



CHAPTER

11

Entertainment Content

Key Idea: Entertainment messages from the mass media follow formulas that are designed to attract our attention and condition us for repeat exposures.

Entertainment Formula 164

- General Story Formula 165
- Genres 165
- Constraints 167

Character Patterns 169

- Demographic Patterns 169
- Stereotypical Portrayals 171

Controversial Content Elements 175

- Sex 175
- Homosexuality 176
- Violence 177
- Language 179

Health 180

- Deceptive Health Patterns 180
- Responsible Health Patterns 181

Values 181

Becoming Media Literate With Entertainment Messages 183

Further Reading 186

Keeping Up-to-Date 187

Katherine, a freelance script writer, had waited 3 weeks to get an appointment with the vice president of Prestige Films & Entertainment Company so she could pitch her idea for a TV movie. If the vice president liked her idea, he would green-light the project,

which would mean she would get paid to write the script and Prestige would likely produce the 2-hour movie that could turn into a pilot for a television series.

Katherine was very nervous as she began her pitch. “This story is about family values as seen through the eyes of a brother and sister who are suddenly orphaned. Chloe is 10 years old and Tony is her 14-year-old brother. The story opens with Chloe, Tony, and their parents on the run from some evil corporation thugs who are trying to track down the father for being a whistleblower and exposing some illegal practices of the company where the father worked. The children narrowly escape the thugs, who find their parents and kill them. Now orphans with no family or friends, the children have to keep moving around so that the thugs don’t find them. Most of the movie is about how the brother and sister form a strong bond as they take care of each other as they have to quickly grow up. There is a series of scenes showing how they struggle to find transportation, shelter, and food to eat while they evade the thugs chasing them. There are also some tender scenes with Chloe and Tony talk about their grief and fear. Finally in the climax, the kids figure out a way to trick the thugs into an ambush where they are able to kill the thugs. They take the thugs’ car and discover its trunk is full of cash. So the movie ends on a high note.”

The vice president smiled broadly. “I love your idea. It’s got so many great story elements. It’s got tragedy. It’s got action and suspense. It’s got kids fighting to survive. It’s got family values. It’s got violence and retribution. I love it!”

“So you’ll green-light the project?” Katherine couldn’t believe that after 2 years of pitching various film projects, she finally had a winner.

“Yes. Definitely yes! But I’d like to see one change—one small, tiny change. If you agree to that, it’s a go.”

“What kind of change?”

“Could you make Tony a porpoise?”

“A porpoise—a fish?”

“Yes, let’s make Tony a fish. TV viewers love animals!”

Entertainment messages, like news and information-type messages, follow particular formulas. Producers of entertainment messages must follow these formulas so as to grab the attention of audiences and hold their attention throughout their stories. The more completely producers understand these formulas and the more skillfully they can use them to construct their stories, the more successful their messages will be. As consumers of media messages, we too can benefit from greater understanding of these formulas.

ENTERTAINMENT FORMULA

On the surface, it appears that the media present a wide variety of entertainment messages. But when we analyze those messages, we can see that they follow standard patterns. For

example, a wide variety of songs have been presented as popular music in recordings, cassettes, and CDs and on the radio over many decades. Each of those songs follows certain formulas. None of those songs is a purely random sequence of notes. Musical formulas tell musicians which notes are played in sequence (melody progressions) and which notes are to be played together (chords). There are a small number of standard rhythms. All of the songs are creative variations on the standard formula. The same can be said for any media message.

General Story Formula

There are formulas for telling stories. Screenwriter Sue Clayton analyzed successful and unsuccessful Hollywood films to try to figure out which elements are most associated with success. From this analysis, she discovered a formula, which she calls the genetic blueprint for a successful movie. This blueprint calls for 30% action, 17% comedy, 13% good versus evil, 12% love/sex/romance, 10% special effects, 10% plot, and 8% music. This formula shows that *Titanic* and *Toy Story 2* were perfect movies (Baker, 2003). While it is doubtful that we could ever reduce the formula for a successful movie or story to a precise mathematical formula, there are certain characteristics all stories must have to appeal to audiences. All stories begin with a conflict or a problem. The conflict is heightened throughout the story, and the main characters try to solve the problem. Finally, during the climactic scene, the problem is solved, and the conflict is eliminated or at least significantly reduced.

This general formula is used not only by the creators of media messages; the formula is also used by us—the audience—to help us easily recognize the good and bad characters and to quickly find where we are in the story. Stories that follow the formulas the closest usually have the largest audiences because they are the easiest to follow. The more experience we have with entertainment messages, the more we learn the story formula. We are conditioned to expect certain plot points, certain pacing, certain types of characters, and certain themes.

Genres

The overall entertainment story formula is elaborated in different ways across different genres of entertainment. Let's examine the story formula in the genres of drama, comedy, romance, and reality programming.

Drama. The drama genre has three basic subgenres that illuminate three types of drama entertainment: tragedy, mystery, and action/horror (Sayre & King, 2003). Tragedy must have characters that are perceived by the audience as noble and good. However, bad things happen to these characters either because they have a fatal flaw they cannot get around (as is the case in Shakespearean tragedies) or because fate has conspired to do them in (such as what happens in the movie *Titanic*). What audiences enjoy about tragedies is the opportunity to compare themselves with the tragic characters and feel better off than those unfortunate characters.

With the mystery formula, an important element of the plot is missing. For example, in a "whodunit" mystery, the *who* is missing. A serious crime usually triggers the story, and

someone must use the information available to figure out who committed the crime. The suspense is in solving the puzzle. Audiences are drawn into the story as they try to solve the mystery for themselves.

The action/horror formula is primarily plot driven as good and evil fight it out in ever deepening conflict. Characters are stereotypes or comic book types. Within several seconds after being introduced to a character, we know whether that character is a hero or a villain. Characters are static and don't change. The plot relies on fast-paced action that maximizes arousal in the audience. The primary emotions evoked are fear, suspense, and vengeance. Violence is a staple in almost all of these stories. The formula of violence tells us that it is okay for criminals to behave violently throughout a program as long as they are caught at the end of the show. This restores a sense of peace—at least until the commercials are over and the next show begins. Also, we feel that it is permissible for police officers, private eyes, and good guy vigilantes to break the law and use violence as long as it is used successfully against the bad guys.

Comedy. With the comedy formula, minor conflict situations flare up and set the action in motion. The conflict is heightened verbally, through deceit or insults. Characters are developed through their unusual foibles and quick wit. The action is neatly resolved at the end of the show, and all the main characters are happy.

One subgenre of comedy is the character comedy or comedy of manners. Here the humor arises out of character quirks that illuminate the craziness of everyday situations. Characters find themselves in difficult situations that we all encounter everyday. As characters try to work their way through these situations, the absurdity of certain social conventions is illustrated, and this makes us laugh. Examples include *Seinfeld* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Another subgenre of comedy is the put-down comedy, where certain characters have power over other characters and exercise that power in humorous ways. Examples include *Two and a Half Men* and *The Office*. The situation comedy formula is so well known by viewers that Nickelodeon has created some 60-second sitcoms. Because viewers have no trouble recognizing typical plots and stereotypical characters, we have no trouble following the action.

Romance. A romance story begins with a person experiencing either loneliness from a lack of a relationship or a relationship that is bad due to betrayal, jealousy, or fear. As audience members, we are made to identify with the main character and feel her pain. But she is full of hope for what seems like an unattainable goal. Through hard work and virtue, she gets closer and closer to her goal—even though she experiences frequent heart-rendering setbacks—until the story climaxes with the fulfillment of the goal, which transmits intense emotions to the audience.

