

# Bringing Color into the Living Room: Analyzing TV Guide Covers, 1953 to 1997

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## Abstract

Many contemporary students are unfamiliar with the cultural history of television programming in the United States. References to iconic series that represented significant milestones in minority representations and discussions of racial issues—such as *I Spy*, *Julia*, *All in the Family*, or even *The Cosby Show*—fail to serve as useful examples when instructors cannot assume widespread familiarity. The exercise described in this note uses cover images from the magazine *TV Guide* between 1953 and 1997 to illustrate changing representation of minorities, present an overview of television programming history, and provide an opportunity to apply theoretical insights. Using a web-based archive of the magazine covers, the students can observe the emergence of nonwhite entertainers not only on the television screens but also onto the coffee tables of mainstream American families. This exercise can precede several discussions about racial issues, such as minority representation, cultural reflection, or post-civil-rights-era history.

## Keywords

classroom-based exercises, data analysis, minority groups, media literacy, race and ethnicity

Several years ago, I was leading a discussion of Bonilla-Silva's (1997) landmark *American Sociological Review* article, "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation," in my upper-level race-and-ethnicity course at Winona State University. As we outlined his primary argument, we came across this passage suggesting that traditional views of racism as an individual-level phenomenon were inadequate: "In this account, contemporary racists are perceived as Archie Bunker-type individuals" (Bonilla-Silva 1997:468). To ensure that everybody in the room understood the reference, I asked what I considered to be a softball question: what does it mean to be an "Archie Bunker-type" individual? To my surprise, not a single student could answer the question; one suggested he might have been a comic book character. Only after I mentioned the television series *All in the Family* did a few students display some signs of recognition, although none could recall ever seeing the show.

When the central metaphor of a major theoretical work has no relevance to its reader, one could blame

the author for not providing a more universal example or fault the audience for not being sufficiently stocked with cultural capital. I realized, however, that any article written when my students were toddlers (or, as will increasingly be the case, before they were born) can easily pose this problem. I am a white male professor in my late 40s whose formative years in the 1970s and '80s involved watching a lot of mainstream television programs broadcast over the public airwaves. My cultural knowledge does not necessarily resonate with theirs, and I need to either find a different source with more contemporary references or help educate them about their society's cultural history. This article describes one way to achieve the latter goal. Rather than simply

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lecturing the students about highlights of television cultural history, I let the students experience how this history changed through a quantitative content analysis of magazine covers. In doing so, I am also supporting the American Sociological Association's Task Force on the Undergraduate Major and its recommendation that every major "participate in a research project using primary or secondary data" (McKinney et al. 2004:9).

Television long dominated the leisure time of American citizens, especially students. Most introductory sociology textbooks describe "the media" as one of the four most important agents of socialization, alongside the family, peer groups, and educational institutions. Through the end of the twentieth century, discussion of the media primarily revolved around television, as the three major broadcast networks still claimed the most viewers for their situation comedies, dramas, and daily news shows.

The media landscape has changed dramatically in the past several decades, due first to the increasing presence of cable (nonbroadcast) television stations, which led to audience diffusion, and, second, to rising Internet options that let individuals watch programs at their convenience rather than at a prescribed day and time determined by network executives. As a result, many contemporary students do not have the same appreciation for how mid- to late-twentieth-century media trends influenced or reflected changing cultural values, especially those involving attitudes regarding status group membership and integration.

This article describes a teaching exercise that helps students understand, through a content analysis of *TV Guide* covers, how the mainstream entertainment industry systematically excluded minority actors. It provides a strong visual demonstration of how television lacked persons of color from the 1950s through the mid 1960s, gradually transitioning to limited integrated images that included minorities over the next two decades. The collection of over 2,300 magazine covers provides data that allow students to discuss theories of cultural reflection and social change, introducing a context for considering the impact of social movements and larger historical trends. This activity works well for classes ranging from 15 to 100 students.

After describing the exercise, I briefly analyze the major trends in these covers for three time periods. I also include several charts that summarize the patterns the students will see. I then summarize the assessment data used to evaluate the exercise's effectiveness. My purpose is twofold. First, this

activity is an interactive method to introduce students to some major cultural artifacts from late-twentieth-century broadcast television history, helping them better understand some of the references in scholarly analyses and critiques. Second, it gives instructors an entry to discuss the implications or applications of these data. While I do not explicitly make an argument explaining these changes in popular culture's representation of minorities, I hope to help instructors set the stage for discussing any number of readings that refer to television cultural history.

## CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ISSUES OF RACE

Instructors encounter many challenges when teaching topics of racial inequality. We ask students to discuss and critically analyze one of the most taboo subjects of American culture, and they arrive in the classroom with a myriad of experiences and perspectives. One of the primary findings regarding social stratification is that nonminority middle- and upper-class students are overrepresented in postsecondary institutions. Many of these students do not have firsthand knowledge of the most overt forms of discrimination or bigotry. More than two decades ago, Bohmer and Briggs (1991:154) attempted to address the problem that "students from privileged class and race backgrounds are frequently hostile, or at best neutral, to presentations on race, class, and gender stratification." In the intervening years, explorations of race, class, and gender stratification have taken hold as core units in many disciplines—especially sociology—but explicit discussions about these topics remain a challenge for students immersed in a larger culture that often denies that these primary divisions still help structure many social relations. Khanna and Harris (2015) attribute this in part to a presumed "postracial" discourse, which assumes that issues of racial inequality should be discussed in history courses but are not relevant to contemporary society.

