The Race of Ratings

Thirty Years of US Prime-Time Television

By

Lawrence Hazelrigg and Brenda L Hughes

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Preface

Since this book is partly about audiences and their effects, we have thought it right and proper that we should begin by saying something about our intended audience. The core of our book consists in a social-science study which is located in a specific historical period, the period from the 1960s to nearly the new millennium. Historical context is important. We repeatedly index that history in our discussions of the results of our inquiry. For some of our readers, especially those old enough to have memories of their living experiences of part or all of those decades, our "indexing" will probably seem inadequate. And it is. Indexing is always inadequate to what is being indexed. But we are confident that it is neither irrelevant nor inappropriate. It is intended to be broadly orienting for those readers who lack memories of the lived experiences, and to that end of guidance we have offered citations of many other works that can deepen and thicken one's understanding of events and processes of long ago.

Our study is not an ethnography, however. It was never intended as such. The study that is at the core of this book is both qualitative and quantitative. It consists in both classifications and measurements. And in both descriptions and explanations. Some of our intended, our "hoped for," audience are uncomfortable, in varying degrees, with "quantitative research." Let's be clear: what is at issue is not quantification as such; for words such as "more" and "less" and "same" and "first" and "later" and "half" (and so on, through a much longer listing) all involve quantification. They *are* quantifications. Rather, one might speculate, it is the fact of numerality that is the source of discomfort. But that, too, is not exactly the main rub. The main rub is mathematics; rather, the various logical operations built of it. Our commitment to such readers is simple: we do not want "the mathematical" to get in the way of understanding the reasons behind, the content of, or the results from our study. There is a limit to what we can accomplish in fulfilling that wish, however, and any achievement within that limit can occur only with the patient assistance of the reader. As mathematics goes, everything in this study is really very basic, and we have tried to be as carefully explicit and basic as we can be in reports of what we have done, how we have done it, and the meanings of the many results. For some readers, a patience of another sort will be needed, and to them our response is

not an apology so much as a simple admission that we are teachers who would rather be understood by every student who seeks to learn than by any reader who is interested mainly, if not only, in joining an avant-garde.

Having said that, this is not a primer in methods or in statistics. While we have sought to make all parts of our study as accessible and clearly presented as we can, our main intent is substantive. There are important issues of social reality at stake. We have sought to add clarity of analysis and conclusion regarding the issues, and we have not attempted to hide or camouflage our convictions that the issues, and our findings about them, have been and are of importance to the present health and prospects of our society. Thus, we have meant to write this book both as a research report about some vital issues still facing US society and as a report that will also teach some basic uses of social research. To that end, we tend to switch back and forth between results of inquiry, explication of methods of inquiry, and ethical implications of both. At a time when so many students are expected to engage in education by bootstrapping, it seemed appropriate to construct a book that aims to teach in multiple registers at the same time.

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The study presented in the text below is based on Hughes' data file, which she built and then used in her doctoral dissertation and her articles. Hazelrigg, not a member of Hughes' doctoral committee, is grateful to have been given the opportunity to assist in bringing her project to a wider audience; for she did what too few do, in this age of abundant (if already harrowed) aggregates of data—namely, designed an original project of research on issues of social process, then built the requisite data set. A follow-up study, based on wavelet analysis in conjunction with direct Fourier modeling, is underway.

We are grateful to Sarah Palmer and Ben Williams, publishers, for presenting to us the opportunity to bring this report to a very wide audience.

Chapter 1

Introduction to a Question and the Complexity of its Conditions

The ultimate aim of the study presented in this book has been to address one question: Did prime-time television shows that were telecast during the thirty years from 1963 more likely succeed, more likely fail, or survive at indifferent rate, if one or more members of the regularly recurring cast were identifiably Black?[1] Subsidiary to that, did "proportion Black" make a difference? And by still another measure—whether the given show was "Black-centered" in its sociocultural orientation—did "Blackness" make a difference?[2]

1.1 Possibilities of Group Difference in Process Outcomes

Thus, the ultimate aim is about "group difference." For some of the social sciences, sociology apparently most noticeably, most research and commentary has been mainly about differences between or among groups. Indeed, sociology in particular has sometimes been defined as most distinctive because of its attention to "group differences." Such differences are cross-sectional. This is to say that they are primarily about the composition of a specified population of human beings in one or another location at one or another date in time.

We will have more to say about "group difference" and cross-sectional perspectives later. For purposes of this introduction, however, we emphasize that while this study does begin with cross-sectional perspective—the question of "Black versus Non-Black" in the cast compositions of US prime-

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[1] The "prime time" designation means 8pm to 11pm in the eastern and pacific standard time zones; 7pm to 10pm in the central and mountain standard time zones.

[2] We generally follow the practice that Crenshaw (1988, p. 1332 n2) described, capitalizing "Black" as we would "English" or "Norwegian" or Nigerian." To write "Black American" would be redundant here (but also a potential confusion, since "American" can include any country of North, Central, or South America).

time telecasts of comedies and dramas—the analysis begins in a perspective of process dynamics that potentially changed over time. This choice of perspective is based partly on an aesthetic principle. All of our data consist in perceptions. Aesthetics is the study of perception. The fact that our grounding is aesthetic does not mean that concerns either of epistemology or of ethics are irrelevant. To the contrary. But because of the nature of our data, we must begin with a basic perspective about human social processes that produce, reflect, and respond to perceptions.

