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An American Mess: How Colorblind Racism Prevents an Enlightened Conversation on Race in Television Media

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CONCLUSION

Americans of all identities who view mainstream media are taught to maintain a worldview that values white people over people of color, or to disregard other identity groups completely. Colorblind ideology is so insidiously at play in the media. Inaction is an action, indecision is decision. Not casting POC in substantive roles or not dealing with race in meaningful ways (only using race for humor) are artistic/editorial directions. Even when made by accident, they work to demonstrate how colorblind ideology has destroyed any modicum of seriously addressing issues concerning race/ethnicity in America, working to prevent racial parity and suggesting that we live in a society where race isn't salient in peoples' lives (except under the guise of humor).

Every day millions of Americans view media that is completely or mostly made by and featuring whiteness and white people. And every day we think that is acceptable, we think it is normal, and we think we shouldn't do anything to change it. In essence, we are bystanders, or passive accomplices, with the media that we follow, support, and believe in, and that systematically undervalues or excludes POC. We reinforce and promulgate colorblind racism in our own homes each time we turn on a TV show or a movie in which people of color (as well as Whites who recognize structural racism and oppression) are not reflected in and choose not to change the channel, or press the power button.

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METHODOLOGY

Scandal

Everyone has a secret... and Olivia Pope has dedicated her life to protecting and defending the public images of the nation's elite and keeping those secrets under wraps. Revered and feared at the same time, Olivia, a former communications director to the President of the United States, left the White House to open her own prominent crisis management firm. She is hoping to start a new chapter in her life—both professionally and personally—but she can't seem to completely cut ties with her past. The creator and executive producers of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice* delve into the behind-the-scenes machinations of a mesmerizing top crisis manager in ABC's drama, *Scandal*.

Walking Dead

Based on the comic book series of the same name, *The Walking Dead* captures the ongoing human drama following a zombie apocalypse. The show tells the story of a small group of survivors living in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse. The plot is focused primarily on the dilemmas the group faces as they struggle to balance their humanity with their survival against the zombie horde, while facing the changing dynamics of their group, and hostility from the scattered remains of a struggling human populace who are focused on their own survival now that the structures of society have collapsed.

Based on the television drama *Scandal* and *Walking Dead*, each individual episode is examined for the following characteristics:

1. The presence or absence of POC characters;
2. The types of roles they occupy (if present);
3. The nature of race/ethnicity in each episode plot (central, marginal, absent); and
4. The nature and extent of dialogue about race/ethnicity in each episode.

Secondly, data was coded and to construct categories of racial representation (dialogue, characters, plot), which can include but are not limited to:

1. Colorblind
2. Direct
3. Stereotypical
4. Neutral
5. Non-representative
6. Progressive

DATA ANALYSIS

In the first season of *Scandal* there are three main characters who are POC. However, there were zero (0) instances of plot or dialogue that portrayed race in any way. Race is not just marginal to this show, but it is invisible, save for the characters' skin color. For the first research question, of how POC characters are represented, the answer can only be that they are "non-representative." Race is not a factor in any way in any of their lives, and their racial identity may as well not exist. This non-representation means that *Scandal* strictly adheres to a colorblind ideology. The roles could have been played by an actor or actress because race is a non-factor. Further analysis to support my conclusion is found below.

The Walking Dead features more nuanced representation. The cast is more diverse and includes numerous POC characters both with and without speaking roles. There were seven (7) instances of dialogue regarding race, and each of these I classify as "direct" racist comments. An important caveat to one of these instances is described in the discussion portion. Two (2) instances of plot I classify as direct, and both are discussed below. Besides T-Dog's name being stereotypical, the four main recurring POC characters in the first season are progressive. They do not rely on stereotypes. They are somewhat central to the plot, and completely central at certain points. And regarding plot construction of race, two episodes in particular were constructed in such a manner that they put forward a racial ideology, and both of these constructions are problematic and regressive. Particular emphasis is provided in the discussion. Overall, this show cannot be argued to adhere to a colorblind ideology, and I posit that the ideology is more direct, relying on racist epithets, jokes and slurs, and problematic and regressive constructions, including upholding white supremacy and POC.

This project aims to demonstrate how the current racial ideology in America is portrayed through television media. It is primarily guided by the work of Eduardo Bonita-Silva and his masterful examination of post-civil rights racism in the United States in his book *Racism Without Racists*. From a firm understanding of the ideology of this new racism -- its frames, styles, and storylines -- the content of two television shows are analyzed to identify the racial ideology and the representations of people of color within.

Scandal (ABC) is progressive in the sense that it has a Black female lead, and two other main POC (people of color) characters. It is the first show in 38 years featuring a Black female lead that has been renewed by a major network. *The Walking Dead* (AMC) is about reconstructing society and trying to survive amidst a zombie apocalypse. Is race still a salient issue in this context? Those who argue of a "post-racial society" would say no, but the show constructs a reality that is quite different.

A qualitative content analysis using simple emergent coding procedures was utilized. Although there are characters in the program who are people of color, *Scandal* was found to have zero representations of race, whether it be through dialogue or plot related, besides the fact of the characters' skin tones. *The Walking Dead* portrays numerous instances of direct, or overt, racism and constructs ideologies of people of color that are regressive and problematic. Plot in this program at times upholds white supremacy and relegates the lives of people of color to insignificance.

INTRODUCTION

Race is one of the most, if not the most, significant factors of our identity. It shapes our ideas on sexuality, gender, power, success, love, religion, our ideals, our hopes and our dreams. We are all racialized beings, and the media is inherently interested in portrayals of race in American society. The purpose of this study is to examine how race is constructed through selected contemporary television programs and to analyze the racial ideology they deliver.

In this research, I will refer to non-white racial and ethnic groups with the broad term "people/person of color" as the term minority has been rejected in many spheres as connoting inferiority. People of color (POC), at least in contemporary usage, is an umbrella term that links together the Black, Latino/a, Asian and Pacific Islander (API), and Native American communities. POC is a descriptor that these groups created as a means of self-naming (as opposed to the imbalanced power dynamic of "minorities") and empowerment, and unlike the case with "minorities," recognizes that this power dynamic was institutionally created and is institutionally maintained.

Even with a Black first family, Americans fail at having a constructive conversation about race through our national dialogue - the media. This presentation will examine the dominant racial ideology of contemporary America, and show examples of how a modern form of racism are perpetuated through one of the most powerful institutions of our nation. This research is done with two core empirical truths as a foundation:

1. To consume media is to consume a pre-constructed ideology, that is created by humans (writers, producers, directors, actors – to an extent - and other decision makers)
2. What we see on television matters, and can have manifestations in reality

THEORY

Frames of Colorblind Racism

1. Abstract Liberalism
 - Opposition to using practical purposes to alleviate de facto racial inequality
 - The sacrosanctity of the "individual" with "choices" as a justification of de facto segregation.
2. Naturalization
 - A frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences.
3. Cultural Racism
 - Relies on culturally based arguments such as "Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education" or "blacks have too many babies" to explain the standing of minorities in society.
4. Minimization of racism
 - Suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances.