



NORMAN SOLOMON
Creators Syndicate

TV ratings much too shallow

As politicians and network TV execs continue their rhetorical brawl for the moralistic high ground, one thing is certain about the new rating system that begins in January: It won't be very informative.

We're told that sex, violence and profanity are the big problems with the shows that reach millions of viewers every day and night. But truth in labeling would require much clearer descriptions of what pours out of the tube.

For instance:

• **TV-H (Homophobic)**

Standard TV fare includes plenty of programming that's negative toward people who aren't among the heterosexual majority. Right now, "gay bashing is more acceptable than gay kissing on prime-time television," says critic Al Kielwasser.

"Some advertisers are willing to support a movie-of-the-week in which gays are beaten and shown lying in a pool of blood," he adds. "But even 'progressive' sponsors pull out when the script calls for gay men lying in bed."

• **TV-I (Insipid)**

Modern television offers plenty of fluff, bolstered by laugh tracks and background music. The really bad stuff — and there's a lot of it — is truly mind-numbing.

• **TV-N (Narrow)**

This rating has been earned by network news programs and politics shows. If the spectrum on television can't get any wider than ABC's George Will to Sam Donaldson, then a TV-N rating should be firmly affixed to routine broadcasts.

• **TV-RS (Racial Stereotyping)**

The TV-RS tag applies to local newscasts around the country. Black males are commonly seen in handcuffs or on their way to prison. Behind the anchor desks, black men are likely to be found presenting sports results. And Asian-American men can rarely be found at all.

When it comes to TV entertainment programs, Latinos — nearly one-tenth of the U.S. population — account for only 1 percent of the roles. In those appearances, they're apt to be cast as villains.

Meanwhile, in recent years, the Fox network has pioneered a comedy formula with young black actors following shuck-and-jive scripts — rather than depicting the richness of African-American culture.

• **TV-S (Sexist)**

Denigration of women can still be a howl. Or so it seems. First in line for a TV-S rating is *Married With Children*. Many others qualify.

• **TV-SV (Selective Violence)**

"We not only need more information — about violence, sex and language — but we also need a different information system, one that goes beyond a simple violence count to the issues of fairness and equity," says George Gerbner, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communications. He's right.

Gerbner helped to spotlight violent TV content three decades ago with his "Violence Index." Now, he's proposing a "Fairness Index" to assess "how fairly people and actions are represented."

The TV industry has begun to admit that it inflicts a "staggering quantity of violence" on the viewing public, Gerbner notes — but it continues to ignore "the ways in which violence is portrayed." As a nation, we haven't yet asked a key question: *What lessons do televised images teach?*

"Violence is essentially a demonstration of power," Gerbner emphasizes. On television, the heavies who end up paying for their evil ways "are disproportionately lower-class, and Latino or foreign, or women midlife and older."

Television doesn't just reflect the inequities and prejudices that already exist. It reinforces them. The dominant messages form a pattern: "Violence-laden television tends to create an unfair pecking order with women, children, older people and minorities at the bottom."

Labeling TV programs won't change them. But the labels convey certain attitudes about content — what matters and what doesn't. Right now, the shallowness of the labeling on the national agenda speaks volumes about what gets accepted without a second glance.