Prime-Time Television and Gender-Role Behavior
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This article presents a strategy for examining the interaction of females and males on prime-time commercial network television. The strategy employs a simplified version of Bales’ Interaction Process Analysis. The methodology has been taught to students who have used it to assess the extent of gender-role stereotyping on television. Use of this strategy and resulting data are discussed for a course on gender roles and an introductory sociology course.

Prime-Time Television and Gender-Role Behavior

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There has reportedly been a resurgence of interest on the part of academia in the mass media and their effects on both individual and public opinion (Lang and Lang, 1981: 654). This resurgence comes after a 30 to 40-year “famine” (Gans, 1972: 697). Some of the recent interest has been focused on commercial network television and its portrayal of women. Butler and Paisley (1980: 68) point out that the media portrayal of women has been of concern to the women’s movement since the 1960s, and that systematic analyses of such portrayals have been carried out since the 1970s.

While the audience effects of television programming and viewing have not yet been convincingly demonstrated, feminists and many sociologists agree that the potential, at least, for such effects is great and that the portrayal of women is largely negative. Tuchman (1978), Lemon (1978), and Butler and Paisley (1980) have pointed out that television may not only reflect contemporary standards in gender roles, but may also generate such standards. Consequently, the content of programming on commercial network television is worthy of attention and analysis in relation to the gender-role behavior of women and men. The focus of this article is on prime-time (7–10 p.m. Central Time, 8–11 p.m.)
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Eastern Time) commercial network television. After briefly reviewing the literature on prime-time television and gender roles, the article presents a framework within which students and their instructors can objectively and systematically analyze the social interaction of women and men as depicted on television.

TELEVISION AND GENDER ROLES

It is almost commonplace today for introductory sociology textbooks, as well as other texts in sociology and women’s studies, to assert that the mass media, and television in particular, have become a major agent of socialization in modern society. For example, Light and Keller (1982: 129) make the following assertion in their introductory sociology textbook: “For many children, television has become a major agent of socialization, with both good and bad effects.” Robertson (1981: 328) makes a similar observation, arguing that all forms of the mass media strongly emphasize traditional gender roles. Similarly, while contending that “no significant studies directed toward the negative image of women on commercial television and its effects on the viewing public” have been done yet, McDonald and Godfrey (1982: 12, 10) also assert: “The ever-present negative image has daily impact because commercial television is part of the socialization process which influences the lives of the audience.”

Whether or not one is convinced that such an effect has been demonstrated, one can certainly appreciate the potential for influence when one considers Tuchman's (1978: 9–10) observations on the pervasiveness of television in the United States:

In the average American household, television sets are turned on more than six hours each winter day.

More American homes have television sets than have private bathrooms, according to the 1970 census. 96% of all American homes are equipped with television, and most have more than one set.

By the time an American child is fifteen years old, she has watched more hours of television than she has spent in the classroom. And
since she continues watching as she grows older, the amount of
time spent in school can never hope to equal the time invested
viewing television.

The average adult spends five hours a day with the mass media,
almost as much time as she or he spends at work. Of these five
hours, four are occupied by the electronic media (radio and
television).

Television consumes 40% of the leisure time of adult Americans.

It was, no doubt, this realization of the potential influence that
led feminists and sociologists to look critically at the televised
image of women. Certainly, “compelling” evidence (Tuchman,
1978: 30, 33) of television’s impact has been observed in areas
other than gender-role imagery, particularly in relation to violence
and racial attitudes. Several studies have also provided some
evidence suggesting that television imagery does have an impact
on gender-role perceptions and attitudes, particularly those of
children (see, for example, Sprafkin and Liebert, 1978; Gross and
Jeffries-Fox, 1978; Pingree, 1976; and Beuf, 1974).

Most of the research on television and gender roles to date,
however, has focused on the amount of air time allocated to
women and men, and on the content of women’s depicted image.
What is the image of women and men that is observed in the many
hours of viewing? To what extent are women and men portrayed
as exhibiting similar modes of social behavior? To what extent
is traditional gender-role modeling reinforced by television
imagery?