Writers who have mastered this formula are very successful. For example, among all paperbacks sold in the United States, about half are in the genre of the romance novel. One romance novelist who has really understood the formula is Nora Roberts. She has published 127 romance novels, all following the same basic romance formula. In one year, she had 11 titles on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In total, she has 85 million books in print, and her work has been translated into 25 languages (Riggs, 1999). Has she produced a body

of great literature that will be read for centuries? No, of course not. Has she recognized a market for a particular kind of story and manufactured many products to meet that need? There is no doubt of this.

The most dominant two genres in prime-time television from the 1970s through the 1990s were dramas and situation comedies. The type of drama shifted from action/adventure and westerns in the 1960s to crime/detective dramas in the 1970s. However, the comedy genre is king with audiences; comedies account for half of the top 100 television shows and top 100 movies of all time (Sayre & King, 2003).

After years of watching stories on television and in the movies, we have become adept at following the formulas about characters, plots, and themes. We know these formulas so well that many of us think we can write and produce our own shows. Perhaps some of us can, but producing a successful show is a very difficult undertaking. While the formulas are deceptively simple, making them work well is very difficult.

Constraints

Although these formulas are relatively simple for audiences to understand, they are exceedingly difficult for producers to follow well when creating television series. The reasons for this are that producers must work around so many constraints. Some of these constraints are introduced by the media, and other constraints are introduced by society's norms.

Constraints by Medium. Telling an entertaining story presents a different challenge as you move from one medium to another. If you plan to tell a story in print, you have only one perceptual channel (eyes), and you need to use words to trigger vivid images in the minds of the readers. If you plan to tell a story in song, you again need to trigger vivid images and strong emotions, but you must do this through the audience's ears, not their eyes. With a song, you also need to use words that sound good; that is, they must have a certain cadence that goes along with the rhythm of the music, and often there is a rhyming pattern. Also, the words must tell their story in 2 or 3 minutes.

Television is by far the most challenging medium for telling stories. At first, it might seem the least challenging because it appears to have few perceptual constraints; that is, you can use audio as well as video elements. Also, you are not dependent on the reading abilities of audience members. But there are two significant challenges with the television medium. First, stories must be enormously compelling. When people watch a show on television, it is extremely easy for them to switch away from the show to many other competing channels. Also, television stories are frequently interrupted by breaks for commercials, and some of these breaks have a dozen or more ads and last for 4 or more minutes. Viewers can forget about the story or lose their motivation to stay tuned unless that story has really intrigued them. Therefore, storytellers on television must do things to catch the audience's interest right from the beginning; they must build the action to a high point before each commercial break so that the audience will want to stay tuned throughout the commercial pod and find out what happens when the show returns, and they must keep the action interesting every minute so that people who are flipping through channels will want to stop and watch the show.

Second, television stories must be fairly simple. This is why formulas are so standard. People might tune into a story in the middle. If the story follows a simple formula, people can easily understand where the story is when they start watching. Audiences must instantly be able to know who the characters are. Also, unlike print, people can't control the pacing of the story or turn back a few chapters and reread an earlier part. Of course, people can now record video and play back the action to catch things they did not understand on first viewing, but they rarely do this. As a result of this constraint, television stories must be simple and very easy to follow; people must get the gist of the story, even if they are not paying much attention to it.

With television programs, not only must producers use the well-known formulas, but they must also be creative enough to break with the story formula to keep their stories fresh to viewers who have seen the same plot hundreds of times. These two tasks seem impossible to attain at the same time, and this is why the percentage of television series that have lasted more than several dozen episodes is small.

Societal Constraints. The public has certain expectations about what it will and will not tolerate in entertainment. We can see where this line of acceptability is when the public gets offended and complains—particularly in the areas of bad language, sexual portrayals, and violence. Television programmers are essentially conservative and fearful of offending viewers, so they present content that they believe reflect mainstream American values.

This line of acceptability, however, changes over time as people get over their shock at a new kind of portrayal, then eventually get used to it. For example, writing in the late 1980s, George Comstock (1989) pointed out “that much of what is on television today would not have been considered acceptable by broadcasters or the public 20 or even 10 years ago. Public tastes and social standards have changed, and television has made some contribution to these changes by probing the borders of convention accompanying each season. . . . These conventions of popular entertainment provide television, as they do other media, with rules that minimize the possibility of public offense” (p. 182). Since Comstock wrote that, television has continued to push the line of public acceptance, and what offended viewers in the 1980s hardly gets their attention today.

The same evolution of a formula has been occurring with popular music. The basic formula of popular songs is a story about love or sex. For example, in one content analysis of themes in popular music over the past 60 years, it was found that 70% of all songs have dealt with the topics of sex and love (Christianson & Roberts, 1998). What has changed in the formula is the way this theme is treated. Love used to be treated as an emotion, and the lyrics were symbolic; that is, the words suggested actions but left it up to the listeners to imagine the sex. Now love is treated as a physical act, and the lyrics are much more explicit in describing those acts, so listeners do not need to use their imaginations as much.

Storytelling formulas evolve as public tastes change over time. People get bored with too much repetition and look for something slightly different. Producers need to know how far they can push the line of acceptability at any given time without offending people and hence losing audience members. The media have become much more sensitive to these

changes in taste because they know if they can push the line and not offend audiences, they will be the first to present a new twist in the old familiar formula, and this will attract large audiences.

The Fox television network is especially known for pushing the line of television programming. It aired shows such as *When Good Pets Go Bad* and *World's Scariest Police Shootouts*. When these shows came under harsh criticism, Sandy Grushow, director of programming for Fox, made public apologies. And in the late 1990s, Grushow spent a lot of time apologizing. Then, in February 2000, Grushow made the decision to air *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?* The show was a sensation, drawing 23 million viewers, but it again was an embarrassment when it was revealed that the selected bride, Darva Conger, had not really intended to get married on the program but went through with it only to get an annulment several weeks later. Grushow apologized again but this time offered an explanation for continuing to program these types of shows: "It's like someone who goes to their boss and says, 'We can make something at half the cost that will make twice as much money.' The boss would say, 'Go do it, but don't embarrass us.' This has turned into an embarrassing situation and now they have to fix it" (Bauder, 2000a, p. 3E).

CHARACTER PATTERNS

The population of characters on television is very different from the population of people in the real world. This is not to say that there are not types of people in real life like almost every character on television. Instead, in the aggregate, the pattern in the population of TV characters is different from the pattern of people in the real world. These differences can be seen most clearly in two ways. First, when we look at patterns in the aggregate, we see that the demographic balance is very different in the television world compared to the real world. Second, we see that the characters are presented as stereotypes.

Demographic Patterns

When we look past the individual characters and focus instead on patterns across the entire population of television characters, we can see that the television world is very different from the real world (see Table 11.1). The patterns of gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, socioeconomic status (SES), and occupations are very different in the television world compared to the real world. If we notice these demographic patterns in the television world and assume that they are the same in the real world, we will be creating faulty information for ourselves. For example, look at Table 11.2 to see the differences by occupation between the TV and real worlds.

The entertainment stories in the mass media also have a fairly standard set of characters, and this set of character types does not change much across media or vehicles. For example, one study of characters appearing in shows across 32 channels on a typical cable system found the same patterns of gender, race, and age across all channels (Kubey, Shifflet, Weerakkody, & Ukeiley, 1996).

