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PRIME TIME IN BLACK AND WHITE: MAKING SENSE of the 2001 FALL SEASON

Prime Time in Black and White is a five-year, longitudinal study of 1) the on-screen presence of black Americans in prime-time network television and 2) of issues pertaining to behind-the-scenes control. The first installment, *Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season*, is based on a content analysis of 224 episodes of 85 fictional series airing on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN and WB over three selected weeks: October 14-20, October 28-November 3, and November 11-17, 2001.

Highlights

1. Prime time 2001 presented America primarily in black and white.
2. Race was rarely discussed explicitly in prime time.
3. Black characters were concentrated on the least-watched network.
 - The most central black characters were concentrated on UPN.
 - Black characters with the most screen time were also concentrated on UPN.
4. Monday and Saturday nights were "black nights" in prime time.
5. Black characters with the most screen time appeared on Monday nights.
6. Black characters were the most likely to appear in sitcoms.
7. Black characters were rarely seen at home.
8. Black characters were not stereotyped by occupation.
9. White control of prime time continues to hamstring efforts to diversify it.

The more things change the more they stay the same

When television was widely introduced in the United States following World War II, the nation's population was starkly rendered in black and white. Data from the 1950 U.S. Census, for example, present a nation divided between a hulking white majority (89.3 percent) and a marginalized black minority (9.9 percent). Other racialized groups, which together accounted for less than 1.0 percent of the population,¹ were largely absent from official representations of the nation.²

Network television — a medium devised to sell audience attention to advertisers — reflected this popular image of the nation from the beginning. In a period of legalized racial segregation, U.S. commercial television was carefully crafted into a tool to service the amusement needs of the dominant, white majority, which also happened to be the largest, most affluent market segment. Indeed, early television programmers were mindful to circulate images and themes the white audience would find comforting. In practical terms, this meant that television portrayals of race had to reflect a racial order with which the white audience was familiar: whites on top, blacks on bottom.

¹ For purposes of Census enumeration during this period, the Hispanic/Latino population was classified as "white." Today, of course, the U.S. government officially considers "Latino" or "Hispanic" as an "ethnic" category, and a large portion of people who identify as being of Latino or Hispanic ethnicity classify themselves as racially "white."

² *The American Almanac: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994-1995*, Table 12, Bureau of the Census.

Toward this end, early popular shows like *Amos 'N Andy* (CBS) and *Beulah* (ABC) portrayed blacks in either comical or subservient terms, as either buffoons unequipped for equal participation in society or as servants who seemed content to cater to the needs of their white masters. The NAACP argued that these images were damaging to the growing movement for racial integration and thus played a key role in CBS's cancellation of *Amos 'N Andy* in 1953, at the height of its popularity. But black Americans had by then been established as the prototypical racial "other" in prime time, a status that would endure throughout the unfolding history of the medium.

Subsequent decades witnessed network television make adjustments to the racial ethos of the times. In reaction to the social movements and racial reforms of the 1960s, for example, television moved to present "respectable" images of blacks that more closely reflected America's newfound sense of racial morality. Thus "assimilationist"³ shows like *I Spy* (NBC) and *Julia* (NBC) introduced novel black characters whose accomplished middleclass lifestyles positioned them, unfortunately, as tokens in a white world disconnected from the realities of the rest of the black community. The societal tensions laid bare by the urban uprisings of the decade were virtually nonexistent in the world of small-screen fiction.

During the 1970s, by contrast, a series of black-oriented situation comedies emerged on network television that confronted the gritty realities of innercity, urban life – albeit with much humor and comic relief. But while period shows like *Sanford and Son* (NBC), *Good Times* (CBS) and *The Jeffersons* (CBS) were set firmly in the black world and populated with black characters, they were developed by white producers to appeal to the largely white television audience. Some critics questioned whether the medium had regressed back to the buffoonish portrayals of the 1950s.⁴

The 1980s proved a pivotal period for network television. By the beginning of the decade, the network share of the television-watching audience began a dramatic slide from more than 90 percent to the 50 percent figures we see today.⁵ Cable television and other technologies (e.g., the vcr) were becoming an alarming threat to the three major networks (ABC, CBS and NBC). Ironically, it was during these troubling times, in 1985, that Fox Broadcasting Company established a fourth major network. Meanwhile, the 1980 Census had recorded a significant jump in the population of "other" race Americans (from 1.3 to 2.3 percent) and announced for the first time that "Hispanic origin" individuals made up 6.4 percent of the population.⁶ The black and white rendering of America was becoming more complicated at the same time that Reagan-era politics heralded the declining significance of race.

