

Chapter 5

The 1980s: Bill Cosby and Ensemble Casts Diversify Television

U.S. Population, 1980

Total: 227,757,000

Black Population: 26,903,000

Percentage of Total: 11.8%

Percentage of Black Population on Television: 5%–7%

Latino Population: 14,974,800

Percentage of Total: 6.6%

Percentage of Latino Population on Television: 1%–3%

Many changes occurred during the decade of the 1980s in media, in advertising, and especially on television. Most changes were readily apparent. Television commercials began to feature black people, and minority images began to show up on the tube every night. National magazines carried black faces on their covers, and urban radio stations came into vogue when black-programmed stations pulled top ratings in big city markets. For advertisers and programmers the disparity between black and white television viewers became apparent.

Ensemble casts provided the vehicle for the integration of television. Steven Bochco's *Hill Street Blues* introduced a diverse cast never before seen on prime time. Set in an unnamed ghetto precinct, the police drama was

innovative in approach, style, and tone. Each episode was a day in the precinct and also carried some story lines from episode to episode. The ensemble cast, so large, so diverse, and with so many plots going on in a single episode, initially confused viewers. Ratings were low, but the show was critically acclaimed and won six Emmy Awards that first year despite the low ratings. The realism of the characters and situations slowly drew more viewers and continued to receive the critics' thumbs up.

Airing from 1981 to 1987, language was often crude and rude, sex scenes were explicit, and violence was graphic for the time. Daniel J. Travanti headed the diverse precinct's characters cast as Captain Frank Furillo. Michael Conrad played Sergeant Phil Esterhaus, and Veronica Hamel was Furillo's love interest. Charles Haid and Michael Warren played partners Renko and Hill, one white, one black. Both suffered gunshot wounds in the closing scene of the first episode, and viewers had to wait until the second episode to see if they survived. They did, and their struggles with the experience made them perennial favorites with fans of the show.

The diverse cast had its share of minority criminals and prostitutes yet offered a balance with black and Hispanic police officers. Lieutenant Ray Calletano, played by Rene Enriquez, was a rare Latino character in prime time not cast as a criminal, comic, or Latin lover—he was a quiet, competent police detective. In one episode Calletano is honored as "Hispanic Officer of the Year" and referred to as a Puerto Rican in his tribute. His character is, however, from Colombia. The episode created awareness on the different Latino and Hispanic cultures and the stereotypes that relegate all people of Latino heritage to one homogeneous group.

Hill Street Blues introduced the mixed-race partnership in police work in the 1980s, but *Miami Vice* gave the combination notoriety and style in the characters of Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs. Played by Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas, the duo on the hip program appealed to the MTV generation. The city of Miami was prominently featured as well as the Cuban influence in that city. Edward James Olmos costarred as Lieutenant Martin Castillo. Sandra Santiago provided a rare image of Latino

women in a role other than prostitute, and Olivia Brown diversified the image of black women on detective programs in her role as Detective Trudy Joplin.

Later in the decade, Philip Michael Thomas appeared in a made-for-TV movie titled *A Fight for Jenny*. A first for prime-time television, the

movie featured an interracial lovemaking scene. Due to the controversial nature of that scene, some local network affiliates chose not to air the movie.

From the familiar casting of a butler to lieutenant governor, the character Benson from the show of the same name was symbolic of the diversified images of minorities on television in the 1980s. The show aired on ABC from 1979 to 1986, and Robert Guillaume portrayed the wise and wisecracking character with poise and integrity. His early portrayal was often described as a dignified butler portrayal, a label received with mixed reactions in the black community. Although nominated several times for Best Actor in a Comedy, Guillaume never won the honor. However, the parent program *Soap*, from which *Benson* was a spin-off, won him the honor for Best Supporting Actor in a Comedy.

Continuing with the 1980s version of the butler-maid stereotypes, Nell Carter starred in a very popular situation comedy as maid for a widowed single male parent played by Dolph Sweet. First telecast in 1981, *Gimme a Break!* ran until 1987. Carter's character was the familiar nurturing, physically rotund maid caring for the children in a white household—not as a domestic but as part of the family. Telma Hopkins played her friend Addy Wilson and offered the only glimpse of Nell's connection to the black community. The stereotypical portrayal of the black maid with no family of her own—and no sense of a need for such—continued to be the most acceptable portrayal of black women in prime-time comedies.

The popular sitcom *227* offered Marla Gibbs the opportunity to shine again as a wisecracking lovable character on NBC from 1985 through 1990. Set in a workingclass black neighborhood, the program focused on the female characters played by Gibbs, Alaina Reed Hall, Jackée Harry, Regina King, and Helen Martin. A typical scene had the women sitting on the front stoop of apartment house number 227, talking, gossiping, and giving viewers a glimpse of working-class black culture and values.

Probably the most underrated program of the 1980s depicting black life and culture was the short-lived *Frank's Place* starring Tim Reid. Set in New Orleans, the show was a combination of drama and comedy, heavier on the drama. The “dramedy” would not enjoy success as a television genre until more than a decade later with David E. Kelley's *Ally McBeal*. *Frank's Place* was ahead of its time, as well, in the absence of a laugh track. The show portrayed black people in a number of diverse roles with unique and interesting backgrounds and dealt head-on with issues of race and discrimination in realistic story lines. One poignant episode focused on the unspoken discrimination within the black community between light-skinned black people and dark-skinned black people. Low ratings

were attributed to an audience expecting the typical comedy and instead getting thought-provoking drama. It was canceled after only one season but remembered for its quality. The program also featured Daphne Maxwell Reid and Robert Harper.

Without question, the most significant and influential show on prime time in the decade was *The Cosby Show*. The show debuted on NBC in

1984 and enjoyed high ratings through its last telecast in 1992. Developed by Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, the program came from Bill Cosby's stand-up comedy routines. He insisted on creative control of the program and hired Harvard Professor Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint to ensure the show's realism. Pitched initially to ABC, who rejected the show, NBC saw it soar in the ratings to number three its first year on the air and then maintain the number one spot for the next 4 years.

The show brought the Huxtables into U.S. homes every Thursday evening. Cosby played patriarch Cliff Huxtable with Phylicia Rashad as his wife Clair. He was a doctor and she a lawyer, and together they brought a new look to the black family on television—the upper-middle-class professional black family. Sabrina LeBeauf, Lisa Bonet, Tempestt Bledsoe, and Keshia Knight Pulliam played daughters Sondra, Denise, Vanessa, and Rudy. Son Theo was cast with Malcolm-Jamal Warner. The show proved a black-cast program could attract a large white audience; and, without focusing on race, the program communicated that indeed all families experience the same ups, downs, and fun experiences.

And while America watches *The Cosby Show* in record numbers, others recognize the importance of Martin Luther King Jr. in getting to that point on television.

Cosby led NBC to its highest rating in more than 10 years. Cosby had a 36 rating and a 57 share . . . the only unqualified hit of the season.

Broadcasting and Cable,
October 20, 1986

Bill Cosby exerted his creative control by having Dr. Poussaint review each script to ensure reality and to infuse black culture in a seamless way. For example, Dr. Poussaint included references to black theater and black colleges and displayed works by black artists on the set without necessarily referring to race or racism. One controversial inclusion on the set was a poster reading "Ban Apartheid." The program did not deal with the issue, but the poster was displayed in Theo's room. NBC objected until Cosby insisted that the poster remain.

Cosby often wore sweatshirts from traditional black colleges and universities. But more than anything the program's universal appeal was in the family conflicts and resolutions, common to all races and ethnic groups. This gave *The Cosby Show* crossover appeal like no other show before it.

At the same time that *The Cosby Show* enjoyed unprecedented success, ad agencies began to see the value in courting the black audience. BBDO New York, one of the largest advertising agencies, developed the Special Markets department under the direction of the coauthor of this book, Doug Alligood. In 1984 BBDO began to provide its clients with advice, counsel, and comment on aspects of special populations including not only black people but also people of Latino and Asian heritage, gay people, military personnel, and the teen and college markets. Other agencies followed with increased interest in these so-called special-niche segments of the population. Coupled with the expansion of cable television's targeting special segments of the population, television again saw dramatic changes in the depiction of minorities on television.

Alligood originated the "BBDO Black Audience Prime-Time Network Viewing Study" in 1984 as well. The study of black prime-time network television viewing preferences evolved from an idea Alligood had as president of Uniworld, a black-owned advertising agency. His premise was that the agency needed to build the knowledge base of what black viewers were watching on prime time. Most people at that time assumed that if you put a show on television featuring one or more black performers, black people would watch it and, if a show was popular with total viewers, it had to be popular with black viewers. Working with Nielsen Media Research, BBDO was able to identify the shows that were watched primarily by black audiences, those watched primarily by white audiences, and the shows that had the greatest appeal to the coveted crossover, or colorblind, audiences.

Initial studies noted that the top shows popular with both black viewers and total viewers numbered as many as 13 out of 20. However, things changed quickly. A likely consequence of Cosby's domination of network ratings during the 1980s saw more programs featuring black performers in major roles than ever before. However, none replicated the success of *The Cosby Show* in crossover appeal. With the exception of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the 1990s reflected black preferences that were completely different from those of white and total U.S. households.

Your data showed me that although blacks are heavy users of general media, they process these media differently than the general population. This difference is easily seen by the Nielsen rankings of television shows for black households versus those for total households. "Buppies" may be sharing jokes around the water cooler with their white coworkers, but despite common belief, as blacks move up the socioeconomic scale they do keep a strong sense of ethnic identity.

Nicole de Coteau in a letter to Doug Alligood comments on his report on black viewer preferences (October 1992).

While it may have gone over the heads of many, *The Cosby Show*, which reigned for nine years on NBC, was practically a public service announcement on behalf of equality, a 30-minute reminder that minorities can and should enjoy the same success and quality of life and family as every American.

*The Post Standard,
November 16, 2003*

In my opinion, the key to the crossover success of *The Cosby Show* was that it was the first prime-time television show to stress how much we (the viewing audience) have in common as opposed to how different we all are.

Doug Alligood

The studies we produced at BBDO showed that *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show* spin-off, ranked number one in black households from its first year on the air in 1987 through 1992. Representing the longest run at the top for any show among black viewers, *A Different World* presented a fairly accurate picture of what life is like at a predominantly black college and at the same time it introduced a number of fresh new talents to American audiences.

Doug Alligood

