CREATING POSITIVE TELEVISION IMAGES

This project was motivated by the convergence of three related bodies of literature: research on the effects of media violence, the portrayal of minorities and women in the media, and the prosocial potential of television.

By far, the bulk of scholarly attention to television has been devoted to the effects of violence on the viewing audience. The results of several decades of research in this arena clearly reveal that violence in the media can affect the violent attitudes and/or behaviors of at least a portion of the viewers (Roberts & Bachen, 1981; Withey, 1980).

A related concern has been the effects of stereotypic portrayals of American ethnic minority groups and nonminority women. Indeed, the mass media have presented stereotypic portrayals of black and other minority Americans throughout their entire history (see Bayles, 1985; Berry, 1980; Graves, 1980; Poindexter & Stroman, 1980; Staples & Jones, 1985). Equally problematic has been the lack of television programming depicting cross-race interaction. Weigel and Howes (1982), for example, reported that cross-racial associations constituted only 1% of children’s network programming.

Images of women have been constrained in their adherence to traditional sex-role stereotypes (e.g., Morgan, 1982; Weigel & Loomis, 1981; Zuckerman, Singer, & Singer, 1980). Women characters are typically portrayed as passive, domestic, or in traditional “women’s roles” (e.g., teacher, nurse, secretary).

Thus despite television’s admitted socialization potential (e.g., Abeles, 1980; Berry, 1980; Rushton, 1979), its use to date has been dominated by violence and by negative images of minorities and nonminority women. In addition to being incomplete and stereotypical, these images can negatively affect the self-esteem of members of the stigmatized groups (Abeles, 1980).

This use of the medium is even more frustrating because of television’s prosocial potential. A substantial body of research on the effects of prosocial television has now demonstrated the medium’s ability to enhance interpersonal empathy, cooperation, nonviolent problem resolution, and reversal of racial or gender prejudices and stereotypes (see Rushton, 1979, for a review). The general conclusion that emerges is that television, whatever its content, can have a demonstrable impact on its viewers. A major problem, however, has been the lack of adequate programming of a prosocial nature (Houser, 1978; Rushton, 1979).

CREATING “STAR CRUSADERS”

In order to help in redressing this problem, I gave some time to “creative writing” and developed the concept for an educational television program that would address each of the concerns outlined in the preceding pages. In beginning this creative endeavor, I saw a number of needs: The program would have to be attractive and appealing to its target audience, it should promote interracial harmony and positive multicultural exchanges, it must reverse the stereotypical images of minorities and nonminority women, it should provide positive role models and vicarious cross-ethnic experiences, and it should develop an appropriate prosocial value base.

The creation of the original “Star Crusaders” concept has been detailed elsewhere (Fairchild, 1984). In summary, the pilot television program involved an interracial and cross-gender team of skilled young adults, cast in counter-stereotypical roles, who traveled to other planets to solve problems of intergroup conflict. The program incorporated the conditions for reducing prejudice specified in the “contact hypothesis,” developed in race relations research (Allport, 1954): The team of protagonists shared equal status and common goals, they cooperated in a fairly intimate context, and they enjoyed successful outcomes.

This formula for “Star Crusaders” was then articulated in a treatment and a shooting script, and was later produced by a public broadcasting station in Los Angeles (KCET-TV, Channel 28) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (see Fairchild, 1984). “Star Crusaders” aired in Los Angeles in the summer of 1981.

The program introduced five Star Crusaders: Logan (adult black male), Jim (young adult black male, and the leading protagonist), Susan (young adult Asian female), Tom (young adult white male), and Miguel (young adult Mexican-American male). Each of the Star Crusaders possessed a unique and useful skill or ability (e.g., telepathy, history, computer sciences, acrobatics).
The pilot program pitted the Star Crusaders against a Hitlerian demagogue who was preaching racial, ethnic, and age separation. In a dramatic debate, Jim defeated the demagogue and his separatist ideology.