TABLE 11.1 Demographic Patterns

Gender: Males used to outnumber females 3 to 1 in the television world. The gender difference has been moving more toward a balance over the years but very gradually. Now on prime-time TV, 60% of characters are men and 40% women.

Men are more likely to be shown as working and in a wider variety of jobs than are women. However, the percentage of women in professional status jobs is the same as men in those types of jobs. Also, compared to the U.S. labor force, TV professionals and law enforcement agents are overrepresented while managerial jobs, laborers, and service workers are underrepresented.

This gender imbalance varies by type of program. In soap operas, there is a balance among the genders. Also, in situation comedies and family dramas, there is almost a balance, but in police/detective shows, males outnumber females 5 to 1.

Ethnicity: 80% of all characters are White Americans. African Americans comprised only 2% of television characters until the late 1960s, when they jumped to about 10% of all characters. Now, African Americans account for about 16% of the main and minor roles, which is larger than their percentage (12%) in the real-world population of the United States. Hispanics, however, have not fared as well. Although Hispanics make up about 9% of the U.S. population, only about 2% of all television characters are Hispanic. Asian Americans and Native Americans combined account for about 1% of all television characters.

Age: Three quarters of all television characters are between the ages of 20 and 50, but in the real world, only one third of the population is between these ages. Young children and the elderly are underrepresented on television. Fictional characters younger than age 19 make up only 10% of the total television population, even though they make up one third of the U.S. population. Also, characters older than age 50 account for about 15% of all television characters. The most dramatic imbalance is in the over-65 age group. Barely more than 2% of television characters are at least 65 years old, but 11% of the real-life population is in this age bracket.

Marital status: Marital status is obvious with about 80% of the women and 45% of the men. Of those for whom you can tell their marital status, more than 50% of the women are married, whereas less than one third of the men are married.

Socioeconomic status: Almost half the characters on television are wealthy or ultra-wealthy, and very few (less than 10%) are lower class.

Occupations: The higher prestige occupations are overrepresented on fictional television. Nearly one third of the television labor force is professional and managerial, whereas in real life, the figure is only 11%. Working-class people are greatly underrepresented, except for a few television world professions. For example, prostitutes outnumber machinists by 12 to 1; there are twice as many doctors as welfare workers, 8 times more butlers than miners, and 12 times more private detectives than production line workers. But the world of work may be changing a bit. Vande Berg and Streckfuss (1992) analyzed occupations in prime-time television and found that there was a slight increase in the representation of women and in the variety of their occupational portrayals. Still, women remain underrepresented and limited in their depictions in organizational settings. Males outnumber females 2 to 1 in the workplace.

Sources: Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978); B. Davis (1990); Glascock (2001); B. S. Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, and Atkin (1980); Mastro and Greenberg (2000); Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001).

TABLE 11.2 Comparison of Occupation Prevalence in TV World and Real World (in Percentages)

Occupation	TV World	Real World
Medical workers	12.1	.9
Police	11.4	.9
Lawyers	8.3	.7
Executives/managers	6.4	31.0
Media people	8.3	.3
Space travelers	5.9	.0001
Salespeople	2.6	11.8
Forensic specialists	4.5	0.01

Source: Medich (2002, p. 16).

On almost all of the demographic indicators, the television world has very different patterns than the real world. However, it is interesting to note that one minority—African Americans—has fought for better representation on television programs and is now proportionally more likely to be represented in the television world (16%) than in the real world (12%). This group continues to fight successfully for representation. For example, during the fall 1999 television season, African American leaders severely criticized the big four television networks that premiered 26 new series; in all of those series, the lead characters and nearly all the cast regulars were White, even those on shows where the action takes place in urban high schools and New York City nightspots (B. Lowry, Jensen, & Braxton, 1999).

What can account for this dominance of males, Whites, and youthful adults? Perhaps it is due to the demographics of the people who are television writers. Turow (1992) pointed out that according to the Writers Guild of America, White males account for more than three quarters of the writers employed in film and TV. Minorities account for 2% of all writers. And it appears that the demographics of the writers are not getting more diverse. In a survey of the age, gender, and ethnicity of writers working in Hollywood's television and film industries in 1985, it was reported that it was dominated by White males. In 2002, the same pattern was found as far as gender and ethnicity (Bielby & Bielby, 2002), and Glascock (2001) reported that males outnumber females 3.6 to 1 among creative personnel, which includes producers, directors, and writers.

Stereotypical Portrayals

There is a positive as well as negative side to stereotypes. Stereotypes are positive from the point of view that they are easy for viewers to recognize. But stereotypes can also have a negative

effect because they are often inadequate as well as biased, often serve as obstacles to rational assessment, and are resistant to social change.

We use stereotypes in dealing with real-world information, not just media portrayals. For example, when we meet a new person, we try to “type” that person based on the characteristics we can immediately see, such as age, gender, appearance, how he or she talks, and so on. Once we have typed someone, we have a set of expectations for that person. For example, if we see a 5-year-old girl in a fancy dress playing with a doll on the steps of a church, we would immediately call up a specific set of expectations. In contrast, if we see a middle-aged man with a beer belly straining through his dirty T-shirt, chewing tobacco, and cleaning a rifle, we would call up a very different set of expectations. Stereotypes provide us with a set of expectations that we can access quickly as we encounter people and events. They are a necessary mode of processing characters, especially when there are thousands of messages coming at us quickly everyday and we need to create order out of “the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 96).

Characters in the television world are developed as stereotypes according to certain formulas, which make the characters easily and quickly recognizable to viewers. Look at the examples of stereotypes in Table 11.3. For each of these stereotypes, a clear image likely comes into your mind. You have seen each of these characters many times. When one of them appears in a story, it only takes a few seconds for you to recognize who that character is.

TABLE 11.3 Examples of Prevalent Stereotypes

- The strong, self-reliant police detective who uses unconventional methods to deal with the scum on the street. He is irritated by his authoritarian bosses but always gets the job done using his own unorthodox methods.
- The nurturing mother who has kooky kids and an idiot husband
- The sexy young female actress/model/nurse/secretary who becomes a romantic interest of a male hero
- The dumb blonde who is superficial, cares only about physical appearance and dress styles, and has no common sense
- The young street punk who commits petty and violent crimes, usually for drugs. He is tough and sassy until police intimidate him into making a plea bargain.
- The nerdy male adolescent who displays hilariously dysfunctional social skills. Although he is very sensitive, he never learns from his social mistakes.

Stereotypes, however, can be harmful when they lead audiences to believe that all people of a given type share certain negative characteristics. This is why two groups—African Americans and women—are vocal in their complaints about how their demographic groups are stereotypically portrayed in television stories. Stereotypes in some other areas, such as occupations, families, the elderly, and body images, can also be harmful.

African Americans. It appears that the stereotype of African Americans on television has changed. In a review of the literature on ethnicity on television, Busselle and Crandall (2002) drew three conclusions. First, the world of situation comedy is one in which African

Americans are approximately as prevalent as they are in the real world. But unlike the real world, discrimination, poverty, and crime do not exist. Second, drama programs about Black families are rare. And as argued by several researchers, when Black families are portrayed, their lives are consistent with the beliefs that opportunities abound and that hard work begets economic comfort. Third, we know relatively little about the roles of African American characters in programs with predominantly White casts. From the extant evidence, it appears that Black and White characters most often interact in the workplace, and Blacks most often occupy positions of superiority over Whites rather than positions of subservience or equality (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Finally, when African American characters are not members of the middle or upper class, they are portrayed as social undesirables rather than as the working poor.

