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Children and Power on Television: The Other Side of the Picture

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Popular stories and images depicting children cultivate certain assumptions about and behaviors toward them. Today television is the "wholesale" supplier of such stories to most people. Television is the mainstream of mass-produced culture that provides the broadest common bases for collective action and interaction in industrial societies.

Despite the widespread imagery of the troublesome—and troubled—child from Dennis the Menace to the young girls in the *Exorcist* and *Born Innocent*, and many others in the press, movies, and television, there is no reason to suspect that television incites violence specifically against children. Its stories and images tend to cultivate conventional values and norms that abhor rather than condone child abuse. Among these norms, however, are also conventional assumptions about people and power. The way television fits children and adolescents into its dramatic world of power can be seen to provide the other and more hidden side of its valuation of them. This chapter, then, describes our research* as a basis for some conclusions about the role of television in supporting a social scenario within which the more problematic as well as the more benign aspects of our treatment of children find their niche.

INDICATORS OF TV CONTENT

An examination of the Vanderbilt Television News Archives for 8 years showed little attention of any kind paid to children and youth. An average of 63 stories a year mention children and youth on the network evening news. Less than 6 percent of that, or only 3 stories a year, deal with child abuse. With only the most dramatic and sensational exceptions, child abuse is even less newsworthy on the air than in the press.

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An analysis of *TV Guide* plot synopses for 7½ years revealed similarly few programs, or about one a month on all of television, that involved any mention of abandonment, neglect, hurt, or abuse of children. A third of these were repeat telecasts. Of course, there are few programs depicting children at all, and most of them appear as situation comedies or children's cartoons.

A more systematic analysis of the world of television drama was based on ten years of monitoring and related studies, in which we noted the incidence of victimized children and adolescents in over 10 percent of network programs.

Cultural Indicators is an ongoing project that relates televised images and messages to conceptions of social reality held by viewers, and to action related to those conceptions. At the time of this writing, the Cultural Indicators data bank consists of reliably coded observations of over 1500 network prime time and weekend daytime programs, and nearly 15,000 dramatic characters representing all speaking parts in those programs, and many surveys of adult and young viewers (see Gerbner et al., 1979).

The World of Television Drama

Television entered the American home in the 1950s. Within 30 years it has saturated the land and is an active presence in 98 percent of its homes for an average of 44 hours a week. A new era has begun.

Nielsen reports that the typical viewer lives with television about 30 hours a week. Children and their parents watch more, their grandparents the most, and teenage girls the least (but still over 23 hours a week).

Viewing for most people is a ritual performed with little selectivity or deviation. Children spend, on the average, over 6500 hours in the world of television before entering school. Even during the school years, time spent with television equals or exceeds time spent in school. Our own research shows that the generation born after television is significantly more imbued with the television view of the world than the generation born before television.

Television is now our common and constant learning environment. Drama is its most vivid and popular curriculum. In one week, the typical evening (8–11 P.M.) viewer of a single network station will encounter about 300 dramatic characters playing speaking roles. (That is in drama alone, not counting commercials, news, game or talk shows, documentaries, or, of course, other viewing times.) Of these, 217 are males, 80 females, and 3 are animals or robots of no clear gender. The racial composition of this typical slice of the world of prime time dramatic television is 262 whites, 35 members of other races, and 3 whose race is hard to tell.

The children of the typical family will meet another 137 dramatic characters in speaking parts during weekend daytime hours. Gender and race in weekend daytime (clearly identifiable for only two-thirds of these—mostly cartoon—characters), are about the same as in prime time.

Overall, the world of television is three-fourths American, three-fourths between 30 and 60 (compared to one-third of the real population), and three-fourths male.

Clearly the world of television is not like the real world. Its demography reflects its purposes: to produce audiences for advertisers. Looking at it through the prism of age reveals a population curve that, unlike the real world, but much like the curve of consumer spending, bulges in the middle years of life. That makes children and the elderly relatively neglected, old people virtually invisible, and the portrayals of these and other minorities, as well as of women, sensitive barometers of the dramatic equities of life.