When attempting to discuss how the legacy of racial discrimination still affects current social relations, instructors often encounter a related challenge: many younger students do not possess the cultural capital that would give them the raw material for analysis, a seeming prerequisite for applying critical perspectives in this area. This helps explain why so many teaching notes over the past 10 years have attempted to incorporate lessons that first expose students to American cultural history and then analyze it critically. Khanna and Harris

(2015) suggest asking students to spend time outside the classroom watching prime-time television programs, such as sitcoms, dramas, or reality shows—implicitly acknowledging that instructors can no longer assume this is a “normal” activity—and record settings and characterizations that make up racial representations. Mastro and Robinson (2000) propose looking at images of police officers and criminals on prime-time television, an exercise revisited by Monk-Turner et al. in 2010.

These exercises can be rather time-consuming. As Khanna and Harris (2015) note, watching media in the classroom takes valuable time that could be spent on discussion and analysis. Expecting students to grasp the history of such representations would require them to spend countless hours watching decades-old programming that, even devoted TV junkies would admit, is often rather banal, trite, or even vapid. And although documentaries, such as *Color Adjustment* (California Newsreel 1991), can help show how minorities were depicted, because they present many examples of such depictions, they paradoxically fail to convey how few images of non-minority characters were actually available.

## WHY DO IMAGES MATTER?

Scholars of cultural studies have long recognized that the images presented in popular entertainment affect how members of society view themselves and others. Commercial products are often embedded with widely held social values, and their consumption often perpetuates these ideals, defining what is beautiful or proper. Alexander (2003), for example, has examined how ideas of masculinity are constructed on the covers of *Men's Health* magazine, suggesting that images of muscle-toned bodies generate insecurity about men's physical worth while offering products that will supposedly help align their own bodies with the ideal. Hazell and Clark (2008) have suggested that the portrayals of black men and women in the advertisements of *Esquire* and *Jet* magazines continue to promote ideologies of racism and white supremacy. Following the civil rights movements of the 1960s, images of minorities in popular culture increased not only in raw numbers but also in the diversity of representations. (See Hazell and Clark [2008] for a summary of studies examining changes that took place in mainstream magazines that did not have blacks as a target audience, such as *Time*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, etc.)

The images presented in television shows are also important because they define possibilities for

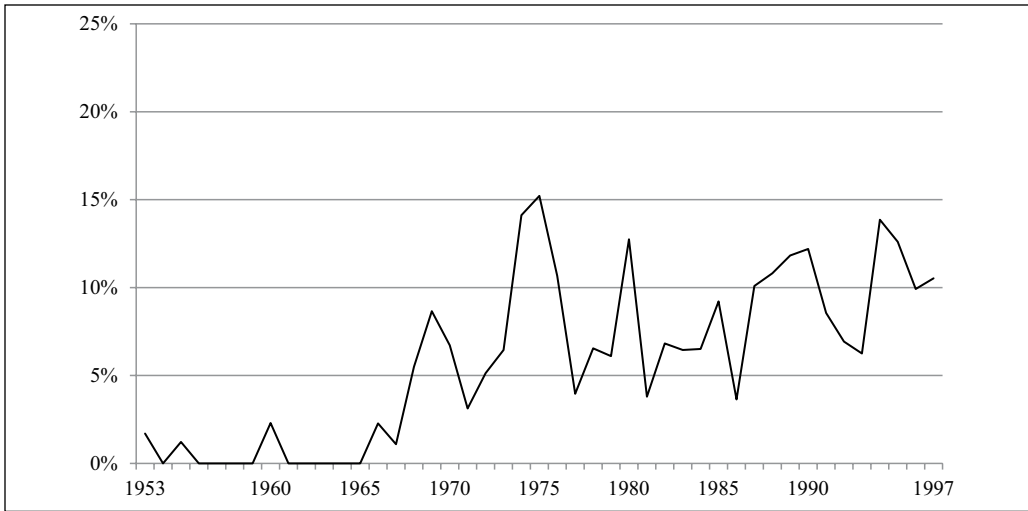
personal identity, helping viewers decide who they are and how they fit into larger society. As Gerbner suggests, television “cultivates a sense of opportunities and life chances. It contributes to our conception of who we are and how we relate to others and the world. It helps define our strengths and vulnerabilities, our power and our risks” (quoted in Budd, Craig, and Steinman 1999:12). The options television presents, of course, are limited. As Budd et al. (1999:20) note, “television tends to present identity and difference moderately, or as issues involving Others not targeted for commercial appeal.” Even so, expanding the range of possible ideas about what might be normal or acceptable in society even a little bit can have a disproportionately large impact for a marginalized group.

