

Is Watching People Knowing People?

A few years ago, a good friend asked for my opinion about a television show that aired the preceding night. I replied that I thought the show was okay, but that the behavior of one of the characters was simply ridiculous. In real life, I argued, no one acts like that. He disagreed, believing that the behavior of the character was uncommon but still realistic. So I asked him if he ever knew anyone that possessed such a personality. He thought for a moment and replied that he did – and he named a similar character that existed on another TV show.

Just how much of what we think we know about people comes not from our actual lives but what we see on television?

Consider rural communities. For people raised in a large city, their overwhelming understanding about their fellow citizens living in rural areas comes from what they see on TV and the movies. Rural people are nearly always portrayed as racists, bigots, ignorant, uneducated, misogynistic, and intolerant.

What do rural people learn about the city? The entertainment world presents a land of anarchy, populated by violent predators, rapists, murderers, thieves, gangs, freeloaders and people who aspire to destroy rather than improve society.

Who among us hasn't laughed at the sitcom father or husband? A lazy, stupid, incompetent, prevaricating schemer seems to define the lead man in nearly every comedy. The last intelligent father on a TV comedy was probably Bill Cosby, who played the role of a medical doctor back in the 1980s.

Women fair somewhat better, but they are still portrayed in a manner that doesn't serve womanhood well. I have lived in apartment complexes most of my life, and (to my chagrin) I have never witnessed beautiful, scantily clad, young women engage in tickle fights in our hallways. If this is happening in your complex, please contact me.

Computer experts are always portrayed as outrageous, with quirky behavior. Lawyers are always slick and quick-thinking. Doctors, fire fighters, and police officers are always martyrs to their jobs. Sitcom children are always wiser, more intelligent, and more quick-witted than their dimwitted parents. Gay men are always effeminate while lesbians are generally "butch". The token black in an otherwise all-white cast, the shrewd (and miserly) Jewish businessman, and the energetic Catholic family with a large number of children – the list

of stereotypical caricatures we see in entertainment seems endless. And while I know that sex at first sight does occur, I cannot believe that it happens anywhere near as often as it is portrayed on TV or movies.

I would argue that Bible-believing Christians are depicted the worst on the boob tube. Devout Christian characters with conservative political leanings are nearly always portrayed as ignorant lunatics on television today. They are also dangerous, extremists, intolerant, judgmental, educated only in the Bible, and seething with deep-rooted hatred.

And yet, what is the truth about devout Christians? Someone should compare charitable giving between committed Christians and secular humanists. I would like to learn who donates more of their own time and money to helping the poor in their community. Who sponsors, feeds, and assists more of the poor around the world? Which group commits more murders, rapes, and other violent crimes? I would wager that devout Christians would come out surprisingly well in such a comparison. Yet they are overwhelmingly portrayed in a negative manner.

Group identification is not confined to America. Another friend of mine once spent a summer in Australia, and was surprised to find that many Australians believed every American was wealthy. My friend attributed those beliefs to the television shows Dallas, Dynasty, and Falcon Crest. Though the shows had been off prime time television for years in America, they apparently still had a large audience in Australia.

So it must be with the rest of the world. Many people receive their understanding of America not from anything politicians say or do, but from what they see and hear about America in the movies and television shows that promulgate the world.

I believe that the entertainment industry's predilection with writing characters that are stereotypes actually divides society. Visual entertainment is so believable and influential, that it shapes the way we think about others. The people that we see in entertainment become as real to us as our friends and neighbors. Group identification has now replaced the beautiful uniqueness and depth of personality of actual individuals. However, humans are so complex that no character we see on the screen can ever capture the rich, intricate personality of a real person. Sometimes, seeing is not always understanding or knowing.

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