The aesthetic perspective led us to ask, as our first motivating question, *If* the hypothesis of a group difference in the specific content of perceptions is in fact true, how would that group difference have come to be? What were (are) its conditions, and what are the contingencies of those conditions? In other words, we begin with a question of how a process of determinate activities—including all of the activities that resulted in the telecast of a specific episode of a television show, followed by all of the activities that resulted in a relative judgment by viewers of that episode—would yield a group-based evaluation that lengthened or shortened or left unchanged the life expectancy of that show. Therefore, our time-series data, the per-show trajectory of Nielsen ratings, amount to a stream of regularly updated probabilities of survival *one more episode* (thus perhaps one more year), and our final analysis is designed to determine whether the racial composition of the show's regularly recurrent cast affected that stream of survival probabilities.

While our final aim is to answer the question of a group-based difference in the success of prime-time television shows, we will complete that aim through an investigation of process dynamics. It is largely true, of course, that a binary distinction like "Black versus Not Black" remains stable on a per-person basis. That is, *perceptions* of a person in US society tend to be sorted by that binary distinction. As David Bindman (2021) said by choosing another's sentence to serve as title of his book about the aesthetics of artistic portrayals, "race is everything." Well, is it? Some human beings do behave in ways that seem to say that "race" does trump everything else, perhaps excepting gender.

Despite the fact that the distinction has virtually no biological value, the prevailing assumption has been that distinctions of race are innate and therefore stable. Even so, however, *conditions* of and *reactions* to the distinc-

tiveness do change over time as well as vary across space. Therefore, the process dynamics are about perceptions; *and* these perceptions did change during the thirty years of our data describing 400 prime-time comedies and dramas (the show-specific distribution of cast compositions changed); *and* those changes were not only reflective of, they were also instructive about, events to which general television audiences were being visually exposed as never before. Some of that exposure was via regular news reports and special-event reportage and commentary. Some of the exposure was via prime-time comedies and dramas that brought men, women, and children who were identifiably "Black" into the "white spaces" of Non-Black households on a more or less regular basis. Both exposures were a televised version of "get to know your neighbors" (even if—indeed, especially if—they live on "the other side of the tracks"). This qualitative distinction of "Black" vis-à-vis "Not Black" will persist motivationally throughout our analyses of data, and a quantitative dimension will be added (percentage of a show's regularly recurrent vast who were identifiably Black) in search, for example, of "tipping point" thresholds. But the analytical matrix of our examination of the data of viewers' preferential choices of which shows to watch will consist of the timelines of variations in those choices as outcomes of dynamic factors that were constitutive of the production of each show's life course. The specific cast-composition factor was only one of the many factors of production, and by the standard of "null hypothesis" it should have made no difference.

Our data do not enable us to connect specific episodes of this or that television show to viewer perceptions (including perceptual memories) of specific events of the civil rights movement as it proceeded from the 1950s to the 1960s, thence more diffusely through the 1970s and 80s. Content analysis in search of citations of any of those events during specific episodes of the 400 shows comprising our data set was never seriously contemplated not only because of the scope of the undertaking relative to the marginal return in general but also because we lack means of tying judges' perceptions of such citations as specific determinants of their then-present and future viewing choices.

However, the fact of time-series data does enable us to investigate relevant changes over time, as manifested in judgments about specific shows, and this ability supports the foundation of our study. Only after having

learned much more about the general process by which prime-time shows succeeded or failed, we next looked for differences in those processes and their outcomes by racial composition of show casts. Our presentations in this book will follow that approach. This does not mean that we will forgo glances at cast composition as we move along. But our final conclusions will come only toward the end (chapters eight and nine)..

By taking the step-by-step approach, we intend this study to be not only a report of a specific research project but also, equally importantly, a demonstration in the conduct of research about matters of social *process*. We are thereby in agreement with other scholars who have urged more and better attention to the theorization and empirical investigation of dynamics (cf. Abbott 2007; Crary 1990, 1999; Tuma and Hannan 1984). Description of static conditions, which is the main aim of many cross-sectional studies, is only a point of departure for further inquiry. How did those conditions come about? What were the main conditions and their contingencies? Why did a central tendency (mean, median, line of equilibrium, etc.) take that specific numerical value rather than a higher or lower value? Likewise, the variance around that central tendency: why was it that and more or less variant? Was the generative process uniform and constant of outcome over time, or was it differentiated, and if it was, by what condition? Was the process overdetermined by institutional formalities of commercial commodification, or did endogenous recursions yield surprises, unexpected innovations? Did any exogenous events stimulate process bifurcations, and if evidence does demonstrate bifurcation, was it stable, or did one (or both) forks diffuse into nullity?

Cross-sectional studies tend to privilege linearity. We do not reject linearity, but we see it generally as simplification of a generative process that operated with meaningful nonlinearities in its dynamics. We want to preserve for inquiry all available information that might hold clues to insights into generative processes. Therefore, while we do engage in abstractions, and this sometimes results in linear simplifications as end points of analysis (mainly when the time-series is too sparse to support more inquiry), we try to be clear about the information that we abstract away from a main focus before moving on to further investigation of that and/or other focal evidence.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to an introductory description of the question that motivated the study reported in this book, the conceptual

orientation of that question and its conditions, television as a medium of communication in general and specifically during the civil rights movement that resumed innovatively during the 1950s and 60s, and the innovative data file that one of the authors, Brenda Hughes, constructed for her doctoral-dissertation research. Chapters two and three continue those primarily descriptive efforts with more detail, all in preparation for the data analyses that begin in chapter four.