The images found on the covers of a magazine like *TV Guide* matter because they cross two areas of cultural consumerism. First, they help sell the magazine to prospective consumers at point-of-sale locations. The publishers must assume that the entertainers (or the hook of the story attached to them) will have sufficient appeal to help secure the purchase. Second, the individuals promoted on these covers are selected from a limited set of entertainers currently featured in a commercial medium bounded by a finite number of shows on three (or, following the creation of PBS, four) major networks broadcasting nationally on the public airwaves.

## BACKGROUND OF TV GUIDE

The magazine *TV Guide* was first published in 1953, published by Walter Annenberg independently of the major broadcast networks. Annenberg had already established a successful career producing the *Daily Racing Form*, providing information about thoroughbred horse racing throughout the United States. Having established a reliable system for keeping track of statistics about individual horses and the races where they competed, he had the framework in place for a magazine targeted towards television viewers that included scheduling information for both national and local broadcasts. He supplemented the listings with feature stories that profiled prominent entertainers and analyzed trends in the industry. Though *TV Guide* was sold by subscription, roughly 60 percent of its copies were point-of-sale purchases; the magazine was featured prominently near the checkout stands of grocery stores throughout the nation (Altschuler and Grossvogel 1992:8).

Most of the magazine's covers depicted television actors. Feature stories about such actors generally focused on the most successful or popular



**Figure 1.** Percentage of nonwhite entertainers on *TV Guide* covers, 1953 to 1997.

shows during any season. For example, during the 1955 viewing season, the top five television series (as measured by the Nielsen company) included *The \$64,000 Question*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Disneyland*, and *The Jack Benny Show*. The November 5 edition featured the story “How They Guard Those \$64,000 Questions,” while the November 19 edition asked, “\$64,000 Questions: Who Dreams Them Up?” Jack Benny, Ed Sullivan, and several actors from *Disneyland* specials landed on the covers that year—Lucille Ball appeared twice. All these shows had high viewership, reaching more than one third of all households with television sets in the country. (In 1955, only two thirds of homes owned televisions, though the proportion would surpass 90 percent by 1961.) Many of the other stars appearing in the top 30 shows also appeared on the covers in 1955: Jack Webb (*Dragnet*, the eighth-most-watched series), Arthur Godfrey (*Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*, 16th), Perry Como (*The Perry Como Show*, 18th), Jackie Gleason (*The Honeymooners*, 19th), George Burns (*The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, 28th), and Phil Silvers (*The Phil Silvers Show*, 30th). Their presence in the magazines on supermarket stands could help to boost their shows’ popularity, feeding into a cycle of exposure, adulation, and market share.

However, the entertainers profiled and featured on the magazine’s covers were not limited to those who had already achieved the highest levels of success. This was particularly true after the magazine had established itself as the primary television

directory in the 1960s, when it often highlighted shows or actors who had received critical (if not popular) acclaim. For this reason, the covers can be seen as an imperfect but nonetheless useful representation of what American audiences could see in its weekly television broadcasts.

It was a largely white image. Figure 1 presents the percentage of entertainers depicted on the covers of *TV Guide* between 1953 and 1997 who were nonwhite. The lack of minority faces on the covers during the 1950s should not come as a surprise, at least to those familiar with popular broadcasts during this period. The Cuban entertainer Desi Arnaz, depicted (with his wife Lucille Ball) twice in the early 1950s, was the only nonwhite person on the cover in the entire decade.

As students learn in this exercise, minority entertainers began to appear on the covers of *TV Guide* with greater regularity after 1967. However, in the 45-year period used in this analysis, they constituted just a fraction of all entertainers portrayed: 135 different nonwhite individuals out of 2,073 total unique entertainers (6.5 percent) were depicted on these covers.

While *TV Guide* is still being published today, the exercise described in this article proposes to end the analysis at 1997 for two empirical reasons. In the early 1990s, the magazine was purchased by Rupert Murdoch, the global media magnate whose holdings include Twentieth Century Fox; by the end of the decade, the magazine had mostly lost its editorial independence, and it cannot be considered a reliable reflection of American cultural preferences. Second,

in 1997, the publisher began producing multiple cover versions with different sets of entertainers in an attempt to promote multiple sales of “collector’s editions” to a single consumer, questioning the continued use of this as a consistent data set. Fortunately, television programming after this cutoff will—for several more years, at least—remain more easily recollectable by contemporary undergraduate audiences.

## THE EXERCISE

This exercise presumes that students will work in small groups, with one computer available to each group. The activity could also take place in a computer lab, especially if no wireless Internet connection is available in the classroom. Alternatively, the supplemental materials provided with the article could be downloaded and distributed to students prior to this activity. Students could be asked complete a simple pre-exercise survey gauging their current awareness or estimate of the prevalence of minorities in television broadcasting as described later in the assessment section.

