



# **Casting the American Scene:** Fairness and Diversity in American Television

## **Update and Trends since the 1993 Screen Actors Guild Report**

*Women and Minorities on Television*

**A Cultural Indicators Project Report**

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# **CASTING THE AMERICAN SCENE**

**A Look at the Characters on Prime time and  
Daytime Television from 1994-1997**

***Report Highlights***

- Despite slight progress toward more equitable representation, men still outnumber women two to one.
- The representation of African American males (but not females) increased each year until it reached 171 percent of its real-life proportion.
- Commercial media shun poor people. Low-income wage earners are virtually invisible.
- Asian/Pacific characters are still less than one half of their proportion of the U.S. population.
- Latino/Hispanic characters are less than one third of their real proportion of the U.S. population.
- Television characters in the nineties are healthier and wealthier, than in the eighties.
- The characters (especially women) are also younger. The stage is set for more younger women - older men relationships.
- There has been a decline in the number of characters with disabilities, and disabled performers still do not play "normal" roles.

- Women age faster than men and as they age they become more evil.
- Mentally ill characters and "foreigners" fail most often, and commit most crime and violence.

## **Introduction**

Electronic media have re-shaped the way our children are reared and socialized, the way we manage our lives, and the way we conduct our public affairs. A child is born into a home in which television is on an average of almost eight hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent, govern our societies, and cast the cultural environment. That historic sea-change has made the cultural environment the new frontier in the struggle for equity and justice. This is one of a series of reports from that frontier.

The Screen Actors Guild commissioned a study of television and motion picture "Casting and Fate" in 1993. It was a part of SAG's continuing effort to broaden the range of media images of women, racial, ethnic and all age groups, and people with disabilities. That study included an analysis of 10,796 characters appearing in prime time dramatic programming from 1981 to 1991, recorded in annual weeklong samples from ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX (in 1991), and 1,058 characters appearing in daytime serial dramas during the 1991-92 broadcast season.

This follow up to that 1993 study looks once more at characters who appear on prime time and daytime television. Unfortunately, it finds that this aspect of landscape of American television has changed very little over the course of the decade. Despite incremental changes, men still outnumber women, key minority populations are chronically underrepresented and televus

## **Design and Methodology**

The report draws on the Cultural Indicators (CI) research project data archives. CI research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. This update reports on trends from annual weeklong samples of prime time network drama recorded from 1994 to 1997 and daytime serial drama from 1995 to 1997.

Dramatic programs are fictional shows, including series, films, and animated cartoons appearing from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern Time. In the prime time sample 6,882 characters appeared during 440 episodes of dramatic programs, and in the daytime sample 2,137 characters appeared in 205 episodes of the network serial dramas.

These samples were screened and coded by trained analysts, using an extensively tested instrument of analysis. The testing procedure requires the reliable observation by multiple independent coders of various aspects of plot, theme and characterization. The full tabulation of coded observations can be seen in the Appendices (pp. 14-15).

## Prime Time Television

The 1993 report concluded that, by and large, the world of television is frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations. The current study finds that little has changed since the 1993 report. Through changes in ownership, management, stars and styles, the cast of the world of television is much as it was in 1993, or, for that matter, in 1969, when Cultural Indicators began.

The U.S. Census classifies more than 13 percent of the population (and one-third of African Americans) at or below the poverty level, and many more as low-income wage earners. But among characters playing major roles on television, such wage-earners make up only 1.4 percent of major characters in prime time, 1.2 percent in daytime, and half that (0.6 percent) in children's programs, concealing crucial realities of American life and society.

Figure 1 and Table 1, below, show relative changes in proportional representation by race and gender. The horizontal line at the 100 percent level in Figure 1 indicates correct proportional representation (their actual percentage of all characters, not their absolute numerical value) according to U.S. Census figures. Bars reaching above that line indicate overrepresentation, bars below that line show underrepresentation. Similarly, the proportions in Table 1 over 100 indicate overrepresentation and under 100 show underrepresentation.

Table 1 indexes the deviations from the proportionately

correct representation. It can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1 that while white male proportionate overrepresentation and all female representations remained relatively stable, the representation of African American males (but not of females) increased each year until it reached 171 percent of its real-life proportion in 1997.