1.2 Perception and the Idea of a Comfort Zone

The data on which this study is based pertain to prime-time comedies and dramas telecast from 1963 to 1994. Most of those television shows did not last very long. Recognizing that fact in their study of entertainments, Bielby and Bielby (1994) recited a TV producer's admission that most "hits" are flukes because audience responses are too complex to be reliably predictable. Our data reconfirm the generalization. This fact is itself testament to the impact of viewers' preferences of time-use. That selectivity of attention is active revelation of discriminations in perceptions. It is the kind of revelation that theorists of decision-making had in mind when they coined the phrase "revealed preference"—a "proof is in the pudding" test that prizes "what people actually do" over "what they say" they do or thought. It is the decisive test that market observers and advertising executives seek, when they decide whether to become a "sponsor" of–that is, advertise their wares during—this or that proposed comedy or drama and, later, whether to continue the financial support.[3]

[3] Thus, of course, the phrase "commercial television." Commercial firms could choose to associate themselves with this or that TV show in return for "advertising fees" paid to the television network and/or private producer of a TV show. It is easy to see that this arrangement had, on balance, a traditionalist or conservative rather than progressive effect on content. Caygill (1989, pp. 85–86) reminded his readers that Adam Smith recognized as a "secret motive" leading to "the development of a commercial civilization" a pragmatic conception of means-ends relations. "The pleasure in a means apart from its end"—that is, intended goal—"transforms itself into the drive toward the endless accumulation of means characteristic of an expanding commercial civilization." This drive toward self-justifying accumulation of means creates space for experimentation; thus, tension between being a forward-looking leader of innovation and a protector of commercial forms and interests (see also Atkin 1992, Bogle 2001, MacDonald 1990).

While preference as revealed by relevant explicit action is generally a more direct, less ambiguous index of sentiments than is public pronouncement of preference in the same field of options, getting to that publicity is often a selective process that leaves private personal thinking, contemplation of pertinent issues, in the shade, especially when the relevant sentiments have been scanned as sources and/or targets of public controversy. A per-person sequence from "private truth" to "public lie" does not necessarily preclude the opposite sequence, but of the two reversals it usually requires less fortitude or conviction (Kuran 1995).

Revelation by action can be a forced choice by circumstance, and controversy might be only a less subtle part of the forces at work. Choices among options are often situated in a field of ambiguities and ambivalences that reflect uncertainties due to personal awareness that one's perceptions are sometimes faulty but even when not faulty can lead to unpleasant choices of action. Doing what is expected of "someone like me" is an invitingly safe harbor, inasmuch as it hides (and hides from) the conditioned and conditioning dynamics of perception. In this vein, repetition of past actions can still be seen as one's prudent behavior, especially insofar as it promotes continued accumulation of means.

Richard Carter (1988; see also Carter 2007) addressed those dynamics of preferential choice under the heading of "comfort zone" in his discussion of "TV's black comfort zone for whites." A seemingly neutral concept—after all, everyone has a comfort zone—the idea harbors contradictory perceptions. One the one hand, since the binary contrast, Black versus White, ignores intra-category variation (as in the popular idiom, "if you've seen one X, you've seen them all"), it perpetuates the fallacy that intra-category variance is insignificant relative to between-category variance. While median income and median wealth per household were lower among Black households during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, that did not mean that all Black households were impoverished.[4] As Lawrence Otis Graham, scion of a wealthy family, lamented in his memoir of "our kind of people" (Graham

[4] About two percent of households that were self-described as Black had incomes of a least a million dollars, circa 2020. Granted, that was only a seventh of the corresponding proportion among Non-Black households. A similar disparity occurred in wealth: among the top ten percent of Black earners, for instance, the median level of assets was about $343,160, versus $1.8 million among the top ten percent of White households.

1999, p. 40), a show such as *Sanford and Son* (1972–77; 136 episodes, NBC) perpetuated the rumor that all Black families were junkyard dealers, headed by a poorly educated bigot. Graham, born in 1961, was there reflecting his and his friends' experiences during their childhood and adolescent years, when commercial media in the USA offered very little that was positive stimulus to and affirmation of the aspirations of Black youth.[5]

Carter's discussion of the contingency of perceptions is centrally relevant here, too. No doubt all of us know that perception is contingent on perspective, but in the ordinary course of day each of us mostly, moment by moment, perceives without reflection on the action *as such* in the moment. "I simply perceive what I perceive." For biophysical reasons, of course, there are limits, and these limits result in blinders, "tunnel visions," and the like, that we usually do not notice. Our embodied sensory apparatus is limited to an extremely narrow range within the spectrum of radiant energy, for example, and no known human being can experience the taxis of a single atom of carbon or a single molecule of carbon dioxide. Thus, perception is virtually always perspectival. It is perspectival for cultural, social, economic, geographic, political reasons, as well as for biophysical reasons, and Carter was drawing attention to the former far more than to the latter. As was Graham. As had Frazier (1939, 1957), Tumin (1957, 1958), and Tumin and Collins 1959).

It takes considerable effort today, in US society, to be astonished by new observations about everyday life. David Bindman's (2021) choice of title for his new book about aesthetics features a key observation: *'race is everything'*. The three-word sentence was enclosed in quotation marks (single quotes, British style), because Bindman was quoting another person as he recited the sentence as a question. How is it possible that *one binary categorization*—like most binaries, expressed as an opposition—can summarize the *entirety*

[5] It is telling that when US producers sought vehicles that could reflect actual conditions of life in ways that would both entertain and instruct, they looked to the UK for exemplars. *Sanford and Sons* followed the model of the BBC's *Steptoe and Son* (1962–74), just as *All in the Family* (1971–79; 207 episodes, CBS) followed *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–75, BBC). A reader should bear in mind that producers such as Norman Lear and Alan ("Bud) Yorkin had very recent and vivid memories of careers being destroyed by conspiracists looking for "communists hiding under local beds" in the USA. TV shows that had passed muster in Great Britain offered promising bets for the US market of politics as well.

of a society's popular life, when the main term is, as biologists have repeatedly said, fictitious? This is indeed a profound question of aesthetics. What is the one perspective that so dominates the entire world of existing perceptual experiences as to reduce the whole to a uniform fiction? Have we been transfixed by another kenotic event?

