

1978

A Survey of Sex Typing on Prime Time Television

Patricia Sue Henry
Eastern Illinois University

Recommended Citation

Henry, Patricia Sue, "A Survey of Sex Typing on Prime Time Television" (1978). *Masters Theses*. 3206.
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/3206>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

PAPER CERTIFICATE #2

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates who have written formal theses.
SUBJECT: Permission to reproduce theses.

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow theses to be copied.

Please sign one of the following statements:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

August 28, 1978
Date

Author

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University not allow my thesis be reproduced because _____

Date

Author

pdm

A SURVEY OF SEX TYPING

ON PRIME TIME TELEVISION

(TITLE)

BY

PATRICIA SUE HENRY

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1978

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

August 24, 1978
DATE

August 28, 1978
DATE

A SURVEY OF SEX TYPING
ON PRIME TIME TELEVISION

BY

PATRICIA SUE HENRY

B.A. in Ed., Blackburn College, 1970

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in Education at the Graduate School
of Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1978

According to former FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, the average child will spend nearly 25,000 hours in front of a television before he or she is eighteen years old. With this fact in mind, I wondered what America's children learn from watching prime time television regarding sex-typing, or the characteristics which are considered appropriately masculine or feminine.

A review of related literature showed that critics in the early 70s pointed out that women portrayed on television were less numerous than men, less intelligent, brave, and adventuresome. In short, women were stereotyped as supportive underlings.

To find out if women fared any better on television in 1978, I conducted a survey of forty-five prime time television programs on the ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS networks.

I found that on the programs monitored, men outnumbered women in starring roles nearly three to one. Men starred in more dramas than women. The male stars had occupations requiring intelligence and and were often depicted as brave and aggressive.

Women predominantly starred in situation comedies and were depicted as bumbling, less-than-bright scatterbrains. The female characters starring in dramatic formats were unbelievable concoctions of athletic ability, sexy good looks, and charm who usually did the bidding of some more powerful male superior. The majority of all female stars were portrayed in the 20-30 year old age range.

I concluded that women are not portrayed any more accurately on television today than they have been in the past. Programming on all the networks monitored provided inaccurate models of American women. Parents should be as choosy about their children's television viewing as they are about their peanut butter. Parents should also let their disapproval of programming be known to the networks, local stations, and sponsors.

A SURVEY OF SEX TYPING
ON PRIME TIME TELEVISION

BY

PATRICIA SUE HENRY

B.A. in Ed., Blackburn College, 1970

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in Education at the Graduate School
of Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS
1978

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|---------|---|----|
| Chapter | | |
| I. | INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| | Purpose of Study | 2 |
| | Questions | 3 |
| | Limitations | 4 |
| | Delimitations | 4 |
| | Definition of Terms | 5 |
| II. | REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE | 6 |
| III. | METHODS AND PROCEDURES | 11 |
| IV. | FINDINGS | 12 |
| V. | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 16 |

* - * - * - * - *

APPENDICES

| | | |
|----|---------------------------------|----|
| A. | LIST OF TABLES | 25 |
| B. | SAMPLE OF SURVEY FORM | 26 |
| C. | DIRECTIONS FOR SURVEY | 27 |
| D. | LIST OF PROGRAMS | 28 |
| | BIBLIOGRAPHY | 29 |

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to Nicholas Johnson, former FCC commissioner:

"Of the 60 million homes in the U.S., more than 95 per cent have television, with 25 per cent having two or more sets.

On the average winter evening during prime time, fully one half of the entire American population is watching television By the time the average child enters school, he has already spent more hours learning about his world from TV than he would spend in a classroom earning a college degree. By the time he is 18, he has spent nearly 25,000 hours in front of the television set."¹

With America's children "plugged in" to their televisions from the time they are toddlers, the potential of television as an instrument of education is tremendous. Programs for preschoolers have taken on more and more educational qualities over the years. "Captain Kangaroo" taught manners and courtesy to children in the 50s and 60s, and today "Sesame Street" is a recognized preparatory for kindergarten. But as important, if not more so than the overt educational message being transmitted over the air waves, are the covert messages being broadcast to impressionable children.