Increases in proportional representation have not been shared equally among groups. It can be seen in Figure 2, below, that Asian/Pacific characters are still less than one half of their proportion of the population, with 2.6 percent of the cast in 1994-1997. Latino characters are represented at less than one third of their proportion in the US. Increases in the number of elderly characters are negligible, while disabled characters, and characters with the lowest incomes have decreased.

Figure 2 shows that Asian/Pacific characters are still less than one half of their proportion of the population, with 2.6 percent of the cast in 1994-1997. Latino/Hispanic characters are less than one third of their real proportion of the U.S. population.

The rate of disability among characters has declined to almost half of the 1993 figure. When they appear, however, disabled characters do not play "normal" roles; their part is focused on the disability.

Market-driven media have little use for poor people. They are still virtually invisible in prime -- or any other -- time. The U.S. Census classifies 13 percent of the population (and one-third of African Americans) at or below the poverty level, and many more as low-income wage earners. But on television, during 1994-1997, only 1.4 percent of the major characters in prime time, 1.2 percent in daytime, and half that (0.6 percent) in children's programs were from this group. Overall, these characters are less than 1 percent (0.8) of the total cast.

As well as being healthier and wealthier, television characters in the nineties are younger than in the eighties. Figure 3 below compares groups of male and female characters. The nineties saw an increase in the number of young adults, especially women. The stage is set for younger women - older men relationships.

In Figure 4 below, a more detailed breakdown of the age of prime time characters is presented, comparing the population of television with the US population. As can be seen, children are virtually absent in prime time. Young and middle-aged adults, 25-45 years old, dominate the cast with 64.6 percent. As characters age, they drop from view. Characters 60 years and older are only 5.6 percent of the TV population (up from 5.3 percent in 1993). Half of these characters are younger than 65. Characters 65 or over make up only 2.8 percent of the prime time cast, about one-fifth of their true proportion of the population. The gender imbalance makes these distortions even more glaring. Bluntly put, women age faster than men.

Almost nine out of 10 women are below the age of 46. Their proportion peaks at 30, then drops sharply.

Men age more gracefully. While women begin to vanish from the scene after age 30, men just begin to peak. Figure 4 shows that while the percentages of both women and men between 25 and 35 over represent those age groups, men after age 40 decline more slowly than women. For example, the proportion of women at age 40 matches that of the U.S. Census. But the proportion of men at age 40 is more than double that of the U.S. Census. After 40, women's share drops precipitously while men's declines more gently. At ages 55 to 64, men's representation matches that of the Census, while women's falls far below and disappears soon thereafter.

Before they reach midlife and older age, women's roles are primarily romantic. Female characters under 18 engage in verbal or physical sexual interaction in 25.6 percent of their appearances versus 16.9 percent for males of the same age. Female characters from 18 to 39 years old have sexual interaction in 39.1 percent of their appearances. But for women after 40 such interaction decreases to 21.3 percent (17.8 percent decline) while men drop from 27.7 percent to 18.2 percent (9.5 percent decline).

## Daytime Serials

Daytime drama is more white and more female than prime time. Compared to prime time, female characters have a one third increase to 48 percent of all characters, but minority groups suffer a decrease by a third, to 13.5 percent. As shown in [Table 4](#) below, every group but women and African Americans are represented at less than half their current population, and there were only increases in half of the demographic groups listed below. [Figure 5](#) presents the proportional representation of diversity in a graphic format and highlights the disparity in proportional representation of minority characters on daytime television.

The age curve for daytime serials is presented for a comparison with prime time in [Figure 6](#). Daytime favors men with a longer mid-life span, as does prime time. However, the age distribution is little more even-handed than in prime time. Women do not drop from proportional representation at age 40 as in prime time, but rather at age 55. And men do not enjoy 20 years of comparative overrepresentation. But young females outnumber young males and older males outnumber older females.

## FATE: HEROS and ZEROS

Cultural Indicators analysts identify the main goals of characters and judge whether the characters succeed or fail. "Good" characters usually win and "bad" characters usually

lose. From the 1994-97 period, of the prime time characters judged "good," 63.4 percent succeed and 6.6 percent fail. Reflecting the stability of television plots over the years, these numbers differ little from our prior study period, at 63.2 and 6.4 percent, respectively. For villains life improved, with 11.8 percent (up from 9.6) succeeding and 59.8 percent (down from 69.9) failing.

