

It's a White, White TV World Out There

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Last month, the Screen Actors Guild issued such a negative report on the number of Latino actors on network prime-time TV that it almost seemed as if things couldn't get any worse. But they soon will.

According to a recent *Los Angeles Times* story, a look at the fall season's programming shows that not only Latinos but other minorities--including Asians, African Americans and Native Americans--will be "virtually invisible" in new prime-time network shows. By allowing this to happen, television executives are making a serious mistake.

The Times' story indicated that of the 26 new comedies and dramas premiering on the major broadcast networks next fall, not one features a minority in a leading role and few even feature secondary characters who are minority, "turning the TV lineup into a nearly all-white landscape." This, despite repeated commitments from network executives to "do better" when it comes to portraying minority characters.

Some people act as if it were merely a matter of intellectual curiosity that TV shows purportedly set in Los Angeles, New York or Chicago do not reflect adequately the contemporary demographic realities of these metropolitan areas. Yet imagine for a moment if it were an "all-Asian landscape" on TV? Would watchers be concerned? Would they ask how the absence of white faces impacts young Americans?

The fact is, one in nine Americans is Latino. In metropolitan L.A., nearly one out of two residents is Latino. Yet you wouldn't know it if you watched all the sitcoms involving two guys and two gals trying to make it in the big city. Why?

A recent SAG study carried out by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute in Claremont brought together nearly 100 Latino actors and actresses in New York, Los Angeles and Miami to take a closer look at Latinos and the entertainment industry. Their conclusion: The television industry remains stuck on a narrow, hackneyed image of Latinos.

Despite the success on TV of several Latinos, including Cheech Marin, Bruno Campos and Jimmy Smits, the industry still views the typical Latino as being an uneducated immigrant with certain racial characteristics: darker skin and a heavy Spanish accent.

Although the Latino community has many immigrants who speak with accents, this certainly doesn't reflect all Latinos. In California, Latinos hold positions ranging from the speaker of the Assembly and Los Angeles County sheriff to police officers, teachers and Catholic bishops. At the national level, Latinos serve on the president's Cabinet and they win Pulitzer Prizes in

literature. Latinos are just like other Americans when it comes to their jobs and their education; you just wouldn't know it from watching TV.

Why does this stereotype of Latinos continue to dominate the entertainment world? One reason may be that decision-makers in the industry, including casting directors, producers and agents, are bombarded daily with the tired images of Latinos and blacks that dominate prime-time news shows. A 1998 Tomas Rivera Policy Institute national survey of Latino TV viewers found that Latinos are eight times more likely to see themselves portrayed in the news as illegal immigrants, drug runners or gangbangers than in positive roles such as medical doctors, elected officials or teachers. The news plays a critical role in influencing decision-makers as they form their images of the world. And for Latinos, this image is overwhelmingly negative.

Another reason is that with the advent of national Spanish-language television networks, the perception is that Latinos only watch television in Spanish. Again, the Tomas Rivera Institute's survey found that Latinos watch television in both English and Spanish. This is particularly true among younger viewers.

The institute's researchers also found that the Latino community is not vocal in letting the entertainment industry know when it is upset about negative portrayals. This lack of protest may contribute to the networks' complacency.

More alarming than the pigeonholing of Latino actors and actresses, the stereotyping and the TV industry's denial of the nation's demographics is how efficiently television makes minorities nonexistent, a kind of ethnic whitewashing. Many metropolitan regions, including L.A., are polarized between the haves and have-nots. TV contributes to this by deciding who will exist and who won't on TV. If a group simply doesn't exist, then neither do its problems with education, health care and jobs.

Whether TV executives recognize it or not, the face of America is white, black, brown, yellow and red. But don't look for anything other than white on the new programs this fall on network television. Industry executives have decided that the only new faces they will show are white. Apparently, they still reside on Fantasy Island.