

ing constantly promotes an ideal of woman as a slender, youthful sex object for men to enjoy and for women to measure themselves against? Is there truth in this claim? If so, what are the implications for the ways we understand ourselves as male and female, and the ways we behave?

2. How can we better educate consumers? What alternatives to current advertising could be developed that would provide reliable information without the hard sell?

3. In recent years, advertising has emphasized more and more strongly the importance of targeting very specific audiences, especially consumers with deep pockets. This has meant that popular TV programs have sometimes been dropped because their audiences have not been sufficiently affluent. What implications does this have for the frequent claim by spokespersons of the television industry that they simply give the public what it wants?

20 Racism and the American Way of Media

ASH COREA

Racism is as integral a dimension of U.S. culture as advertising, and it has even deeper roots. There is a curious view that racism more or less vanished with the success of the civil rights struggles against segregation and for voting rights of the 1950s and 1960s. This claim lies somewhere between hypocrisy and willful blindness to everyday realities. It is not only in the United States that white people exclude Black people from opportunity, but the American dream of a fair deal for all citizens is exposed as a cynical myth given that discrimination and disadvantage assigned by skin color are so systematic. Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos have current experiences of racism to relate, not just stories from bygone years, even though these experiences also have a continuity with the years of slavery and colonial subjugation.

Communicating racism, both in mass media and in the everyday conversations fed by the mass media, sustains it as an active cultural, and therefore political, force. Corea examines the way media, especially television, continue to stereotype both majority and minority, by means of some thought-provoking contrasts. She proceeds to summarize both the history of media portrayal of African Americans and their very limited presence in positions of influence in media institutions. At the close of her argument, she addresses the significance of

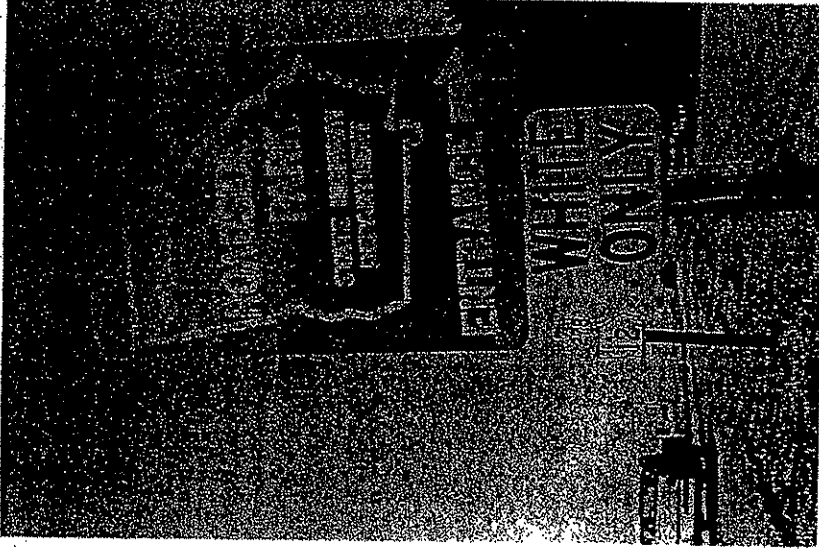
the widely popular Black-cast Cosby Show to ask whether U.S. television, unlike the leopard, has changed its spots.

Although Coleda's analysis focuses on African American experience, a considerable amount of what she points out can be applied to the experiences of other so-called minorities in the United States, such as Latinos. One of the problems with the term minority is that it lumps together people of widely differing backgrounds and cultures because of one factor: the readiness of white people to discriminate against them. And because they are labeled minorities, they are effectively marginalized and set apart from mainstream social life. The fact remains that collectively we are speaking of up to a quarter of the U.S. population, more than 60 million human beings, whose origins in Africa, Latin America, and Asia make them part of the nonwhite majority of the planet.

For the twenty-first century, how we communicate concerning this issue and how quickly U.S. mass culture adapts to this reality are of pressing importance. Where do U.S. media stand?

Many writers argue that the media merely reflect what is happening out there. What is more, on television African Americans, women, and white men seem to have the same opportunities that exist in the society. Eddie Murphy and *In Living Color* can mock Stevie Wonder and other African American celebrities, Arsenio Hall can have a long-running and successful TV talk show, Bill Cosby can make it to the top of the ratings, Geraldo Rivera can make headlines, Connie Chung can draw a top news anchor salary. So it must be true: Everyone has the same opportunities.