EVALUATING “STAR CRUSADERS”

In order to evaluate the effects of the program on viewers, a three-phase method was developed to assess (1) program content, (2) viewer perceptions of that content, and (3) the effects of the content on interpersonal attitudes and behaviors.

The first study, a detailed and objective content analysis, calculated the proportion of “total human appearance time” that various ethnic and gender groups were portrayed. Results indicated that whites were involved in scenes 64% of the time, blacks 50%, Asians 25%, Hispanics 25%, males 87% and females 46%. Interracial interaction accounted for 40% of the total human appearance time.

The second study, an audience perception analysis, involved 104 university undergraduates who judged the themes and impact of the program. These students viewed the program in small group settings, and then evaluated the program on an open- and closed-ended questionnaire. In reporting up to four themes, the students accurately perceived the prosocial themes in the program with peaceful living mentioned by 62%. Other themes reported to have high salience in the program were interpersonal cooperation (32%) and racial harmony (35%). Although nearly half (43%) of the students said that the program had little or no impact on them, some students said that the program reinforced their existing attitudes (15%), increased their sensitivity to racial discrimination (24%), or increased their concern for problems on earth (14%).

The third study was a larger field experiment involving 948 students in the public schools. Of these students, 494 were in the 5th and 6th grades (about 10-11 years of age), and 454 were in the 7th and 8th grades (about 12-13 years of age). The schools were predominantly black and Hispanic. Students in intact classrooms were exposed to one of three conditions: “Star Crusaders” without a discussion, “Star Crusaders” with a discussion, or a control film about animals (“Wild Kingdom”). The use of a discussion condition was motivated by the research literature, which has demonstrated the positive benefits of media-related discussions and activities (e.g., Wade & Poole, 1983).

Students were given a closed-ended questionnaire that assessed appeal, agreement with themes in the program (10 Likert-type items), character evaluation and identification (students were shown pictures of the seven key characters and asked, “How good do you think this person is as an actor or actress?” and “How much would you like to like this person?”), and a “feeling thermometer” for four ethnic/racial groups (Asians, blacks, Mexican-Americans, and whites). Questions were worded so as to be suitable for both treatment and control conditions.

Results indicated that students found “Star Crusaders” more appealing than “Wild Kingdom” (the discussion condition was most liked by elementary school students, and the no-discussion condition was most liked by the junior high school students). Exposed students typically endorsed the themes in the program (e.g., “It is best to solve problems by working together,” and “Some leaders can turn people against each other”). Students also more favorably evaluated and identified with the “Star Crusaders” characters if they had seen the videotape. This latter finding was particularly true for the lead character, Jim (the young adult black male). As expected, gender was related to character identification, with female students more likely to identify with female characters, and male students more likely to identify with male characters. Students’ feelings toward their own and others’ ethnic groups were not related to exposure to “Star Crusaders” (See Fairchild, 1984, for details).

These studies provided evidence of the potential of the “Star Crusaders” concept to capture and hold the attention of a youthful audience, and to form a basis for the adoption of positive values concerning racial and gender groups.

In many respects, however, research on “Star Crusaders” was limited in nature because the videotape was a constant. Although containing a variety of content, the tape as a whole presented a constant stimulus to viewers. As a result, some of the more interesting research questions could not be addressed—for example: What features of the program are related to which results?

RE-CREATING “STAR CRUSADERS”

After 7 years of creative and research work, I had produced a 30-minute pilot tape and data from a series of investigations demonstrating the tape’s efficacy in schools. I could continue research with that tape, but I felt enough research had already been devoted to an admittedly modest pilot television program. What I now needed was
new direction—an effort to improve on the original concept and develop a television series that would be suitable for either broadcast or classroom use. This, certainly, is not the typical work of a social psychologist.