So it is not surprising, perhaps, that *The Cosby Show* (NBC) exploded in popularity after it was introduced in 1984. Consciously engineered by its black creators to counter earlier black stereotypes with "positive" images, it had the unintended effect of nicely resonating with regressive racial politics. The white audience embraced the sitcom, research revealed, largely because the comfortable lifestyle of the fictional Huxtable family seemed to confirm the popular idea that America had finally moved beyond race. That is, in exchange for inviting the black family into their homes every Thursday night, white viewers could feel more secure in their own racial morality, even as they supported terminating programs that were instituted during the Civil Rights era to combat racism.⁷

The decade of the 1990s was marked by a number of important developments and trends: the debut of two new networks (UPN and WB in 1995) and the increasing segmentation of the television audience; an alarming consolidation of media ownership;⁸ the continuing invisibility of "other" race groups in prime time and a corresponding over-representation

³ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between racial politics and prime-time programming, see Gray, Herman, 1995, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness,"* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

⁴ For example, see the National Black Feminist Organization, on the 1974 TV season, quoted in *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977.

⁵ See www.insidepolitics.lrg/ps11/networkshare.html for network audience share trends from 1952 to 1998.

⁶ As scholars have noted, changing census figures for certain populations do not necessarily reflect objective changes in the size of the groups. Racial and ethnic categories are often added, deleted, or redefined between censuses. The resulting numbers, however, do reflect official and popular understandings at the time they are released.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of audience reactions to the *Cosby Show*, see Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis, 1992, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

⁸ By 2001, a handful of multinational media conglomerates controlled most of the nation's media. This issue is discussed in more detail below.

of black Americans (about 16 percent of all characters, compared to about 12 percent of the U.S. population); and a significant rise in the number of black-oriented situation comedies. Indeed, by the turn of the century, most black characters on prime-time television were ghettoized on the two least-watched networks (UPN and WB), on certain nights of the week, and in a handful of black-oriented sitcoms.⁹ Meanwhile, a multi-racial coalition of advocacy groups led by the NAACP used the threat of network and advertiser boycotts to forge voluntary diversity agreements with the networks.¹⁰

Problems and objectives

Throughout its fifty-year history, network television has been locked in a cycle of public pressure and industry appeasement. The more things have changed the more they seem to have stayed the same. From the concerns of advocacy groups about diversity and public responsibility, to industry claims about the economic logic of programming practices, the prime-time images of the day can only be understood in relation to the debates about those that preceded them. To be sure, these debates are important because network television – despite its shrinking audience share – continues to serve as a major community forum in our nation,¹¹ providing us with images of who is in and who is out, what is true and what is false, who we are and who we ought to be.¹²

In this sense, what happens in prime time nicely reflects the American racial order and may provide us with an important glimpse at the processes by which this order is maintained. *Prime Time in Black and White* shines a spotlight on these politics. Beginning with the present report, *Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season*, it tracks key statistics that allow us to explore the relationship between the

television and American racial orders – both in terms of on-screen portrayals and behind-the-scenes control.

Study data

Data for this study come from four primary sources:

1. Tapings of the entire ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN and WB prime-time line-ups over three selected weeks (October 14-20, October 28-November 3, and November 11-17, 2001);¹³
2. Employment reports from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the Writers Guild of America, West (WGA), and the Directors Guild of America (DGA);
3. Official network program web sites;
4. Media industry annual reports.

Representing the nation

Figure 1 reveals that the black and white rendering of America remains alive and well on prime-time television. Both white and black Americans were over-represented on the screen in 2001, accounting for about 76 percent and 16 percent of all “featured”¹⁴ characters, respectively (n=3544). Together, these two groups represented 92 percent of all prime-time characters, while comprising only 82 percent of the nation’s population. These figures, the chart shows, closely resemble those from a comparable study of the 1999 fall season.¹⁵

⁹ *The African American Television Report*, Screen Actors Guild, June 2000.

