Study Finds TV Shows Still Don’t Reflect Diversity of Audiences

Prime-time television is getting better at reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population, but it still falls short on this all-important front, a new study says.

While Latino characters are more prevalent on prime-time TV shows than they were a year ago, they’re still only half as visible there as they are in real life, according to “Fall Colors 2003-04: Prime Time Diversity Report,” a study released April 21 by Children Now.

This is the fourth such report commissioned by Children Now, a research and action organization dedicated to improving children’s lives by focusing on education, health care, media and extra-curricular activities.

“The report said in its introduction, “Yet few of the faces they see on television represent their race or cultural heritage.”

The report said that television, as a prime storyteller for this generation, sends important messages about the kinds of people our society values by whether it features certain types of people in the stories it tells.

Among the study’s more significant findings:

- Latino characters were four times more likely than other groups to portray domestic workers.
- Almost half (46 percent) of Arab or Middle Eastern characters were portrayed as criminals.
- Males comprised 65 percent of the prime-time population, compared to females at 35 percent. (This ratio hasn’t changed since the first report in 1999.)

The study also found that “youth are most likely to watch television during the 8 o’clock hour of prime time, yet most racial diversity can be found during the 10 o’clock hour, when they are least likely to be watching.”
The report is designed to give TV executives a picture of the diversity on their networks over time. It examined prime-time TV series on the six major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, WB and UPN) for the 2003-04 season.

It divided shows into several genres: situation comedy, drama, comedic drama, variety, reality, real life and wrestling. It did not include sports programming, news magazines, made-for-TV movies and other specials.

The study also divided “character roles” into several categories: opening credits (characters appeared here and were integral to the show), secondary recurring (didn’t appear in the opening credits but were regularly featured on the show), primary non-recurring (were vital to only one episode), secondary non-recurring (played a supporting role in only one episode), and tertiary (spoke but weren’t regular or vital).

“The world of prime time entertainment on the six broadcast networks continued to fall short of reflecting the rich diversity of our society,” the report concluded. Prime-time shows “depicted a world where people primarily associate with members of their own racial group, where some racial groups remain non-existent and where males significantly outnumber females.”

The researchers studied two episodes of each series airing between 8-11 Eastern time on the six broadcast networks. The study did not include mid-season replacement shows.

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Click here to read the press release about the study.

Click here to read the report (16-page PDF).