However, in the United States the overwhelming factor that defines the position a group will occupy is color. Education, wealth, occupation, gender, and religion are also part of the picture, but, nevertheless, being African American normally means occupying the bottom stratum. This in turn limits access to the benefits produced within the society. As a group, African Americans compete with other groups who are discriminated against, such as Hispanics and Native Americans, for the honor of being at the bottom. Gender does intervene in this matrix: Women occupy lower positions when compared with men.



USA, anno 1957

In the complex array of factors at work, four clear points emerge. First, white men occupy the apex of the hierarchy in the United States, in terms of both power and status. Second, white women earn lower salaries (on average, two-thirds those of white men) and have much less political influence. Third, African American men have less political influence still and are paid substantially less than white men. Finally, African American women earn less than the other three

groups, although they have greater access than African American men to very low-paying jobs such as babysitting, fast-food restaurant work, and cleaning. They have the very least political power. For those citizens of the United States who have difficulty believing the evidence before their own eyes, seemingly endless studies have documented this pattern in detail, from Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) through the series of reports issued in 1989 by the Special Committee on Children, Youth and the Family of the U.S. House of Representatives.

So far, then, it has been suggested that there is in reality, if not in TV reality, a distinct relationship between color and access to wealth and power by members of certain groups. These groups are further subdivided by gender, with white men at the apex, followed by white women and then African American men. At the very bottom are African American women. A similar analysis would generally be valid for Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.

As the discussion now moves to a consideration of how media, in particular television, relate to this reality, the following three questions should be kept in mind:

1. Do African Americans and white Americans occupy the same positions within the controlling structures of the media?
2. Does television portray African Americans and white Americans as being equal to each other and as coexisting in a multiracial environment?
3. What factors are there that could militate against African Americans and white Americans receiving equal treatment on television?

African Americans and Employment in Media

Consider the following statement by an African American TV executive who was asked about the operation of power in the television industry:

Positions of real power have been in the past, and continue to be, reserved for a network of white males who all know each other, run the industry, and occasionally allow a token number of White women to preside with them over the decision making process. (Massing, 1982, p. 44)

One could dismiss this TV executive's statement as sour grapes. However, in 1986 a report titled *Minority Broadcasting Facts* was released by the National Association of Broadcasters, and in it were the following figures on the numbers of general managers of commer-

cial TV stations who were nonwhite: 9 African Americans and 5 Latinos. There were also 4 African American TV station managers. Yet in the United States there are nearly 1,300 commercial TV stations. Clearly, then, African Americans are not overwhelmingly represented in the controlling structures of television.

The Federal Communications Commission also released an equal opportunity trend report in 1988 that outlined ethnic minority employment in television and cable over the period 1983-1987. Ethnic groups were subdivided between males and females, and also between categories of employment. During 1987 the overall number of people employed was 176,159, compared with 160,967 for 1983. The proportion of minority professionals increased a little, from 15.3% in 1983 to 16.2% in 1987, or 28,590 in all, mainly owing to the presence of a few more Latino professionals. The 1987 percentages for minorities subdivided by gender were as follows: 4.2% African American women; 4.7% African American men; 2.2% Latinas; 3.4% Latinos.

However, the figures also showed that ethnic minorities were underrepresented in the top four groups, which jointly account for about 85% of all positions: officials and managers, 10.6% (3,832); professionals, 14.7% (8,006); technicians, 19.8% (6,345); sales workers, 10.0% (2,391). According to Dr. Edward Wachtel (1986), if we were to look more closely at these categories we would see that they serve to mask the real underrepresentation of African Americans in the power structure of the electronic media. Wachtel suggests that a more adequate picture of the real situation would be given if we were to match minority employment with salary. Is a sales worker, for example, an executive who sells ad spots to corporations, or that executive's typist?

So in answer to the first question posed, we can draw the following conclusion. Ethnic minorities such as African Americans exhibit a minimal presence in the upper echelons of influence in television, especially in the three big networks.

