to the audience was the love between main character George and his wife Louise Jefferson. Before this show, earlier depictions of black couples were mainly negative. With the stereotypes of the male role being lazy and dumb like the Sambo archetype and the female role behaving aggressive and dominate towards their partner like the Sapphire archetype. With George and Louise Jefferson viewers were able to watch a black couple embrace one another instead of shun one another away. The on-air chemistry between Sanford and Hemsley was so perfect that the two appeared together on TV commercials and other sitcoms as George and Weezy for years after The Jeffersons ended. They were so convincing as a married couple, in fact, that most viewers didn't realize that Sanford was 21 years older than Hemsley; old enough to be his mother! (Kovalchik 2012) Also, what were very interesting for viewers to watch were the Jeffersons neighbors Tom and Helen Willis, who made the debut as the first interracial couple to be shown on prime time television. Of course a lot of the comic relief came from George teasing and insulting the Willis’s because of them being a mixed couple but it was still a positive and major step for television for an interracial
couple to be aired. Also a first for television was seeing how the Jeffersons were a black family with a black housekeeper. Character Florence Johnston was the Jeffersons full time maid who eventually moves in with them becoming a show regular. Besides getting to know the Jeffersons the audience got to know their neighbors and many other people around the town of Manhattan were the show was based. The sitcom was also known for showing controversial topics in episodes such as racism, suicide, gun control, and illiteracy. The Jeffersons, unlike reality shows today which show black people coming from broken homes, gave viewers a chance to watch George and Louise raise their son Lionel in a healthy household. From successfulness, to black love and family, as well as heartfelt messages all of these components made for longest running black sitcom ever.

Only four years after The Jeffersons ended a new black family sitcom would broadcast and become very popular. Family Matters aired on ABC September 22, 1989 then later moved to CBS. Coming right after The Jeffersons it is the second longest running black sitcom with nine seasons. Also, just like The Jeffersons, Family Matters was a spin off from the show Perfect Strangers and it too out lasted its original show. The sitcom focuses on a middle class family known as the Winslow’s living in Chicago. The father was Carl Winslow and the mother was Harriette Winslow, and then their children were Eddie, Laura, and Judy Winslow. Other main characters are their nerdy and pesky next door neighbor Steve Urkel, Stefan who was Steve’s handsome alter ego, Rachel who was Harriette’s younger sister, their nephew Richie, Estelle who was Carl’s mother, Myra who was Steve’s crazy girlfriend and then ex, Waldo who was Eddie’s best friend, and their adopted son 3J. This was a large cast, with every character being black and having in depth storylines in the show. Viewers were able to watch yet again another functioning black family grow in society. The father Carl started the series off as a police sergeant for
Chicago. Later throughout the series he works his way up to lieutenant and then captain. Being able to see a black man playing as a police man on prime time television and then get promoted to captain of a major police station was such a good representation of blacks being a part of the work force and being a role model. The mother Harriette was strong willed and hard worker and always kept it real with her advice to her husband, children, and others. Steve Urkel’s character made being a nerd cool, even though he had to create a machine to physically change himself into Stefan to initially attract Laura other people in the cast liked and admired Steve for who he really was and Laura eventually came around too. Steve Urkel also showed the audience watching that black men are highly intelligent and can be scientist and engineers too even if he was portrayed in a dorky kind of way for comical relief. Urkel’s popularity made him a hot commodity on the sitcom crossover front; he made appearances in Full House, Step by Step, and Meego. He was also mentioned, but not seen, in an episode of Boy Meets World. (Wood 2015) This sitcom just like The Jeffersons dealt with controversial episodes facing issues of alcoholism, gun control, and bullying.

The showing of black sitcoms on major network television took a sharp decline after the glory days of the 1990s. During the mid-1990s there was a record 18 black sitcoms on five major networks. (Williams 2014) Audiences did not see another predominantly all black cast until 2014’s hit show Black-ish. That meaning from 2009 to 2014 there were no new black sitcoms being aired. What began to rise in the place of black sitcoms was a popular demand for reality television shows. Such as Love & Hip Hop New York/ Atlanta/Hollywood, The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Basketball Wives Miami/L.A., Bad Girls Club, and dating shows with black celebrities like She’s Got Game with the famous rapper The Game. Mona Scott-Young is credited as one of the producers and faces of ratchet reality TV — stereotyping Black women as
angry, catty, violent, loud and promiscuous. (Dalton 2015) Although there are successful drama series such as Scandal, Empire, and How to Get Away with Murder those shows also depict the black community in a demeaning manner. With storylines of poverty, drugs, cheating, and other stereotypical thoughts of black living. And character roles of that such as the Jezebel and Sapphire archetypes. After seeing women and men of color behave themselves for national television in such poor taste these recent years it is no wonder why when Black-ish aired on September 24, 2014 it was seen as a breath of fresh air. Black-ish is a sitcom based on an upper middle class family. The father Andre Johnson is an advertising executive and the mother Dr. Rainbow Johnson is a surgeon. Once again, just as the older sitcoms presented audiences with a well-balanced black couple so is Black-ish. Viewers are able to watch a black family that has both parents who work very successful careers. Other main characters are their children Zoey, Andre Jr., Jack, and Diane. As well Ruby who is Dre’s mother, Rhonda who is Dre’s lesbian sister, Earl aka Pops who is Dre’s father, and his co-workers. Again viewers can now watch a very large cast of black actors just like in Family Matters. This show like its processors lets audiences view controversial topics such as race. Embodying characteristics of past successful black sitcoms Black-ish is keeping the hope alive for the rise of many more black sitcoms to make their return to television one day.
Conclusion

With only two black sitcoms on television now, where does that leave the state of the black youth? This generation is growing up on reality television which is hour long shows filled with stereotypes that they soon believe and eventually they inhabit those very same traits. Not just teens but sadly even the children now are far more fascinated with drama and other people’s lives than their own because that is what reality television has taught them to be interested in. Thus, leading them to aspire to be the bad bitches, rappers, porn stars, and athletes that they see on the television screen in the favorite reality series. And as a result, children are now trying to grow up too fast because of a mixture of reality television and social media. If there were more black family sitcoms on the air again this generation would be able to watch people of their own color behave normally in a healthy setting. With episodes that would teach them their rights from their wrongs without them even noticing. It would help to create a tighter family bond once again; parents could get to know their children better and vice versa while watching the show because sitcoms brought families together for quality time. Black sitcoms were not just entertainment for people of color but they revolutionized the way we watched and the way we were perceived by other races on television. The black sitcom era impacted so many lives with positive views of the black community and hopefully this generation and the ones to follow will turn their heads away from reality television sooner than later so that they too can enjoy sitcoms with their families one day.
References


