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blackworld



Gil Noble

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The Emmy Award-winning host and producer of *Like It Is*, Gil Noble is responsible for the longest-running African American-produced television program in the US. *Like It Is* has been on air since June 1968, after the Kerner Commission — established to investigate the causes of the racial unrest that erupted around the country that year — concluded that white racism was responsible for the riots in urban America and warned that the country was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." The report urged the media to provide greater representation of minorities on the air, as well as programming that reflected minority issues and viewpoints.

Noble, the host of the show since its inception, has for the past 34 years fulfilled that mandate. His one-hour Sunday afternoon program offers analysis of current political, economic and cultural issues through interviews, profiles and documentaries. Among the ground-breaking stories Noble aired were his "Drugs Into the US: The Quiet Route," about the trafficking of drugs through American military installations, and "The Odyssey of Jesse Jackson," on the civil rights leader's national and international activism.

In recent months, network officials have threatened to discontinue *Like It Is*, claiming that the program was not profitable and would only be kept on the air if it could generate at least \$20,000 in ad revenues per show. Concerned leaders and organizations in the New York have held several rallies to support *Like It Is*.

I recently spoke with Noble. He declined to talk about the status of his show, observing that "that situation is a work in progress and I don't feel

that it is appropriate for me to comment about it," but he did speak freely with me about the state of black journalism, black leadership and the War on Terror.

You are one of the leading black journalists in the United States. What do you think of the state of black journalism today?

There are many compartments to journalism. There's electronic journalism, and there's print journalism. I'm more conversant with the former rather than the latter. I would say that one of the things that I have some concern about is that journalism has drifted under the umbrella of materialism. It's now a business. And for that reason I think it evokes an ethos that is problematic. Reporting tends, in many instances, to gravitate towards that which will get the widest viewership or readership, rather than towards those issues that may offend people.

As far as black journalism is concerned, my concern is that perhaps too many black journalists fail to understand the genesis of the opportunities that they have at their disposal now, employment-wise, and have therefore concluded that overloading on "black issues" is something that is not really conducive to moving forward in your career, especially if you're working in major media.

Many journalists prefer to avoid political controversy, not taking sides on issues, but I've noticed that you are not reluctant to express opinions and take positions. How do you balance journalistic objectivity with political activism?

Objectivity is questionable. It's hard given the climate in this country and the long-term friction between the races for either a white journalist or a black journalist to be objective — especially on issues that involve race. If objectivity were the norm, then I wouldn't feel that it's important for black people in journalism to be any different. But if people who are the lions of the industry — in radio and television — practice subjective journalism, then I think an African American reporter should not shrink from trying to provide an antidote. The whole purpose of black people getting into the business back in the '60s was not to bring objectivity into the business, but to balance an acknowledged subjective industry. The Kerner Commission Report said that there was a major perspective of events that wasn't getting proper airing and proper reporting, and therefore it was important to get reporters and producers and programs that show this other perspective.

If you step back and look at the educational process that we are all exposed to in this country, and examine the content about African history on this side of the Atlantic or on the other side of the Atlantic, you will see that it is anemic. You don't learn too much about Africa, or how this country came to be what it is in specificity. This has affected and infected both black students and white students. So if a black student really does his homework, begins to ingest this story about what has happened to peoples of color down through the pages of history, and decides to report that perspective, I think that they are supplying a badly needed antidote. What troublesome is that to supply that antidote may not put you on the hit parade of your employer. So a lot of reporters of color punk out, to be blunt about it. They know how to talk the talk, they know how to sound relevant, but at root, they're looking to advance their career, and they've gotten the message that if they're too strong, then their horizons are limited. And they're not wrong in reaching that conclusion, because that's the truth. If you're too pointed in your reports, if you're too strong on a certain perspective, it will hamper your horizons.

Unlike other black commentators, you don't simply address African American concerns, but also African issues. I know you've had African leaders on your show. How does activism for Africa play into your role as a journalist? What does Africa mean to you?

Africa is the root of my existence. Were it not for Africa, you and I would not be here or anywhere else. It is also the sheet anchor of the industrial development of this country. It also happens to be the sheet anchor of the industrial development of the Western countries. So to look at European history, and to look at so-called US history and not really focus on the genesis of their development, then you're skirting important issues, and you're compounding the felony because that's what's happening today. So you come out of school with a decaffeinated awareness of who you are and what the world really is. The inference is that the reason certain people are on top and are in control of the world is because they are better, they're smarter, they're more able, they've got this, they've got the other. The truth is a completely different story.