*TV Guide* was first published in April 1953. Each of the magazine’s weekly covers is available at the publisher’s website, organized chronologically, and it is easy to view the progression of these covers through any given year. This assignment works best if students complete it in pairs, letting them discuss whether an entertainer in a particular magazine qualifies as a minority. For purposes of illustration, I assume below a class with 15 groups, assigning each group a year between 1953 and 1967, although this exercise can be adapted to accommodate both smaller and larger classes. Direct them to the website <http://www.tvguidemagazine.com/archive/>, where they can find their assigned year. Starting with the first issue of that year, ask them to record every cover that either depicts a nonwhite actor or describes a cover story that addresses some issue related to race or ethnicity. Point out the “Details” pop-up menu that appears below each cover; this provides the names of the entertainers depicted on the cover as well as a description of the cover story. If students spend 10 seconds on each cover, this part of the exercise should take no more than five minutes.

After the students have completed this portion of the activity, ask each group how many covers were encountered that included nonwhite actors, keeping a tally. They will not be able to identify more than 10 for this period, so it should be easy to describe each cover found. Next, ask each group to advance 15 years, and consider that set of 52

covers, again recording each one that contains a nonwhite entertainer. This will cover the period between 1968 and 1982. Then summarize the results once again. They will uncover considerably more data points in this period. Ask the students to consider how the images have changed and to explore patterns. If time permits, this exercise can be repeated for the covers between 1983 and 1997. There, students will see many more covers that include Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey, entertainers who starred in two of the most popular shows during this period, and they will notice far fewer depictions of minorities portraying lower-income characters.

These trends can then be further explored by including data about television viewership, the top television shows watched by American audiences, and the civil rights activism promoting increased minority representation in popular entertainment, as described below. Shorter excerpts from the documentary *Color Adjustment* can be shown after data from each period has been collected and summarized to help put these statistics in greater context, especially the segments that provide clips from the television shows the instructor wishes to highlight.

## TV GUIDE MAGAZINE COVER TRENDS

Reviewing the entire set of covers is time-consuming, and this is one good reason to divide the investigative chores as a group project in the classroom. The instructor need not be completely fluent with the contents of the more than 2,300 covers, much less have an intimate knowledge of every television show they reference. If students have questions about specific entertainers or programs, they should be encouraged to quickly look them up on the Internet; the websites [Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com) and [IMDB.com](http://IMDB.com) provide a considerable though not comprehensive archive. However, the ensuing discussions about the observed patterns and trends will be much more informative with some short histories about television programming during these periods, and this section provides highlights the instructor might find useful to help further educate students about this foray into our cultural past.

Table 1 provides summaries of the nonwhite people depicted on the covers of *TV Guide* during the three time periods described below. These figures provide the basis for the trends described by Figure 1. For each year, two percentages are provided. The first is the proportion of magazine

**Table I.** Minority Representations on *TV Guide* Magazine Covers, 1953 to 1967.

Year / Period	Covers with people	Total number of people	Total number of nonwhites	% of covers with at least one nonwhite	% of people depicted who were nonwhite
1953	38	59	1	2.6	1.7
1954	50	79	0	0.0	0.0
1955	51	82	1	2.0	1.2
1956	49	73	0	0.0	0.0
1957	51	77	0	0.0	0.0
1958	49	71	0	0.0	0.0
1959	50	66	0	0.0	0.0
1960	51	87	2	3.9	2.3
1961	49	81	0	0.0	0.0
1962	50	76	0	0.0	0.0
1963	49	92	0	0.0	0.0
1964	49	94	0	0.0	0.0
1965	50	92	0	0.0	0.0
1966	51	88	2	3.9	2.3
1967	49	92	1	2.0	1.1
<b>1953–1967</b>	<b>736</b>	<b>1,209</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>0.6</b>
1968	50	91	5	10.0	5.5
1969	46	104	9	15.2	8.7
1970	49	134	9	14.3	6.7
1971	46	96	3	6.5	3.1
1972	46	78	4	6.5	5.1
1973	42	93	6	11.9	6.5
1974	41	85	12	17.1	14.1
1975	42	92	14	19.0	15.2
1976	41	75	8	9.8	10.7
1977	43	101	4	7.0	4.0
1978	40	107	7	15.0	6.5
1979	43	82	5	11.6	6.1
1980	42	102	13	21.4	12.7
1981	41	79	3	7.3	3.8
1982	42	88	6	14.3	6.8
<b>1968–1982</b>	<b>654</b>	<b>1,407</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>7.7</b>
1983	51	124	8	13.7	6.5
1984	48	123	8	14.6	6.5
1985	51	152	14	19.6	9.2
1986	49	110	4	8.2	3.6
1987	49	109	11	16.3	10.1
1988	46	148	16	21.7	10.8
1989	51	186	22	23.5	11.8
1990	49	205	25	32.7	12.2
1991	50	152	13	26.0	8.6
1992	50	101	7	14.0	6.9
1993	47	112	7	12.8	6.3
1994	52	101	14	19.2	13.9
1995	50	119	15	24.0	12.6
1996	50	121	12	22.0	9.9
1997	45	76	8	15.6	10.5
<b>1983–1997</b>	<b>738</b>	<b>1,939</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>9.5</b>

covers that depict at least one nonwhite individual (an actor, journalist, musician, athlete, news figure, etc.). The second is the proportion of depicted individuals who were nonwhite. Especially with the rise of ensemble shows that had at least one minority cast member, the first percentage rose much more rapidly than the second in the last half of the twentieth century.