Children in the World of Television

As we can see in Table 15.1, one out of every five Americans (18.3%) is a child under 10 years of age. But in prime time, only one out of every 60 characters (1.9%) is a child under 10 years of age. Even in weekend day-

TABLE 15.1: Age distribution of the American population and the population of characters in television drama

	Totals	1–9	10–19	20–29	30–64	65+
Census	100% 203,208*	18.3	19.7	14.5	37.6	9.9
World of TV	14,973	1.9	12.2	18.5	65.0	2.2
Males	11,074	1.7	10.5	14.4	71.4	2.0
Females	3,883	2.5	17.0	30.3	47.2	2.9
Prime Time	11,505	1.7	7.9	20.5	67.7	2.3
Males	8,387	1.4	6.7	15.7	74.1	2.1
Females	3,111	2.3	11.2	33.4	50.5	2.7
Weekend Daytime	3,468	2.9	26.6	12.1	56.3	2.1
Males	2,687	2.5	22.6	10.5	62.9	1.6
Females	772	3.6	40.5	18.0	33.9	3.9

* Note: The actual population figures are based on the 1970 U.S. Census. The television population figures are based on the Cultural Indicators archive of character in network television drama 1969 through 1978.

time children's territory, the young viewer will find only 1 out of every 34 speaking parts (2.9%) belonging to a child under 10.

Another fifth (19.7%) of the American population is between ages 10 and 20. This group has more dramatic and romantic potential and thus more substantial representation on television. Although prime time teens number less than 8 percent of the total prime time population, weekend daytime teens are actually overrepresented. Girls under 20 make up nearly half of the entire female population on weekend daytime programs.

On the whole, then, the world of television drama is nine-tenths white, three-fourths male, and virtually devoid of young children but more hospitable to teens. Girls dramatically increase in visibility as they reach maturity. A closer look will show how this visibility is distributed.

In order to take that closer look at a fairly sizable group of characters, we shall examine the combined category of children and adolescents.[1] Our typical viewer finds 22 children and adolescents playing speaking roles in an average week's prime time programs. Of these, 4 (18%) are nonwhite and 8 (36%) are girls, which makes this the most racially and sexually balanced of all prime time age categories. However, 7 of the 8 females are white. Thus 39% of all white youngsters are girls, but only 25 percent of all nonwhite youngsters are girls.

The viewer of a typical weekend's daytime television finds 20 youngsters playing speaking parts. Of these, 5 (25%) are nonwhites and 6 (30%) are girls. Here 5 of the 6 females are white. Therefore, on children's television 33 percent of all white youngsters are girls, but only 20 percent of black youngsters are girls. Children find the same lopsided cast populating their (mostly cartoon) programs as those of prime time. Overall, the world of television ignores children, underplays adolescents in prime time, shows a more interracial cast of youngsters than of other age groups, and casts more white females and black males as children and adolescents than as members of other age groups.

The class structure of age portrayals shows more children and adolescents, especially nonwhites, coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than do members of other age groups. Seven percent of prime time white youngsters are "lower class." (There is practically no observable class structure on children's television.) Fully one-third of all nonwhite youngsters are "lower class." Both are the highest percentage of "lower-class" characters in any age group of the respective dramatic character populations.

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[1] The combined child-adolescent category is slightly different in numbers (although not in proportions) from the "Under 20" category. The youngsters analyzed as children and adolescents excluded married and other "young adult" roles, and all those who could not be reliably classified for sex or race.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Analysts' judgments of personality traits for each dramatic character were recorded on bipolar adjective scales. Mean ratings were obtained for each age group. These ratings show young adults as the most attractive, and settled adults as the most smart and efficient characters in prime time television drama. Children and adolescents stand out only in being less powerful and less violent than adults.

In weekend daytime programs, children and adolescents equal young adults in being attractive, smart, and efficient but still rate less powerful and less violent. Young boys are generally rated less fair than young girls. Young girls are more favorably presented, but lose favor as they become adolescents. The adolescent girl in prime time is very attractive but less happy than the younger girl, and less warm and smart and fair than adolescent boys or younger siblings.

Children are not the favored people of television. They are shown as relatively weak, poor, and vulnerable. Prime time is not a happy time for young boys or for adolescents of either sex. Young boys and older girls are likely to mean trouble.

The nature of that trouble is implicit in patterns of conflict. Where males outnumber females 4 to 1, much of the action revolves around predatory sex, money, and power. Crime and violence are symbolic demonstrations of norms and rules of the game of power.

The population of the world of television provides the backdrop against which the action unfolds. Television presents young people as they become dramatically and socially useful for it. The representation of women is concentrated in the sexually most available age brackets, largely in the late teens and early twenties. Children and adolescents, as a group, are more sexually balanced, racially mixed, and "lower class" than any other age group on television. White girls and black boys weigh heavily in the balance. The troubles they bring are of different kinds.

Violence as Demonstration of Power

In the world of television, two-thirds of all major characters are involved in violence. This rate has remained within ten percentage points of that proportion for at least ten years.