Gender. There is a good deal of gender stereotyping. Females are more likely to complain about these gender stereotypes because there are more negative female stereotypes compared to male stereotypes. Males are usually portrayed with positive personality characteristics such as competency, leadership, and bravery. As for females, there are two primary stereotypes. If a woman is single, she is often portrayed as a sex object. There is a strong emphasis on the female body being attractive, desirable, and youthful. If a woman is a mother, she is usually portrayed as wise and nurturing. The profile of women on prime-time television has not changed much in 50 years (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999).

Gender stereotyping is also in educational programming. Barner (1999) examined sex role stereotyping within children's educational programming mandated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). A content analysis revealed that males had a greater representation than females, and both male and female characters exhibited sex role stereotypical behavior. Also, males were more likely to evoke some consequence for their actions, whereas female actions tended to be ignored altogether.

Occupations. Research has consistently found that the world of work is dominated by male characters and that more women than men cannot be categorized by occupation (Signorielli, 1990; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Vande Berg & Streckfuss, 1992). In the 1990s, for example, Signorielli and Bacue (1999) found that 4 out of 10 female characters did not work (20.3%) or their occupation was unknown (19.2%). By comparison, fewer than 1 of 4 male characters could not be classified in an occupation (12.4%) or were seen as not working (12.3%). These images may ultimately suggest that working outside of the home is not as important for women as for men.

In the world of work, female characters usually have less status than do males, but this does reflect the real world. As Farley (1998) notes, on average, males still make more than females, and male participation (or lack thereof) in household tasks is often related to the discrepancy in earnings between spouses.

Interestingly, marital status is an important predictor of employment for women. Content analyses of programming in the 1970s and 1980s indicated that married women were less likely to be employed outside the home, whereas single women and women who were divorced or widowed were more likely to be portrayed as working outside the home. By comparison, the marital status of male characters did not restrict their employment. Most male characters were portrayed as working, with single men

the smallest group of male characters who did not work (Signorielli, 1982, 1990; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001).

Ethnicity also plays a pivotal role in the depiction of occupations on television. Fewer non-Whites than Whites are professionals, but proportionally, more non-Whites have law enforcement jobs. Compared to the U.S. labor force, professionals and law enforcement agents are overrepresented, whereas managerial jobs, laborers, and service workers are underrepresented (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001).

Governmental employees do not fare well in television stereotyping. An analysis of 1,234 prime-time series episodes from 1955 to 1998 reveals that governmental employees are often portrayed in negative roles. With politicians, 51 % were in negative roles—either as corrupt or scatterbrained (Aversa, 1999).

Families. There have been some changes in the way families are portrayed on television. In a study comparing families in TV situation comedies from the 1950s through the 1980s, Scharrer (2001) found that fathers in the more recent seasons were portrayed as fools compared to fathers in earlier seasons. On domestic comedies, the adult members of families are now more likely to interact more openly, and there is more expression of feelings in spousal relationships (Douglas & Olson, 1995). But the adults are also shown as having more conflicts with children. As a result, the relational environment has become more conflictual and less cohesive in modern TV families than in families from earlier decades. Also, modern families are less able to manage day-to-day life and less able to socialize children effectively (Douglas & Olson, 1996).

Elderly Characters. Older characters are typically not revered or treated with respect in television entertainment. They are typically portrayed as being eccentric, infirm, stubborn, and foolish.

Body Image. A content analysis of three magazines from 1967 to 1997 found that male bodies were portrayed as more lean, muscular, and V-shaped. This fits with the male body image ideal of thin and athletic. “Sociocultural standards of beauty for males emphasize strength and muscularity” (Law & Labre, 2002, p. 697).

Hollywood movies are also a target of critics of the media’s obsession with a certain type of body image. Alexandra Kuczynski wrote *Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery* in which she argued that Hollywood has created a standard of beauty that does not exist in nature. “This standard is pert, symmetrical features atop a skinny body with large breasts (also called ‘tits on sticks’)” (Kantrowitz, 2006, p. 54). She says that Hollywood creates celebrities with perfect bodies and then floods the media with these images, making them the standard to which everyone tries to meet. When people cannot meet this standard, they undergo surgeries or get depressed. Also, Himes and Thompson (2007) conducted a study to examine how overweight characters were presented in movies and television shows. They found that fat characters were typically stigmatized; that is, non-overweight characters used humor to put down overweight characters often directly to their face. They also found that male characters were three times more likely to engage in fat stigmatization commentary or fat humor than female characters.

CONTROVERSIAL CONTENT ELEMENTS

In the world of media entertainment, everything can be forgiven except dullness. When TV was being criticized for having so much violence, then–CBS president Howard Stringer was arguing against standards to clean up television by saying, “We don’t want to turn the vast wasteland into a dull wasteland” (*USA Today*, July 1, 1993, p. 2A). And that is the key—TV and all the entertainment media must avoid being dull.

Recall from an earlier section in this chapter that it is very difficult for producers to apply the story formula in a way to attract and hold audiences. It takes a very talented writer to create a story that is not dull. Less talented writers can rely on three staples to avoid dullness. These are sex, violence, and “bad” language. Each of these three is controversial because if writers and producers go too far, many viewers will complain. Still, producers frequently use these elements to arouse their audiences and keep otherwise uncreative plots and uninteresting characters from appearing dull.

Sex

A large number of people in the American culture are offended by sexual portrayals and nudity on television. The FCC is sensitive to this and acts as a watchdog. For example, the FCC fined CBS \$550,000 for the breast-baring incident at the 2004 Super Bowl in order to placate the large number of people who complained (G. Fabrikant, 2004b). However, producers continually push the line to test the public’s tolerance of sexual portrayals.

Frequency. Sexual activity on television has been prevalent since the 1970s (Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993; Cassata & Skill, 1983). If we limit our definition of sex to visual depictions of intercourse, the rate fluctuates around one (B. S. Greenberg et al., 1993) or two (Fernandez-Collado, Greenberg, Korzenny, & Atkin, 1978) acts per hour of prime time. In soap operas, the rate is even higher.

If we expand the definition to include all visual depictions of sexual activity, such as kissing, petting, homosexuality, prostitution, and rape, the hourly rates go up to about 3 acts on prime time and 3.7 acts per hour on soap operas (B. S. Greenberg et al., 1993). And when the definition is further expanded to include talk about sex as well as sexual imagery, the rate climbs to 16 instances per hour on prime time (Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1990). Most of this talk about sex is on situation comedies in the early evening, when it is presented in a humorous context.

The most recent major set of studies, conducted from 1997 to 2002, analyzed 2,817 programs across 10 channels and found that about two thirds of all shows (64%) contain some sexual content and 14% have sexual intercourse. Among the 20 top-rated shows among teens, 83% contained sexual portrayals. The overall rate was about three scenes per hour. Two thirds (67%) of all network prime-time shows contain either talk about sex or sexual behavior, averaging more than five scenes per hour. And the rates of sexual portrayal continue to increase. Over that 5-year time span, the percentage of shows portraying sexual intercourse doubled from 7% to 14% (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; Kunkel, Eyal, & Donnerstein, 2007). However, when we take a longer time span, the opposite pattern is

revealed. To illustrate, Hetsroni (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of the findings from content analysis about sexual portrayals on television. After examining the findings derived from 2,588 hours of broadcasts from 18 seasons, Hetsroni concluded that the frequency per hour of most of the sexual contents had decreased over the years. This is particularly notable for dialogues about sex and normative heterosexual conduct, but it is also true for illegal sexual interactions and messages about risks and responsibilities in sexual behavior.