A 1993 report published by the National Association of Black Journalists Print Task Force shows that a significant number of African Americans leave the print media within five years of taking their first jobs. The Black journalists surveyed expressed the following typical concerns: (a) Newsroom managers are not committed to retaining or promoting Black journalists; (b) Black journalists spend longer than non-Black journalists in entry-level positions; and (c) Black journalists are not kept informed, as non-Black journalists are, about seminars and other opportunities to advance their careers. The surveyed

journalists also felt that raising these issues would damage their chances for advancement: First Amendment or no First Amendment, their experience of the newsroom atmosphere was that it actively discouraged them from even voicing the issue.

There seems no reason, given these realities, why the number or proportion of ethnic minority journalists should ever see improvement. Although overall from 1991 to 1993 there was a slight rise, from 9.39% to 10.23%, in the proportion of all print journalists who were from ethnic minorities, 45% of daily newspapers still employed no minorities at all. Black journalists' belief that management generally is not committed to their hiring, retention, or promotion is certainly supported by these data. At the same time, print media executives cite the dearth of Black journalists and editors as the reason they cannot find qualified Black candidates for promotion to executive levels. [For data concerning ethnic minority presence, or absence, in other areas of the U.S. communication industry, see Downing, 1994.]

Jill Nelson, in her book *Volunteer Slavery* (1993), confirms that the milieu of the newspaper militates against the promotion and retention of African American journalists. Invariably, if African American journalists are hired, their managers either do not expect them to be well prepared for the craft or have unrealistic expectations of their performance. The tiny number of Black people in management positions often means that Black journalists do not get the level of mentoring support that other journalists get. One well-known white American TV journalist gave a presentation at a seminar in 1993 in which he recounted how he had been mentored when he was totally unknown and poorly prepared, and how his mentor had been instrumental in getting the inexperienced journalist's inevitable initial bloopers excused. Sadly, the same journalist was able to say later the same day, without any apparent awareness of his contradictory stance, that there are simply no qualified ethnic minority candidates for the top jobs in TV news. This was a classic illustration of the gulf between ethnic minority and white perceptions inside the media.

TV and African Americans: Hostility, Segregation, or Avoidance

Looking back over the social development of audiences for public entertainment or sports in the United States, it is clear that, histori-

cally, public entertainment has always been organized with African Americans absent from or segregated in the theater or stadium, in most places in the North and in all of the South (Nasaw, 1993). Differences of social class, of white ethnicity, of gender, and of religious belief were minimized, but only at the cost of firmly drawing a color line that materially contributed to the white U.S. public's definition of normal, full Americans as white people.

In keeping with this tradition, television, argues Michael Winston (1982), from its early stages, either was directly hostile to African Americans or ignored them: "It was to be 'white' not simply, as newspapers were, in its employment practices, but in its projection of American life—insofar as it reflected American reality at all" (p. 177).

In spite of the civil rights movements of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, in spite of the Black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, there still exists among many white people an underlying belief in and image of the United States as essentially a white country. African Americans are seen as peripheral to the growth and development of the United States. Essentially, African Americans are stereotyped as a problem in an otherwise harmonious country. For example, in urban America being a mugger is synonymous with being African American or Hispanic. The immediate image we accept as the norm is that of whites being mugged by African Americans and Hispanics.

How did this belief that all African Americans are potential muggers originate and become so embedded in the culture? Leading Black communication scholars in Britain have traced out the genesis of this image in British media (see Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), but the full story has yet to be told for the United States. Let us, however, refresh our memories about how television handled the 1989 incident in which a jogger was raped and viciously beaten in Central Park. By contrast, let us consider the media treatment of the so-called preppie murder, which occurred in the same park in 1987.

In the television news coverage of the former incident, viewers were informed that the jogger was an investment banker, which immediately set the tone that she was a worthy person. Next, they were informed that the attack occurred in the part of Central Park that borders Harlem, a predominantly poor African American and Latino district. Viewers were bombarded with details about how the woman was brutally beaten, raped, and left to die by these cruel African American and Hispanic young thugs. One particular young man charged with involvement was singled out as being from a good family;

he was doing well in school and should have been looking forward to a bright future. There was in general, however, little information given about the conditions and environments of these young African Americans, whereas there was an implied and shared assumption that all African American men are liable to be violent, cruel, and vicious muggers, the kind of people who would predictably perpetrate such a crime on decent white women.