Beyond the moral of the run-of-the-mill police show that "crime doesn't pay," what does the viewer pick up from the program? What do children see on TV that they innocently assume to be real? How is American life and the roles of men and women in particular portrayed on television?

¹Joseph Fletcher Littell, ed., Coping With Television (Evanston, Illinois: McDougall-Littell and Company, 1973), pp. 22-23.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of television on sex typing-- the process by which children acquire the attitudes and behaviors deemed characteristically masculine or feminine by their culture.²

Psychologists agree that there are many influences on a child's opinions of what is typically male or female behavior. The parents, needless to say, are a major factor and source of role-model identification. But with the average child spending 25,000 hours in front of a TV before he is eighteen, the influence of television to create models of male and female behavior is undeniably great.

This study takes a look at the role models portrayed during the evening entertainment hours on the three major networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC, and the PBS channel.

²Sally Wendkos Olds and Diane E. Papalia, A Child's World: Infancy Through Adolescence (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), p. 343.

Questions

In my study, I wanted to determine the following:

1. Which sex receives star billing on prime time TV?
2. Which sex is given more air time on prime time TV?
3. Which formats are male dominated on prime time TV?
4. Which formats are female dominated on prime time TV?
5. Which network(s) airs more male-dominated prime time TV programs?
6. Which network(s) airs more female-dominated prime time TV programs?
7. On prime time TV programs, where female characters are depicted, what is the approximate age of the female(s)?

Limitations

1. The reliability of responses on the survey form depended on the ability of the reviewer to remain objective in his or her opinions.
2. The survey asked for surface judgments only in order to keep opinion to a minimum.
3. Local UHF channels were excluded in the survey.

Delimitations

1. The programs monitored were selected randomly from the TV Guide to afford a range of types.
2. All three major networks (CBS, ABC, NBC) were monitored plus the Public Broadcasting channel.

Definition of Terms

Networks studied: PBS, CBS, ABC, NBC

Prime time 7-10 p.m.

Star billing: Listed first in the credits, main weekly regular, or
title name of show.

Format: Category determined by general arrangement or
plot of program.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Television has been studied for some time, and those who study it are generally divided in their opinions. On the one hand are those who view TV as a mirror that reflects society. On the other hand are those who say television is not just a reflection but an actual influence on our culture. A powerful enough influence, they say, to cause vast changes in the very structure of society.

Marshall McLuhan is perhaps the best-known authority on the medium of television. His main thesis, simply stated, is that the printed word is on the way out and electronic media are taking its place. He sees any medium as an extension of one of several senses with television being an extension of the central nervous system.³

McLuhan's theories are concerned with the way things are said (the medium) rather than what is being said (the message). He purports that it is the medium that is all important and stimulating to the viewer.

An opposing viewpoint is presented by Jerry Mander in his book Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television.

³Littell, Coping With Television, p. 16.

Mander is very concerned with the messages imparted by television. His background is advertising, and he arrived at his viewpoints after years of concocting TV commercials. He says, "Humans have moved into totally artificial environments . . . television is capable of implanting arbitrary realities."⁴ As a former advertising executive, Mander makes a powerful presentation of the way advertisers first create an artificial need for their product then promote their product to fill that need.

The National Organization of Women (NOW), New York Chapter, monitored television commercials over a year-and-a-half period. Their findings show that female role models in commercials are less than ideal. The majority of commercials sell either domestic or cosmetic products and thus star women. Yet, NOW discovered the following:

"Almost all of them showed women inside the home. In 42.6 per cent they were involved in household tasks; in 37.5 per cent they were domestic adjuncts to men; and in 16.7 per cent they were sex objects. That doesn't leave very many, and a lot of commercials don't even have people in them. Only 0.3 per cent showed women as autonomous people, leading independent lives of their own."⁵

The NOW study found women in commercials filling two stock roles--the housewife--mother or the sex object. It also found in most of the ads

⁴Jerry Mander, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (New York: William Morrow and Company, Incorporated, 1978), p. 53.