¹⁰ For example, see *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 2000, p. A1; *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2000, p. A1.

¹¹ For a discussion of the role of media in the construction of place and community, see Hunt, Darnell, M., 2001, “Representing ‘Los Angeles’: Media, Space, and Place,” in M. Dear, ed., *From Chicago to L.A.: Making Sense of Urban Theory*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

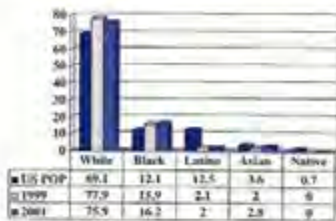
¹² For example, see Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, 1986, “Living With Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process,” in J. Bryant and D. Zillman, eds., *Perspectives on Media Effects*, Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates.

¹³ These weeks were selected to coincide with the initial airings of new Fall 2001 programs and to include two important programming environments in the sample (sweeps versus non-sweeps). Several of Fox’s new shows premiered in the final sampled week. Eight trained researchers viewed the tapes and coded the data in accordance with a standard codebook. An agreement level of greater than 90 percent was achieved in a training test, and a level of 81 percent was achieved in a 10-percent post-test sampling. Certain variables were dropped from the analysis and others were recoded in order to subsequently increase the effective level of inter-coder reliability.

¹⁴ “Featured” characters were defined as “those who either have speaking roles or who are explicitly highlighted by the words or actions of other ‘featured’ actors in the episode.”

¹⁵ *The African American Television Report, 2000*.

Figure 1: Population versus television, by race (percent)



In contrast, Latinos were greatly underrepresented in prime time (only 2 percent of all characters), while Asian Americans approached proportionate representation (about 3 percent of all characters), and Native Americans remained invisible (0 percent of all characters).¹⁶

When gender is considered, Figure 2 shows that black men significantly outnumbered black women on the screen, the former accounting for nearly 60 percent of all prime-time characters for the group. The gender breakdown for white characters was identical.

Figure 2: Black characters, by gender (n=575)



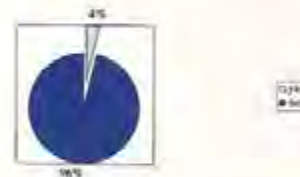
Figure 3 presents the share of episodes (n=224) that were coded as “multi-racial” or “mono-racial.” That is, the chart expresses a global determination of whether any characters of other racial backgrounds appear in an episode, either as “featured” characters or in the background (e.g., “extras”). Consistent with the increasing diversity of American society, about 92 percent of all episodes were “multi-racial.” But as the racial breakdown for “featured” characters reveals above, most of these episodes attained “multi-racial” status because other race characters were typically included as “props” in the background – not because they were centrally located in the storyline.

Figure 3: Overall scene diversity (n=224 episodes)



Finally, Figure 4 suggests that race is rarely addressed *explicitly* in prime time. While many of the episodes exhibited the undercurrents of race through either their settings or casts of characters, only about 4 percent directly acknowledged race as a key narrative theme.

Figure 4: Explicit reference to race? (n=224 episodes)



Marketing, segmentation, and segregation

Conventional programming wisdom holds that audience members naturally gravitate toward characters with whom they can identify and relate. In racial terms, this has meant that programmers assume the largely white audience prefers programs primarily populated by white characters in the more central roles. But because black audience members also prefer to see themselves represented on the screen, A.C. Nielsen has reported that the top-twenty most popular television programs for white and black Americans scarcely overlap.¹⁷

Although it is rarely admitted publicly,¹⁸ network programmers select and schedule programs with this truism in mind, and advertisers buy airtime according to the resulting racial demographics. One

¹⁶ Percentages do not sum to 100 due to the observation of “unclear” race characters.

¹⁷ For example, see *Black American Study*, A.C. Nielsen Company, May 1991.