We should pause, however, to ask about the young white man who, in 1987, raped and murdered a white woman in Central Park—an incident the press labeled the "preppie murder." He was portrayed as a fine, upstanding young man who, under the influence of drugs and alcohol, coupled with sexy provocation from the young woman, lost his head and accidentally strangled her. Television reports did not dwell on this victim with the same intense attention given the Central Park jogger, or on the barbarism of this act. Instead, they presented viewers with extenuating circumstances that would enable them to understand that this was not a premeditated crime, but just an unforeseen accident. (If only the dead girl's body could itself become an accident.)

By contrast, no extenuating circumstances were offered to explain the barbarous behavior of the young men who raped and beat the jogger (who narrowly survived the incident). No attention was focused, justifiably or not, on the harsh poverty of much of Harlem as an extenuating factor, not—more to the point—did the media trouble to ask the basic question of what kinds of individuals most of the young men were. The television coverage did not dwell on how some of these young men had been terrorizing the residents in their apartment buildings for months on end. It was not until the white woman jogger was mugged that these residents experienced some respite from the terror and harassment they had endured without any police protection or interest. Only white victims seemed to count.

Why were these two incidents treated so differently by television, especially given that in the preppie case the white woman was dead, whereas the jogger survived? Color. In the Central Park incident it was African Americans attacking fine, respectable whites, not a preppie behaving out of character. Television viewers were presented with well-established categories that they took for granted and accepted as real.

On the other hand, the Central Park preppie murder was unreal. Young, wealthy white men do not murder respectable white women.

Therefore, the woman was at fault. She must have been a quasi-prostitute, loose, asking for it, deserving of what happened to her. Otherwise she would not have been killed by a white man in Central Park.

Public outrage against the attackers of the Central Park jogger was phenomenal. There were suggestions that they should be castrated, locked up and the keys thrown away, given the death sentence. The preppie murder did not evoke such intense responses. That situation was presented as unclear, as if there were doubt as to whether the suspect actually committed the murder. On television he was shown leaving court with his parents and his lawyer. A Catholic bishop was wheeled out as a character reference. Indeed, the whole tone of the proceedings on television lacked the "hang 'em high" lynching response meted out to the attackers of the Central Park jogger.

Were these two incidents treated the same by television? No. Both crimes were hideous, and the attackers should be punished. However, one victim was dead, whereas the other, though badly beaten and raped, was alive and recovering. Why are the African Americans more deserving of punishment than a white murderer? We can subscribe to that position only if we accept the established belief that African Americans are violent, uncontrollable, and uncivilized, or if we consider it obvious that they require more punishment regardless of whatever crimes they have committed.

These two violent incidents are important because they illustrate that African American and white American offenders are not portrayed as equally deserving of punishment. The television treatments of both events were presented within a context that relied on accepted racial belief about African Americans. That belief can be stated as follows: African Americans have an inherent tendency to mug, rape, murder, and otherwise disrupt the normal orderly processes characteristic of white society in the United States of America (the preppie murder notwithstanding).

To move to more everyday TV, let us examine the virtual apartheid that exists in most television situation comedies. African Americans and white Americans are not portrayed as living or interacting harmoniously. Sitcoms are either African American or white American (rarely the former, until the success of *The Jeffersons* and later *The Cosby Show*). Also, as Gray (1986) observes, many all-Black sitcoms have not stirred from stereotyped and demeaning portrayals. He comments on the patronizing, even contemptuous, assumptions behind a series such as *Different Strokes*, which was integrated in the

presentation of African Americans as marginal in this society. There is no parity between African Americans and whites on television. Apart from some TV commercials full of instant cheerfulness around food or drink, African Americans and white Americans are not shown as living in an integrated society where they interact as friendly equals, respectful of each other's needs and tolerant of each other's differences.