Anthony Appiah expanded the fictional status toward a slightly more individualistic accounting, when he (2018) wrote of the "lies that bind" people into "ethnicities"—collectivities that, like "tribes" and "clans," try to celebrate a native ancestry the empirical status of which is at least close to the sequence that begins with "private lie" and enters "public truth." Genomic research has added an abundance of genetic information to (because from) the great mixing bowl of ancestral histories. Now that all of this new information is so readily available, will we soon see "Neanderthal" joining the list of thousands of ethnicities?

A different perspective invokes a different historical connection, as in the title that Thomas Ricks chose for his (2022) book, *Waging a Good War*. Ricks' title displays the ambivalence of a society's history between sides of a massive civil war, the ultimate cause of which was enslavement of a "Black race" by a "White race"—a cause that so animated the defenders of slavery as a right of each state that they strove to disband the republican union. A corresponding question posed in conjunction with the one formed of Bindman's title is about that same "Everything": Why was it so obvious even to the poor members of the seceding "White race" that for them, as well as for the wealthy slave-owning members, the "common cause" was worth devastation and demoralization? For the victors, a "good war" was preservation of the union and final intent to abolish slavery. For the vanquished, a "good war" was … what exactly? Widely shared resentment at having lost, including loss of enslaved persons whom only a small fraction of the seceding "White race" actually ever had; a resentment that has long simmered in undercurrents of revolt against the victorious members of the "White race" and that continued wherever possible a degradation of members of the "Black race" (see, e.g., Williams 2023).

All of that, erected on a binary categorization that does not exist in terms of human biology. Elijah Anderson (2022) reported that the main theme of his life experience had been being *Black in White Space*. What daily personal

experience can someone who is White draw upon as basis for understanding *that*? Very few White persons born in the United States have lived daily life in, say, Angola, Botswana, or Kenya. Imagine you are playing chess (or checkers), you are White. And more than four of every five spaces are Black. That might be a rough approximation to a Black citizen's perception that institutional forms in the United States are biased against Blacks.

Patricia Hill Collins (2005) told of her own personal experiences of learning how to appear to be middle-of-the-road obedient in order to have a space in which to be, by other lights, disobedient. This was generally the disobedience of "thinking differently," of trying out new ways of being, most of that distinctiveness primarily (when not entirely) a new generation's groping locus vis-à-vis predecessors. Most of us have had that experience in some degree, but those of us who are "mainstream white" (or at earlier date, white Anglo-Saxon protestant) surely have had less opposition to face. What Collins (2005, p. 99) called being an "outside within" Elijah Anderson (2022) experienced as being *Black in White Space*, and Sherman Alexei (2007) as being on the reservation even when sailing the high seas, traversing the prairie, scouring the desert, or reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Neither captures all of the intent of Collins' two-word phrase, however. Another binary categorization has been a field of vituperations and aggressions similar to those associated with "race." To say that "everything is gender" is not totalizing in quite the same way, since "gender" has been tied to "the sexual difference" and thus with the biology of sexual reproduction. One wonders: if humans could reproduce asexually, would "gender" exist? The question is home to a rather large irony known as "immaculate conception."

Collins wrote of life experience as one who had to contend with subordination due to the lie of race and then also, within that subordination, the lie of gender (or "the weaker sex"). Each of those dimensions has had tribalist tendencies, in the sense that has been applied equivalently to ancient societies such as Athenian and Spartan Greece and the Warring States of China. The glaring fact that such histories continue to play today, millennia later, is testimony that Homo sapiens is surely not the most advanced form of intelligent life in the known universe. That is hardly compensation for those who have been, and those who continue to be, victims of tribal

animosities. For present purposes, however, it does illustrate the force of perspective in the contents of ordinary daily perceptions.

The notion of "comfort zone," an aesthetic phenomenon, tends to be divided by color and by gender. To that extent, it would be only unnecessary duplication. But its value is different because it is a very personal dimension of daily experiences within each of the categorized boxes (Black vs. White; Male vs. Female). It differs per person both spatially and temporally. In much the manner that George Herbert Mead (e.g., 1913) theorized, it can vary as one's world of others expands—not just the "anonymous others" but the "significant others," those persons with whom one interacts and through that interaction becomes a different self. Experience counts. But it is far more valuable to have twenty different experiences than one experience twenty times.

Choose any year between 1962 and, say, 1992; guess what proportion of White families had shared dinner with a Black family in the latter family's home even once? And vice versa? We have not seen a reliable point-specific estimate of that proportion for any of those thirty years. But we would be astonished to learn that it was even a twentieth. On the other hand, we do know that many White families have visited one or more Black families in the latter home many times during those thirty years, even though it was a vicarious visitation.

Television was the conduit. That was worth far more, we suspect, than anyone has been able to measure. A person's comfort zone is open for inspection. It is open for exploration. It is, or can be, open to change. Television during the relaxation of an evening was an open invitation.

1.3 Television as a Medium of Communication

A phrase recently popular in the media and in casual conversations—namely, "social media"—could be mistaken as a judgment that newspapers and telephones and letters and such were not *social*. The intent has been different. The new media—platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, email and text messages, blogs and performances via YouTube—are differently social by being more "*democratically* social." The information is

less filtered by aggregation services (such as United Press International, Associated Press, Reuters, centralized television networks, and the like), more spontaneous and individualized from grassroot sources, less subject to standardized style sheets, more fleeting, and commodified in smaller, even tiny packages. With the advent of smartphones, lives are lived and lost through the ephemera of digital haze.