⁵Judith Adler Hennessee and Joan Nicholson, "Now Says: TV Commercials Insult Women," New York Times Magazine, May 28, 1972.

women's lives are dreary. It's the men, children, and even the family dog who have the fun while the women work. In 54.4 per cent of the food commercials and 81.2 per cent of the cleaning commercials, men are the beneficiaries. Women also have no credibility in selling the products. The woman's voice is followed by a male voice-over, the voice of authority, which confers the stamp of approval on the product. Male authority is a built-in assumption, and it teaches women to look up to men as experts; 89.3 per cent of the voice-overs are male.⁶

The NOW study was concerned with the image of women in commercials, but what about the roles of women in the programs themselves?

According to Coping With Television, published in 1973:

"Lately some changes have found their way to the screen. Maude, at the very least, has broken the mold of the subservient housewife. Cher effectively diminishes her husband, Sonny, to the somewhat perverse delight of their weekly variety-show audience. Policewomen, female doctors, and lawyers appear on dramatic series, although they rarely reach above assistant status in their professions. A television woman may now go to work, although oddly enough, she must be single to do so For every TV woman of real interest and independence, there are still several more vacuous stereotypes to counter her effect."⁷

⁶Ibid

⁷Littell, Coping With Television, p. 119.

In 1973 a study was made to analyze the ten most popular commercially produced children's shows for depictions of male and female roles. Four of the top ten shows, however, had to be eliminated because no female characters showed up consistently. On the shows showing females, males were seen twice as often, and these males were aggressive and constructive. Females, on the other hand, tended to be ignored for inconsequential behavior or punished for very active behavior. In the shows analyzed, the females got around this by being witches. The authors of this study concluded that on TV:

. . . both male and female roles are limited because certain behaviors are considered appropriate for only one sex. A child who identified with the female characters would be shown that it is inappropriate for her to make plans and carry them out or for her to be aggressive Boys, on the other hand, are shown that it is sex role inappropriate for males to defer to another's plan or suggestion or to express admiration of others. On a still more specific level, female children are taught that almost the only way to be a successful human being if you are female is through the use of magic. By using magic one may manipulate others without their being aware of it, and may manipulate them effectively. One may imagine the shock to the little girls at the age of ten or so when they realize that witchcraft is not really a viable career.⁸

Another researcher of television programming characterized her findings this way:

. . . the television screen is an out-and-out disaster area. Our children are exposed to quiz shows where housewives vie for washing machines

⁸S. H. Sternglantz and Larry Serbin, "An Analysis of Sex Roles on Children's Television Programs," paper presented to Society for Research in Child Development, 1973, p. 13.

or game shows where they make fools of themselves under the patronizing gaze of a male M.C. Situation comedies telecast during children's prime time include such splendid inanities as "I Dream of Jeanie" (a flagrant master-slave relationship between the sexes) or "I Love Lucy" (the die-hard scatterbrain embodying the infantilized woman and the hen-pecking wife) Even "Sesame Street," despite its noble educational intentions, teaches role rigidity along with the letters of the alphabet. Susan is almost always in the kitchen. Puppet families are traditional: Dad works, Mom cooks (an inaccurate portrayal of many black and poor families and of middle-class dual-professional families as well). Boy monsters are brave and gruff. Girl monsters are high-pitched and timid. Oscar turns out to be a male-chauvinist as well as a grouch. When his garbage-pail home needs a spring cleaning, he calls a woman to do it.⁹

⁹Letty Cottin Pogerbin, "Down With Sexist Upbringing," in The First Ms. Reader, (New York: Warner Paperbacks, 1973), p. 170.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Since these earlier studies, what, if any, changes have been made in the way women are portrayed on television? To explore this question, I decided to zero in on the evening entertainment hours, 7-10 p.m. and monitor a variety of programs from the three big networks (CBS, ABC, and NBC) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). I included PBS because I wanted to see if the "educational" channel was any less biased in its portrayal of women's roles than the commercial networks.