Racist Stereotyping on TV: From Amos 'n' Andy to Cosby

To understand the long roots of these problems in U.S. television, we have to begin with *Amos 'n' Andy*, which was initially a very popular radio show and then was transferred to television. The *Amos 'n' Andy* radio formula originated with racial stereotypes derived from white vaudeville entertainers performing in "blackface," that is, with their faces painted with caricatural African features. According to Barlow (in press), the blackface characters that white comedians Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll developed for their characters in radio's *Amos 'n' Andy* were fairly typical of the prevailing minstrel stereotypes in white popular culture. Amos was the classic "Uncle Tom" stereotype, Andy was the "coon." These figures were easily recognizable in white popular culture, and had been since well before the Civil War (Lott, 1993). Gosden, who was from southern Virginia, attributed his mastering of "Negro dialect" to having been raised by an African American housekeeper. He also had from childhood a close friend called Snowball, who lived in his household as the boys grew up. According to Gosden, Snowball was the source of his humor for the show.

The stereotypes that Gosden and Correll portrayed on radio in the 1920s and 1930s served a variety of purposes in the social and political arena of the epoch. The characters of Amos and Andy were identified as having no education and, by definition, no intelligence. African Americans in the South mostly did not have the vote in 1938, when this radio program was at its zenith. The implication that white Americans derived from this program was very crude: African Americans are grossly ignorant and uneducated. Therefore, to give them the vote, decent jobs, political power, would be tantamount to reducing American democracy to a racial injustice—to whites.

formal sense but centered on a white man's adoption of two Black boys. In fact, television has invariably followed the successful formula of the radio programs that preceded it, which presented African Americans in a demeaning manner. Television, according to Professor J. Fred MacDonald (1983), became "visualized radio: the enactment for viewers of story lines and stereotypes that had proven successful for decades on radio" (p. 7). The influence of film and its generally racist portrayals was also of considerable importance (Nestey, 1982). In general, as television developed, either African Americans were portrayed as simple, happy, uneducable buffoons or they were ignored. A classic example of their being ignored is the fact that many Vietnam War documentaries scarcely included or mentioned them, even though African Americans were greatly overrepresented in the fighting compared with their numbers in the general population.

A different but very important example can be seen in the development of art in the United States, especially music, where African Americans have played a central creative role. Television, radio, and the music industry have managed to take over the cultural forms produced by African Americans, such as blues, jazz, and swing, without their actual participation. The original swing bands were those of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, yet it was bands such as Glen Miller's and the Dorsey Brothers' that were dubbed the "Kings of Swing." Some readers might argue that Duke Ellington and Count Basie were recognized by TV as being talented and great musicians, but was it just coincidental that the Glenn Miller Band and the Dorsey Brothers Band received much more time on radio, television, and film?

If it was coincidental, why has there never been an African American musical star with his or her own musical television series, with national syndication and a national advertising sponsor? In 1956, *The Nat "King" Cole Show* premiered on NBC, but in spite of NBC's efforts and the show's popularity, the show never found a national sponsor and was canceled in 1957. None of the conglomerates wanted to be closely identified with a "Negro program." Cole himself wrote after this experience that "racial prejudice is more finance than romance" (see MacDonald, 1983, p. 62).

Thus regardless of whether we are discussing the presentation of African Americans in a barbaric situation such as the crime committed against the Central Park jogger, or in sitcoms, or in TV documentaries about the Vietnam War, or the cultural appreciation of music in this society, there is one compelling factor that we cannot ignore: the

In 1951 *Amos 'n' Andy* premiered on television, with African American actors instead of whites in blackface. How did African Americans respond to this presentation of themselves on white television? This episode is important, not only in the development of the racial politics of American television, but also in the acknowledgment that audiences can be active, not merely passive, in their responses to media. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sought an injunction to prevent CBS from putting the program on television. Several groups sensitive to the African American struggle for civil rights condemned *Amos 'n' Andy* as an affront to social achievement. The Michigan Federation of Teachers called the TV series "a gross and vulgar caricature of fifteen million Negro citizens of our country" (MacDonald, 1983, p. 27). Several eminent African Americans blasted the show, describing it as the slow and steady poison of 20 years on radio now being transferred to TV. The African American *Pittsburgh Courier* led a successful campaign to have the show pulled.

One question that must not be avoided is why African Americans agreed to portray themselves and their race in such a demeaning manner. The answer is simple: job opportunities. African American actors were overwhelmingly excluded from TV and film except as infrequent guest stars on variety shows or as "walk-ons" (usually in the roles of house servants); very rarely were they stars in filmed or live drama. Examples of this exclusion are legion. The great singer Lena Horne was originally allowed only as far as a film soundtrack, while a white actress mouthed the words she sang on camera. Paul Robeson, the distinguished actor, thinker, and political campaigner, appeared as co-lead in a film glorifying British colonialism in Africa (*Sanders of the River*). Hatie McDaniel, attacked by some African Americans for her role as maid to Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, snapped that she would rather earn \$7,000 a week acting a maid than \$7 being one. *Amos 'n' Andy* provided regular employment for 142 African Americans who were paid handsome salaries and had a chance to develop their careers.