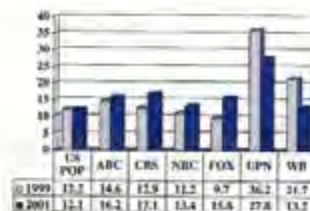
¹⁸ Indeed, personal interviews with network executives in February and March 1993 revealed that they are reluctant to explicitly talk about race when describing audience demographic goals.

consequence of these practices is an increasing segregation of prime time, whereby most programming is designed to efficiently garner the attention of *either* white or black Americans – rarely both.¹⁹

Indeed, a 1999 study of prime time revealed that black characters were largely ghettoized by network, by day of the week, and by show type (i.e., concentrated in sitcoms).²⁰ It should be noted here that programmers have long known that black Americans watch a disproportionate share of television, about 70 hours a week versus about 50 hours for whites.²¹ It is also known that black Americans spend a larger share of their disposable income on the types of consumer items marketed in television commercials.²² While it was beyond the scope of this study to formally analyze prime-time commercials, anecdotal evidence suggests that these all-important product pitches also exhibit the racial demographics of the anticipated audience.

Figure 5 presents findings on the black presence by network from a study of the 1999 fall season and compares it to current data for the 2001 fall season. In 1999, black characters were clearly concentrated on the two least-watched networks (UPN and WB), accounting for about 36 percent and 22 percent of all characters, respectively. Indeed, more than half of all black characters appearing in the sampled episodes that season did so on the two fledgling networks. Two seasons later, however, black characters continued to account for a hugely disproportionate share of UPN characters (about 28 percent), but the remainder were more evenly distributed across the other networks, at levels not too divergent from the black proportion of the U.S. population.

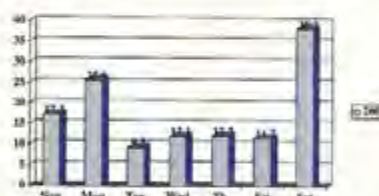
Figure 5: Black characters, by network, by year (1999, n=988; 2001, n=575)



When the black presence by night of the week is examined, however, a pattern emerges that resembles earlier findings of ghettoization. Figure 6 reveals that Monday and Saturday were “black” nights during the Fall 2001 season, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all black characters in prime time. (In 1999, Monday and Friday nights combined for more than 50 percent of all black characters.²³)

This figure becomes more compelling when it is noted that Saturday is the least-watched night of network television²⁴ and that the sampled episodes from Saturday were populated by only about 4 percent of the total number of characters in prime time. Two Saturday programs on CBS – *Early Edition* (a cancelled drama set in a large metropolitan newspaper) and *The District* (a law and order drama set in the nation’s capital) – featured casts that were largely black, 76 percent and 62 percent respectively.

Figure 6: Black characters as a percent of all characters, by night of the week



Meanwhile, Monday night featured three of the four programs with the highest percentage of characters that were black – *Girlfriends* (89

¹⁹ Popular exceptions to this rule include dramas like *The District* (CBS), *Early Edition* (CBS), and *Boston Public* (Fox).

²⁰ *The African American Television Report, 2000*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Black households continue to outspend white households on key consumer products,” *Target Market News*, February 13, 1999, <http://www.targetmarketnews.com/trends.htm>.

²³ *The African American Television Report, 2000*.

²⁴ Indeed, neither Fox, UPN, nor WB airs original programming on Saturday nights. Instead, a substantial portion of the black characters from the larger networks is relegated to this least-watched night.

One (88 percent), and *The Parkers* (79 percent). Each of these black-oriented sitcoms aired on UPN, combining for a sizable share of the fledgling network's disproportionately large pool of black characters. Table 1 presents the top-five and bottom-five shows for 2001 in terms of the percentage of black characters.

Table 1: Top 5 and bottom 5 shows in terms of the percentage of characters that were black

Top

1. <i>Girlfriends</i> (UPN)	sitcom	89%
2. <i>One On One</i> (UPN)	sitcom	88%
3. <i>My Wife and Kids</i> (ABC)	sitcom	83%
4. <i>The Parkers</i> (UPN)	sitcom	79%
5. <i>Early Edition</i> (CBS)*	drama	76%

Bottom

1. <i>Just Shoot Me</i> (NBC)	sitcom	0%
2. <i>Dharma and Greg</i> (ABC)	sitcom	0%
3. <i>Three Sisters</i> (NBC)	sitcom	0%
4. <i>Dawson's Creek</i> (WB)	drama	0%
5. <i>Sabrina</i> (WB)	sitcom	0%

* cancelled

Finally, Figure 7 reveals that black characters were less concentrated in sitcoms during the Fall 2001 season than in 1999. That is, about 61 percent of all black characters appeared in dramas in 2001, compared to only about 50 percent in 1999. Nonetheless, compared to whites (31 percent), Latinos (23 percent) and Asians (21 percent), black characters (39 percent) were still the most likely to appear in sitcoms.