One of the distinctive qualities of the decade of the 1990s, Chuck Klosterman (2022) pointed out, was its transitional status between "copy everything for the files" and "everything will now be digital." Records previously kept as hardcopies for archives were now trash for the recycle bin, lost to premature anticipation of automatic storage of digital codes. Television, after radio, proved to be a long transition. But it did happen. The order of information media evolved at an unprecedented rate, compared to most evolutions.

The pace of this change has been disquieting, and in many respects its effects remain unclear or unsettled (Ganz 2024). Traditional habits by which information was evaluated no longer serve so matter-of-factly. The orderliness of journalist distinctions between reporting the news and writing editorial opinions has seemed less sacrosanct than some have remembered it (see, e.g., Rauch 2021).[6] But information can cover its own tracks. Public misrepresentations, deliberate or accidental, create both facts on the ground and mirages even after the wizard has been disrobed and left to his witless end (cf. Kuran 1995).

Democratization sorts such differences by ballots in the electoral box. Perceptions of information, whether its impression on each mind is favorable or unfavorable, are weights on the scale of citizenship. Television has been integral to that process for several decades, replacing fireside chats and conversations side by side with audiovisual cosmetics. Another wizard waits in the wings, ready for camera and action. In a memorandum on youth, composed at the end of the 1950s, Paul Goodman pointed to what he regarded as inconsistency, perhaps contradiction, in the information of citizens:

[6] Rauch's voice is recognizable but from a world now gone. Will it or its simulacrum ever return?

> In American society we have perfected a remarkable form of censorship: to allow every one his political right to say what he believes, but to swamp his little boat with literally thousands of millions of newspapers, mass-circulation magazines, best-selling books, broadcasts, and public pronouncements that disregard what he says and give the official way of looking at things. Usually there is no conspiracy to do this; it is simply that what he says is not what people talk about; it is not newsworthy (Goodman 1960, p. 39).[7]

Goodman seemed to believe that the situation he described was specific to the United States or to his era or perhaps both. He apparently thought of himself as an anarchist, but he had his own perceptions, preferences, and expectations, all of which both implied and assumed some kind of ordering of the realities of daily life. As he said in that vignette, much depended on whether anyone was paying attention to anything anyone else talked about. That was true in 1960, just as it is true today. It was also true in 1860 and during the centuries prior to that. Much depended then, too, on the kind and quality of information in circulation, for bits of news travelled much more slowly then, raising the likelihood that time and space performed filtrations. Whether few or many people were paying attention to anything going on, day by day, beyond the fenced yard or the length of half a day's ride by horseback, added to the filtration. Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond could still be surprised at how slowly some news spread over the land. Now a person's self-handshake can spread across the entire world with the speed of electrons.

Part of what is newsworthy today is about fragmentation. As societies have gotten more complicated, it has become increasingly difficult to achieve and maintain reliable evaluations of increasing volumes and uncertainties of information that is or has recently been in circulation. Some social scientists and public-policy advisors now express concerns that orderliness itself has been fragmenting, as too many competing interests have swamped

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[7] Goodman's (1960, p. 13) message was addressed explicitly to boys and young men but also almost exclusively to White youth without notice. His childhood and adolescence were lived in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Although the area borders Harlem to the south, Goodman was raised in a rather insular setting.

available abilities to process and evaluate new or re-introduced claims of information (see, e.g., Brandtner 2017). Concerns about "the problem of social order" are nothing new, of course. But the fact that this concern has been blossoming again does suggest that Goodman's feeling about orderliness being much too censorial and authoritarian during the 1950s, even without the aid of conspiracy, might have been a bit premature.

Entertainments are instructive, whether by a specifically intended design or not, and as much was true of television entertainments during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, as was true of radio entertainments before the advent of television. Televised comedies and dramas were not exactly a new commodity, but the presence of video ("I see") stimulated and guided visual imaginations that radio had left largely to its auditor. This change did change the aesthetics of perception (see Haug 1986 [1983]). Depending on the person sitting in the living room or working at the kitchen counter, the change could be characterized as an enrichment or as an assault against the viewer's own skills of imagination. Television networks left no doubt, of course: like the slogan of a major industrial manufacturer, television was "better living through audiovisual electronics." Harold Cruse's (1967, p. 35) lament about "a tradition of white cultural paternalism" had application that was simultaneously both broader and more specific.

The presence of a television set's cathode-ray tube soon prompted an addition to popular lexicon: "tube" became shorthand for the television appliance as a whole, including conveyed contents; and this was soon followed by "boob tube." The added adjective was social criticism, as it invoked slang, "boob," in summary of an inept, stupid, or blundering person who was capable of nothing better than the dullest of dull offerings by television. Television became known as the unpaid caretaker of a family's children as well as sparkling companion to the local dullard. Soon after Goodman's book was published, the head of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow, intoned his own verdict:

> When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers — nothing is better.
>
> But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a maga-

> zine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.
>
> You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials — many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom. True, you'll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it.[8]

Network executives heard the message.

Notably, that passage said nothing of television newscasts. It would be unfair to neglect the instructional value conveyed by those newscasts. Consider that previously most reporting, although aided by radio, had been mainly in newsprint, and many adults were poor readers—weak skills and little patience to learn as adults what they failed to learn in school. Televised news brought spoken words with pictures into the living room most evenings. Douglas Edwards began at CBS with fifteen minutes of national and world news every weekday evening for fifteen years (1947 to 1962). His successor, Walter Cronkite, brought an expansion to 30 minutes of news. The other networks followed suit. Granted, those productions in front of the camera were from the start commodification with commercial interest. Like other installments of better living through television, the newscasts were "sponsored" by other companies touting commercial products of their own. Granted, too, however, the newscasts brought a common report to households across the nation, and during the 1950s and 60s one could see people standing in front of the display window of an appliance or furniture store, watching the same televised report. This was no doubt part of Goodman's criticism: too much uniformity. By the same token, however, it was integral to that connective tissue of a community such as Goodman had known in Washington Heights and which social scientists such as Émile

[8] https://time.com/4315217/newton-minow-vast-wasteland-1961-speech/

Durkheim (e.g., 1951 [1897]) had discerned as vital to the health of an entire society (cf. Mead 1913; Putnam 2000; Achen and Bartels 2016).