Which conclusion should we believe? Are sexual portrayals increasing or decreasing on television? It appears the best way to answer these questions is to acknowledge that the rates of sexual portrayals change over time and that these changes go in cycles. Across some time periods, there appears to be an increase in portrayals as producers push the line of acceptability, while across other time periods, there appears to be a decrease in portrayals as producers cut back in response to public complaints. The bottom line here is that sexual portrayals will always be a part of media entertainment messages because humans have always been—and will always be—interested in sex.

Consequences. Most depictions of sexual behavior are not presented responsibly from a health point of view. Schrag (1990) reports that American children and teens view an average of more than 14,000 sexual references and innuendos on television each year. Of these, less than 150 refer to the use of birth control, so the rate of unprotected sex is very high, yet there is a very low incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or pregnancies depicted in these stories. This situation may be changing. For example, by the 1997–1998 television season, about 9% of shows dealing with sex presented safe-sex messages, and this had increased to 15% of shows in the 2001–2002 television season (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Although sexual portrayals are improving in their depiction of safe practices, fewer than one in every six shows that present sexual content will have any mention of the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity or any reference to contraception, protection, or safer sex. Kunkel et al. (2007) found that topics related to sexual risks or responsibilities (e.g., condom use, abstinence) are increasingly included on television but nonetheless remain infrequent overall. Such safe-sex messages occur most frequently in program environments where they are most relevant (i.e., when sexual intercourse is included in the story).

Homosexuality

The U.S. television industry has a long history of ignoring, stereotyping, and marginalizing homosexuality (Harrington, 2003). Gay and lesbian issues or characters were virtually invisible on television in the 1950s and early 1960s. Then, in the 1970s, gay characters began to appear, but they were limited to two treatments. One treatment was the coming-out story, and the other was the “queer monster” story. Furthermore, although the 1970s ushered in prime-time shows about gay characters, they were typically played by straight actors and marketed to a straight audience.

In the 1980s, depictions of homosexuality declined dramatically due to the conservatism of the Reagan years and the growing concern about HIV/AIDS (and its association with gay male sexuality) (Gross, 2001). Gay characters began to appear in greater frequency throughout the 1990s in part due to a growing stigma attached to antigay prejudice and a growing

recognition of a gay consumer market (Gross, 2001). By the late 1990s, about 50 network series had lesbian, gay, or bisexual recurring characters, more than twice the total of all previous decades of television. In 1997, prime-time viewers witnessed the first lesbian lead actress/character on network television, which was the comedienne Ellen DeGeneres, who played Ellen Morgan on ABC's *Ellen*. The following year, NBC featured the first network gay male lead in its hit show *Will & Grace*. During the fall 1999 television season, the big four television networks premiered 26 new series. There were 17 gay characters on the four major networks and about the same number of Black, Asian, and Latino characters combined. A big reason for this is that there are many gays in Hollywood and not many minorities (Brownfield, 1999).

In many respects, the 1990s seemed to transcend the longstanding “rules” for representing homosexuality on television: (a) Gay or lesbian characters must be restricted to onetime appearances in television series or one-shot television movies; (b) gay and lesbian characters can never be “incidentally” gay—instead, their sexuality must be the “problem” to be “solved”; (c) their problem should be explored in terms of its effects on heterosexuals; and (d) gay and lesbian erotic desire must be completely absent (Dow, 2001, pp. 129–130; see also Gross, 2001).

Although there are more representations of homosexuality than ever before, scholars caution against the presumption that these are necessarily more progressive representations. As throughout television history, gays and lesbians are still more likely to appear in comedies than dramas, where the line between “laughing with” and “laughing at” remains strategically ambiguous. Also, gay and lesbian characters are still typically portrayed by straight (or not “out”) actors and marketed to straight audiences (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001).

The most recent analysis of sexual portrayals on television programs found portrayals of non-heterosexuals in about 15% of programs overall. Of 14 genres, only movies and variety/comedy shows had substantial percentages of programs that contained non-heterosexual content. Programs on commercial broadcast networks were less likely to have non-heterosexual content than those on cable networks, especially those on premium cable movie networks (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007). Also, in his meta-analysis of the findings from content analysis about sexual portrayals on television over 18 seasons, Hetsroni (2007) reports that the frequency of portrayals of homosexuality has increased considerably.

Violence

Violence was the most studied form of content in all of the mass media from the advent of television as a mass medium around 1950 to the turn of the century. Scholars continually monitored the amount of violence on television, producing at least 60 major content analyses (see W. J. Potter, 1999), and then interest waned.

Depending on the definition used, violence has been found in 57% to 80% of all entertainment programs (Columbia Broadcasting System, 1980; Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 1980; Lichter & Lichter, 1983; “NCTV Says,” 1983; W. J. Potter & Ware, 1987; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961; Signorielli, 1990; Smythe, 1954; Williams, Zabrack, & Joy, 1982).

The most consistent examination of television violence has been conducted by Gerbner and his associates (e.g., see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Since the late 1960s, they have documented the frequency of violent acts that fit the definition: the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon) against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing. Signorielli (1990) reports that from 1967 to 1985, the hourly rate fluctuated from about four to seven violent acts, with peaks occurring about every 4 years.

The most comprehensive analysis of violence on television has been conducted with the National Television Violence Study (NTVS, 1996), which analyzed the content of a total of 3,185 programs across 23 television channels for all day parts from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m., 7 days a week, over the course of a television season. NTVS researchers report that 57% of all programs analyzed had some violence and that one third of programs presented nine or more violent interactions.

The numbers in the above paragraphs are limited to physical forms of violence, and they do not include verbal violence. Verbal violence is even more prevalent on television than is physical violence. For example, Williams et al. (1982) reported finding a rate of 9.5 acts of verbal violence as well as 9 acts of physical violence per hour on North American (United States and Canada) television. W. J. Potter and Ware (1987) found about 8 acts per hour of physical violence and an additional 12 acts of verbal violence on American television. Also, B. S. Greenberg and his colleagues (1980) reported that an average prime-time hour of television contains 22 acts of verbal aggression and 12 acts of physical aggression. In a comparison of rates of violence on television from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, W. J. Potter and Vaughan (1997) found that the rates of physical violence remained stable but that the rates of verbal violence had increased dramatically. They reasoned that programmers were wary of increasing physical violence because such an increase would trigger a public outcry, but the substantial increase in verbal violence was tolerated by the public, so the increase continued.

There have also been some scientific studies of the amount of violence in films. For example, the top-grossing 50 films of 1998 contained a total of 2,300 acts of violence, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, based in Washington, D.C. "Violence was not only a staple of popular entertainment, it was often portrayed as laudable, necessary or relatively harmless activity," said S. Robert Lichter, the center's president (D. Goldstein, 1999, p. B1). In another analysis of violent films, Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque (2003) content analyzed popular slasher films in the 1990s and found more acts of violence in them than similar films from the 1980s. One change was that recent slasher films rarely mixed scenes of sex and violence. The researchers also posed the question about whether females were more victimized than males, and they concluded that in all slasher films, there were more male victims than there were female victims. But they did not stop with this conclusion; they also found that the ratio of female victims is higher in slasher films than in commercially successful action/adventure films of the 1990s. This means that when a female is shown in a slasher film, she has a greater chance of being victimized. Also, females are shown in fear longer than males.

