



July 5, 1978

Editor, Equal Access
Office of Women's Activities
Corporation for Public Broadcasting
1111 Sixteenth Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20036

Dear Editor:

The May/June issue included an article, "Women and Minorities 'Underrepresented' in Sample of PTV Programs," outlining some of the conclusions of an 86-page report prepared by the Annenberg School of Communications at CPB's request. The article could just as well been titled: "Women and Minorities 'Increase' in Sample of PTV Programs." It points out, after all, that "women were better represented in 1977 than 1975" in general adult programming; "minority group members were more representative of their numbers within the population" in adult programming; and that children's programming "appeared to be more racially and sexually balanced than the adult programs."

It is this ambiguity that reduces the Annenberg report to little value. Shortcomings in research methodology undercut whatever findings the report presents. Conclusions are often unsupported by the findings; sometimes they contradict the findings. The sample is seriously flawed and therefore much of the results are rendered statistically insignificant.

The report cannot be used realistically as either a barometer of success or as an index of concern. Its value is questionable.

The sample, upon which the report's findings are based, is too small and incomplete. It is difficult at best to gauge change in the overall content of programming on public television from just one "typical" week's programs. The exercise becomes suspect, however, when even this very small sample is pared down to exclude almost one-third of the programs actually distributed by PBS during the sample week (January 23-29, 1977). What happened to: CARRASCOLENDAS, WALL STREET WEEK, WASHINGTON WEEK IN REVIEW, CAPTIONED ABC EVENING NEWS, NOVA: "First Signs of Washoe," SOLAR ENERGY, WAY IT WAS, PBS MOVIE THEATER, VIBRATIONS, WORLD PRESS, SENATE CONFIRMATION HEARINGS, CABINET CONFIRMATION WRAPUP, BOOK BEAT, AGRONSKY AT LARGE, DOCUMENTARY SHOWCASE: "Appalshop," and GREAT PERFORMANCES: "Arthur Rubenstein"?

Social science researchers commonly use a 95% confidence level to determine what is statistically significant and what is not.



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This means, that 95 times out of 100, the sample will accurately reflect the total population being analyzed. Many of the results cited in the Annenberg report do not meet this standard level of accuracy.

The report's conclusions sometimes bear no resemblance to the report's findings. For example, the finding that "eight out of ten characters in general adult and dramatic programs are white" means that 20% are non-white. The non-white population of the U.S. television households is around 11%, according to the A.C. Nielsen Company, so this finding would seem to reflect positively on public television programming. Another finding shows "two out of five (characters) are Black" in segments of children's programs. This would suggest, if anything, Blacks are over-represented in these programs given their overall proportion of the population. Yet, the conclusion of the report is quite different: "The overall picture that emerges in no way represents the heterogeneity of the population as far as...color...(is) concerned." How did the report's authors get from their findings to such conclusions?

Other positive findings are also cast in a very negative tone. The report terms an 86% increase in the proportion of women in adult programming over a two-year period as a "slight improvement."

It is this kind of conjecture and sampling flaw that renders the report inadequate and misleading. If CPB desires to determine how the content of public television relates to the composition of this country's population, either of two courses of action would seem appropriate: (1) conduct an analysis of a small sample of programming — similar to what was done in this report — but ask fewer, broader, less detailed questions to which meaningful, unambiguous results can be determined, or (2) conduct an analysis of a much larger sample that can address more detailed questions and arrive at meaningful, statistically significant results.

The report, in its present form, is both misleading and dangerous in that it undermines the efforts of those who have paid serious attention to extending public television programs to best serve all groups in our population. Their efforts should be fostered and the route to future progress should be clarified, not obfuscated by misleading research.

Sincerely,

CHLOE AARON
Senior Vice President
Programming

CA/jsb

July 20, 1978

Ms. Avery Burson
Editor, Equal Access
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Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Ms. Burson:

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to PBS's letter of July 5, 1978.

In claiming ambiguity, PBS is ambiguous. If they are criticizing the difference between the headline of the article and the reported findings, then they might have a point; however, one cannot fault the report because of a newsletter's headline.

The PBS letter goes on to criticize the research methodology -- yet does not give specific examples. The methodology is well documented. It includes procedures for insuring that the data are accurate and reliable. The coders, responsible for gathering the data, worked in pairs and underwent an intensive two-week training period. Moreover, each item was tested for reliability, and only those items meeting acceptable reliability standards were included in the analysis and report.

I fully agree with their dissatisfaction with the sample. However, I must ask PBS the same question that they have asked of us. What did happen to CARRASCOLENDAS, WALL STREET WEEK, WASHINGTON WEEK IN REVIEW, etc.? Under the terms of our contract with CPB, the programs aired during the pre-selected sample week of January 23-29, 1977 were to be supplied by PBS. However, PBS did not fully co-operate in this matter -- the sample of tapes arrived about three months late with many missing programs. After numerous discussions with Audrey Rowe of CPB, we selected a cut-off date so that the research could be completed without additional expense. PBS was given adequate notice of this deadline and the missing programs; but according to Ms. Rowe, they could not locate the specific programs that were missing. Consequently we analyzed the programs that we had in our possession, making substitutions whenever possible. (For example, we used the episode of NOVA PBS had sent even though it was not the specific episode that should have been included in the sample.)

I am especially concerned with the PBS statement that the conclusions bear no resemblance to the findings. This is just not true -- the conclusions are based upon findings from the analysis of a large number of content items --

not only one or two variables. Consequently when the report is read in total, as it should to fully understand this complex phenomenon, the conclusions are fully warranted.

In regard to minority representation, the report states that "more than eight out of ten" characters in General Adult and Dramatic programs were white. Specifically, in General Adult programming 86.5% are white, 7.8% are black, and 5.6% belong to other races; in Dramatic programs 89.5% are white, 6.1% are black and 4.4% are of other races. Clearly the report could have stated that "almost nine out of ten characters were white." Moreover according to the 1970 U.S. Census, all characters and male characters have about the same representation as the U.S. population; however, black female characters tend to be underrepresented.

But who ever said that television programming had to have absolute parity in regard to the U.S. population: The basic research concern is how people are portrayed -- what roles they play, what occupations they have, how active they are, etc. It is not the simple question of the distribution by sex and/or race; rather it is the overall pattern conveyed by the programming. For example, 51 percent of the characters in any television program could be women. However, if women are cast only as housekeepers, sex objects or as generally ineffectual or inept, what would be the benefit of "numerical parity?"

"Negative reporting" is also a matter of interpretation. PBS is right, there has been an increase in the percentage of women in General Adult programming: They're up 94% (not 86% as PBS claims). But let's look at the data: In 1975 only 15% of the characters were women while in 1977 the percentage of women rose to 29.1%. Although the percentage increase is very large, to report only the increase would be very misleading.

The purpose of our research was to ascertain and report the facts, not to assign credit or blame. Anyone who reads the full report will find that we have done so fairly, fully, and impartially. We wish neither to undermine nor to foster anyone's efforts but to provide a valid basis for judging the extent and nature of women's and minority group representation. It would be unfortunate indeed if PBS would now join those elements in commercial broadcasting who try to find fault in the methodology (also in vain, I must say) when they do not like the findings.

Sincerely,

Nancy Signorielli

Nancy Signorielli, Ph.D.
Research Coordinator

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