The existent literature provides some answers to these questions.
Consistently, it has been found that women are seen less than men
on commercial network television—a situation to which Tuchman
(1978: 7) refers as the “symbolic annihilation of women.” In fact,
there is some evidence that the disparity in air time between women
and men has increased over the years. For example, in 1952 it was
reported that 68% of the prime-time characters were males, while
in 1973 this figure increased to 74% (Tuchman, 1978: 10). Most
studies indicate that men outnumber women in television pro-
gramming by a ratio of two to one. Not only are viewers less likely
to observe female characters than male characters on prime-time
television, but a recent study (Mackey and Hess, 1982) indicates that it is only rarely that a viewer has an opportunity to see females interacting with other females in the absence of males. Less than 7% of all scenes depicting social interaction in a comprehensive sample of prime-time commercial network television programs showed females interacting with other females in the absence of males—in contrast to 32% of the scenes showing males interacting with other males in the absence of females. Indeed, these observations are suggestive of symbolic annihilation. Not only is female-female interaction trivial in its representation, but when it does occur, it is most likely to be seen in the context of situation comedies.

The studies that have been done also indicate that women and men are most often depicted in dissimilar social positions on prime-time television. Butler and Paisley (1980: 93–94) summarize these findings well:

In television programs, men are more often employed than women and have higher-status jobs (93).
Marital status is known more often for women than for men (94).
Television programs for children show men in more roles than women and show women more often in family roles (94).

Furthermore, neither men’s nor women’s depicted occupations are reflective of reality (DeFleur, 1964; Butler and Paisley, 1980). Gross (1974) suggests that such distortions are significant in that heavy television watchers (adults who watch four or more hours per day) tend to respond to factual questions in ways that are more reflective of the world as depicted on television than the real world around them. Hirsch (1981), reanalyzing the same data, questions whether such a cause-and-effect relationship exists.

Note that in responding to questions about the depiction of women and men, most studies have paid little attention to the social interactional and behavioral dimension of gender roles. While the observations cited do indeed suggest stereotyped depictions, it is important for students of sociology to move beyond superficial role assignments and to focus attention on the nature
of role behavior and social interaction. The importance of a more in-depth examination of television portrayals is suggested by Tuchman (1978: 41) when she observes: "A quick glimpse at contemporary television seems to indicate that times have changed." More employed women are shown (for example, Alice, One Day at a Time, and Cagney and Lacey), and in some instances, at least, it is "mother who knows best" (for example, Miss Ellie in Dallas, Alice in Alice, and Ms. Romano in One Day at a Time). But have there really been changes in the depicted behavior of women and men?

Several studies that have focused attention on this question suggest that traditional behavior is most prevalent. Lemon (1978: 64) examined the issue of dominance in female-male interaction on prime-time television. She concluded that "television generally shows men as more dominant than women." In an older study (Smythe, 1953), it was observed that male heroes were portrayed as more potent and active than female heroes. Turow (1974) observed that 70% of the directives issued on prime-time dramas are given by men, and McNeil (1975) noted that the employed females depicted on prime-time television are shown engaging in personal interaction five times more than in professional interaction, while for males the depicted interaction is nearly equally distributed between professional and personal interaction. Similarly, Tedesco (1974) observed that not only are males more often depicted as employed (and employed in different occupations) than females, but males are generally characterized as engaging in instrumental behavior, while females are generally characterized as engaging in social-emotional behavior. Thus, depicted behavior is quite consistent with gender-role stereotypes. As a consequence, Tuchman (1978: 42) notes: "Contrary to our impressionistic glimpse, it (the section of her co-edited book on television and female imagery) finds that the image of women has not improved."

In considering how one might assist students in moving beyond impressions and in tapping the social interactional dimension of gender roles, the dichotomy proposed by Parsons and Bales comes to mind. The dichotomy is that of instrumental behavior versus
expressive behavior. Certainly, this represents one of the most widely disseminated analyses of the division of labor by gender in American sociology. It is Parsons and Bales's contention that instrumentally oriented behavior, that concerned with manipulation of the physical environment and oriented toward the achievement of a goal, traditionally characterizes males' social action. Females' social action, on the other hand, is traditionally characterized as expressively oriented and concerned with the social and emotional needs of the family and community.

In studying the emergence of leadership in task-oriented groups, Bales (1950) operationalized these differently oriented behaviors in his "Interaction Process Analysis System." The system enables one to observe, code, record, and compare interacting individuals' behavior. Twelve categories of behavior are employed, and these twelve categories are grouped into instrumental (task-related) or expressive (social-emotional) types of behavior (see Figure 1). Over the years, interaction data have been gathered from numerous groups that have used this system with consistent results (Jones and Gerard, 1967: 659). This system serves as the basis of the methodology used with students in critically observing and analyzing television portrayals of women and men.