Movie previews also present a high degree of violence. In one study of video rentals, it was found that the majority of previews on rental tapes contained violence, and these portrayals were common across MPAA ratings (G/PG, PG-13, and R) (Oliver & Kalyanaraman,

2002). Rates of aggression in previews were positively associated with increased marketing and distribution costs for the previewed films.

Violence on television has been examined not only for its frequency but also for its context—that is, the way it is presented. For example, W. J. Potter and Ware (1987) found that with much of the violence, the perpetrator is rewarded and the victims are rarely shown with much pain and suffering. This was also the case in the NTVS studies, where violent acts were rarely punished, and rarely were victims shown as suffering any harmful consequences. Also, 37% of the perpetrators of violence were portrayed as being attractive, and 44% of the acts were shown as being justified. These patterns led the researchers to conclude that violence not only was prevalent throughout the entire television landscape but was also typically shown as sanitized and glamorized (see W. J. Potter & Smith, 2000).

This level of violence in the media is far higher than the real-world levels of violence and crime. This was demonstrated by Oliver (1994), who analyzed pseudo-reality-based police shows, such as *COPS*. She found that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) figures for murder, rape, robbery, and aggregated assault were 13.2% of all crimes, but in the television world, these four violent crimes accounted for 87.0% of all crimes. Also, the FBI reports that 18.0% of crimes are cleared, but on television, 61.5% are cleared—that is, the perpetrator is arrested, is killed, or committed suicide. Again, television focuses on the most arousing crimes rather than the dull ones. Also, there is a more satisfying resolution to crimes than there is in the real world.

Language

It appears as if “bad” language has broken the barrier on television and is here to stay. For example, Kaye and Sapolsky (2001) examined prime-time network programs to ascertain whether usage of offensive language increased throughout the 1990s when a content-based rating system was implemented. The per-hour rate of objectionable words increased between 1990 and 1994 but decreased in 1997 to a level slightly below that found in 1990. Although the FCC deemed the “seven dirty words” as too offensive for television, five of these words had made their way onto the prime-time airwaves.

People continue to complain about bad language on television, and the FCC monitors television programs to determine if they are obscene or not. In making their determination, the FCC takes context into consideration. For example, many people complained about indecency in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, but the FCC ruled that it did not contain indecency, although there was considerable profanity and violence. The FCC reasoned that the language was appropriate for soldiers fighting in a war (“FCC Finds No Indecency,” 2006).

In addition to obscenity, bad language also includes racial and gender slurs. In the spring of 2007, radio shock jock Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team as “nappy headed hos” in offhanded comments during one of his radio broadcasts. Many listeners were greatly offended and criticized his language. This triggered the attention of the media, which made it a prominent controversial story. African American and feminist leaders harshly criticized Imus’s comments. Although Imus met with Rutgers officials and formally apologized, and even though his apology was accepted by the members of the women’s basketball team, Imus was fired from his job. Imus had found that after three

decades as a popular shock jock where he insulted a wide range of politicians and public figures, his language in this instance had crossed a line where the consequences were severe and immediate.

HEALTH

The television world is a generally healthy one when we look at patterns across all kinds of shows. While parts of this pattern of health portrayals are very responsible in presenting healthy messages to viewers, other parts of this pattern are deceptive; that is, some portrayals present a very misleading message about health.

Deceptive Health Patterns

Although there are many indicators of deceptive health, I'll present only five in this section. First, although most characters are not shown having particularly healthy habits (eating responsibly, regularly exercising, and getting medical checkups to prevent illnesses), most characters appear healthy, fit, and thin. It has been estimated that 64.5% of the American population is overweight or obese (American Obesity Association, 2004), but on television, only 6% of the males and 2% of the females are. Furthermore, characters do not gain weight from their high-caloric diets, although eating and drinking are frequent activities on entertainment programs. About 75% of all shows display this activity. But eating is usually unhealthy. The traditional meals of breakfast, lunch, and dinner combined account for only about half of the eating; snacking accounts for the rest. Fruit is the snack in only 4% to 5% of the episodes.

Second, although there is a high degree of violence on many shows, few characters are portrayed as suffering any harm. In fact, most characters are portrayed as being healthy and active. Only 6% to 7% of major characters are portrayed as having had injuries or illnesses that require treatment. Pain, suffering, or medical help rarely follows violent activity. In children's programs, despite greater mayhem, only 3% of characters are shown receiving medical treatment. Prime-time characters are not only healthy but also relatively safe from accidents, even though they rarely wear seat belts when they drive. And they are rarely portrayed as suffering from impairments of any kinds as a result of an accident.

A third indicator of deceptive health is that the everyday normal health maladies are rarely shown. Most health problems that are portrayed are serious and life threatening. When help for medical problems is portrayed, it is not in a preventative or therapeutic manner but in a dramatic and social way. Hardly anyone dies a natural death on television.

Prime-time characters are not shown with any kind of physical impairments. Rarely does a character even wear glasses; even in old age, only one out of four characters wears them. Only 2% of characters on prime-time shows are physically handicapped. When they do appear, they tend to be older, less positively presented, and more likely to be victimized. Almost none appear on children's shows.

Fourth, mental health is portrayed in a dangerously stereotypical manner. In real life, mentally ill people are usually passive and withdrawn, frightened, and avoidant. But on television, mentally ill characters were found to be 10 times more likely to be a violent

criminal than non-mentally ill television characters (Diefenbach & West, 2007). In television stories, mentally ill characters are typically shown to be active, confused, aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable.

Fifth, doctors are greatly overrepresented on television compared to their numbers in real life. Health care professionals dominate the ranks of professionals, despite the paucity of sick characters on television. They are five times their numbers in real life proportionally. Only criminals or law enforcers are more numerous. Also, many of these doctors are shown making house calls and devoting far more time to individual patients than real-life doctors are able to do.

Responsible Health Patterns

The use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs has dramatically declined over the years on television. Smoking was a frequent activity until the mid-1980s, until it almost completely disappeared except for reruns of old movies.

Alcohol use has also substantially declined. When it is presented now, it is frequently shown with negative consequences. Until the mid-1980s, alcohol consumption was common on television. The drinking of alcohol was shown twice as often as the drinking of coffee and tea, 14 times that of soft drinks, and 15 times that of water. It was shown as sociable, happy, and problem free. Also, alcohol use was rarely portrayed with any negative consequences. When negative consequences were shown, they were usually very slight, such as a temporary hangover. Despite high rates of consumption across many characters, only 1% of television drinkers are portrayed as having a drinking problem.

Although television is showing more responsible portrayals of drug and alcohol use, the movies do not fare so well. An analysis of the 200 most popular movies of 1996 and 1997 reveals that characters frequently abuse drugs and alcohol. Moreover, these characters are not portrayed as worrying about the consequences (Hartman, 1999).

VALUES

Examining the arts within a culture is a way to determine the values of that culture. For example, the ancient Greek and Roman cultures exhibited the values of perfection, harmony, and beauty in their art. During the European Middle Ages, the art reflected the dominance of the Catholic Church, with its focus on the life of Christ, especially his birth, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. Earthly existence was mundane and painful, whereas the afterlife was glorious. During the Renaissance, the art reflected the values of a scientific approach to understanding the world. During the European Romantic era, the focus shifted from the logical and intellectual concerns that were dominant during the Renaissance to the emotions of humans. During the Modern era, the arts were decoupled from the church and political institutions. Art glorified the individual and his or her unique way of looking at the world and constructing meaning (Metallinos, 1996).