In prime time, the rate of involvement goes down to 56 percent of major characters. In weekend daytime children's programs, by far the most violent part of television, it goes up to 80 percent. Men are more likely to get involved than women, and adults are more likely to get involved than children, although about half of all women and children are still involved in violence.

In an act of violence, as we defined it, one party compels another to act against his or her will on pain of injury or death. The other falls victim to that act. Involvement implies risk; a character's chances of being a perpetrator or victim indicates fate and degree of vulnerability.

For example, 46 percent of all major characters in network television drama commit violence and 55 percent suffer it (with 64% being involved in both ways). A ratio of risks can be obtained by relating the number of victims to the number of aggressors. Thus the overall risk ratio is 6 : 5, meaning that for every 12 victims there are 10 violents, or there are 20 percent more victims than violents in the world of television. The ratio for women and nonwhites is 13 : 10. The ratio for nonwhite women is 18 : 10. So, if and when involved, women and nonwhites are more vulnerable to victimization compared to their inflicting violence than are white males.

Now let us examine the risks encountered by children in the world of television. The overall victimization ratio of children and adolescents is 16 : 10, the highest of all age groups. The reason is the frequency of victimization among boys. Over 6 out of 10 boys are involved in violence; their victimization ratio is 17 : 10, which is the highest of all male groups. "Only" half of all girls are involved in violence; their victimization ratio is 13 : 10, which is average for women.

A closer look at victimization by race and age shows interesting differences. Nonwhite girls are less visible but more vulnerable than the whites. White girls, especially visible in adolescence, are relatively safe. That safety, however, turns to vulnerability in young adulthood. With a victimization ratio of 18 : 10 for all young women and 25 : 10 for nonwhite young women, the older girls are even more vulnerable than the younger boys.

As measured by the violent-victim ratio, the pecking order of the world of television has mostly whites and adult males on top. At the bottom are women—old, nonwhite, young, and lower-class, in that order. Next in line, and the lowest ranking male character in the pecking order, is the young boy.

The structure of power in the world of television drama thus affects boys and girls differently. Young boys are the most underrepresented, the most racially mixed, and the most badly battered. Young girls start out underrepresented but become more numerous, more desirable, less happy, and much more vulnerable as they mature (as if to prepare them for the fear and insecurity young women exhibit in our viewer studies).

Conceptions of Reality

Victimization is but the tip of the iceberg of relative devaluation and neglect. The pattern we found is part of the general context of mass entertainment as socialization primarily from an adult majority, male-oriented consumer point of view.

The results of our research on viewer conceptions show strong and stable associations between patterns of network dramatic content and conceptions of social reality. Heavy viewers tend to respond to many questions more in terms of the world of television than do light viewers in the same demographic groups. We have found that television cultivates an exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust in heavy viewers compared to similar groups of light viewers. When asked about chances of encountering violence, about the percentage of men employed in law enforcement and crime detection, and about the percentage of crimes that are violent, significantly more heavy viewers than light viewers respond in terms more characteristic of the television world than of the real world. Mistrust is also reflected in responses suggesting that heavy viewers believe that most people just look out for themselves, take advantage of others, and cannot be trusted. When samples of junior high school students were asked, "How often is it all right to hit someone if you are mad at them?" a significantly higher proportion of heavy than of light viewers answered, "Almost always."

Our results reflect the fact that heavy viewing is associated with greater apprehension of walking alone at night in the city in general and even in one's own neighborhood. Heavy viewers also overestimate the proportion of people involved in violence and the number of criminals, compared with similar groups of light viewers.

Television viewing appears to be associated not only with heightened perceptions of danger but also the tendency to act to protect themselves. Far more heavy than light viewers of police and crime programs report that they "bought a dog for purposes of protection," "put new locks on the windows and doors for purposes of protection," and "kept a gun for purposes of protection." Schoolchildren who watch more television are also more likely to exhibit violence-related fears;[2] to believe that the police frequently use force; and to assert that the average policeman will often shoot fleeing suspects. Finally, children and adolescents who watch more television are more likely to mistrust people and believe that others "mostly just look out for themselves." These findings support the conclusion that one correlate of television viewing is a heightened and unequal sense of danger and risk in a mean and selfish world.

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[2] From a survey conducted for the Foundation for Child Development (New York) by Nicholas Zill in 1976. (Available from the FCD.)