In order to keep track of the programs and their characters, I devised a survey sheet which I hoped would eliminate a wide range of interpretations. Six women and one man took part in the monitoring. Their ages ranged from twenty-two to forty-four. Everyone taking part in the monitoring received the same instructions. Choice of viewing was left up to the participants. Only two duplicates were turned in, and these were voided.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Many of the programs monitored are among the most popular shows on television. Some of the programs are established favorites, some are new programs, and some are one-time-only presentations.

Forty-four programs in all were viewed, comprised of twenty half-hour programs, twenty-three one-hour programs, and two two-hour programs for a total of thirty-seven hours of programming (see Table 1).

On the forty-four programs, seventy-two male characters were reported as stars versus twenty-five females, or there were approximately three male stars for every one female star overall.

Table 2 reports the breakdown of male versus female by networks.

It is interesting to note that of the three major networks only CBS had a somewhat normal balance of male and female stars with sixteen males versus twelve females. ABC starred men three times as often as women in the programs monitored, and NBC starred men in a nearly unbelievable ratio of seven to one. Even the PBS channel showed a predominance of male stars with five men for every one woman star.

Table 1
Number and Length of Programs Monitored

| Network | Number of Programs | 1/2-Hour Programs | 1-Hour Programs | 2-Hour Programs | Total Hours |
|---------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| PBS | 8 | - | 8 | - | 8 |
| CBS | 15 | 11 | 4 | - | 9 1/2 |
| ABC | 13 | 8 | 5 | - | 9 |
| NBC | 9 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 10 1/2 |
| Totals | 45 | 20 | 23 | 2 | 37 |

Table 2
Number of Male and Female Stars

| Network | Number of Programs | Male Star(s) | Female Star(s) |
|---------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|
| PBS | 8 | 16 | 3 |
| CBS | 15 | 16 | 12 |
| ABC | 13 | 26 | 8 |
| NBC | 9 | 14 | 2 |
| Totals | 45 | 72 | 25 |

Formats for the forty-four monitored programs ran the gamut from situation comedy, variety, drama, and documentary. The survey form provided for an "Other" format category, which was checked twice and in both cases was used to describe a roundtable discussion type of format.

The majority of the programs were either situation comedies or dramas (see Table 3). Of the networks monitored, CBS shows the most situation comedies with nine monitored, and NBC presents the most dramatic shows with seven monitored.

Male stars dominate in the dramatic format programs, with the three major networks fairly evenly divided as indicated by Table 4. On the male-dominated dramas, the usual occupation was policeman followed by detective, newspaper editor, astronaut/spy, a teenage boy raised by wolves, Air Force UFO investigators, and a man who turns green and swells up into a monster/crime fighter.

The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) had the heaviest concentration of documentary type programs, and these were entirely dominated by men in both subject matter and narration.

Female characters, on the other hand, were dominant in situation comedies, and these were almost exclusively on CBS (see Table 5). The females'

Table 3
Programs Monitored by Format

| Network | Situation Comedy | Variety | Drama | Documentary | Roundtable Discussion |
|---------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------------|--------------------------|
| PBS | - | - | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| CBS | 9 | 1 | 5 | - | - |
| ABC | 8 | - | 5 | - | - |
| NBC | - | 1 | 7 | 1 | - |
| Totals | 17 | 2 | 19 | 5 | 2 |

Table 4
Formats Starring Male Characters

| Network | Situation Comedy | Variety | Drama | Documentary | Roundtable Discussion |
|---------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------------|--------------------------|
| PBS | - | - | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| CBS | 4 | - | 4 | - | - |
| ABC | 6 | - | 4 | - | - |
| NBC | - | 1 | 6 | 1 | - |
| Totals | 10 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 2 |

Table 5
Formats Starring Female Characters

| Network | Situation Comedy | Variety | Drama | Documentary | Roundtable Discussion |
|---------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------------|--------------------------|
| PBS | - | - | 1 | - | - |
| CBS | 5 | 1 | 1 | - | - |
| ABC | 2 | - | 1 | - | - |
| NBC | - | - | 1 | - | - |
| Totals | 7 | 1 | 4 | - | - |

occupations on these comedies varied, including wife, waitress, factory worker, advertising copywriter, layout artist, secretary, and advertising account executive. None of the full-time working women portrayed had a husband. They either had a job and children or children and a husband, but they did not have a conventional marriage, children, and a full-time job. This adheres to the formula noticed five years ago that dictates that working women can't have a husband and family.¹⁰

The number of male- versus female-dominated programs when viewed in relation to the total number of programs monitored reveals some startling findings (see Table 6). Overall, 73.3 per cent of the forty-four programs were dominated by male stars, and only 26.6 per cent were dominated by female stars.

