

Let the market bully hip-hop

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DURHAM - How do you create a socially conscious rapper? You pay him, of course.

Although Bill O'Reilly, Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey and others have recently decried the coarseness of hip-hop culture, they have been short on feasible solutions. Thus we will no doubt continue to hear these songs, see these videos and worry about their social impact.

The latest incarnation of this debate involves the Stop Snitching movement, which entered the public consciousness when NBA player Carmelo Anthony was shown in a DVD that warns potential witnesses and informants looking for an immunity deal about the dangers of cooperating with the police.

According to a recent "60 Minutes" report by Cooper, the Stop Snitching movement is having an appreciable impact on inner-city crime investigations. In some urban areas the percentage of homicide investigations that result in an arrest has dropped into the single digits, presumably because would-be witnesses and informants are reluctant to talk with the police. Meanwhile, Stop Snitching T-shirts have become popular, even as some public officials seek to banish them.

The media outcry over the Stop Snitching movement and the seemingly endless outrage over naughty lyrics will no doubt result in calls for censorship (even Def Jam Records founder Russell Simmons wants to ban certain words) or labeling of records, which will only increase demand for and the street credibility of the offending artists.

So what might we do to actually make a difference?

How about taking a lesson from socially responsible investors and use market forces to create positive social benefits?

RAPPERS WHO RHYME ABOUT VIOLENCE, SEX, DRUGS and their hatred of snitching are a lot like corporations that make huge profits but have negative social impact. Enron, meet rapper Cam'ron. For many years, socially minded investors have pooled their resources into social funds that support companies rated as socially responsible.

My analysis of corporate social responsibility initiatives indicates that companies do respond to socially minded investors, consumers and other stakeholders, by cooperating with social rating agencies, releasing corporate social responsibility reports and meeting with activists. With more than \$2 trillion invested in social funds, corporate social responsibility is now discussed in boardrooms and classrooms around the world.

While the jury is still out on whether socially responsible investors are rewarding the right companies, it is clear that individual companies can use their market power to create social impact across the economy. Now that Home Depot has introduced an environmental labeling program, its suppliers will begin to adjust their operations to meet the demands of America's second-largest retailer. Niche companies like Whole Foods can grow quickly if they deliver a good product and have the loyal support of socially conscious consumers.

Similarly, there are already many talented hip-hop artists like Common, Mos Def and Talib Kweli who rap with a social conscience. And numerous others are waiting to be discovered on iTunes, MySpace or even in your quaint local record store. But without consumer demand, these rappers will always be drowned out by audacious lyrics.

SO WHY DON'T BILL, ANDERSON, OPRAH, YOU AND I CONTRIBUTE (in accordance with our respective incomes) to a sort of venture capital fund to identify socially conscious rappers and support them with studio time, marketing and distribution and radio air play? This money could provide incentives for aspiring rappers to take their music in a more positive direction.

Conservatives who favor market-based solutions and fret about our cultural decline would be supportive, as would be progressives, who are probably fans of Common and the rest already. Moreover, concerned citizens could counter the negative influence of lyrics that demean women, celebrate drugs and advocate a socially destructive set of ethics by supporting talented but underappreciated artists who can make powerful social contributions.

Over time, these artists could sell records based on their lyrical prowess and their social mission the same way Ben and Jerry's sells great ice cream and good feelings today.

Of course, association with such a fund would itself be a potential threat to an artist's street credibility. So, a catchy name and expansive product line of accessories would be a must. A Stop Stop Snitching T-shirt could be mass-produced at low cost. And if it could be done in a factory that paid a living wage, allowed unions and had safe working conditions, there would be a long line of socially minded investors eager to buy one.