Figure 7: Black characters, by genre (n=575)



Images of black life

A recent study of entertainment television found that black characters, like white characters, now are more likely than their counterparts in the real world to occupy high-status lifestyles.²⁵ While this finding suggests that the negative stereotyping of black Americans so prevalent in earlier periods may no longer characterize prime time, it also raises concerns about the unintended consequences of overly "positive" portrayals of black life. That is, as audience research on the *Cosby Show* revealed,²⁶ perhaps unrealistically rosy renderings of black life on television work to mask the continuing disadvantages faced by the group, thereby relieving whites of the moral obligation to acknowledge and share more of their group-based privilege.

Table 2 reveals that the occupations of black characters in prime time are largely inconclusive on this score. The largest single category, representing about 37 percent of all characters, was labeled "other" because none of the 30 or so distinct occupations comprising the category was present to any appreciable degree in the sample. The next largest category, about 30 percent of all characters, was coded as "unclear" because occupation could not be determined from the relevant episode. With the exception of "criminal" (about 3 percent of all black characters), the remaining occupations were all suggestive of middleclass to upper middleclass lifestyles: student (10.4 percent), police officer (7.8 percent), attorney (3.7 percent), doctor (2.6 percent), nurse (2.2 percent), secretary (2.2 percent), and teacher (1.9 percent).

Table 2: Occupations of black characters (n=539)

Other	36.5%	Criminal	2.8%
Unclear	29.9%	Doctor	2.6%
Student	10.4%	Nurse	2.2%
Police officer	7.8%	Secretary	2.2%
Attorney	3.7%	Teacher	1.9%

One indicator of the degree to which black life is integrated into the mainstream may be how frequently television takes us inside the black home. In the past, critics of prime time have argued that when black characters appear on the screen, they

²⁵ See Entman, Robert and Andrew Rojecki, 2000, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁶ See Jhally and Lewis (1992).

often do so primarily to complement white characters who are more central to the storyline. That is, rarely do black characters appear as central characters in their own right, whose family connections are explored in any meaningful way.²⁷ Figure 8 suggests that despite the over-representation of blacks in prime time, relatively few images are provided of life inside the black home. When a black character first appeared in an episode, she or he was most likely seen at some place "other" (47 percent) than "home" (17 percent) or "work" (36 percent).

Figure 8: The first appearance of black characters, by location (n=553)



If the same character appeared a second time, Figure 9 shows that the likelihood she or he would be seen in any one of the locations was about the same: 49 percent of characters appeared at some "other" place, 36 percent at "work," and only 15 percent at "home." Moreover, most of the at-home appearances of black characters in 2001 can be attributed to a handful of black-oriented sitcoms.

Figure 9: The second appearance of black characters, by location (n=363)



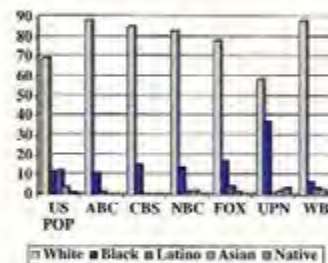
UPN and black prominence

The finding of black over-representation in prime time does not necessarily mean that the black characters appearing on the screen do so in any meaningful way. In order to better understand the centrality of black characters in prime time, we must consider two important indicators of character *prominence*: series regular status and screen time.

"Series regulars" are those central characters around whom a prime-time program revolves. The names and/or faces of the actors who portray these characters appear in the opening credits. They are the primary characters with whom audience members connect when they tune in week after week.

Figure 10 shows that when black series regulars are examined by network, a pattern emerges that is similar to but more pronounced than the one observed above for all black characters. That is, the percentage of UPN series regulars who are black (37 percent) was even higher than the network's figure for black characters (28 percent), and it is about three times the black American share of the overall U.S. population. On Fox, CBS, NBC, and ABC, black series regulars were present in proportions that are close to the group's actual population proportion (about 17 percent, 15 percent, 14 percent, and 10 percent, respectively). On the WB, however, black series regulars accounted for less than 7 percent of the series regulars appearing on the network.