Deliberate instruction was borne in newscasts. The more popular offerings came after the evening news, and these, while primarily entertainments, also offered instruction. Some of it was deliberate and direct. Game shows, for example could test and teach even when the subject matter was something of popular culture. Other entertainments were instructive with indirect or semi-deliberate intent, as when sporting competition offered lessons about the aesthetics and the ethics of winning and losing. Then, too, there were entertainments that could, and sometimes did, offer instruction unwittingly via simple reflections of imagined daily life. Watching the series of episodes of a western such as *Laredo* (1965–67; 56 episodes, NBC) might give lessons in how to keep cattle dust out of your mouth and lungs by wearing a dry bandana, for instance, or how to saddle a horse or avoid getting one's heel caught in the stirrup.[9] A person is not likely to learn to fly an airplane by watching new adventures of Superman (or *Lois & Clark*: 1993–97; 87 episodes, ABC), but following Martin Milner and George Maharis or Glenn Corbett as they tool along *Route 66* (1960–64; 116 episodes, CBS) might stimulate investment in the pleasures of an automotive convertible.

Aesthetic considerations of the main offering of prime-time television—the succoring relaxation and casual amusements—can easily bring "boob tube" commodification to mind, no doubt. But as Minow acknowledged, the best of television offsets the mental lethargies with some benefits that only television could provide, chief among them the instructional value of viewing one's own experiences through a lens of episodic sequences of life in other households or places of employment. As mentioned above, streams of information tend to cover their own trajectories and guide a viewer into anticipation of a next installment. That future-looking attitude is generally helpful especially insofar as it stimulates a confidence that more and better life can be achieved. The consumption of mass-media production involves a circularity of the imagined process dynamic: a viewer can replay

[9] This TV series had a stable of nearly three dozen writers and more than six hundred cast members (credited and uncredited, mostly appearing in single episodes). The town of Laredo had only 3500 residents in 1880 (the date at which it began to integrate fully into the US national economy), so each cast member stood for about six residents.

an episode again and again, experiment with "what if?" counterfactual thinking, perhaps concluding in a richer diagnosis of "what happened and why" in the relived episode. Storyboard authors and script writers contribute to that by reflecting their own experiences of their own and others' lives. But they also strive to remain "current, up-to-date, and maybe just a bit ahead of the game," with unexpected twists and turns that challenge at least some of their consumers to think again. This circularity of dynamic tends, therefore, to engender a *self*-consumption within the consumer, even the consumer of a blatant commodity. Consumers of art, like producers of artistic performance, can become trapped in that circularity, as others have said (e.g., Petrusich 2024; Doggett 2012). The expression, "having a tiger by the tail and not knowing how to let go," highlights the dilemma a few cycles too late.

Television demonstrated during the 1950s and 1960s that its "boob tube" could serve as a mirror held up to the people of the United States, reflecting much more than the basic technology of electrons. Increasingly, some of those reflections gave truly shocking reports of the depths of hatred that some people felt for other people. In 1946 a southern governor, Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, openly endorsed White violence against Black citizens:

> White people will be justified in going to any extreme to keep the nigger from voting. You know and I know what's the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before an election. I don't have to tell you more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean (quoted in Ricks 2022, p. 99).

Whether the statement represented his genuine sentiments or not, Bilbo knew that such talk would keep him in office as long as he wanted. Concerns of ethics and morality were secondary at best. He probably assumed that the large majority of his White electorate would feel fully within that "comfort zone."

Ricks, who recently recited that vignette of normal campaigning by utter bigotry and deceit, assembled a raft of historical evidence showing that television's mirror was instrumental in building the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s as "in large part a battle for public opinion. The American people watched the fight on television and were pulled in by it. Public

opinion began to focus on civil rights as a major issue in the country" (Ricks 2022, p. 128). The issue was nothing new to Black Americans, of course. They had been living it, day in and day out. To many White Americans, it could have been something of a surprise. Not completely, perhaps. There had been terrible "race riots" before (e.g., Detroit in 1943, along with similar riots in Los Angeles and elsewhere, partly due to large numbers of white and Black in-migrants from southern states). But the increasingly shocking scenes seen on television during the 1950s and 60s alerted white citizens to a question they had been comfortably ignoring: "Is *this* what I want my country to be?"

Some of the most shocking scenes had depicted white *women* lashing out in contortions of seemingly animalistic anger. Even white viewers who shared prejudiced perceptions found the images of sheer hatred difficult to digest, since the reaction was against mostly young men and women who were simply asking for fair treatment and respect. Stories about Nazi atrocities had been filtering into popular consciousness, as the tolls from efforts to exterminate entire groups of citizens of Germany and surrounding countries were being added to visual accounts of the war. How does one reconcile that knowledge with traditional assumptions about humanity? It was all too easy to see parallels to atrocious behaviors in Birmingham, Alabama, for instance, as the local police used dogs and their own assault weapons to beat people into submission. Yes, white Americans had previously tried to exterminate indigenous peoples especially of North America. But it had become easy to relegate that to the past. This was *now*, the 1950s and 60s.