RESPONSIBILITIES OF TELEVISION AND OF CITIZENS

The responsibilities of television are as large as its freedom of action is limited. The Constitutional prohibition against legislation abridging freedom of speech or of the press turns out to shield not so much the public interest as the right of corporate owners to serve the limited interests of their clients, the advertisers. Any program policy that does not strive for maximum audience ratings at minimum cost to provide the best buy for the advertising dollar is beyond the scope of serious consideration for inclusion in the regular daily or weekly television fare.

Within those limits, the contribution of television is twofold. On the one hand, many excellent programs and public service announcements do their best to provide information and inspiration for controlling child abuse. On the other hand, the aggregate and long-range configurations of the daily dramatic ritual may undercut these efforts at enlightenment.

Television is an integral part and chief cultural arm of the industrial establishment of society. Its principal function is to help introduce members of society to their places and their roles in the social order. It is paid to assemble large audiences and tell them stories that sell styles of life, people, products, and services at a profit. Other stories do not sell so well to those who underwrite their production, the sponsors, and do not, therefore, become a significant part of the symbolic environment in which people learn who they are and how things work.

The stories shown in the dramatic world of television need not present credible accounts of what things *are* in order to perform the more critical function of demonstrating how things really *work*. In fact, illumination of the invisible relationships and dynamics of life has always been the principal function of drama and fiction. That function is best performed when the "facts" can be invented so as to lend themselves to compelling demonstrations of the "natural" and seemingly inexorable social order.

In a world of such demonstrations, casting has a message of its own. Large real-life populations that are virtually invisible in the world of popular fiction and drama are set up for neglect, abuse, and eventual annihilation. (The absence of the very old from the world of television hides the stockpiling of millions of old people in human warehouses where they languish and die out of sight and out of mind.) With children, the underlying picture is more mixed but, on balance, not much more reassuring.

On the surface, program by program, most of television reflects and conveys decent, if safe and selective, values of conventional middle-class urban and even urbane liberal morality. This is called entertainment. It animates most of the industry's institutional representatives. Understandably, they become defensive and angry when confronted with the results of deeper and less familiar but more systematic and critical analysis. Like other industries that have been found to produce defective, unsafe, and even deadly products or by-products when they thought they were just serving an appreciative and lucrative market, television has a vested interest in confusing, avoiding, or dismissing the implications of independent and critical research.

In cultural production, even more than in the tobacco, pharmaceutical, automobile, airplane, nuclear energy and other industries, the confusions and evasions can be quite prolonged. What the cultural industries discharge into the climate of common consciousness is not some clearly identifiable and measurable pollutant, but rather it discharges the environment itself, including most of the norms, standards, and definitions by which its quality is supposed to be measured. As the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher once said, "If a man were permitted to write all the ballads he need not care who makes the laws of the nation." The right and freedom to produce a self-serving common symbolic world confers the power to interpret it by the same standards that govern its production in the first place.

Nevertheless, attention will have to be paid to independent critical research, at least by citizens and their organizations, as distinct from cultural consumers and their suppliers, as the human cost of enduring social problems rises in relation to the benefits derived from concealing or perpetuating them. This analysis considers the usual preoccupation with plot as part of the artifact of entertaining rationalization and distraction. We concentrate on associations of casting, social typing, and fate. These associations seem to be remarkably stable from year to year; they are rooted in well-established group relationships.

The casting, as we have seen, tells its story by proportions and omissions. Every single plot may be plausible and well motivated, yet the total context can still be functionally distorted.

The low visibility of children in the world of television is part of such functional distortion of reality. It also helps to hide, but not necessarily limit, the other functions. These have to do with children's and young women's high rate of victimization, and the further association of victimization with age, sex, class, and race. Disproportionate preoccupation with even sympathetically presented or "accidental" victims in an underrepresented population, relative to exhibiting their own share of numbers and exercise of power, diminishes and degrades that group.

The notion that ours is a "youth oriented society" may be a slogan of little substance. Consumers of personal products, and characters in commercials and dramas that sell them, are the most numerous in the early middle years of life. But the orientation is more toward markets and power than youth. Children and adolescents lose out on all counts.

The underlying aggregate structure of the world of dramatic television counters its overtly righteous messages. Children take on the characteristics of a social minority with less than their share of attention, values, and resources, and consequently diminished life chances. What some define as abuse may simply play out roles implicit in that dramatic context.

The need is for action toward creating a culture, and television system, that can afford to address itself to the nation's future, its children. That would require a broadening of the resource base for mainstream television through whatever mechanism is most effective to give the creative talents of television's professionals the time and money they need to break the constraints that now bind them to markets that use but have little use for children. Citizens, writers, actors, and producers must work toward a system of popular storytelling whose culture-power cannot devalue and hurt children any more.