In reconceptualizing "Star Crusaders," I was concerned with four issues: (1) maintaining the appeal of the program, (2) maintaining prosocial themes in the program, (3) creating sets and plots that could be feasibly produced, and (4) developing a research agenda to be incorporated into program production.

I was also concerned about the quality of the pilot program itself. Although it had been positively received by viewing audiences, I was dissatisfied with several aspects of the program. First, the program was not entirely consistent with respect to its "counter-stereotypical" images. In certain scenes, conflict on the alien planet was depicted using some minority actors in stereotyped activities. Second, the pilot was too "preachy" in presenting its prosocial themes. The debate between the demagogue and Jim was too didactic, and too non-action-oriented.

Third, the casting of the "Star Crusaders" did not allow for the portrayal of certain groups. Black and Hispanic women, and Asian men, were all but nonexistent. Moreover, the content analysis demonstrated a lack of equal time (and therefore probably also of equal status) in the presentation of various group members.

These issues were difficult to overcome, and "Star Crusaders" sat on a back burner for several years, until I returned again to "creative writing." The result of this creative work is "Star Crusaders: An Animated Space Adventure." The title of the series tells a lot about the proposed program: A group of youthful protagonists are the nexus for the series. These youth, born in space as part of a moving colony, conduct space exploration in the course of their training and engage in conflict resolution as their raison d'être. The program will utilize state-of-the-art animation techniques, thus avoiding many of the prohibitive costs associated with live-action and science-fiction production.

The program is to have a triple purpose: to entertain, to present prosocial themes, and to inform. Concerning the latter, "Star Crusaders: An Animated Space Adventure" will feature "real science" in the context of space exploration. Information in the program will be correct in terms of current knowledge about astronomical processes and other scientific areas. The more subtle, prosocial messages of the program will be embodied in the modeling of cross-ethnic, and cross-gender egalitarianism.

Although the series is targeted to a youthful audience (early childhood through adolescence), it will use "adult" dialogue and situations, and will therefore attract older audiences as well. Other successful programs have this same cross-age appeal (e.g., E.T., the Extraterrestrial; "Star Trek").

The Concept

Time. Approximately 200 years in the future.

Setting. On board "The Ariel," a space vehicle for exploring the far reaches of space. Because of the distances (and therefore travel time) involved, space travel is multigenerational. The Ariel is huge (built in space, it is more than a cubic kilometer), and rotates in order to simulate gravity. Population: 1,553.

Protagonists. The first children born in space, the Star Crusaders have been specially trained for space exploration. The first cohort is composed of 16 crusaders. They are divided equally in gender, and the major racial groups are represented. In addition, they are multinational and multilingual.

One emphasis will be the development of harmonious Soviet/American relationships. Key characters will be of Soviet and American origin, and will work harmoniously together. Other key characters will represent the people of the world. In a sense, the Ariel is to be a traveling United Nations.

The Star Crusaders will be specialists with respect to their vocational training (e.g., astro-navigator, gravitational physicist, electrical and mechanical engineers, biologists, botanist, etc.).

Activities. The Star Crusaders are explorers of space. Part of their training includes knowledge about the solar system, and animated holograms provide them, and the viewing audience, with an education about the planets. After the development of a Star Drive (allowing for space/time transformations exceeding the speed of light), the crusaders explore the far reaches of space: black holes, X-ray stars, binary star systems, other galaxies, pulsars, neutron stars, and other worlds. Material will be presented as entertaining lessons in astronomy, and will adhere to current scientific theory and facts. Fictional material will include contacts with other life forms and civilizations (an emphasis on scientific plausibility will be maintained). The Star Crusaders will encounter disasters and perils that require intelligence and cooperation to solve.

Considerable attention will be given to "life in space." New forms of recreation, physical exercise, and communal living will...
Prosocial themes. The series is intended to provide positive models for interpersonal relations, especially cross-gender and cross-ethnic relationships. Characters will be cast in “equal status” roles, and will demonstrate cooperative efforts in achieving common goals. Some programs will explicitly deal with the peaceful resolution of conflict between life forms encountered in space. For example, in one treatment, the Star Crusaders bridge the gap between two warring factions and bring peace to a world at war.