**METHODOLOGY**

Bales's Interaction Process Analysis system is a rather complex one, consisting not only of twelve behavioral categories, but also requiring the observer to note to whom and from whom behaviors are directed. This complexity is deemed as unnecessary for purposes of determining the extent to which television imagery reinforces or serves to break down gender-role stereotypes. Further, the complexity of the system makes it problematic for use with undergraduate students for purposes of a class project on gender roles. Consequently, the system has been modified.

In the modified Bales system, social behaviors are first dichotomized into task-oriented (instrumental) behaviors and social-emotional (expressive) behaviors. Following Bales's lead,
these two dichotomous categories are further separated into task-oriented asking behavior (that is, asking for direction, information, input); task-oriented giving behavior (that is, giving direction, information, input); social-emotional behavior that is positive in emotive valence (that is, showing solidarity, tension release, understanding); and social-emotional behavior that is negative in emotive valence (that is, showing antagonism, defensiveness, tension). The original twelve behavioral categories from the Bales system are thus retained as guides for coding within each of the four major types of behavior.

A coding frame (see Figure 2) for observations of social interaction has been devised employing the four types of behavior identified above. The coding frame enables an observer to code up
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior Category</th>
<th>Male #1</th>
<th>Male #2</th>
<th>Male #3</th>
<th>Female #1</th>
<th>Female #2</th>
<th>Female #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Coding Frame for Observation of Social Interaction on Television

to six interacting individuals who are identified by gender (arbitrarily labeled in the figure as three males and three females). There is also a place on each frame to note the name of the program observed, which can be used in comparing portrayals across types of programs.
The coding system works as follows: The observer attends to interaction taking place among two or more individuals, since the focus of concern here is on social interaction. These interacting individuals are located in a scene, defined as a set of actors situated in a specified locale. Whenever there is a change in locale (not just camera angle) and/or person-composition, a new scene is observed. Only one scene is recorded per coding sheet.

The observer codes each actor’s behavior in turn. A behavioral act is usually a verbalization—although nonverbal acts, as well as intonation and facial expressions contextualizing verbalizations, are also observed. The behavioral act begins when an actor in the scene begins speaking (or nonverbally behaving) and continues as a unit until another actor in the scene responds or begins behaving, or until the scene ends. The behavioral act is observed as a whole unit of behavior and is coded and recorded by the observer with a slash mark in one of the four categories of behavior in the column designated for that actor. The response of the second actor is then observed, coded, and recorded in a similar manner. Coding continues across individuals, one behavioral act at a time, until either the scene ends or the time interval for coding is over. Five-minute intervals (samples) are observed and coded for each television program viewed.

Prior to presenting the coding system to the students, six colleagues (five faculty members and one graduate student) served as independent coders to test the reliability of the instrument. The reliability test was accomplished in the following manner: A seven-minute segment of a prime-time television program was videotaped. The segment contained six scenes. The videotape was shown to the six coders simultaneously, and they recorded the behavioral acts from the segment. Two indices of reliability were used: (1) The first response from each of the six initial behaviors observed was compared across the six observers to assess reliability for an individual datum; and (2) the totals for coding categories for the entire six-scene segment were compared across the six observers to assess the reliability of the aggregate data. The results showed a 91% agreement among the coders on the individual datum and a reliability coefficient of 0.82 for the aggregate. These
TABLE 1
Proportion of Males and Females Observed on Prime-Time Commercial Network Television, By Type of Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Program</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comedies</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Dramas</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Dramas</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Programs</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

measures of reliability fall well within the parameters suggested by Butler and Paisley (1980: 66) for content analysis of media presentations.

Using this coding instrument and method, then, the six independent coders proceeded in March, 1979, to collect data on all regularly programmed prime-time commercial network television shows. The programs were randomly assigned to the six coders. Two purposes were served by this data collection. First, it provided additional assurance that the coding instrument and method were indeed appropriate to collecting interactional data off of television; and second, it provided a baseline of data against which subsequent student observations could be compared. Tables 1–3 illustrate some of these findings and the kinds of analyses that can be done with the students’ data.