The breakdown by network is even more informative. Only CBS has a somewhat even distribution with 53.3 per cent being male dominated and 46.6 per cent female dominated. The gap widens on ABC with 76.9 per cent male and 23 per cent female. The PBS channel showed 87.5 per cent male-dominated programs as opposed to 12.5 per cent female. NBC had the highest percentage of male-dominated programs with 88.8 per cent and only 11.1 per cent female dominated.

¹⁰Littell, Coping With Television, p. 119.

Table 6
Number of Male-Dominated Programs
vs. Female-Dominated Programs

| Network | Total Number of Programs Monitored | Number of Male-Dominated Programs | Per Cent of Total Monitored | Number of Female-Dominated Programs | Per Cent of Total Monitored |
|---------|--|---|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| PBS | 8 | 7 | 87.5% | 1 | 12.5% |
| CBS | 15 | 8 | 53.3% | 7 | 46.6% |
| ABC | 13 | 10 | 76.9% | 3 | 23.0% |
| NBC | 9 | 8 | 88.8% | 1 | 11.1% |
| Totals | 45 | 33 | 73.3% | 12 | 26.6% |

Of the twenty-five starring female characters, twelve were portrayed as 20-30 year olds (see Table 7). The age distribution after that is even, with four each in the 10-19, 31-40, and 41-50 year olds. Only one female star was listed in the 50-70 age category.

Table 7
Approximate Age of Female Stars

| Network | 10-19 | 20-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-70 |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| PBS | - | - | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| CBS | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | - |
| ABC | 1 | 7 | - | - | - |
| NBC | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Totals | 4 | 12 | 4 | 4 | 1 |

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditionally, what did little girls learn was typical female behavior from watching television? They saw Father Knows Best's wife as a vaguely pretty lady with a lilting musical voice who spoke only to affirm her husband's thoughts. They saw Miss Kitty on Gunsmoke who was certainly an independent sort, but her independence was a by-product of the tough, hooker-with-the-heart-of-gold character she played. They saw Lucille Ball entangle herself in impossibly ridiculous situations week after week. They saw Hazel, an intelligent, clever, and witty middle-aged woman, whose status in life was derived from being a maid to an upper middle-class family.

In an interview with David Sohn in the book Coping With the Mass Media, Jerzy Kosinski said:

"Children have always imitated adults, but 'TV babies,' with access to a world beyond that of their parents and siblings, often mimic TV personalities. They behave according to TV models, not according to their moods, and their actions reflect patterns they have picked up from television."¹¹

*

Two professors at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, Larry Gross and George Gerbner, conducted a study which suggests that the television experience impinges significantly upon viewers'

¹¹Joseph Fletcher Littell, ed., Coping With the Mass Media (Evanston, Illinois: McDougall-Littell and Company, 1976), p. 19.

perceptions of reality. They gave a multiple-choice quiz to heavy and light television viewers and discovered that:

. . . heavy viewers answered many questions in a way revealing that what they saw on television had altered their perceptions of the world and society. They were more likely than light viewers to overestimate the U.S. proportion of the world population They also overestimated the percentages of people employed as professionals, as athletes, and as entertainers in the "real world," just as television overemphasizes the importance of these groups.¹²

Gerbner and Gross point out that the viewers' incorrect perceptions of the real world do not come from misleading newscasts or factual programs but from repeated viewing of fictional programs performed in a realistic style. These programs begin to take on a confusing reality for the viewer. Once television fantasy is incorporated into the viewer's reality, the real world takes on a tinge of fantasy--or dullness because it fails to conform to the expectations created by televised "life."¹³

What of children watching fictional programs? How do they deal with the "reality" presented on the tube? Jerry Mander in Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television says:

"When the child is watching a television program, he or she has no innate ability to make any distinction between real and not-real.