My root concern is that black reporters have a unique opportunity to give a perspective and to remind people about the context of today's events. Looking at the uprisings that are taking place around the world, looking at the uprisings that took place on both sides of the Atlantic in the '50s and '60s — that was the result of something. The upheavals of today, the so-called war that we're looking at, the Middle East...these are wars that are the result of something, and it seems to me that a reporter of color can really do great service to readers and viewers by putting the trauma of today and the trauma of yesterday in context — by explaining how things got to be that way.

You've interviewed a number of black leaders — what do you think of the state of black leadership today?

Black leadership has been severely compromised again because of the materialism, the glut — the money and profit has been intoxicating and it's been suffocating. So many countries, even those who are really properly focused and have a proper agenda for upliftment and independence, find themselves trapped by global financial institutions, by the IMFs and the World Banks of the world. These agencies give life to a country if they're supportive, and can kill a country if they're not. So a lot of these leaders of foreign countries find themselves in a heck of a position trying to uplift their people while avoiding getting into hock. It's hard to avoid borrowing money.

Even in the US, black leaders are in organizations that are underwritten by the very interests they oppose. Black leadership is in a very difficult position because of the enormous economic pressures put both on international leaders and leaders in the US, and that compromises their ability to be effective because they are dependent on economic support from many of the institutions that we are supposed to be fighting.

While we're talking about the state of black America and the progress made, what was your reaction to this new case of police brutality in Los Angeles?

Malcolm X used to say that if you stick a knife in my back six inches and pull it out three inches, that's not progress. Progress is removing the blade altogether and healing the wound that the blow made. Progress must be put in some sort of context. Your example is well-put. How can you feel as a black man that you've come a long way when things like that continue to happen? It could have been you, it might be you tomorrow, it might be your

woman, it might be your mother or your father.

Police brutality is the symptom of an urgent problem. The police exist to protect property. We are not property-owners. Police never act in our behalf — with very few exceptions. And the only way we're going to get the police, or educational institutions, or healthcare to treat us with respect is if we demand it. It's folly to expect to be given respect when we really don't demand it. So if we had some of our own institutions, if we controlled the economy of our own communities, if we controlled the economies of the countries where we are bound, then I think you'd find that we'd be getting a lot more respect. But you can't name me one piece of real estate in this country or around the world that is peopled by people of color, and that is controlled by people of color — can you?

No, I can't... What about Cuba? Some say Cuba is a "racial democracy."

There is not a country in the Caribbean whose economy is controlled by the people of color in that land. One country that has made an extraordinary effort is Cuba, and look at the hell they're catching.

You mentioned the War on Terror and the Middle East — what do you think of this ongoing war that began after 9/11?

I think the American public would do well to crack some history books, and to seek out some information about what may be the cause of this horrible situation that was experienced here on Manhattan Island. It didn't happen out of the blue. In my judgment, it's something that has been festering for a long time. Journalists go by the doctrines of the five Ws — Who, What, When, Where and Why. We know what happened, we're told who did it, we certainly know where it happened and when it happened — the one question that journalists have not asked is, "Why did it happen?" So, without trying to take a position as a savant on what's going on over there, I think the journalist ought to examine what brought this on and that may be useful in ending it. I don't see really how you can stop anybody from brutalizing you unless you remove the grievance. If there is no grievance, if there is no justification, alright, so be it, then you put that person out of commission. But at least explore what it is, the reason why you're being brutalized. This country has been set upon for the first time in its history. Bombs in the form of flying planes have hit this country. It's horrific, but a good journalist has to question why.

I honestly do believe that the African American journalist can make a major contribution, but the spine has to be there. There has to be some courage, there has to be a willingness to look beyond the hood of their car, or the expanse of their lawn, and stick their necks out to tell the truth. There are very few places left on this planet, as we speak now, where it'll be safe for you to raise your family. What value is it if you've got a six-figure income and you don't have a safe place for your children? A journalist can play a major role in putting a perspective to the reader or viewer that may help change their behavior. That's what a journalist is supposed to do. And I think a black journalist has a peculiar experience that he or she has been through that ought to be infused in their work. But for God's sake, don't decaffeinate it.

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