The World According to Television

by George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli

To some television viewers, TV's world is their world. It fills their lives with presidents, police officers, spies, surgeons, and celebrities. Television has a power over its viewers unmatched by any institution since religion in pre-industrial times.

On the average, Americans watch 30 hours of TV per week, one-third during the prime-time hours. The prime-time world is populated by over 300 primary and 1,000 secondary characters each week. Conventional and familiar though this world may appear, it bears little resemblance to the world according to the U. S. census.

The past 15 years have seen impressive changes in the style and format of TV programming, but changes in the demographics of the TV population have been only superficial. While the characteristics of the nation's population have shifted, television's world has retained a striking consistency year after year.

People on television do not live and die like the rest of us, but are created or destroyed to tell a story. The characters who populate the screen are those for whom its world has particular use—people with important jobs, whose lives are filled with adventure, power, and sex. For example, blue-collar and service work occupies more than two-thirds of Americans, but only 10 percent of prime-time TV characters. Some children know more about what television's doctors do than what their own parents do for a living.

Dominant social groups have even more power in television's world than in the real world, while minorities have less. The message is that people with power and status have opportunities, while others do not.

The purpose of network television is to assemble viewers to sell them advertised products, and the demography of television resembles the consumer marketplace. Prime-time programs are inhabited by those to whom advertisers pitch their products. On TV, members of the middle class, and people aged 18 to 49, those in what the industry calls the "prime demographic market," far exceed their share of the general population.

Drama requires selection and invention, and we do not expect the networks to replicate the U. S. census. Yet, census statistics provide a standard by which we can measure how television deviates from the real world. The important issue is not that there are such deviations—that is obvious—but rather what kind of deviations and what consequences they have.

The Prime-Time Census

Our account of the characteristics of television's population is based on a detailed analysis of some 14,000 characters in 878 prime-time network programs. In order to simplify comparisons between the demographics of the television world and those of the United States, we use a "representation index." The index is the ratio of the percentage of characters in prime-time TV to the corresponding percentage found in U. S. census figures, multiplied by 100. It

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measures representation, with 100 percent as a base. When a group is overrepresented on TV, its representation index will be greater than 100; when underrepresented, its index will be less than 100.

On TV, men outnumber women by about three to one; their representation index is 140, while that of women is only 53. Men make up 49 percent of the U. S. population but 73 percent of the prime-time population, while women, a majority of the U. S. population, are only 27 percent of the prime-time world. This ratio fluctuates only slightly from year to year. For example, the smallest percentage of female characters was 25 percent in 1973–74 and the largest was 31 percent in 1980–81.

As might be expected, women are most underrepresented in action and adventure programs, while somewhat better represented in situation comedies. In situation comedies, women are outnumbered two to one. Even more startling, in children's programming women are almost always outnumbered by four or more to one. These findings hold for primary as well as secondary characters.

In practically every type of program, minorities are underrepresented in relation to their numbers in the census. Blacks on TV represent only 73 percent of their share in the real-world's population and Hispanics but 37 percent, and a disproportionate number are secondary rather than primary characters. A single program like Hawaii Five-O may present an overrepresentation of Asians, but usually as secondary characters. The disproportionate male-female patterns of the total TV population are also true of minority characters.

Prime time is dominated by well-to-do white males in the prime of life. Television underrepresents young and old people alike. People under age 19 make up about one-third of the U. S. population, but only one-tenth of the prime-time population; people over 65 make up 11 percent of the U. S. population, but only 2 percent of the prime-time population.

The age distribution of women favors young girls and women under age 30. Women on television are concentrated in the 20-to-29 age group. Fully one-third of the female characters on TV are in this age group. Men are equally concentrated. A third of their number are in the 35-to-45 age bracket. The TV-character population is structured to provide a relative abundance of younger women for older men, and to ignore older women. Yet in the real world women make up an increasingly large share of the population at older ages.

The age distribution in prime time bulges in the middle, but not because of a baby boom. The bulge has not moved for years. While 45 percent of white men are between 35 and 50, however,—the age of authority in TV drama—more than half of nonwhite men are younger — between 25 and 40. Half of the white women also are between 25 and 40, while nonwhite women are even younger than white women — half of nonwhite women on TV are between the ages of 20 and 34.

Women past the young romantic age, however, are more likely than men of the same age to be cast in "older" roles. For example, among major characters over age 65, more than 90 pecent of the women are presented as "elderly" compared to only 77 percent of the men in this age group. Older men are much more likely to play romantic roles than are older women.