¹²Larry Gross, "The 'Real' World of Television," Today's Education, January-February, 1974.

¹³Ibid

Once an image is inside the box and then inside the child's mind, having never existed in any concrete form, there is no operable distinction. All images are equally real Whatever I as parent can say about the images being in a separate category called 'unreal' has only superficial meaning."¹⁴

America's children tuning in to entertainment programming any evening between 7 and 10 p.m. become victims of the "reality" depicted in the programs. They do not see appropriate or accurate role models to use as patterns for their own behavior. They see an imbalance of men over women which does not reflect the real world. In reality, women outnumber men, yet on television children see nearly three times more men than women.¹⁵ Not only are the numbers portrayed inaccurate, but the people themselves are inadequate portrayals that do not reflect real life.

The serious male characters are usually seen as policemen, private investigators, news editors, soldiers, and astronauts. In short, men are most often seen in dramatic settings with exciting, adventurous, most often dangerous jobs. To be sure, women are now portrayed in dramatic programs also, but only four of the nineteen dramas monitored starred women.

Of these four programs, one portrayed a 19th century Russian lady, one portrayed a young, sexy tennis pro grammar school teacher who is held

¹⁴Mander, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, p. 252.

¹⁵Victor Dolmatch, ed., Information Please Almanac (New York: Information Please Publishing, Incorporated, 1978), p. 2.

together by bionics and is a United States spy in her spare time , and one portrayed three young , very sexy private investigators who do the bidding of an unseen omnipotent male named Charlie .

My conclusion concerning dramatic formats is that they unfairly show men outnumbering women in jobs requiring intelligence . Women are shown as unable to handle important jobs unless they are young , sexy , and/or aided by bionic powers presumably bestowed on them by men .

Although women do not fare well in dramatic format programs , I do not feel that men are given a better deal . I agree with Nicholas Johnson when he says:

"I believe that the women's role portrayed on television is creating at least as many problems for men as for women Men and women can help each other to self-realization . Men are robbed of this opportunity equally with women when they are sold an image of themselves that constantly imposes the need to role play their masculinity ."¹⁶

Perhaps the portrayal of men in dramas does give little boys models of competence , bravery , and independence , but these larger-than life characters might be overwhelming . What of the boy who would rather be a pipefitter than Starsky or Hutch? Must his self-image suffer if he doesn't

¹⁶Nicholas Johnson , Test Patterns for Living (New York: Bantam Books , 1972) , p. 49 .

enjoy danger? Television dramas are rampantly unfair to females, but they are not much better to males.

Women do shine in one area of television programming, and that's the situation comedy. Of the seventeen situation comedies monitored, nine on CBS and eight on ABC, seven starred women. Five of these were on the CBS network which contributed to the high percentage (46.6 percent) of female-starring programs for that network. On the surface, this nearly 50-50 balance of male and female stars for CBS programs monitored is commendable when compared to say NBC with only 11.1 per cent of the programs monitored starring women. However, CBS predominantly stars women in situation comedies, indicating that women must be laughable in order to succeed in a man's world.

In real life women are no more comical than men. Why must they be depicted as such on television? A ten-year-old girl watching a situation comedy will assume the ability to get laughs is a prerequisite for success as a human being. On the subject of success, children will conclude from the programs monitored that successful working women cannot have a good marriage, children, and a job. They can be divorced and work, or never married and work, but if they have a husband, they should not spend too much time away from home. Television teaches that good wives and mothers don't want and probably can't handle any task more exacting than matching socks.

According to the programs monitored, if TV women are the stars of the show, they are probably within the 20-30 year old age range. Indeed, ABC is especially fond of young women stars with seven of its eight female stars in this age group.

In all, of the twenty-five female stars reported, twelve were judged as being 20-30 years old. This is nearly half of the female population on the programs. What does this do to the perception of children? In the real world, half of the women are not aged 20-30. A child watching such programming might conclude that women magically disappear when they pass age 30--or wrinkle and turn grey, whichever comes first.