Figure 10: Black series regulars as a percent of all series regulars, by network

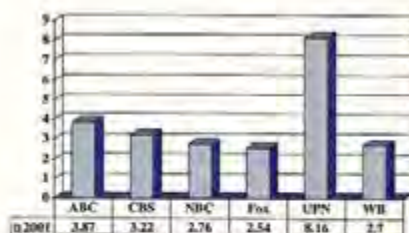


²⁷ The African American Television Report, 2000.

But all series regulars are not equal, and series regular status alone may give an incomplete picture of how important a given black character is to an episode's storyline. Observing how long black characters appear on the screen provides us with another, complementary measure of prominence.

Consistent with the high concentration of black characters and black series regulars on UPN, Figure 11 reveals that the black characters appearing on the network in 2001 were typically on the screen for much longer durations than their counterparts on the other networks. That is, the mean screen time per hour of programming for black characters on UPN was 8.16 minutes, compared to only 3.87 minutes for ABC, 3.22 minutes for CBS, 2.76 minutes for NBC, 2.7 minutes for WB, and 2.54 minutes for Fox. Indeed, more than half (52 percent) of all black characters with screen times exceeding 10 minutes – arguably *the* most important black characters to their respective storylines – appeared on UPN. These findings mirror those from a 1999 study that also found UPN exhibiting a significantly larger mean black screen time than the other networks (14.01 minutes).²⁸ Findings further suggest that mean screen time for black characters has decreased somewhat for each of the networks over the two-year period.

Figure 11: Mean screen time for black characters by network



When we consider mean screen time by night of the week, findings support the earlier characterization of Monday as a “black night” in prime time. That is, the mean screen time for black characters on Monday night (6.61 minutes per hour of programming) was nearly double the mean across all nights (3.68 minutes).

When we consider mean screen time by show type, it appears that findings about the possible declining concentration of blacks in sitcoms should be treated with caution. That is, although 61 percent of all black characters appeared in dramas in 2001, the more *prominent* black characters were still concentrated in sitcoms (mean screen times of 2.61 minutes and 4.89 minutes, respectively).

In short, an analysis of series regular status and screen time for black characters reinforces the notion that prime time remains highly segregated in 2001. That is, the most prominent black characters in prime time were ghettoized on the least-watched network (UPN), in situation comedies, and on Monday nights. With a few notable exceptions,²⁹ the black characters appearing on other nights, other networks, and in dramas were much less prominent.

White control

When Sidney Poitier became the first black American to win a best actor Oscar in 1963, Hollywood paced the nation on matters of racial inclusion. As the nation's political establishment slowly responded to the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, prominent white members of the entertainment industry quietly supported efforts for a more sweeping transformation. Some of these Hollywood insiders even provided behind-the-scenes financial support for militant organizations like the Black Panther Party.³⁰ Even though the whites who controlled the entertainment industry were generally seen as left of center,³¹ the escapist fare of 1960s television favored the medium's conservative, commercial imperatives over the growing movements for racial justice.

Over the next several decades, America was locked in a cycle of progress and retreat on matters of racial inclusion. Affirmative action programs had been instituted in the early 1970s to open up white-controlled institutions to previously excluded minority groups. These programs, many had pointed out, most directly benefited middleclass minorities and were thus no panacea for the nation's deeper structural inequities. Supporters had nonetheless hoped that the resulting trickle of minorities into key institutional positions would

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Some of the more prominent examples are identified above.

³⁰ Personal interview with David Hilliard, May and June 2002.

³¹ See Lichter, Robert S., Linda S. Lichter and Stanley Rothman, 1991, *Watching America: What Television Tells Us About Our Lives*, New York: Prentice Hall.

slowly begin to transform the institutions from within.

But an increasing white backlash, inaugurated by the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980,³² effectively diagnosed affirmative action as terminally ill. The patient soon took a turn for the worse as the conservative President stacked the U.S. Supreme Court with justices in his own political image. Many pronounced her as all but dead when California voters passed Proposition 209 in 1996, banning the use of race as a criterion for admissions, hiring, and/or the awarding of contracts in state public institutions. Officially and popularly, America was "colorblind."

But the television establishment was clearly out of touch with this "fact."