The pattern reported in the prior study of casting and fate has changed from casting non-white characters disproportionately in roles of villains and failures. While Latino/Hispanic and Asian/Pacific characters formerly had higher ratios of failures per success, now the only characters that fail more than white males are those with foreign national origin and those with mental disability. The ratios of failures per success are 1.22 (mental disability), 0.72 (non-U.S. origin), 0.56 (white males) 0.56 (Asian/Pacific), 0.55 (Latino/Hispanic) 0.35 (all women) and 0.33 (African American).

"Fate" is the positive ("good" or "hero") or negative ("bad" or "villain") role and successful ("winner") or failing ("loser") outcome to which they are destined.

Heroes outnumber villains, but the balance depends on gender, age, and other factors. For every "bad" man in prime time there is a "good" man, but for every "bad" woman there are about 4.5 "good" women, in prime-time. In daytime drama male and female heroes both outnumber villains by about two to one. But older women bear a disproportionate burden of negative characterizations.

In prime time, one third of all female villains are over 44 years old but only one sixth of all female characters are older than 44. This increasing villainization of age is confined to women, and reversed in men. Only one fourth of fifth villains in prime time are older than 45, although one fourth of all male characters are over 45.

Villainy on prime time presents itself most overtly with characters who are shown involved in violence or crime. Characters portrayed as suffering from mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups, with 60.0 percent shown to be involved in crime or violence (three times the average rate), perpetuating a stigma of the most damaging kind. By contrast, characters with *physical* disabilities were not cast as villains (Table 5). The second most dangerous characters on prime time television are those of foreign origin. (Figure 7)

## CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the television cast is its stability. The marketing imperative rules television. Advertisers seek novelty but not change. They they have no incentive to sponsor programs that undermine the existing

structure of power, expose glaring inequities, or feature less powerful, less wealthy, or less healthy customers — except, perhaps, as anomalies or threats. The world of television seems to be frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations.

Women consistently play one out of three roles in prime time television. Their representation increased only 3.5 percent since 1993. They fall short of majority even in daytime serials. They age faster than men, and as they age they are more likely to be portrayed as sexless and evil.

Seniors of both genders are greatly underrepresented and seem to be vanishing instead of increasing as in real life. As characters age they lose importance, value, and effectiveness. Mature women seem to be especially hard to cast — and hard to take. They are disproportionately underrepresented, undervalued, and undersexed.

People of color, the vast majority of humankind, estimated to reach a majority in America by the year 2000, are 18.3 percent of the major network prime time cast. African Americans are 12.3 percent of prime time, but Latino/Hispanics, over 10 percent of the U.S. population, are about 2.6 percent of prime time and 3.7 percent of daytime serials. Americans of Asian/Pacific origin, 3.4 percent of the U.S. population, also suffer conspicuously by their virtual absence as 1.4 percent of prime time and 0.4 percent of daytime roles.

As the 43 million disabled Americans gain legal rights of equal access and employment in real life, physical disability is visible in only 1.9 percent of characters, and mental illness in only 1.2 percent of prime time characters. Mentally ill characters are portrayed as bad people who fare badly in all types of programs.

If prime time is a time of macho adventures, family comedies, and societal power-plays, daytime is a time of interior turbulence. Its sexual and marital themes raise female representation but reduce social diversity below that of prime time.

A disproportionate number of ill-fated characters comes from the ranks of poor, Latino and foreign men, and both young and old, African American, and poor women. At the bottom of fate's "pecking order" are characters portrayed as old women and as mentally ill, perpetuating stigma of the most damaging kinds.

These results present a record of television performance and policy. They show not what the industry says or thinks it does but what it actually presents to the public. These results therefore provide a basis for judgment and action regarding employment and programming policies vital to a democratic



society

APPENDIX I. Demography of Cast of Characters in Prime  
Time Dramatic Programs, 1994-97

APPENDIX II. Demography of Cast of Characters in Daytime  
Serial Dramatic Programs, 1995-97

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