We may never have a full measure of the contribution of television to the civil rights movement of those years. Martin Luther King, Jr., put his handprint on the question in 1967, however, when he celebrated lessons from Mahatma Gandhi (as well as from several Chinese strategists): make it possible for your enemy to defeat himself. Or in King's own words, "in the South, in the nonviolent movement, we were aided on the whole by the brutality of the opponent" (quoted in Ricks 2022, p. 99).

News reporters became major figures in scenes conveyed on those television screens. So, too, were many other persons who had major presences in the public consciousness. Some of them were elected officials—John and Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, George Wallace. Still others were

appointed figures—a chief example being Theophilus ("Bull") Connor, who seemed to step forward from central casting to lead much of the brutality. Others had very substantial presence as moral exemplars of non-violent protest against violations of the US Constitution and precepts of Christian theology, King being the foremost of many leaders. It was not that persons such as Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, and Malcolm X (née Little) exercised no leadership. To the contrary, they created a central foreground as a stage for the effective actions of a growing movement led by Martin and Coretta Scott King, John Lewis, Roy Wilkins, and Bayard Ruskin, among many others.

When an occupant of the Oval Office in Washington, DC, is faced with a highly exposed problem that seems to have no quick and palatable solution, what does that incumbent do? A favorite recourse is the appointment of a presidential commission. In July 1967 Lyndon B Johnson selected Otto Kerner, Jr., governor of Illinois, to lead a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. The members were charged with investigation of the causes of the hundreds of riots that had been occurring and then to recommend remedial action. The commission report was issued the following year. Its main conclusion was a public declaration that could have been news to no one but the latter-day Rip van Winkles: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." That statement, occurring early in the report's executive summary, probably raised more than a few eyebrows because of the verbal tense that had been chosen. But it was nonetheless clear that the report had not been intended to be simply another diverse selection of "bones to throw" to different audiences. The authors had written from the assumption of *one* society, now and later. One society, once again under serious threat of dissolution.

A half-century later, Alice George, a popular historian associated with the Smithsonian Institution, wrote of the commission, its foundational conditions, its report—a best-seller of the day—and its eventual consequences, that the commission "got it right but no one listened" (see also De La Cruz-Viesca, Ong, Comandon, Darity, and Hamilton 2018) This was hardly the first time that officers of the US government had refused to act. The 1872 report of a joint select committee of Congress, appointed to "inquire into the condition of affairs in the late insurrectionary states," documented much evidence that the insurrection had continued. Members of Congress

turned away (see US Congress 1872; Williams 2024). Gunnar Myrdal (1944) had written a widely read treatise on the "American dilemma"—namely, the "blatant contradiction" between the nation's core ideals and the way in which citizens who were Black continued to be treated seventy years after the 1872 report from the US Congress.

It is easy to conclude today that no one listened to the report of the Kerner Commission. George (2018) knew that lots of people did listen, although today it has become evident that memories are short, and perceptions are blind to the hypocrisy that Myrdal had documented. The problem was neither the commission nor its report. The problem was the audience—rather, the diversity of its audiences. The first pages of the executive summary left no doubt: "white racism," it said explicitly, was the main cause of "the explosive mixture" that had been accumulating in US cities for more than twenty years since, and despite, the "race riots" of 1943. The authors were explicit and definitive well beyond their famous declaration about "two societies." Three examples from the first two pages of the summary:

- "To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values."
- "What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."
- "It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group."

Like George, Thomas Ricks knew that attention to the diagnosis and recommendations became more diffuse after 1968. Controversies about war in southeast Asia, followed by investigations of presidential malfeasance, occupied more and more of the public discourse. Waves of backlash

against the gains in civil rights also changed public discourse (see, e.g., Ganz 2024; Packer 2013). Ricks (2022, p. 325) named three waves. The first, occurring during the late 1960s,"was embodied by George Wallace. The second wave came under the presidency of Ronald Reagan"; and the third wave, "less restrained and uglier, emerged in recent years under Donald Trump." Insurrection was being treated as a form of patriotism.

It would be unwise to dismiss prime-time entertainment television during the eras of George Wallace and Ronald Reason (i.e., the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s) whether as a continuation of efforts to accomplish at least some of what the Kerner Report recommended or as a stimulant to the right-wing backlashes against improved civil rights. Granted, it has often been popular to discount "popular culture" as a fluff of commodity fetishisms, something to keep the masses contented. But popular culture in fact has always included expressions, conditions, and consequences of civil rights, both the positive and the negative or reactionary. Anyone who was alive and old enough to understand audio-visual presentations during the 1950s knows that television coverage of many events contributed to public consciousness not only of the turmoil, trials, and travesties that attended the movement of citizens seeking equal protections of the law, as they called for respect of their citizenship rights, *but also* of the promise of re-affirmations voiced by many public leaders that equal protections and equal rights under the US Constitution would prevail. Giving just due to that history is beyond the scope of this study, but the relevance of television screens during events of the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond, is undeniable. That is true not only of the news reports, vital as they were. Many other persons lived their public presences as celebrities of show business.

That four-word phrase, "celebrities of show business," is a prime example of a form of "reputational capital" that degrades rather quickly—and all the more quickly through an "over-exposure," which can be difficult to gauge in the moment. Politicians face similar risks, but they have the institutional form of elected office, and of the electoral process, as housings that afford some shelter against over-exposure. The institutional form of public entertainment has been offered traditionally as a respite from disagreements, political or otherwise. No doubt the métier of succeeding as a celebrity by skills of popular entertainments can be far more sensitive to risks of over-exposure. The slogan, "leave them wanting more" is counter-fact to "over-

staying one's welcome," and the distance separating the two expectations can be shrinkingly short. Because the guiding light is "entertainment for all," actions that are perceived as political tend easily to carve against that offer of a universality. Few would have been surprised to learn that a Harry Belafonte, a Lena Horne, or a Miles Davis voiced support for civil-rights marches and similar other means of non-violent protest. A very long list of Black entertainers had been self-censoring only "carefully in the margins" for many years, and when confronted they were forthright in standing their ground. Thus, when Belafonte organized an informal grouping of media stars in support of the March on Washington rally for civil rights in 1963, the surprise (if any there was) attended the extent of his success in gaining enlistments (see Jones and Connelly 2023, pp. 115–118, 136–138, 179).

