

The BLACK C o m m e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

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BlackCommentator.com and On-Line Journalism The African World By Bill Fletcher, Jr. BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor

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Every on-line magazine or journal faces some of the same challenges, the most important being, how to raise sufficient funds in order to survive. Yet this question is set against a bigger one: what is the actual role of an on-line magazine?

So, I am going to do something a bit different: I am going to ask you, the reader of BlackCommentator.com, just that question. *What should be the role of BlackCommentator.com?* Now, be careful before you answer. First, I really do want an answer, so please email us with your thoughts. But second, I am asking you to think about this question broadly. Let me explain.

BlackCommentator.com is a magazine of opinion and analysis. We get well over a hundred thousand unique readers per week. This does not translate into funds, but I do not want to focus on that in this commentary. Should our role stop there? In other words, is it sufficient for **BC** to provide a certain type of broad spectrum analysis of today's events? Is there something more that we should be doing?

I am asking you, the reader, these questions because I and others affiliated with **BC** have been grappling with these matters for a while and we could use your input. Prior to the existence of on-line journalism, it was not uncommon for progressive newspapers, magazines or journals to be the focal point for discussion groups. Circles of individuals would gather and go over issues raised in that particular media. In today's world of on-line journalism it is more common for individuals to read articles on line (and perhaps print them out) and, if they are energized by them, forward them to a friend or network to read. Or, maybe, they will post the piece on a Facebook or

MySpace page. While such a practice can get material around, it is not necessarily social, even though it is utilized in so-called social networking. To put it another way, while the material may be viewed by many people, it is not necessarily *discussed collectively* by groupings of people.

We hope you will notice in this week's issue that BC now has a FaceBook page in addition to a twitter page. We hope [FaceBook](#), [twitter](#) and the [Talk Back to BC](#) feature will facilitate the kind of discussions I have mentioned. If you have a FaceBook account click [here](#) to participate in a discussion we have set up on this topic.

So, one question is whether **BC** specifically, and progressive on-line media generally need to be crafted in such a way as to encourage collective discussion? Is it as easy as promoting, in this case, BlackCommentator.com discussion groups where people download and print out articles (or a full issue!) and discuss them? Or is there something else that should be considered?

On-line journalism relies, to a great extent, on secondary sources in order for commentaries, blogs, etc., to be written. First hand reporting is not something that is the main aspect of on-line journalism. As a result, first hand reporting is shriveling up (in both hardcopy and on-line) and opinion - often groundless - replaces facts. So, here is my next question: does this have any implications for what **BC** does in the future? Should we have "stringers", reporters in the field, made up of people who are not full-time writers but will write stories for **BC**? If so, how would this be financed? Or would such an approach be unworkable and change the character of **BC** in a negative direction?

Finally, does **BC** need to engage readers in broader discussions? We have introduced a means for individuals to, literally, call in and voice their opinion on various issues. But what I mean is something different. Does there need to be something equivalent to a **BC** chat-room or should we find the time to bring back our Readers' Corner feature on a regular basis for greater discussion of issues that are raised by our writers?

These are not rhetorical questions. They are being asked of you in order for us to think through the future of the magazine. **BC** has been path-breaking. We intend to continue to be so.

BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.



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