Fictional programs on television provide little better role models today than they did when Harriet Nelson played straight man for Ozzie and David and Ricky. The seeming increase in women's roles is deceptive and misleading, as the roles do not portray characters worthy of modeling.

The programs that deal with real subjects on TV, the documentaries, are even less kind to women. On all five documentaries monitored, the ubiquitous male narrator leads the viewer to think that the female is incapable of discourse on real subjects, or perhaps that, as in the male voice-overs for commercials, a male voice is needed to provide the necessary authority to carry the program.

The PBS network airs a great number of documentaries, which deal with interesting and educational subjects. Yet all of those monitored were narrated by men and dealt with the accomplishments of men. With 87.5 per cent of the PBS programs monitored being male dominated, this network didn't portray women any more favorably than the commercial networks. Indeed, PBS came out a poor third after CBS and ABC. However, the absence of commercials on PBS makes it a better women's champion than the others simply because the viewer is not bombarded by those excessively derogatory portrayals of females used to sell household products.

Today television still does not provide adequate role models for children, even though the problem was pointed out over six years ago by other studies, and the upcoming TV season seems to be taking a giant step backwards if the early reviews are accurate.

Frank Swertlow, TV critic for the Chicago Sun Times, reported on a CBS series debuting in April (1978) by saying:

"CBS's flagrant use of the teenage nymphomaniac as a theme may be of concern for parents. Television has a way of glorifying the images it airs. It gives them a new life beyond their original context. Truly teenage sex exists and so does nymphomania, but to exploit those themes for ratings is the worst form of broadcasting for profit. I'd call it child molestation."¹⁷

¹⁷Frank Swertlow, "CBS Exploits Sex in 'Dallas' Episode," Chicago Sun Times, April 12, 1978, p. 62.

Margita E. White, a member of the Federal Communications Commission and former official of the United States Information Agency, reports:

"News accounts out of Los Angeles indicate that we are in for what one columnist calls 'TV's Titillation Sweepstakes.' The name of the game for the coming season is sex. The networks will be falling all over each other to see which can expose most often the most of the female anatomy . . . the coming invasion of what one producer termed 'a microcosm of America in 38D cups.'"¹⁸

Why does television in the past, present, and future insist on depicting incompetent, dependent, stereotypical women? I believe this continued inaccurate portrayal is largely due to economics. Keeping women in an inferior position spurs them on to spend money to buy the products which they think will help them improve their lot.

Unless the public and women in particular fight back, the situation probably won't be much different five or six years from now. I agree with Margita White when she says, "I do not believe the programming will stand a chance if viewers let their stations know what they think and oversee what their children watch."¹⁹

Nicholas Johnson concurs that the way to protest is to let our local stations know our feelings about their programs. "Develop specific suggestions

¹⁸Margita E. White, "TV to Be Vast Bad-Tasteland?," Chicago Sun Times, April 7, 1978, p. 66.

¹⁹Ibid

about programs you would like to see--or have taken off the air--or other specific suggestions for station management."²⁰

Besides the local stations, I believe in protesting to the sponsors of those programs found to be objectionable. We, the public, must let the sponsors know that we are aware of the inaccurate portrayals that they fund and support with their commercials. Money talks in America, and by threatening boycott of stations or products, the viewing public can force the industry to be more responsible.

Margita White sums up the situation when she says, "The time to act is now--before the vast wasteland turns into bad-tasteland."²¹

²⁰Nicholas Johnson, How to Talk Back to Your Television Set (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 208.

