

Top Journalist, Racial Justice Champion Bankole Thompson Speaks to University of Michigan Students on Media & Democracy

Bankole Thompson, a nationally acclaimed journalist decries media indifference to issues of race and inequality

DETROIT, MI, UNITED STATES, January 29, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The nation is in dire need of future journalists with a fiery conscience who will defend the rule of law and the norms of a democratic and free society where human and civil rights are respected. That responsibility falls to journalists who are willing and unafraid to hold the powerful accountable because democracy and the fight for racial equality cannot be sacrificed on the altar of media insouciance.



Bankole Thompson moderating a 2024 forum at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. featuring U.S. Senator Gary Peters. Peters was chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

That was the message that Bankole Thompson, a nationally acclaimed journalist and standard-bearer for economic and racial justice issues, brought to a class of undergraduate students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on Tuesday Jan. 28 at Mason Hall. Thompson was the opening guest speaker for the spring semester in a class that is devoted to studying the works of Frederick Douglass, the 19th century abolitionist and prophet of freedom as well as Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the anti-slavery activist, journalist and publisher.

Thompson is the founding dean of the anti-poverty think tank, The PuLSE Institute, which was established several years ago based on his influential work on race, democracy and poverty. He is a twice-a-week opinion columnist at The Detroit News, where his column on the presidency, culture and socioeconomic issues appear on Mondays and Thursdays. He is the host of the weekly national podcast, Bankole's Nation. He has been lauded for being a preeminent voice of conscience and courage in the media. He was the first Black newspaper editor in the nation to conduct a series of exclusive sit-down interviews with President Barack Obama during the

historic 2008 presidential campaign and wrote a pair of books on Obama.

David Porter, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, who served as Chair of the English Department from 2015-2020, invited Thompson to deliver a lecture to his class after indicating that the work of the journalistic thought leader is rare these days and represents a continuation of the tradition and legacy of Douglass' commitment of speaking truth to power. Prior to his hour-long presentation, students were assigned chapters in Thompson's latest book, "Fiery Conscience", which lays out a blueprint for effective and courageous journalistic leadership on the issues shaping the lives of disenfranchised and marginalized communities. They also read some of his piercing Detroit News columns.



Bankole Thompson leading a discussion at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. about the 2024 U.S. Senate races across the nation. The guest speaker was U.S. Senator Gary Peters.

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Bankole Thompson, founding dean of The PuLSE Institute

“The students were very engaging because they are equally concerned about the state of the media and what needs to be done to address the plethora of issues of inequality that we are dealing with. I found the interaction with the students including their insightful questions about how to build progressive movements for change to separating the influence of money and power in media operation regarding how journalists should truthfully do their jobs to be very telling,” Thompson said in a statement after the lecture. “The next generation of thinkers, writers and journalists who want to follow in the footsteps of Douglass and other pioneering advocates of racial democracy in the 19th and 20th centuries must be men and women of

conviction. They have to believe in the vocation of speaking truth to power. They can't put their hands on a plow and look back.”

During the talk Thompson, reflected on his own career, the present state of the media, the larger significance to democracy of the long tradition that he has helped to move forward as well as how he chooses subjects to write and speak about. He also discussed the educational crisis in the City of Benton Harbor, one of the most economically impoverished Black cities in the state,

and how he spent five days in that southwestern part of the state in 2019 and wrote seven columns about the crisis that successfully helped to prevent the state closure of the only high school in the city.

Some of the questions from the students centered around Thompson's own views about the changing landscape of the media and how the legacy media is dealing with the emergency of new media platforms such as podcasts. One particular student asked for recommendation of trusted media outlets to follow because of the deep-seated biases that exist in the media landscape.

"We are at an inflection point and unless we have journalists who are serious and committed to reporting and telling the facts, we are going to end up with a seriously fractured democracy that would be in need of major recovery for a long time," Thompson said. "Wounded justice is laying down in the emergency rooms and waiting on surgeons of freedom to perform on the crisis of economic and racial injustice. Journalists should be among the doctors of equality to address the growing dissatisfaction with the state of the media by covering the issues that matter, not what is being offered to the masses simply for ratings and clickbait."

Thompson added, "I was encouraged by the interest of the students I spoke with and it gives me hope that all is not lost for our future. In that class are future leaders of our society who seemed very interested in making a difference in their communities. They want to be involved in the trenches of inequality to help tackle the most important issues. We owe it to history and to ourselves to continue the legacy of Frederick Douglass and not be held hostage by political expediency and the trappings of power."

A member of the National Press Club, Thompson, is a sought after speaker and public intellectual who writes and speaks with the force of history about public leadership, equity, inclusion and political economy.

For example, in February of 2022, he delivered a powerful keynote lecture for Brown University Black History Month Forum on Race and Democracy, in which he warned that American democracy was on life support (<https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2022/02/our-democracy-is-on-life-support-bankole-thompson-discusses-role-of-institutions-in-addressing-racial-inequity>) while explaining the role of major institutions in advancing racial equality. His lecture which was attended by Brown President Christina Paxson, who delivered the introductory remarks and officially welcomed Thompson touched on the many facets of our national life including the role of major institutions in preserving democracy and the impact of the death of George Floyd.

Civil rights leader, the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., former president and founder of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, presented Thompson in 2018, with the Rainbow PUSH Coalition's "Let Freedom Ring Journalism Award," for his national impact and to mark the 50th anniversary death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In endorsing Thompson's book, "Fiery Conscience," Jackson said, "In Fiery Conscience, Bankole takes us on a social, journalistic journey that reminds us that one's fragilities and triumphs are shaped by one's past. Thank you, for this vestibule of hope book during our nation's most moralless times. A time where truth is discounted and lies are ignored. We need your pen more than ever."

The late legendary Detroit News editor and publisher Jonathan Wolman, who served as executive editor of the Associated Press, had long admired Thompson's strong sense of journalistic independence and boldness to ask uncomfortable and Socratic questions of those in power. Indicating that his voice was needed on the opinion pages of The Detroit News, Wolman, recruited Thompson to write columns for the newspaper.

"Bankole is a passionate advocate in the fight against poverty and racial and economic inequality. He gives respect, voice and agency to those affected. This truly makes Bankole a social prophet," is how former U.S. Ambassador Anne Derse described Bankole Thompson.

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