Today, we can examine the broad span of messages from the mass media and ask, What do our stories tell us about our current culture? Some researchers and social critics have

attempted to answer this question. Table 11.4 shows what two media scholars have observed to be the themes in television entertainment. Notice that the first of Comstock's (1989) themes deals with material consumption. Comstock is not referring to the ads in the

TABLE 11.4 Values Underlying Entertainment Messages

Comstock's (1989) List

1. Material consumption is very satisfying.
2. The world is a mean and risky place. There is a great deal of crime and violence throughout the television world.
3. The TV world has turned the social pyramid upside down by showing most characters as wealthy and powerful and very few of them as working class.
4. Males are more powerful than females in terms of income, job status, and decision making. This is slowly changing, but we are still far from a balance of power.
5. Occupational status is highly valued. Professional occupations are depicted as worthwhile, whereas manual work is uninteresting. People attain the status of a worthwhile profession through upward mobility from the middle class. This upward mobility is accomplished through self-confidence and toughness; goodness of character alone is not enough. The movement upward is usually quick and painless.
6. There are a few privileged professions in which the people are almost always shown as doing good and helping others. However, most businesspeople are shady. Businesses are frequently portrayed as taking advantage of the gullible public and abusing their power.
7. Law enforcers are overrepresented as being successful, strong, and justified. Private eyes are almost always shown as better than the police.
8. There is a belief in the occult, life on other planets, life after death, and hidden, malevolent purposes behind the inexplicable.
9. A person's self-interest is very important. People are motivated to get what they want regardless of the feelings of others. Examples include extramarital affairs, crime, hard-driving businesspeople, and police who disregard the rights of others to achieve their goals.
10. There are often truly heroic acts portrayed where there are daring rescues, selflessness, loyalty to others, and the struggle against difficult odds to do the right thing.

Walsh's (1994) List

1. Happiness is found in having things.
2. Get all you can for yourself.
3. Get it all as quickly as you can.
4. Win at all costs.
5. Violence is entertaining.
6. Always seek pleasure and avoid boredom.

stories but to the values in the stories themselves. He says, “It is not solely that so many stories revolve around the rich, but that in so many instances dwellings and their furnishings are beyond the means of those portrayed as occupying them” (p. 172). For example, the popular situation comedy *Friends* features Monica, a part-time cook, and Rachel, a waitress in a coffeehouse, who are shown supporting themselves in a well-furnished two-bedroom apartment in downtown Manhattan.

Notice also how the lists of Comstock (1989) and Walsh (1994) overlap. For example, Walsh is also concerned with the value of materialism, which he argues is at odds with a healthy society. Walsh also argues that the values of the marketplace are as follows: Happiness equals wealth, instant gratification, and me first. In contrast, the values of a healthy society are the following: self-esteem comes from within, moderation, tolerance, understanding, and social responsibility.

In complaining about the direction of programming on TV aimed at young people, *U.S. News & World Report* columnist John Leo (1999) said, “These shows are also carriers of heavy cultural messages, the most obvious being that parents are fools. In the teen soap operas, parents are absent, stupid, irrelevant, zanily adulterous, on the lam, or in jail. The unmistakable message is that kids are on their own, with no need to listen to parents, who know little or nothing anyway. This helps the TV industry certify teenagers as an autonomous culture with its own set of ethics and consumption patterns” (p. 15).

Young people are a very important target for many Hollywood films, and a particular kind of film is believed to be the best draw for them. For example, in a profile of a literary manager, Warren Zide, *L.A. Times* reporter Claudia Eller (1999) examines the values operating in Hollywood. She said, “When it came to getting the script for *American Pie* in shape to be sold, Zide said he and his colleagues advised [the writer] ‘to write the raunchiest script possible without worrying about the rating.’ Apparently it was good advice. The R-rated comedy about four high-school buddies who make a pact to lose their virginity before graduation piqued the interest of several studios before it was sold to Universal Pictures for \$650,000” (p. C5). Eller also quotes Zide on his reaction to a script about teenagers on a spring break: “I hated when I was growing up and you go to see some R-rated movie and there’s no nudity in it, and you’re like, ‘Oh, man, I was gypped.’” So, now as a literary agent, Zide asks, “Do we have enough T&A in it?” (p. C5).

BECOMING MEDIA LITERATE WITH ENTERTAINMENT MESSAGES

Recall from the previous chapter that media messages contain many elements to make them appear like the real world, but those messages must also contain elements that remove them from the mundane real world. In this chapter, you have seen how the entertainment messages depart from the real world when it comes to character portrayals, controversial content, health, and values. The more you know about these discrepancies, the more you can separate your media-world knowledge from your real-world knowledge and thus prevent the media-world distortions to influence your expectations for the real world.

Television and film ignore things that are not visually interesting, such as thinking by ourselves, reading, walking, and other quiet activities that make up much of our lives.

Activities such as housework, running errands, and small talk with neighbors are vastly underrepresented. Instead of ennobling our ordinary experiences, television suggests that they are not of sufficient interest to document.

Producers, however, are under no obligation to present an accurate account of the mundane world. Their task is to build as large an audience as possible. To do this, they must rely on all their creative powers to achieve a dramatic effect, so they deliberately distort the world to surprise and startle us. Some creative people produce fantasy that, by definition, is totally unlike real life—they do this to allow us to escape our lives and to see imaginative occurrences. Other producers who try to capture real life must do so in an intriguing manner. That is, they avoid presenting the mundane mainstream of real life and instead highlight the occurrences at the margins where there are particularly interesting people or events. This is real life in the sense that it could happen or even did happen. For example, family dramas appear to be very realistic in their settings, characters, and types of problems encountered. But they are unrealistic in their pacing, with most problems solved in 60 minutes.

The purpose of storytellers who use the mass media is simply to tell a good story so as to attract people and keep them coming back. The writers are not psychologists or sociologists; they are not usually trying to tell us much about how the human mind works or about how society works, but they still do present us with elements that we use to generalize our own conclusions about how the human mind works and how society works.

The danger to us as viewers of these stories is that we gradually absorb the individual fantasy elements. Over time, we start to confuse the “one-step remove” elements from the more realistic elements. Eventually, we come to believe that the patterns of fantasy that we continually see in media stories should be how we live our real lives.

The way to deal with the unrealistic picture presented by television entertainment is *not* to pressure producers to make their world of fiction more realistic. That would be silly. Instead, the best way to deal with this situation is to educate yourself about the content patterns in the media world and to become more sensitive, recognizing where those patterns diverge from real-world patterns. Learn to appreciate the divergences as fantasy and limit yourself to being entertained by their unreality. And avoid being guided by unrealistic expectations based on what media characters look like and how they act.

Now that you have more information about patterns of characters, plots, and values of entertainment stories in the media, you have a stronger knowledge structure about media content. When you use this knowledge structure to guide yourself through your exposures to media stories in the future, you will be able to see much more in those messages. Table 11.5 shows the cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral skills you will need to do this in a conscious, active manner. But do not restrict yourself to the specifics in Table 11.5; instead, use the information presented there to stimulate your thinking about other skills and knowledge. Then, during your exposures to media entertainment, recall the knowledge you will need and consciously apply the skills in all four domains.