Appeal

“Star Crusaders: An Animated Space Adventure” capitalizes on the immense popularity of science fiction with young and old audiences alike. The use of computer-assisted animation heightens appeal, especially for young viewers. As an action adventure, the program will capture the attention, and the imagination, of children and adolescents. By presenting veridical science (true explanations and theorems concerning the structure of the universe), the program will appeal to adults as well. A dynamic music score will heighten appeal.

DISCUSSION

The foregoing program proposal provides a glimpse of the potential of the “Star Crusaders” concept. Of course, a number of challenges remain: obtaining funding, determining a production house, writing scripts, and so on. These are not small items, and I recognize the great improbability of the series’ eventual production. Nevertheless, the first step is the articulation of the proposal, and this chapter has accomplished that.

What is a social psychologist doing creating television programming? Should this not be left to the appropriate industry experts? My answer is that television, as one of the most pervasive socialization influences in our society, must be part of the social scientist’s work and concern. Experts in human behavior should become directly involved in creation of the material being offered to audiences. Social psychologists (and social scientists more generally) should apply knowledge in real-world contexts and toward the resolution of real-world problems.

And what of research? My background as a social psychologist demands a comprehensive research program despite the methodological and conceptual complexities involved. As Gans (1980) noted, the media researcher has the “insuperable task of isolating the impact of the mass media from the impact of other institutions, and obviously, methodological problems abound” (p. 57).

But it is precisely the potential of “Star Crusaders: An Animated Space Adventure” that excites me as a researcher. With a continuing series of programs, it becomes possible to study the myriad influences on children’s social behavior in longitudinal and/or experimental designs. Such studies, at a minimum, must include the following classes of variables: characteristics of the viewer, including personality, cognitive development, group membership(s), and television viewing habits; content analyses of the programming itself; characteristics of the viewing situation (time, day, location, and social influences); the processes involved during or after exposure (e.g., attention, information processing, follow-up activities); and the complex cognitive, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes that may result.

Summative research, as described above, must distinguish between direct and indirect effects, short-term and long-term effects, and the effects of cumulative exposure to the prosocial television programming. Formative research would seek feedback and input from students, teachers, and others during the production of the programs. Here, comparatively less sophisticated research designs would be geared toward providing rapid responses to questions that pertain to the quality and messages of the programs as they are being developed.

Also, the researcher must control for “selective exposure” and “selective avoidance” problems in media effects research. A substantial number of studies have demonstrated that efforts to change attitudes and behaviors of viewers are thwarted by the tendency for viewers to attend media selectively in a way that fortifies their existing attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors (Wallack, 1981).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

My creative engagement in children’s television programming has not been without professional costs. Time devoted to creative writing subtracts from time available for pure research, and research is the currency of evaluation for most social psychologists. My work on “Star Crusaders” has been devalued by some because it demonstrated my “lack of commitment to research” or my “failure to obtain robust results.”

Social scientists committed to social change and social improvement must be aware of the inherent difficulties and impediments to success. Social problems are difficult to study, and certainly difficult to change.
Indeed, the fact that we may want to create social change is cause for alarm to many. Traditional biases within science for "objectivity," and "detachment" from the object of inquiry lead to a depreciation of the applied social scientist's work.

Commitment to the resolution of continuing social problems may require a deviation from the traditional paths to academic rewards. The risks are great, but the potential rewards, it seems to me, are greater. Television can be a pathway to peace by creating a sense of world community, promoting intercultural understanding, and impeding the formation of the enemy image.

If "Star Crusaders: An Animated Space Adventure" has any potential for changing the normative climate of American/Soviet relations, or intercultural relations, or gender relations, then it deserves the effort required to bring it to fruition.

REFERENCES