However, the purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate that the television industry quite consciously developed a program written, produced, and directed by white men that broadcast a stereotypical projection of African American life. Has there been a radical change in the media industry since then as far as African Americans are concerned? Quite frankly, no, despite appearances that might seem to be to the contrary.

During the 1970s, African Americans achieved increasing visibility in news coverage because of the political events of that era. Although the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a few more African Americans being able to participate in TV, the overall numbers in any part of the production process—as actors, producers, camera operators, or executives—have not risen significantly. Contributions of African Americans to television since the 1970s should not be casually dismissed. However, the manner in which they have been treated on TV despite their contributions has been very dishonorable and disrespectful of their sensibilities.

It should be noted that African Americans have gained a significant market as actors and actresses in TV commercials and also public service announcements. But major producers continue to avoid employing the many talented African Americans outside the advertising sphere. Some of the stereotypes that are still very active in producers' minds are depicted in Robert Townsend's comic yet serious 1987 feature film *Hollywood Shuffle*.

The issue is how to interpret greater visibility. African Americans are more visible on television today, and they are not as subjugated as they were in the *Amos 'n' Andy* era. Since 1988, one of television's top four White House journalists has been Cable News Network's Bernard Shaw, an African American. Nevertheless, despite individual gains, African Americans as a group do not have the same degree of opportunity as do white people as a group in the television industry. The key example that might be cited against this interpretation of the trends is *The Cosby Show*, which was immensely popular during the late 1980s and is still widely syndicated, nationally and internationally, but has an all-African American cast. We turn now to a presentation of two contrary positions on whether this show has reversed the image of African Americans on television.

Professor Marc Crispin Miller (1988) argues that *The Cosby Show* owes much of its immense success to advertising, because the Huxtables' milieu is "upbeat and as well stocked as a window display at Bloomingdale's" (p. 69). The Huxtables are successful, wealthy, comfortable, and African Americans. Within their environment the atmosphere is comfortable, without any serious discord, a far cry from the racial caricatures of *Amos 'n' Andy*—maybe. According to Miller, Cliff Huxtable's image represents a threat combined with a reassurance. In spite of his dark skin and physically imposing stature, he has an agreeable persona that should alleviate the fears of whites. Nevertheless,

says Miller, many whites continue to have the mugging nightmare, and are terrified that one day African Americans will steal their worldly possessions. Therefore, *The Cosby Show* has renovated the image so that there appear to be no feelings of animosity toward whites from African Americans, and so that all the old injustices seem to have been rectified. This type of reassurance, Miller states, is needed by white Americans because they are both spatially and psychologically removed from the masses of poor African Americans. In other words, *The Cosby Show* offers white Americans a view of reality that is reassuring and acceptable, just the way they want it to be—no guilt, no fears.

However, let us also consider Downing's (1988b) contrary analysis of *The Cosby Show*, in which he argues that the reasons for its popularity cannot be reduced to one variable only, such as its soothing effect on white America. His position is that it has a different function for African American audiences from its function for white audiences, and also that its positive effects for white audiences are related to its mixing together multiple strands of professional achievement, family life, antisexist positions, and humor, together with an attack on racism that is not preachy. Be that as it may, the TV reality of *The Cosby Show* is not the norm for most African Americans in this society. On the other hand, it does portray African Americans with dignity in a medium that has generally failed to do so.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that *The Cosby Show* is a celebration of the virtues of the upper-middle-class lifestyle that can be achieved through the education system (to which Bill Cosby himself feels a strong commitment; in 1989 he gave \$20 million from his earnings to a college for African American women). Both parents in the show are professionals: He is an obstetrician, she is a lawyer. This has to be placed in a sobering context: Data from the late 1980s indicate that the number of African Americans enrolling in colleges had dropped significantly. At the upper end, the number of African Americans earning doctorates had also declined. Given the limited scope for African Americans on television, *The Cosby Show* represents a refreshing though limited change of pace.