### 1953 to 1967

As mentioned earlier, two early covers, in 1953 and 1955, featured Arnaz alongside Ball promoting *I Love Lucy*. The next nonwhite actor to appear on a cover of *TV Guide*, in May 1960, was the Hawaiian actor Poncie Ponce, who played a cab driver in the detective series *Hawaiian Eye*. He appeared on the cover with the actress Connie Stevens. Two weeks later, Sammee Tong (an American actor of Chinese descent) was depicted (along with John Forsythe and Noreen Corcoran) for his role as the manservant in *Bachelor Father*.

It would take another six years, however, before another nonwhite entertainer would appear on these covers. Bill Cosby, who would have a major presence in broadcast television for the next four decades, was pictured with Robert Culp during their inaugural season of the critically acclaimed show *I Spy*; it was Cosby's first of 18 *TV Guide* covers. Bruce Lee appeared later in 1966 as a member of the *Green Hornet* cast. In 1967, the last year of the first period to be examined, Cosby appears once again with Culp. (Cosby won three consecutive Emmy awards for best leading actor during the series' run between 1965 and 1968.) During the first 15 years of *TV Guide*, then, a total of 7 out of 698 covers include a nonwhite actor, with Arnaz and Cosby each appearing twice.

While the students will not encounter many nonwhite faces in this first part of the exercise, spending time to notice their absence can be illuminating and informative. The sea of Caucasian faces, occasionally punctuated by a black, Asian, or Hispanic entertainer, provides a relatively accurate picture of the limited roles afforded to nonwhite entertainers during this period. This can be further illustrated by looking at a regular feature of the magazine *Jet*, first published in 1951 and self-described as "The Weekly Negro News Magazine." In addition to chronicling the civil rights movements, *Jet* also contained political news, beauty and fashion tips, and entertainment news. The "Radio-TV" section that appeared on page 66 of each issue listed all black entertainers scheduled to appear in the following week's broadcast

entertainment. For example, the February 9, 1967, edition listed only five entries, including Cosby on *I Spy* and Greg Morris in *Mission: Impossible*. This section of *Jet* continued well into the 1970s, but its contents were almost always confined to a single page.

### 1968 to 1982

The second period, between 1968 and 1982, demonstrates a dramatic shift in the racial and ethnic landscape of mainstream television broadcasting. Leslie Uggams, a largely forgotten entertainer whose career spanned three decades from the earliest years of television, was the first female black actor to appear on the cover of *TV Guide* (April 27, 1968) and the first minority to appear solo. Uggams had made her first television appearance as a child actor in the early 1950s serial *Beulah* (1950–52). ("Beulah" was a black servant in a white household, originally played on the radio by the white actor Marlin Hurt.) In 1969, Uggams became the first nonwhite entertainer to host a prime-time variety show since the jazz pianist Nat King Cole (1956–57). The following week, *Mission Impossible*'s Greg Morris was pictured as part of the four-person ensemble cast, foreshadowing a coming trend in television casting. Later that year, Clarence Williams III appeared as one of the *Mod Squad* trio, and Diahann Carroll had a solo cover (December 14, 1968) as the star of *Julia*. During this single year, the number of nonwhite actors appearing on the covers of *TV Guide* (all of whom were black) exceeded the total of the previous 15.

Between 1968 and 1972, the covers of *TV Guide* included 30 depictions of minorities, more than 5 percent of all entertainers who appeared. But most were from only five series: *I Spy*, *The Mod Squad*, *Mission Impossible*, *Julia*, and *Room 222*. Of these shows, the first three were spy/crime thrillers, and each included one minority cast member who played a central role. *Julia*, a situation comedy, featured a single mother working for a white doctor, and *Room 222*, a comedy-drama that took place in a high school classroom, was set in environments that allowed for the introduction of multiple minority characters; both series occasionally addressed contemporary social and political issues. The actors from these five series constituted the majority of nonwhite entertainers on the magazine's covers. While the presence of minorities was increasing—both on the television screen and in the nation's most prominent directory of viewing options—it was still rather limited in terms of shows and actors.

The trends in this second period (from 1968 to 1982) evolved further in the 1970s, and in 1974, the covers of *TV Guide* presented the highest percentage of minority entertainers of the twentieth century. Black and Puerto Rican actors began to appear more regularly, although Asian or other Hispanic actors were still notably absent. A closer look at which actors and television shows were highlighted on these covers helps to illustrate some of the changes taking place in the larger culture.

The success of several series produced by Norman Lear was one of the biggest factors affecting television in the 1970s. His first hit, *All in the Family*, debuted in January 1971, beginning a run as the number-one-rated show for five years and continuing until 1979. Its main character, Archie Bunker, was a confirmed but “lovable” bigot whose family challenged his racist ideologies. The hypocrisy of Archie’s views was reinforced by the friendship his wife Edith had with their African American neighbors, George and Louise Jefferson, and *The Jeffersons* was spun off as its own hit series in 1975. *All in the Family* had a second spin-off, *Maude* (starring Bea Arthur), based on Archie’s cousin, which in turn resulted in a spin-off series starring Maude’s black housekeeper Florida Evans (Esther Rolle) in *Good Times*. In addition to these shows, Lear also produced *Sanford and Son*, a Redd Foxx vehicle that, like *Good Times*, also depicted lower-class minorities in American society.