STUDENTS EXAMINE GENDER-ROLE BEHAVIOR

Students enrolled in a course on the Sociology of Gender Roles have used the modified version of the Bales system for observing, coding, recording, and analyzing gender-role behavior on prime-time, commercial network television for the past three years. Most of the students in this course are junior and senior undergraduate sociology majors. Although few of them have had previous experience with instruments like the Bales system, they readily (and enthusiastically) learn the method during the training sessions.
TABLE 2
Proportion of Male and Female Behavior, By Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Category</th>
<th>Males %</th>
<th>Females %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional +</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional -</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Social-Emotional</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented Asking</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented Giving</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Task-Oriented</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By the end of these sessions, a high level of agreement (comparable to that achieved during the development of the methodology) is observed. Consequently, the class project has been successful each time that it has been used, as is suggested by students’ discussion of the project and their papers analyzing what they have observed. Many students, for example, report surprise that so little change has occurred in the portrayal of women and men in spite of the women’s movement’s complaints about gender-role stereotyping.

In preparation for the class project, a complete listing is made of all prime-time commercial network television shows to be aired during the week designated for the class project. Each student assumes responsibility for coding a five-minute segment of specific programs so that all programs are observed during the course of the project.

Prior to the collection of data, the students are trained in the coding methodology. This training has generally been most effective when done with small groups of students (3-6) at a time. The training session takes approximately one hour. During that time, the student is familiarized with the coding frame and its use. Videotaped segments of two different prime-time television programs are used for training purposes. At least two different scenes (as defined) are observed from these segments. The first segment is one that is relatively simple, involving dyadic interaction. The trainer talks through this scene, pointing out to the students where one act ends and another begins. Then the students view the scene
TABLE 3
Proportion of Male and Female Behavior in Each Category, Crime Dramas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Category</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional +</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional -</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Social-Emotional</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented Asking</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented Giving</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Task-Oriented</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

again and code it. Numbers of acts and kinds of acts observed for each character are discussed. Questions that the students have in using the coding scheme are also discussed. The scene is coded again, and the coding is compared. This procedure is repeated until a high level of agreement (approximately 85%) is achieved. Additional scenes are then observed and coded. After coding each segment during training, the students and instructor discuss the coding until all feel comfortable with it and the instructor is satisfied that the students are all using the system in the same way. The students are encouraged to practice observing and coding with the coding sheets for one week before actually collecting their data.

Upon completion of the training session, the students are supplied with coding sheets and begin collecting data from their assigned television programs. The students are also asked to analyze their data for the next class, using whatever techniques they feel are appropriate, to respond to the following questions: (1) Are there differences in the ways that females and males are portrayed on commercial network prime-time television? If so, what are those differences? (2) Does commercial network prime-time television serve to reinforce stereotypic gender-role behavior, or does it help to break down stereotypic gender-role behavior? The students prepare brief papers focusing on these questions and utilizing their own data. These papers, together with their raw data (coding sheets), are submitted at the next class. Their findings are discussed, and their raw data are combined and analyzed for
the following session. Often, one or more students in the class are sufficiently interested in the project that they volunteer to assist with the aggregate data.

The class discussions are excellent learning experiences. Not only do the students exchange observations and interpretations of what they have noted on television imagery, but they also develop an appreciation for another technique for carrying out social science research (as opposed to the usual survey methodology in which sociology students tend to be the most schooled). They also “discover” limitations in their data and in their ability to draw conclusions from the data. For example, as the students discuss their observations, they soon realize that each of them has only a limited sample of what is presented on prime-time television and that these limited samples sometimes result in different observations. This realization further stimulates their thinking and their interest in what the total sample will reveal.

Additionally, those students who have taken a statistics and/or methodology course frequently make use of what they have learned in those courses by applying statistical tests to their data. Other students, who have not taken those courses, generally sum and compare their data using simple percentages. Once again, a new or renewed appreciation for statistics and statistical testing is a secondary pay-off of the project.

FURTHER USES OF TELEVISION DATA ON GENDER ROLES

This study is also useful in classes where the students are not directly involved in the collection of the data. The presentation of material on prime-time television’s images of gender roles fits well with the topic of sex and gender roles. This study could thus be included in a visual sociology class where the analysis of visual images is the primary focus of the course. It could also be of interest to classes in research methods, as the techniques used are easily and inexpensively done. The methods allow for the observation of social interaction in a quantitative and objective manner. A social problems class may also employ this material usefully. What
follows is a discussion of such a presentation in an introductory sociology class.

In the Introduction to Sociology class, the general topic of gender roles is presented using a variety of methods and stresses the institutional nature of sexism. Many students in the class are quite accepting of traditional gender-role definitions. In fact, some of the students, both male and female, feel threatened by material that calls their personal beliefs into question. For this reason, it is important to present materials that are not of the impressionistic type, as these can easily be dismissed by students. Prior to the presentation of this study, a foundation of material focusing on the institutional nature of gender-role definitions is presented. A sampling of this material includes women’s role with the family (Degler, 1980; Gillespie, 1971), women in education (Brown, 1979; Maccoby, 1980), and women and work (Ryan, 1979). With this institutional foundation, the manner in which gender roles are portrayed on television is investigated. The mass media are important because they not only reflect these social institutions, but may also support the sexism within them by socializing both men and women into certain kinds of behavior.