More recent studies of *The Cosby Show's* U.S. reception argue that the show's popularity among all audiences is a result of their different perceptions of reality. African Americans, Jhally and Lewis (1992) argue, see the show as portraying a Black family in harmony. Conflicts over male and female roles or sibling rivalries are resolved

in a supportive and loving environment. This Black family is not depicted as dysfunctional, stereotypical, violent, drug addicted, or a problem to the rest of society, the usual media fare. White audiences identify with it because this Black family is shown as made up of pleasant, decent human beings, "successful and attractive black people whom white people can respect, admire, and even identify with" (p. 5).

The show's critics continue to argue that it lets racism off the hook, and that the level of wealth and comfort attained by this Black family does not reflect the lives of the vast majority of African Americans in the United States. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, the social and economic conditions of Black people in the United States deteriorated significantly, even though white Americans were simultaneously discovering through *The Cosby Show* that African Americans are human beings. The implications of this contradiction are twofold. First, affluent African Americans may be seen as human beings, and the less affluent as less human. Second, *The Cosby Show* gives justification to the American illusion that anyone can make it, so that less advantaged African Americans have only themselves to blame for their poverty.

Jhally and Lewis (1992) found that class and color together are factors in terms of audience identification with *The Cosby Show*. Members of the white working class tend to identify with the family, whereas white upper-middle-class viewers are more skeptical about the parents' ability to be so available and even-tempered with the four children. The professions of medicine and law invariably cause parents to experience generally high stress levels and to have relatively little time for their children, two factors never in evidence in the show. African American working-class families in Jhally and Lewis's study tended to feel that the show does not reflect their own lived experience, but nonetheless they could relate to the individual characters' behavior as being more believable than that of the usual African American family on TV.

Finally, Jhally and Lewis (1992) present an analysis of the content of prime-time U.S. television over the periods 1971-1976, the pre-Cosby era, and 1984-1989, the Cosby era, in order to establish which characters could be defined as upper-middle-class, which as working-class, and which as ethnic minority. They found that 16% of Black characters in the pre-Cosby era were working-class, but that there were none at all in the Cosby period (pp. 58-59). In other words, in contradiction to the reality of deteriorating conditions for African Americans

during those years, they were presented, if at all, as occupying positions at the higher and more successful end of the social scale.

However, as against this focus in TV, in cinema the years 1989-1993 saw a sudden explosion of Black-directed movies focused on the other end of the social scale. Some of the best known, and most insightful on certain levels, were Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood*. Many of the creative teams producing these films were also largely African American, which was definitely a forward move. Still, looking back on these films collectively (e.g., *New Jack City*, *Juice*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Rage in Harlem*, *Menace II Society*), their almost uniform stress on crime, extreme violence, marauding youth gangs, drug dependency, and the impossibility of escape from or constructive action in poor African American neighborhoods represents yet again only a single dimension of everyday Black existence in the United States. That dimension is indeed more frightening in certain Black areas or subareas than in white areas, for the former are where the toll is taken. Yet considered together, these movies have done nothing to dislodge white stereotypes about the threat represented by African Americans. More reflective films that came out during the same period, such as Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger*, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, and Neil Jimenez's *The Waterdance*, had minimal advertising budgets, short runs, and as a result, very poor exposure. Formula was all.

Conclusions

Throughout this discussion, I have examined aspects of how television portrays reality while making African Americans invisible, or segregating them. The U.S. version of apartheid is as evident in TV as it is in city neighborhoods. At the same time, when African Americans do appear, their presentation generally fits the racist culture of this society like a glove. It is especially the case that the absence of African Americans from positions of authority in the television industry has contributed to their lack of influence over media roles and portrayals.

Further Questions

1. How have other groups been portrayed in the media, such as Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Arabs, Jews? What are the similarities of the portrayals of these groups to those of African Americans? What are the differences?
2. To what would you attribute the success of African American women writers, such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, in having their voices heard and their stories published? Are African American women seen as less threatening by the white majority than African American men? Does their success herald a breakthrough to be followed by others?
3. What are the lessons of the protests against *Arnos 'n' Andy* for the active audience in its relation to media authorities? Do you know of other protests against racial stereotyping in the media?