



BET FOUNDER ROBERT JOHNSON HOPES TO CREATE A BLACK NETFLIX WITH NEW URBAN MOVIE CHANNEL

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Robert L Johnson, founder of BET and RLJ Entertainment, has been planning his entry into digital technology since his days at BET.

In an interview last week, Johnson explained that it had long been his vision to provide African American audiences in particular with targeted programming and entertainment. It was the formation of the cable industry in the 70s and 80s, which not only ushered in a new way we received content (through satellite and cable), but helped to loosen the monopoly both the studios and networks had on its content distribution. This transformation also paved the way for BET to serve a niche audience (i.e Black people) that both the networks and studio ignored or didn't even believe existed.



Johnson said that this shift is happening again. "And so because I had the knowledge and experience of seeing what happened when cable satellite came about, I recognize that digital was going to transform the media landscape in much of the same way," he said.

And just like BET, Johnson is hoping his latest venture, the Urban Movie Channel, will again be at the forefront of this new technological transformation of how we receive cultural-centered content. The UMC, which is available at www.urbanmoviechannel.com, is digital subscription video-on-demand (VOD) channel that caters to a largely urban and African American audience.

"You can call it the targeted version of Netflix and I think that is a fair analysis but beyond that, there is both a cultural model and a business model to consider," he said.

As the name suggests UMC has feature length films including sentimental dramas like *All Things Fall Apart* and blaxploitation classic like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. But there are also live concert music and comedy films like Kevin Hart's *I'm A Grown Little Man*, and *Welcome To Death Row*. And there are also

documentaries like *Dark Girls* and stage play productions like *David E. Talbert presents: What Goes Around Comes Around*.

Currently, the Urban Movie Channel is up and operational, and as Johnson touts, it can be seen from Newark to Nigeria. In an effort to attract audience, the VOD site is offering free service with membership subscription through February 2015. After that, the plans will start at \$4.99 a month, which Johnson notes is significantly lower than what many people pay for subscription to HBO or Showtime on their cable packages.

He also notes that is a solid price for content that Black households have longed pined for. “Basically, this is universal distribution without any gatekeeping,” he said.

In addition to providing on-demand and live streaming market for Black and urban audiences, which rivals the like Netflix or Hulu or Amazon Prime, Johnson said that the UMC provides a great opportunity for Black and urban content creators to not only have access to a platform but tell stories without limitations.

As Johnson points out: Hollywood makes the decisions of the kinds of films that get made and cable channels make decisions about the kind of channels it wants to distribute. Likewise, advertisers, who hold the most control in the current content creation distribution structure, only advertise on programs with compatible values with its brand.

“Using digital platforms or digital media, is a direct way to do it without having to go through lots of gatekeepers, who would either control your access to the consumers, or your audience, or in some way censor or filter it in a way that may not be consistent information you want to give to your consumer,” said Johnson.

The Urban Movie Channel is not RLJ Entertainment’s first foray into digital content distribution. Two years ago, Johnson purchased two companies: Image Entertainment and Acorn Media Group to form RLJ Entertainment. Through the acquisition, RLJ Entertainment became the holder of licenses to over 160 urban or African American oriented movie titles.

Last year, RLJ Entertainment announced the creation of two other VOD digital channels: OnCueNetwork, which also showed movies, documentaries and other programming targeted to African American and Acorn TV, which exclusively shows British dramas and mysteries.

After a successful test run and partnership with YouTube, OnCue is being phased out to make way for UMC, which will be hosted on its own digital platform. However Acorn TV will still operate separately (and is too still available via YouTube). Unlike Netflix, which still offers DVD rentals, UMC will be strictly be video-on-demand. However Johnson said that he is looking to distribute some of UMC’s content on both DVD and Blu-Ray to other distribution networks like Red Box, Target and Wal-Mart.

In addition to the licenses RLJ Entertainment already holds, Johnson said that the group will be reaching out to the major studios for content. Likewise, UMC will be looking to partner with the creative community for stories that are “rarely told” by the mainstream film studios and on networks.

“So we will be talking to producers and talent and film financiers and independent production companies to say let’s sit down and help you tell those stories and [let’s talk about] how you can monetize those stories, create value for yourself and create compelling content for the millions of subscribers, who I believe want to see the stories you have to tell,” he said.

Johnson adds that telling those stories has now become much easier in the digital age. “When I was running BET, we were an advertiser supported network. So if I put on a show Proctor of Gamble didn’t like or another advertiser didn’t like, it would be tough to keep that program going,” he said, recounting how advertisers would police content on BET in ways he felt they weren’t doing for other cable networks.

Now, he said, the power is in the hands of Black and urban audience members instead of advertisers, networks and studios. “It’s only the consumers now who have a say. If they like it, they’ll pay for it and if they don’t, they won’t watch.”

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