ADVANTAGES OF GENDER-ROLE STUDY

One of the major advantages in using this study in an Introduction to Sociology class is that it is of interest to the students. Television is an important aspect of American culture. Most of the students taking this class were born in the television age and are likely to have had a good deal of experience with television while they were growing up. Class members have reported watching between one and two hours of television per day, seven days a week. This is an average amount of time approaching the number of hours spent in university classes.

The longitudinal nature of the study (comparing 1979 observations with current ones) shows how gender roles have both changed and remained the same on prime-time television. Students sometimes believe that great changes have taken place in the way males and females are portrayed and are often surprised to learn
just how stereotyped the current images are. Such a “discovery” also provides a good beginning point for consideration of the mass media as an important institution in modern society, as suggested by Gans (1972).

The methods used are very helpful in getting across the importance of careful observation. This study uses empirical and quantifiable methods that reinforce the earlier topic on methodology. Such a quantitative study is not so easily dismissed by skeptical students. Also, the acquaintance of students with Bales’s (1950) Interaction Process Analysis at this point in the course provides a foundation for later discussions of the nature of social groups, as well as focusing the students’ attention on social interaction per se.

**IMPACT OF PRESENTATION**

In order to assess the impact that the presentation of the study had on the class, a questionnaire was administered at the end of the course, some two months after the presentation. The first four items were of a demographic nature, the fifth item asked about their television viewing habits, and the remaining twelve items were statements with which they could agree or disagree, using a forced choice Likert response set. The class response was both interesting and instructive.

A total of 69% of the class (N = 52) indicated that the study was of great interest. Thus, while not all the students were fascinated by the material, a sizable majority of the class was interested. There was no difference in interest level between male and female students; however, over twice the number of males than females (14 versus 6) in the class agreed with the statement: “Before taking this class I never thought much about the way sex roles were portrayed on television.” This suggests that the females were more likely than the males to be sensitive to the portrayal of gender roles before being exposed to the study.

Consistent with Roper (1980), however, males spend a significantly greater amount of time watching television. Of the females, 56% watched less than an hour of television per day,
while 29% of the males watched between one and two hours of television per day.

The greater sensitivity of the female students to this material showed in other items as well. Not only did female students report thinking about gender-role portrayals before listening to the lecture and seeing the data, but they were more influenced by the material than were the males. Females were significantly (p<.05) more likely to agree with the statement: “Once we learned that sex roles were shown in a stereotyped fashion on TV, I have been more sensitive to this in my own television watching.” Female students were also significantly (p<.05) more likely to agree with the statement: “I have begun to question some of my own sex-role behavior in my relationships with others after studying this topic in class.”

A large majority of the class (85%) were convinced that television presents mostly stereotyped views of gender roles. As this was one of the main findings of the study, it seems that the message was successfully transmitted.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The modified form of the Bales Interaction Process Analysis system has proven to be a valuable teaching tool in the observation of gender-role behavior on television. Although our use of the system has been restricted to prime-time commercial network television, it is quite probable that the system could also be used with other types of television programming—afternoon soap operas, Saturday morning children’s programs, public broadcasting, and so forth.

The technique enables students to assess the extent of gender-role stereotyping in television imagery objectively and systematically. Baseline data, gathered by instructors or by students and instructors, permits over-time comparisons of television imagery and also provides a set of depicted gender-role data for use in other classes.

Since television is such a pervasive medium in our contemporary society, all (or virtually all) students have had experience with it.
It has been our experience that the class exercise, in particular, has had some long-term pay-offs in that students continue to report greater sensitivity to what is portrayed on television long after the class has ended.

There are a few precautions that potential users of this technique should bear in mind. One of them is the necessity of adequately training students in the use of the coding system. The findings are only as accurate as the students’ observations. Second, one also needs to take care in scheduling the data collection. One is best advised to avoid the first week or two of a new television season, in that the season’s programs typically do not all begin at the same time. Additionally, one ought to avoid those times when holiday and/or sports specials are likely to be aired. “Super Bowl weekend,” for example, is not a good time to obtain a representative sample of the regularly programmed fare.

REFERENCES


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