Family Life

Marital status of television characters, especially primary characters, also differs considerably from the patterns found in the U. S. population. Inequality abounds according to sex and race. Information about marital status is not even supplied for about a third of the male characters — compared to only 12 percent of the female characters.

Marital status on television is presented differently for white and nonwhite characters. Among white male characters, the single life is overrepresented (representation index 135), while marriage is underrepresented (representation index 30). Fewer black male characters, however, are single. The representation index for single black male characters is 113, while for married black male characters it is 60.

Among women there is an entirely different pattern. On TV, white women are much less likely to be married than black women. In the real world, the reverse is true. The television representation index for white married women is only 43, but for black married women 126. The representation index for single white women is a high 222, while it is just 60 for single black women. Formerly married characters, whether white, black, male, or female, are underrepresented on prime-time television, despite the growing divorce trend in the real world.

On television, women are attractive and nurturing, often portrayed in the context of home and family,

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and involved in romantic relationships. Women who are employed (they are not usually married despite the fact that a majority of married women work today) are most likely to be cast in traditionally female occupations—as nurses, secretaries, waitresses, and sometimes teachers.

Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as powerful and potent, and proportionally fewer are married. More men are employed, and they usually work in such traditionally masculine and prestigious occupations as medicine and the law.

The average viewer of a typical week's prime-time programs sees lifelike and often intimate, but usually false, representations of the life and work of 30 police officers, 7 lawyers, 3 judges, and 12 doctors, but only 1 teacher, 1 engineer or scientist, and only an occasional blue-collar worker. Nearly everybody on TV appears to be comfortably managing on an average income as a member of the middle class.

But threats abound. Prime-time crime is at least ten times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five to six acts of physical violence per hour menace over half of all primary characters. But pain, suffering, and medical attention rarely follow. Dominant white males in the prime of life or older are relatively safer than others. Indeed, they are more likely to be the victimizers than the victims in a violent encounter. Conversely, old, young, and minority women, and young boys are relatively more likely to be the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence. The ratios of victimizers to victims reflect TV's social structure but not real-world crime statistics.

The government in the world of prime-time TV acts primarily to fend off threats to law and order in a mean and dangerous world. Enforcing the law takes nearly three times as many TV characters as the number of all blue-collar workers on network programs. Television features more about police work, and the jobs of selected professionals and celebrities, than about all other working people combined.

Living with Television

In general, the assumptions, beliefs and values of heavy television viewers differ systematically from those of light viewers in similar demographic groups. These differences reflect recurrent features of the television world. We have named this pattern "mainstreaming." The "mainstream" can be thought of as the relatively similar cluster of outlooks and values that television cultivates in heavy viewers in those demographic groups whose light viewers hold divergent views.

Year after year, television viewing heightens perceptions of danger and risk and creates an exaggerated sense of mistrust, vulnerability, and insecurity. Minority group heavy viewers, who see themselves often on the losing end of violent encounters on television, are more apprehensive of their own victimization than otherwise similar viewers who watch less television. Television viewing also is associated with stronger prejudices about women and old people. Viewing boosts the confidence rating of doctors, but depresses that of scientists.

Living with television diminishes the influence of social forces that once governed social behavior. For example, heavy television viewers are more likely than light viewers in comparable demographic groups to call themselves "moderate"—but to take positions on social issues that are unmistakably conservative.

Although television viewing brings conservatives, moderates, and liberals closer together in their social outlook, the liberal position is weakest among heavy viewers. Not only does TV viewing blur traditional differences and blend them into a mainstream, it bends the mainstream toward a hard-line position on issues concerning minorities and personal rights.

This finding should cause concern. Today's children are born into homes in which the television set is on for an average of six-and-a-half hours a day. For the first time in American history it is not a parent but an outside institution that tells youngsters the stories about what things are, how they work, and what to do about them. By the time today's children go outside the home and encounter other cultural institutions —church, school, books—they have already absorbed hundreds of thousands of highly patterned stories about life, people, and society. But the stories present a false world.

Who is responsible? Network executives have little freedom. They must compete for ratings or make way for others who will. Television has broad impact on the viewing public, but it is in fact the cultural arm of business and industry. It reflects a commercial point of view: conventional, conserving the existing hierarchies of power and values, keeping anxieties and insecurities high, while offering instant gratification from advertised products. That's the world according to television. •