The actors in Lear’s series drove the increase of minority representation on *TV Guide* covers up to 1974. Even though each show lasted well into the latter half of the decade, helping to define the television landscape for an entire generation of young viewers, his characters did not receive continued exposure past 1974. Even so, his success helped inspire additional series that directly addressed their characters’ racial identities. *Chico and the Man*, for example, starred Freddie Prinze as a Mexican American in central Los Angeles working for the bigoted Jack Albertson. (The fact that Prinze’s parents were Hungarian and Puerto Rican did not sit well with Chicano activists at the time.) In the 1974–75 television season, the four top-rated shows all involved multiracial casts in situations and environments directly influenced by issues of racial/class ideology and tension: *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *Chico and the Man*, and *The Jeffersons*.

For the next several years, the number of other minority actors on the covers stayed relatively high. In addition to shows in the Lear empire, there were several new series during the 1970s based on ensemble casting that included at least one

minority character. *Welcome Back, Kotter*; *Barney Miller*; *The Rookies*; *WKRP in Cincinnati*; and *Soap* all included minority characters who, like those in *I Spy*, *The Mod Squad*, and *Mission Impossible*, played central roles while embedded in largely Caucasian environments.

Even so, the number of minority actors appearing in television shows was so small that *Jet* still felt it necessary to list them all throughout the 1970s. In its November 21, 1974, edition, it listed a total of 15 actors appearing in an entire week’s worth of programming, and this included six who were starring in their own shows: *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *That’s My Mama*. (Notably, 8 of those 15 would eventually appear on *TV Guide* covers during the 1970s.)

### 1983 to 1997

The third period that the students analyze, 1983 to 1997, shows a consistent trend of minority representation, averaging 9.3 percent of all entertainers. Very few of the most popular shows dealt with issues of racial identity, including the most popular series of the period: *The Cosby Show*. *Cosby*’s last major comedy vehicle presented an upper-middle-class black family with virtually no acknowledgment of its racial identity. It was the number-one-ranked series each year between 1985 and 1990. During this period, Oprah Winfrey began her ascendance to become one of the highest-paid entertainers on television. One out of every eight minority images on *TV Guide* covers from this period was either Winfrey or a member of *The Cosby Show* cast.

The high percentage of minority faces during this third period, however, does not indicate that television saw a concurrent rise of minority television characters or actors. When viewing the covers, students will notice that a growing percentage of the entertainers depicted consists of musicians (such as Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston) or athletes (including Michael Jordan and several collegiate football players helping to preview upcoming bowl games). As the average number of individuals depicted on the covers increased (from 1.6 in the 1950s to 2.5 in the ’90s), the percentage of covers including at least one minority rose to 20.9 in the 1990s while the proportion of minority faces remained less than half of that.

## CULTURAL REFLECTION

What does this analysis demonstrate? Opening a discussion with the students about what they have



observed can lead to several different themes. First, the presence of minorities on the covers of *TV Guide* obviously results from two different mediated processes. If there are no minority actors on mainstream television shows, it is difficult to depict them in any publication, whether it is a trade magazine or one intended for popular consumption. Even when they do exist—as they increasingly did starting in the late 1960s—the decision to place them on the cover of *TV Guide* had to be made by the editors of the publication. We can question whether the editors of this for-profit publication made the decision to exclude (or later include) them out of a desire for point-of-sale (rather than subscription) purchases: did they imagine that white audiences would be less likely to purchase a copy if a minority were prominently pictured, or might they have calculated they could increase their audience base if they began to appeal to minority households? This analysis does not address such motivations, but the presence of the data can help prompt discussion. (For a more extended discussion about the social attitudes of the *TV Guide* editors, I highly recommend Altschuler and Grossvogel's [1992] research monograph, *Changing Channels: America in TV Guide*, especially chapter 4: "'Afraid of the Dark': Race in *TV Guide*.")

A second theme addresses the culture-versus-structure debate more explicitly. Did the increasing number of minorities on these covers result from changing cultural attitudes, or did they help to create those social changes? Part of the point of this exercise is to help acquaint students with a cultural repertoire most of them lack: the history of American television broadcast serials in the latter half of the twentieth century. From 1953 through 1967, the lack of minorities resulted from their absence as major characters in these shows. What helps explain the increase in their presence in later years? All of this, obviously, took place against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and the countercultural revolution of the 1960s.

This exercise can also lend itself to topics that have most likely already been raised in the first weeks of a course exploring issues of race and ethnicity. How comfortable are the students in assigning racial categories from a distance to individuals appearing in the media? What areas of intersectionality get raised, especially regarding the characters and roles played by nonwhite men versus nonwhite women? Does one observe a more complicated racial hierarchy, where nonblack minorities interact with whites in different ways? Why might Desi

Arnaz, a Cuban entertainer in the 1950s, have not been considered a racial minority at this time?