²¹White, p. 66.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF TABLES

| | | |
|----|--|------|
| 1. | Number and Length of Programs Monitored | 12 A |
| 2. | Number of Male and Female Stars | 12 B |
| 3. | Programs Monitored by Format | 13 A |
| 4. | Formats Starring Male Characters | 13 B |
| 5. | Formats Starring Female Characters | 13 C |
| 6. | Number of Male-Dominated Programs vs. Female-Dominated Programs | 14 A |
| 7. | Approximate Age of Female Stars | 15 A |

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE OF SURVEY FORM

1. Name of program: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____
Network: CBS ABC NBC PBS
Format: ___ Situation Comedy ___ Variety ___ Documentary ___ Game Show
 ___ Drama ___ Other (describe) _____

2. Star
 ___ M ___ F
Occupation: _____
Behavior: ___ Serious ___ Wise ___ Intelligent ___ Comical
 ___ Unknowledgeable ___ Sexy ___ Other (describe) _____
Age: ___ 10-19 ___ 20-30 ___ 31-40 ___ 41-50 ___ 50-70

 ___ M ___ F
Occupation: _____
Behavior: ___ Serious ___ Wise ___ Intelligent ___ Comical
 ___ Unknowledgeable ___ Sexy ___ Other (describe) _____
Age: ___ 10-19 ___ 20-30 ___ 31-40 ___ 41-50 ___ 50-70

 ___ M ___ F
Occupation: _____
Behavior: ___ Serious ___ Wise ___ Intelligent ___ Comical
 ___ Unknowledgeable ___ Sexy ___ Other (describe) _____
Age: ___ 10-19 ___ 20-30 ___ 31-40 ___ 41-50 ___ 50-70

APPENDIX C

DIRECTIONS FOR SURVEY

1. Fill in title of program, date, and time viewed.
2. Circle network broadcasting program.
3. Check format best approximating show, or write in best explanation beside "Other."
4. Check "M" for male star or "F" for female.
5. Write in occupation of star character, not the star's real name.
6. Under "Behavior" check as many of the descriptors that apply to the star character's personality and manner.
7. Check the age category best approximating the age of the character portrayed, not the actor's/actress's true age.
8. Repeat for each main star of program.

APPENDIX D

LIST OF PROGRAMS

CBS

All in the Family
Maude
Alice
One Day at a Time
On Our Own
Baby I'm Back
The Jeffersons
M.A.S.H.
Good Times
The Carol Burnett Show
The Return of Captain Nemo
The Lou Grant Show
The Incredible Hulk
Wonder Woman
Sam: Police Dog

ABC

Charlie's Angels
Welcome Back Kotter
Fish
Carter Country
Barney Miller
Three's Company
Starsky and Hutch
Baretta
The Hardy Boys
Lucan

PBS

Meeting of Minds
Living Sands of Namibe
Spain: The Land and the Legend
Survival in Limbo
NOVA: Icarus' Children
Anna Karenina
Microbes and Men

NBC

The Six Million Dollar Man
The Bionic Woman
CHiPS
Project UFO
James at 16
Police Story
Mysterious Castles of Clay
The Chuck Barris Rah-Rah Show

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dolmatch, Victor, ed. Information Please Almanac. New York: Information Please Publishing, 1978.
- Gross, Larry. "The 'Real' World of Television." Today's Education. New York, January-February, 1974.
- Hennessee, Judith Adler, and Nicholson, Joan. "NOW Says: TV Commercials Insult Women." New York Times Magazine, May, 1972.
- Johnson, Nicholas. How to Talk Back to Your Television Set. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967; New York: Bantam Books, 1970.
- _____. Test Pattern for Living. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.
- Key, Wilson Bryan. Media Sexploitation. New York: Signet Books, 1976.
- Littell, Joseph Fletcher, ed. Coping With Television. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal, Littell and Company, 1973.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Fiore, Quentin. The Medium is the Message. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.
- Papalia, Diane E., and Olds, Sally Wendkos. A Child's World: Infancy Through Adolescence. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975.
- Pogerbin, Letty Cottin. "Down With Sexist Upbringing." The First Ms. Reader. New York: Warner Paperbacks, 1973.
- Sternglantz, S. H., and Serbin, L. "An Analysis of Sex Roles on Children's Television Programs." paper presented to Society for Research in Child Development, 1973.
- Swertlow, Frank. "CBS Exploits Sex in Dallas Episode." Chicago Sun Times, April, 1978.
- White, Margita E. "TV To Be Vast Bad-Tasteland?" Chicago Sun Times, April, 1978.
- Winn, Marie. The Plug-In Drug. New York: Viking Press, 1977; New York: Bantam Books, 1978.