While conservatives invoked the little progress made since the 1960s to proclaim that America was "beyond race," white control of network television remained frozen in time. Network television, like the rest of the Hollywood, continues to be a highly insular industry in which white decision makers tend to reproduce themselves by hiring other whites who share similar experiences and tastes. White males, in particular, occupy nearly all of the industry "green-lighting" positions – the positions from which it is decided what projects will be made, with what kind of budget, and by whom. If these decision makers are the coaches, the point guards of the program development game are "show runners" – the executive producers who manage the development and day-to-day production of television programs.³³ Once these producers have a hit program under their belt, they can generally rely upon a revolving door of opportunities to develop other programs.³⁴

Minorities who aspire to these lucrative positions, however, face a vicious employment cycle. Because only a handful of minorities have actually been

assigned to run a show, opportunities for minorities to develop a hit series have been few and far between. And because the credential of having a hit series to one's credit has been the surest way to show running assignments, few minorities are seriously considered for them when opportunities arise. In other words, the revolving door has never really turned for minorities, and business as usual in the industry has resulted in a process that smacks of institutional discrimination.³⁵ Black show runners could only be identified for five of the 85 shows covered in this report (5.9 percent), and all but one of these shows were black-oriented sitcoms.³⁶

The figures are not much better for television directors. Although white males made up only about 34 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, they accounted for 80 percent of the television directors from the top-40 shows in the 2000-2001 season. Women (composed primarily of white women) accounted for 11 percent of the television directors; all other minorities – 31 percent of the U.S. population – combined for only 6 percent (3 percent black, 2 percent Latino, and 1 percent Asian).³⁷

In 2001, minorities were similarly under-represented among prime-time television writers, combining for only 9 percent of the total (6.2 percent black, 1.4 percent Latino, 1.3 percent Asian, .1 percent Native American). Although black writers, like black actors, were more prevalent in prime time than their Latino, Asian or Native American counterparts, they were still under-represented in the writing corps. They were also concentrated in situation comedies and ghettoized by network. That is, 55 of the 83 black writers worked on sitcoms (66 percent), and 38 of the writers worked on UPN (46 percent). Indeed, 30 percent of all writers on UPN were black; no other network had a writing corps that was more than 8 percent black.³⁸ In short, most black writers wrote

³² See, Omi, Michael and Howard Winant, 1994, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*, New York: Routledge.

³³ For an insider's look at show running, see Wild, David, 1999, *The Showrunners: A Season Inside the Billion-Dollar, Death-Defying, Madcap World of Television's Real Stars*, New York: HarperCollins.

³⁴ Indeed, several white show runners managed multiple shows in 2001 (e.g., David E. Kelley, Aaron Spelling, Dick Wolf, and Steven Bochco).

³⁵ "Institutional discrimination" is defined here as the use of unjustified requirements or prerequisites in routine practices that result in the disproportionate exclusion of minority groups from participation in institutions.

³⁶ The sitcoms included, *The Parkers* (UPN), *One On One* (UPN), *Bernie Mac* (Fox), and *My Wife and Kids* (ABC); *Philly* (ABC) was the lone drama.

³⁷ "DGA report reveals lack of diversity in hiring practices on top forty prime time drama and comedy series" (January 30, 2002), Directors Guild of America, http://www.dga.org/news/pr_expand.php3?232.

³⁸ Source: Writers Guild of America, West.

for black-oriented situation comedies, most of which appeared on the least-watched network, UPN.

Rights, profits, and responsibilities

Apologists for prime-time practices typically resort to three basic arguments to explain the racial conditions chronicled in this report: the "First-Amendment, creative rights" argument; the "small-talent-pool" argument; and "the bottom-line" argument.

The "First-Amendment, creative rights" argument maintains that the constitutional right of free speech extends to the creators of television programs, artists who would be best left alone to enrich the marketplace of ideas by following their own inspirations. Diversity cannot be engineered, the argument follows, without somehow damaging this creative process and the long term integrity (and commercial value) of television programs.

But what this line of reasoning fails to consider is that the very artists who are uniquely situated to create fresh and diverse takes on standard television fare are the ones who are seldom hired to do so. The corps of television writers, as we have seen, was 91 percent white for the 2001-2002 season. These writers typically write from their own experiences, which tend to differ from and obscure the experiences of people of color. Indeed, when these writers attempt to portray minority experiences in their work, the results are often implausible at best and stereotypical at worst. Rarely do we see minority experiences portrayed in prime time with the kind of artistic sensitivity often invoked to insulate the craft from diversity demands.