In addition to changing cultural attitudes, several social movement-oriented projects—sponsored by both activists and government agencies—sought to increase the opportunities available to minority actors. In 1962, the House Committee on Education and Labor held hearings to explore discrimination in the television industry. The attention they brought to the issue motivated additional scrutiny from civil rights activists. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission established rules that encouraged greater and more diversified minority representation. For more than five years in the 1960s, the black actor P. Jay Sidney, who appeared in more than 200 television dramas, regularly picketed television studios that did not hire blacks in representative numbers and personally purchased ads in trade magazines denouncing advertising agencies that did not employ them (Peters 1968). The introduction of greater diversity in television programming took place in a highly charged atmosphere of civil rights activism, one that affected both programmers and *TV Guide* editors. (Some of these events are described very well in the documentary *Color Adjustment*, and this exercise could be used prior to viewing it in class to help put some of the television entertainers and shows in historical context.)

In addition to the faces depicted on the covers, astute students might also notice three of the feature stories advertised there. The first, in the June 20, 1964, edition, is about "The Negro in Television." Written by Richard Gehman, it is the first of a two-part series examining why blacks had so few prominent roles in the television industry—as actors, writers, executives, and technicians. Gehman claims to have conducted more than 200 interviews to research this topic. Some of the comments made by industry executives highlight two contrasting views, often from the same individual: first, the companies they work for have no color barriers, and second, there has been a substantial reduction in the existing color barriers, holding out much promise for the future (Gehman 1964).

The second, in the January 20, 1968, edition, is about "What Negroes Want From Television," written by Art Peters. (Peters, the first black journalist at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, had devoted his career to helping represent underprivileged members of society as individuals rather than as social problems.) This article could easily be assigned to the students

as a follow-up for the next class session. Peters explicitly addresses the cultural reflection argument as he remarks on the cast of characters presented in network television series:

Today, in this enlightened age of civil rights, the barriers of race have been lowered and Negroes are gaining acceptance in television. Unfortunately, they are gaining acceptance as *Negroes*, not as human beings. That is, they are seldom shown as rounded, breathing, living characters with whom the audience can become *really* involved. Part of the problem is, of course, that television to a large extent mirrors American society, in which, despite substantial gains, the Negro still plays only a limited role. This raises the key question of whether television should make an effort to lead rather than just to keep up with the parade. (Peters 1968:7)

Peters includes a prescient quote from Cosby, one that can help illuminate a possible later discussion about the motivation for and impact of *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s.

Noting that most Negro doctors, lawyers, and other professional men move out of the ghettos once they attain a measure of success, Cosby feels that the image of these hard-working, ambitious, successful black men is lost to Negro children. "It is the responsibility of TV and films to build a better image for the Negro," Cosby insists. "I see no reason why there can't be films with Negro cowboys who can shoot and ride and do all these things people respect in a cowboy. Why can't there be black pilots in war stories?" (Peters 1968:10)

Finally, the July 25, 1970, edition has an article by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Oliver Killens titled "A Black Intellectual Looks at Television." Killens provides a somewhat scathing critique of the images in mainstream television, albeit through the eyes of several individuals whom he asked about the progress that blacks have made in this medium.

How do I see it? I think that progress *has* been made, in that there are more actors employed in this medium, and that is good. The Black man is no longer invisible in this medium, and

that is good. I mean a Black kid can see an image of himself on television, even though it is a false image. Is that good? The problem is that the television establishment is attempting to give to the world the image of the integrated society in all facets of American life, even in advertising and commercials, which is all well and good except that it is a colossal lie, because America is not an integrated society. It is a segregated society. A society in which the Black psyche and the White psyche are different altogether. So that image is at the very best a false image, which is what some Blacks are realizing. (Killens 1970:8)

Though the television shows these authors discuss might have little resonance with today's students, the issues they bring up are just as relevant as they were decades ago.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE EXERCISE

To evaluate the effectiveness of this exercise, I conducted it with a group of 26 former Introduction to Sociology students who volunteered to participate in a real-time demonstration. I solicited these volunteers from 195 students I had taught in the previous two semesters, offering them pizza and salad, given that they would participate outside of class during their normal dinner hour. Simulating a classroom experience, I invited them to spend one hour generating some of the data described above, breaking between different periods to discuss their findings, look at some of the magazine covers as a group, and watch selected excerpts from the documentary *Color Adjustment*. All of these students had spent two weeks in their introductory course with me exploring the social construction of race and contemporary inequalities, but because of time constraints, we had not formally discussed cultural legacies. None of the students were currently enrolled in an upper-division sociology course.

Before the exercise, I asked students to complete a short survey to gauge their awareness of how minorities were represented in television between the 1950s and the 1990s. They were asked to identify television shows in each decade that featured minority characters and to guess the percentages of *TV Guide* covers that depicted nonwhite entertainers during these periods. They were also asked to state, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident they were of their knowledge. Following the exercise, they took a similar survey, and they were invited to assess the exercise's effectiveness. Both

**Table 2.** Student Estimates of the Percentage of *TV Guide* Magazine Covers Including Nonwhite Entertainers, by Decade, Pre- and Post-exercise.

