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READY FOR PRIME TIME: Minorities on Network Entertainment Television

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Despite the well-documented growth of racial minorities as a demographic, political, and market force within the United States, this population enters the twenty-first century with a lower level of media access and representation than since the civil rights era.

The cause can be traced to two factors: first, the slow rate of improvement in minority employment in the film and television entertainment industry; and second, the exponential increase in the minority population, such that “minorities” now make up the majority population in California and other areas (see fig. 1).

While minority employment figures have shown slight improvement over the last three decades, communities of color have grown from 16.4 percent of the national population in 1970 to 30.9 percent in 2000 (Bahr et al. 1979; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002). In other words, this population has nearly doubled relative to the national population; and the Latino population alone has nearly tripled (4.5 percent in 1970 to 12.5 percent in 2000). To the extent that the entertainment industry has not kept pace with changing demographics, employment opportunities for racial minorities have actually *decreased* relative to the level of the 1970s. In other words, there are nearly twice as many people of color encountering roughly the same rate of employment.

FINDINGS ABOUT UNDERREPRESENTATION

This report focuses on network television since it reaches all television viewers, unlike cable, thereby providing one of the most powerful bases for a common national culture. While Americans go to the movies fewer than a dozen times in a year, most viewers spend almost as much time in front of the television as workers do

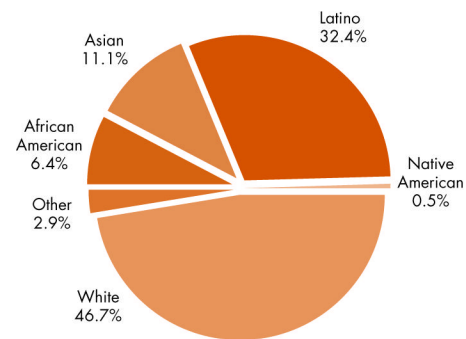


Fig. 1. Ethnic Groups as Percentage of California Population (Source: US Census Bureau 2000)

on the job in any given week. For racial minorities, representation on prime time plays an important role in shaping the views and opinions of millions of viewers tuned in to watch television every night. In addition to the portrayal of minorities in television shows, a related issue is that of equal opportunity and access to prime-time television for minority actors, writers, directors, producers, and executives.

In the past two years, cable and public television have been somewhat more responsive to demographic changes, producing series and specials directed at African American and Latino audiences. But racial minorities remain scarce at the four major broadcast networks: ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC. Recent studies by the Directors Guild of America (see Braxton 2002), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (August 2001), Children Now (September 2000), and the Tomás Rivera

Policy Institute (May 2000) reinforce this point.

In a preliminary analysis of prime-time series during 2001-2002, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center noted significant improvement in front of the camera, with racial minorities now filling 28.3 percent of regular and recurring roles on the four networks (see fig. 2). While the overall number is close to the national demographic of 30.9 percent, Latinos and Native Americans are represented at a rate less than half of their population. Furthermore, minority actors tend to be concentrated in a limited number of series. For example, *The George Lopez Show* accounts for one-third of Latino regular and recurring roles on ABC. Cancellation of these series could mean a significant decrease in overall minority employment.

Behind the camera, and in the executive suite, racial minorities continue to be significantly underrepresented. Minority directors are employed on a mere 4.5 percent of the episodes for series on the four networks (see fig. 3). While all groups were underrepresented on all networks, the situation was notably worse from some groups. No Native American directors were hired during the 2001-2002 season. ABC and NBC did not hire any Latino directors. While its numbers were also low, Fox nevertheless accounted for 57.6 percent of all minority hires among directors.

Minority writers make up 6.9 percent of series writers (see fig. 4). Again, all groups were underrepresented on all networks. African American and Asian American writers were hired at a rate about one-third of their national demographic. Latinos and Native Americans were hired at a rate about one-seventh of their national demographic. While its numbers were also low, Fox hired twenty-three minority writers, twice as many as each of the other three networks.