Television entertainments during the 1960s were generally regarded as less important, less prestigious, than the worlds of Hollywood and musical venues. But one can discern some content trends in the comedies and dramas that were telecast during evening hours in millions of homes all across the country, and some of those trends reflected the concerns that had been expressed in the report of the Kerner Commission in 1968. When Hughes began construction of her data file, she wisely chose first entries from the mid-1960s. Later, we will look for the existence of "before-and-after" effects relative to the commission report. George (2018) was right that too few were listening in 1968 and too few of those who did listen remembered. But was there an effect soon after the report was released? Did such evidence appear in ratings garnered by specific television shows? That is one of the questions we will try to answer.

1.4 The Hughes Data Set

The year 1963 seemed distinctively appropriate: on the one hand, television had shown much of the event that March of the gathering in Washington, DC; on the other, virtually every television set was absorbed eight months later in the trauma of the assassination of a US President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Fittingly, two shows initiated the Hughes data set. The first was *East Side / West Side*, an hour-long drama on CBS, starring George C Scott as Neil Brock, social worker, and Cicely Tyson as Jane Foster, enrolled in a graduate program in social work and employed as Brock's secretary.

Tyson was the first Black actor to have a prominent and recurrent role in a US commercial television show. The setting was New York City. Twenty-six episodes were filmed and telecast (see Andrews 1988, appendix, for a synopsis of each). The episodes offered realistic portrayals of the challenges faced by social workers in a big city virtually every day. Each episode was set in an environment of rapid social change, as Andrews (1988, p. 95) emphasized, and evaluation of the series should be viewed in that framework. The early 1960s followed a decade of mostly haphazard attention to social issues and little effort to enact social legislation.

East Side / West Side proved to be a bit too realistic, however. The producer received notice about halfway through the episodes that the show would not be renewed. Indeed, the network had been subsidizing production of the show, as potential advertisers ("sponsors") were leery of being associated with portrayals of seemingly unsolvable problems. Professional social workers complained about the negative image (never a "happy ending"). Yes, everyone agreed, the show had gained a 35-percent share of viewers during its hour (10 pm Mondays), and the critics offered many accolades (the show won an Emmy that year). But too much realism was not good for "the bottom line," and commercial network television was first, last, and always a proper business of entertainments.[10] Nevertheless, while Scott's Neil Brock, much like the actor himself, was not the warmest of characters in emotive production, the viewer could see that he was learning to understand nuances of difference, and Tyson's Foster aided in that evolution of Brock's comfort zone.

The second entry into Hughes' data set strikes as close to a perfect contrast as one could imagine. It was also far more representative of commercial network offerings during the early 1960s. A situation comedy (sitcom) but fantastical in a way that set it well apart from Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, the world of *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972) existed in 254 episodes of the domesticity of a witch and her "normal" husband in US suburbia. One of the longest running shows then and later, it was a major success for Elizabeth Montgomery and several other actors in recurring roles, not one of them in minority status, assuming magic does not count. Mass entertain-

[10] Andrews (1988) is readily available on the internet. Her account is excellent, especially for anyone who could not see the show's episodes (most of which apparently did not survive).

ment succeeds best at its main goal, profitable survival, when it relieves its audience of unpleasant realities. *Bewitched* was not the proximate cause of television's re-christening as "the boob tube," but it supplied much supporting evidence. Even here, however, via Montgomery's portrayal of Samantha's exotic challenges, one could see the evolution of a comfort zone, her husband Darren's. Indeed, the fantastical element was so ludicrous that it heightened attention to diverse conceptualizations of "comfort."

The Hughes data set began when Brenda Hughes determined to create it as the principal empirical basis of her dissertation research (see Hughes 2003): tracking the life course of each of 400 prime-time comedies and dramas on US commercial-network television during the thirty years from 1963.[11] She was determined to include every show that had at least one Black actor in its regularly recurrent cast. Having identified those, she then randomly sampled the Non-Black shows that were telecast during those thirty years, until she reached the total of 400. This design means that whereas the confidence interval around estimates pertaining to Black shows is very narrow (i.e., *high* confidence in the estimate), the interval around estimates for Non-Black shows is generally a bit wider, as the sampling ratio of the latter shows is about one in four.

Hughes has the distinction among new PhD scholars circa 2000 of having been one of the few (perhaps the only) who created her own data set. More than that, however, she created a data set that, while centrally interested in a cross-sectional comparison, consisted of *processual* data, which she then treated as show-specific data records in a Box-Cox regression design.

After becoming aware of Hughes' dissertation, Hazelrigg suggested that it might have been premature to conclude, as she had, that shows with at least one Black actor in regularly recurring roles actually performed better. The analysis design assumed linearity, yet the data of process outcome (the Nielsen ratings) were inherently nonlinear. Evidence favoring rejection of the null hypothesis because shows with Black actors did *less* well in Nielsen ratings *could* have been concealed in the nonlinearities. With that in mind,

[11] The timespan is actually a bit longer than thirty years. Why? Because the aim was to follow the trajectory of Nielsen ratings for each show during it entire lifespan, and because one of the last shows to be added to the list, *ER (1994–2009; 331 episodes, NBC), would compile a lifespan of fifteen years. This data record was completed after Hughes had completed her dissertation.*