Decade	Actual percentage	Pre-exercise estimate	Difference	Post-exercise estimate	Difference
1950s	0.6	2.5	1.9	1.1	0.5
1960s	3.4	7.1	3.7	2.5	-0.9
1970s	11.8	18.0	6.2	6.2	-5.6
1980s	16.2	26.0	9.7	9.7	-6.5
1990s	20.9	36.5	17.0	17.0	-3.9

Note:  $N = 26$ .

the exercise and the surveys were approved by the institutional review board at Winona State University, a regional public liberal arts college in the upper Midwest with an enrollment of 8,700 students.

The results of these assessments appear in Table 2. Before the exercise, students accurately guessed that the percentage of minorities appearing in the 1950s was rather low: their average guess was 2.5 percent, while the actual percentage was 0.6. (Even so, they were rather shocked when presented with the real data, learning that there were only two during this decade, both of them in servile positions with respect to the main characters.) They also accurately predicted that the percentages would increase throughout the decades. However, they grossly overestimated the slope of this rise, and most of their pre-exercise estimates were almost twice the actual percentages. They also expressed several reservations about their estimates: on a scale of 1 to 10, they expressed a confidence level of 4.5.

Following the exercise, their estimates were much more accurate. While they now consistently underestimated the actual percentages, they might have done so because their perception was now informed by the fact that a very small number of entertainers were depicted multiple times, leading them to perhaps (appropriately) conclude that the percentage of *unique* entertainers was rather low. Furthermore, their confidence level increased to 7.2.

The students enjoyed this exercise. On a scale of 1 to 10, they rated it at 8.1 in terms of helping them make the *Color Adjustment* excerpts more meaningful. When asked for qualitative assessments of the exercise, the students were uniformly positive. "It gave me a better understanding of how television evolved with minorities. I really didn't have a full understanding of how television was in other eras," wrote one student. Another stated, "I thought it was

cool to see an actual visual representation of our culture's attitude. You typically see this in movies, but it felt different to actually see covers of a magazine." Several enjoyed looking at and summarizing the data for themselves, helping to reaffirm the American Sociological Association's recommendations that sociology instructors integrate more of active learning activities into their instruction.

[The exercise] allowed us to find out the information for ourselves which I always find useful and more meaningful. It helps students learn it better and faster. I think it was a good way to show the differences and similarities between the documentary and *TV Guide*.

One final note should also help reinforce how students need this sort of exercise to better understand some of the cultural references made by their professors and in the scholarship they are asked to assess. In my pre-exercise survey, I asked students to describe their familiarity with several iconic television series that included or addressed issues of racial representation and tension. More than half of the student participants had never heard of *All in the Family*, and most of the rest said they had heard about the show but had never seen it. Only 1 of 26 students was able to name any of the actors or the characters they portrayed. Bonilla-Silva's (1997) reference to "Archie Bunker-type" bigots had absolutely no resonance with them whatsoever; instructors who use this text should always be prepared to set aside a portion of class time to help provide an explanation.

## CONCLUSION

This pedagogy asks students to generate data and analyses that are already known to this instructor. It would certainly be much easier to simply present

Table 1 as part of a lecture; declare that minority representation in magazines, such as *TV Guide*, has been low; and then move on to some other point the instructor wants to make. The hands-on component of this exercise serves three purposes. First, it introduces students to cultural artifacts from the mid- to late-twentieth-century American entertainment industry. Authors (and instructors) often erroneously assume that some of the major television shows that had a large impact at the time they were popular are still well known to contemporary students. Following their brief investigations of the visual data, discussions with the students about the most prominent shows from different time periods help establish a common frame of reference for future course sessions.

Second, it provides an entry for considering larger theoretical issues by providing data first and then inviting students to apply analysis to the patterns they observe. Applications of theory have, in my own experience, proven to be among the most challenging aspects of teaching issues of race and ethnicity, largely because my students often lack a more comprehensive (or at least commonly shared) awareness of their society's culture. By briefly immersing them into the changing world of broadcast television, I provide them with an opportunity to discuss issues of the social construction of race. How do we know, for example, the racial identity of an actor based solely on his or her photograph? Several students have properly questioned the logic of this activity based on discussions we held earlier in the semester about the ascribed nature of race.

Finally, this exercise helps demonstrate how students might systematically and transparently conduct their own analyses using archived collections of commercially produced consumer items (including, but not limited to, mass-media publications). While content analysis of textual artifacts has developed sophisticated word-parsing software and investigative techniques, exploring and describing visual depictions remains a very simple, compelling, yet underutilized technique that is readily accessible to undergraduate students regardless of their familiarity with quantitative analysis.

I have adopted and adapted this exercise in my race-and-ethnicity courses over the past two semesters, and I have found the students to be very receptive to it. They enjoy learning more about television history, especially since many have had exposure to a somewhat random selection of series being rerun on various cable networks. After discussing features from shows in previous decades, they often want to make connections to their current

favorites. Since I am often unfamiliar with current programming options, they get a chance not only to educate me but to describe the cast and content of these shows with a new vocabulary. Even though many features of American society have changed dramatically since *TV Guide* was founded, many of the challenges and issues illuminated by analyses of popular culture have enduring patterns, and making connections to the past is a worthwhile and entertaining task.

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