A common refrain among those who control the industry is that the minority talent pool is not very extensive. This "fact," the "small-pool" argument contends, explains why whites continue to occupy a disproportionately large share of key industry positions year after year. In an attempt to appease those who demand more diversity in prime time, key industry decision makers have traditionally relied upon devices such as the minority training program or the minority hiring fair.

But at best, these public relations programs constitute a lottery system that provides one or two opportunities for the hundreds of talented minorities competing for them. At worst, these programs result in much training and exposure, but no minority hiring; they effectively become fig leaves covering business-as-usual hiring practices. Minority under-representation in prime time has little to do with the availability of minority talent. It has much to do with the availability of opportunities, with the decision of those who control the industry not to share them.

The "bottom-line" argument is the final line of defense for those who support the prime time status quo. After all, this argument reminds us, prime-time television is first and foremost a business faced with important profit-making imperatives. Indeed, the five media conglomerates that own the broadcast networks (Disney/ABC; Viacom/CBS/UPN; General Electric/NBC; NewsCorp/Fox; and AOL Time Warner/WB) controlled vertically integrated, global operations in 2001, combining for more than \$240 billion in revenues.³⁹ The decisions made by network executives are conditioned by the earnings expectations of these giant corporations — nothing more and nothing less. If higher ratings and advertising revenues were produced by different prime-time practices (i.e., more diversity among decision makers, writers, and programming), the argument continues, then basic business logic would eventually lead to their use.

But this argument fails on two accounts. First, it is hard to demonstrate the degree to which more diverse practices would increase ratings and revenues because these practices have not been tried on any meaningful scale. Instead, the current institutional arrangement is simply presumed to be the only viable one, despite the fact that it has a rather lackluster track record: more than 70 percent of all new shows fail to be renewed for a second season.⁴⁰

Second, and more importantly, the argument assumes that profit, and the underlying property right claimed by the corporate entity, is the most salient value in this matter. This assumption is dubious at best, but has endured because competing values have been effectively excised from the public

³⁹ In addition to CBS and UPN, Viacom owned 36 television stations, MTV, Nickelodeon, VH1, Showtime, BET, and nearly 200 radio stations. AOL Time Warner owned WB, CNN, HBO, TBS, TNN, Cartoon Network, and dozens of record labels. Disney owned ABC, 27 radio stations, and 80% of ESPN. News Corp owned Fox and 33 television stations. GE owned NBC, 13 television stations, AMC, and Bravo. Source: company 2001 annual reports and literature.

⁴⁰ *New York Daily News*, Friday, May 10, 2002, Sports Final Edition.

discourse about television. That is, early understandings about public ownership of the airwaves and the responsibilities of broadcasters to serve the public interest have all but disappeared.⁴¹ Indeed, the Federal Communications Commission – created by legislation to protect this public interest – has essentially become a booster for the industry.⁴²

Conclusion

Prime time presents a largely black and white world in which the dominance of whites is continually reaffirmed by the secondary status of all others, particularly blacks. It is unlikely that we will see any real transformation in this order until the issues of rights, profits and responsibilities are directly addressed. In the meantime, we are likely to encounter more of the largely symbolic gestures we have witnessed over the years – periodic appeasements that do little to increase diversity throughout the industry or to adjust white control to more equitable levels.

Over the next five years, *Prime Time in Black and White* will monitor this process in hopes of identifying meaningful interventions.

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About CAAS

Established in 1969 as an organized research unit (ORU) of the University of California, CAAS is one of the oldest centers in the nation devoted to the study of African American life, history, and culture. For more information, please visit www.sscnet.ucla.edu/caas/.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between media ownership and the public interest, see McChesney, Robert W., 1997, *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy*, New York: Seven Brothers Press.

⁴² See the testimony of Chon Noriega before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in *Racial and Ethnic Tensions in American Communities: Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination – Los Angeles Hearing*, June 15-17, 1993. See also, Hilliard, Robert L., 1991, *The Federal Communications Commission: A Primer*, Boston: Focal Press.