During exposure to the media, remember that entertainment messages follow a formula. The people who create this world must be creative within a rigid formula. Viewers want formulaic characters and plots so that the entertainment messages are easy to follow. Look at how closely stories follow formulas. Also, notice how stories deviate from a formula and try to assess the magnitude of those deviations. How much can a story deviate before you

TABLE 11.5 Types of Skills and Knowledge Structures Needed to Deal With Entertainment Messages in a Media-Literate Manner

	Skills	Knowledge
Cognitive	Ability to analyze entertainment content to identify key plot points, types of characters, and themes Ability to see entertainment formulas Ability to compare/contrast plot points, characters, and themes across vehicles and media	Knowledge of elements in entertainment formula
Emotional	Ability to analyze the portrayed feelings of characters Ability to put one's self into the position of different characters in the story Ability to control emotions elicited by the plot and themes	Recall from personal experiences how it would feel to be in the situation depicted in the story
Aesthetic	Ability to analyze the craft and artistic elements in the story Ability to compare and contrast the artistry used to tell this story with that used to tell other stories	Knowledge of writing, directing, acting, editing, sound mixing, and so on Knowledge of good and bad stories and the elements that contributed to those qualities
Moral	Ability to analyze the moral elements as evidenced by decisions made by characters, implications of those decisions revealed by the plot, and underlying theme Ability to compare and contrast ethical decisions presented in this story with other stories Ability to evaluate the ethical responsibilities of the producers and programmers	Knowledge of what moral systems say about different decisions as well as knowledge of the moral implications of your decisions Knowledge of other stories that have portrayed this topic, both good and bad Knowledge of values of people in the media industries

become confused and lose sense of what is happening? Look at the stories that are most popular, that is, highest rated television programs and movies with the largest box office. How closely do they follow a formula? Examine the actors and actresses in those popular stories. What do they do that would make them so popular?

Keep asking questions about these stories. Be skeptical. Take nothing for granted. If you stay active during your exposures, you will be increasing your media literacy and thus gain more control over setting expectations for life that are both realistic and special to you.

FURTHER READING

Cantor, M. G. (1980). *Prime-time television*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. (143 pages, including index)

Written by a sociologist who spent 10 years interviewing actors, writers, and producers, this book explains how decisions about content are made in the television industry. She develops a model to show that many forces shape the development of any television program. The examples in the book are dated, but the principles still apply.

Greenberg, B. S. (1980). *Life on television*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. (204 pages, including index)

This is a classic content analysis of American television drama in the mid-1970s. Each of the 13 chapters addresses a different content topic, such as the demography of fictional characters, sex role portrayals, antisocial and prosocial behaviors, family interaction patterns, sexual intimacy, and drug use.

Lichter, S. R., Lichter, L. S., & Rothman, S. (1994). *Prime time: How TV portrays American culture*. Washington, DC: Regnery. (478 pages)

This is a look at what is on television, written from a critical humanistic perspective. There are few statistics but lots of examples from programs to illustrate their main point that the world of television is very different from the real world of families, work, sex, crime, and so on.

Medved, M. (1992). *Hollywood vs. America: Popular culture and the war on traditional values*. New York: HarperCollins.

This film critic argues that Hollywood has a value system that is very different from that of mainstream America. Hollywood glorifies the perverse, ridicules all forms of mainstream religion, tears down the image of the family, and glorifies ugliness with violence, bad language, and America bashing. Then the industry is puzzled why attendance is dropping and criticism is increasing.

Metallinos, N. (1996). *Television aesthetics: Perceptual, cognitive, and compositional bases*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. (305 pages with index)

This book lays out many principles of aesthetics from both a social science as well as an artistic perspective. He demonstrates that humans are bound by their perceptual capabilities and the functioning processes of their brains. However, people also create culture through their art. A person who is visually literate needs to have information in the areas of perception, cognition, and artistic composition.

Postman, N. (1984). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin. (184 pages with index)

This is a strong, well-written argument about how the media, especially television, have conditioned us to expect entertainment. Because our perceptions of ideas are shaped by the form of their expression, we are now image oriented. We respond to pleasure, not thought and reflection.

Sayre, S., & King, C. (2003). *Entertainment & society: Audiences, trends, and impacts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (422 pages, including endnotes and index)

This book spans the entire gamut of media-provided entertainment in 16 chapters. It provides some history of thinking about entertainment, a theory of entertainment content and effects, conceptions of audiences, medium comparisons, and even predictions for the future of entertainment.

KEEPING UP-TO-DATE

Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly

These are scholarly journals that publish research that examines entertainment-type messages in the mass media, particularly television.

EXERCISE 11.1

PRACTICING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS ON ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING

Watch a television program, then think about the following tasks:

1. *Analysis*: Break down the program by
 - a. Listing the main characters
 - b. Listing the main plot points
 - c. Were there violent elements? If so, list them.
 - d. Were there sexual elements? If so, list them.
 - e. Were their health-related elements? If so, list them.
2. *Grouping*: Select the two main characters.
 - a. How are they the same/different demographically?
 - b. How are they the same/different by personality characteristics?
 - c. How are they the same/different in the way they move the plot forward?

(Continued)

(Continued)

3. *Evaluation*: Think about all the characters and make the following judgments.
 - a. In your judgment, which character was the most humorous? Why?
 - b. In your judgment, which character was the most ethical in his or her behavior? Why?
 - c. In your judgment, which actor or actress displayed the best acting skills? Why?
 - d. In your judgment, which of the plot points were the strongest? Which were the weakest?
 - e. In your judgment, what is the theme of this show?
4. *Abstracting*: Describe your show (characters and plot) in 50 words or less.
5. *Generalizing*: Start with particular characters and particular happenings in your show, then infer general patterns of people and events in general.
 - a. Think about the demographics of the characters in your show. Do those demographics in your show match the patterns of demographics in the real world?
 - b. Think about the plot elements (sex, violence, health) in your show. Do these elements in your show match the patterns of these elements in the real world?
6. *Appreciating*:
 - a. Emotional: Was the show able to evoke emotions in you? If so, list those emotions and explain how the show triggered those particular emotions.
 - b. Aesthetic: Is there something about the writing, directing, editing, lighting, set design, costuming, or music/sound effects that you found of particular high quality? If so, explain what led you to appreciate that element so much.
 - c. Moral: Did the show raise ethical considerations (either explicitly or implicitly)? If so, did you appreciate how the show dealt with those ethical considerations?

EXERCISE 11.2

ANALYZING THE CONTENT OF TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT

1. Write a definition for sexual behavior. This is not as easy as it might seem. You must consider issues such as the following: What must the characters do, what are their intentions (a kiss or a hug is not always sexual), and what do they talk about (if a character talks about what he or she wants to do, does that count)?
2. Watch two different situation comedies and count how many acts occur that meet your definition. Note the gender, age, and ethnic background of the characters.

3. Discuss your results with others in class who did their own content analyses of sex.
 - a. What is the range in the number of acts found? Can this range be attributed to differences in definitions or differences in shows?
 - b. Profile the types of characters who were most often involved in sexual activity.
 - c. Are there any noticeable differences in character profiles across types of situation comedies?
4. Now try using your definition to analyze the content on soap operas, music videos, and action/adventure dramas.
 - a. Do you see any big differences in the number of sexual acts across different types of shows?
 - b. Do you see any big differences in the profiles of characters involved in sexual activity across shows?
5. Now think about how sex is portrayed in the television world.
 - a. What types of activity are the most prevalent?
 - b. How responsibly is sex portrayed in the television world—that is, are the physical and emotional risks often discussed or considered? Is sex portrayed as a normal part of a loving, stable relationship, or is it portrayed more as a game of conquest or a source of silliness?
 - c. Did you find anything in the patterns that surprised you?
6. What do you need to know about how sex is portrayed in the media and the role of sex in the real world for you to construct a strong knowledge structure on this subject?