Fig. 2. ACTORS ON PRIME TIME 2001-2002
Percent of Recurring and Regular Roles by Network

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC	TOTAL
African Americans	18.8	23.0	20.1	12.1	18.3
Asian Americans	1.3	3.9	5.4	4.8	3.8
Latinos	7.1	5.5	7.1	4.4	5.9
Native Americans	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.2
TOTAL MINORITY	27.6	32.4	33.0	21.3	28.2

Fig. 3. DIRECTORS ON PRIME TIME 2001-2002
Percent of Episodes Directed by Network

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC	TOTAL
African Americans	1.0	2.7	3.4	2.0	2.2
Asian Americans	0.0	0.6	5.8	0.3	1.5
Latinos	0.0	0.9	2.4	0.0	0.8
Native Americans	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
TOTAL MINORITY	1.0	4.2	11.6	2.3	4.5

Fig. 4. WRITERS ON PRIME TIME 2001-2002
Percent of Positions by Network

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC	TOTAL
African Americans	2.6	2.4	7.1	4.1	4.0
Asians Americans	1.0	0.5	1.6	1.4	1.1
Latinos	1.5	2.4	3.3	0.0	1.7
Native Americans	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.1
TOTAL MINORITY	5.1	5.3	12.5	5.5	6.9

Fig. 5. NETWORK EXECUTIVES IN CHARGE OF PROGRAMMING
2001-2002
Number of Department Directors and Higher

	ABC	CBS	FOX	NBC	TOTAL
African Americans	0	0	0	0	0
Asian Americans	2	1	1	1	5
Latinos	0	2	0	0	2
Native Americans	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL MINORITY	2	3	1	1	7
TOTAL POSITIONS AVAILABLE	31	40	21	27	119

Most analysts agree that change within the networks must come from the executive ranks, in particular those positions that have some responsibility over content, from production to scheduling. Minority executives in charge of programming account for seven positions or 5.9 percent of the 119 positions across the four networks (see fig. 5). These positions include department directors and higher. There were no African American and Native American executives included among these positions. Each network, however, has hired an African American executive as vice president of diversity, although these positions do not have a direct involvement in programming.

NEED FOR RESEARCH

The above data confirm earlier reports about underrepresentation behind the camera. To date, such reports have been unable to do more than present employment statistics and provide anecdotal information about discrimination in hiring practices and the work environment. By their very nature such studies cannot identify underlying causes and potential solutions. Their main purpose is to identify and draw attention to the problem.

For its part, the entertainment industry claims that it operates by economic rationale alone, citing ratings and box office as the major factors affecting decision making. But network television has an extraordinarily high failure rate: At least 75 percent of new series are cancelled in their first season. In the absence of a formula for success, the industry has invented one, going with the actors, producers, and formats it already knows. These do not provide a higher success rate, but they do provide executives with a greater comfort factor than gambling

on the unfamiliar. It is not a question of whether the industry takes risks but of whom it lets do so. In some instances this tendency raises questions about hiring practices, particularly for acting jobs, which are often racially designated up front. Most casting calls specifically advertise for “Caucasian” roles (Muñoz 2002). Such a fact raises many other questions about industry business practices.

There is an urgent need for an in-depth study of network television that provides more systematic and detailed information about employment, but that also examines the structure of the industry and its business practices as they relate to people of color. Network television is one of the major industries in the state of California; and people of color account for 53.3 percent of the state population. Both are among the state’s most vital resources. Further analysis must begin to examine the impediments and practices that keep them apart.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

An in-depth study of network television must examine the following areas in order gain a more complete understanding of the situation facing people of color:

- Impact of minority images, or lack thereof, on public perceptions and public policy.
- Recruitment and hiring practices at all levels of the television industry
- Impact on minorities of business relationships among networks and
 - production companies,
 - vendors,
 - talent agencies,
 - and the guilds
- Executive decision making, particularly in marketing, sales, production and creative development.

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READY FOR PRIME TIME: MINORITIES ON
NETWORK ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION

Racial minorities remain scarce on prime-time entertainment at the four major broadcast networks. In-depth study is needed of industry hiring practices, business relationships, and programming decisions.

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