What Does TV Look Like in Your America?

Tonight, many of us will sit down to watch the Emmy Awards, and even more of us will jump into Emmy-related conversations on Twitter and Facebook. We could let the usual chatter take hold—her dress, his facial hair, someone's speech—or might we bypass everyone's accessories to explore more meaningful terrain. Say, the makeup of the TV families and communities this collective group of nominees helps to create. In other words, why not have a conversation about who we are watching on TV and why?

There will be a watcher or two who will assert that TV is escapism and has no obligation to represent anything or anyone; others will note that it is a business obliged only to show what rates. But even accepting these assertions should leave us wondering why it is that a world of mostly white, middle-class, straight American men in dominant roles is our collective escape.

Most of us will have read or heard about the exciting representations in shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, *Veep*, *House of Cards*, etc. – the strong women they bring to the screen, the groundbreaking inclusion of trans characters, the multiracial families, etc. The numbers show that these characters are an anomaly. Both in terms of nominees and the entire 2013-14 season, the diversity of gender, race, sexuality, age, ability, etc. continues to be largely absent from our screens. For example, by the Women's Media Center tally, women were nominated 369 times this year—which sounds pretty good until you compare it to the 1037 times men were nominated. In this year's six writing awards, 20 nominees out of the total 130 were women (15 percent). Directing is worse, where only four women versus 31 men were nominated (11 percent).

Additionally, the storylines and circumstances of characters that do bring difference into our living rooms are falling short. While there is no denying the thrill of playing audience to Laverne Cox, Uzo Aduba, Julia Louis-Dreyfus or Robin Wright, one is left in the end with an all too familiar Thelma and Louise type message: to be other than white, straight and middle class and to dare to be present, independent and/or a leader is to be at best laughable, and ultimately, criminal. It is to not belong and to have no place except in the margins or behind bars.

Re:Gender did a virtual sit-down with media advocacy organizations and social justice activists to talk TV and to jumpstart a deeper conversation. They include:

Joseph DeFilippis, Founding Executive Director, Queers for Economic Justice; Instructor, Portland State University School of Social Work

Madeline DiNonno, CEO, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,

Sarah Kate Ellis, CEO and President, GLAAD

Ashley Goforth, Digital Engagement Manager, GolinHarris

Re:Gender: Buzzfeed, with help from Alyssa Rosenberg, has an amusing graphic looking at how characters on TV compare to who actually lives in the U.S. today. They look broadly at race and gender. What else would you include to show gender gaps between the worlds of TV and the U.S. today?

DeFilippis: This is a great graph, but I would also add in age, income and sexual orientation. For example, none of this year's 12 nominees for Best Actress in a Drama or Best Actress in a Comedy are over 55 years old. Only two are over age 50 (Edie Falco, 51 and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, 53). I suspect these 12 nominees are representative of the ages of most television characters, which is not representative of women in America. Television producers are obsessed with youth and seem to think that older people, particularly older women, are not particularly interesting.

As for income, women are nominated for their portrayals of characters that work in a wide variety of careers, from maid (Joanne Froggatt), nurse (Edie Falco) and elementary school teacher (Melissa McCarthy), to lawyers (Christine Baranski and Julianna Margulies), businesswomen (Christina Hendricks and Kerry Washington) and politicians (Julia Louis Dreyfus and Amy Poehler). This represents a wide range of economic statuses, which is great. Unfortunately, it does not represent the lives of any poor people. Poverty remains rampant in America: over 46 million people, 15 percent of all Americans, are living below the poverty line, with women over-represented in those numbers. The stories of poor women remain largely invisible on television.

Di Nonno: We know from our research that across Family Films, Prime Time Television and Children's Shows that the percentage of female characters falls short of the real-world population. In Family Films, female characters represent 28 percent, in Prime Time TV, 39 percent and in Children's shows 31 percent of all speaking characters.

Ellis: Even among LGBT representations on television we still find a sizable gender gap in place, with gay male characters outnumbering lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women by a sizable degree. Shows like *The Fosters* and *Orange Is the New Black*, which give an important and more realistic view of how LBT (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) women live, are still few and far between.

Goforth: A gender gap in media that is misrepresented by the media is characters' work pay and position differences. Does a woman's rise in the workplace or compensation match that of her male counterparts? Think *House of Cards* or all of the *Law & Order* shows. How is the portrayal of equality in the work place portrayed when the workplace is not the direct setting for the show? Are female characters prone to having more "issues at home" than their male counterparts? How many times is work interrupted for family issues across the gender board versus how many personal days each gender takes during a year?

Re:Gender: Many call this television's new "Golden Age," but in 50 years, what will be said about how gender was treated in the 2013-14 television?

Ellis: In GLAAD's own 2013 diversity report, we found that only 43 percent of the regular roles on broadcast television were female, which was actually a 2 percent decline from the year prior. Not only is representation of women on traditional TV not appearing to get better, it may even be getting worse. On the bright side though, 2013 was also the year that Laverne Cox's role on *Orange Is the New Black* introduced millions of viewers to transgender people and issues, effectively creating an important media moment that is helping to eliminate ignorance and prejudice.

Di Nonno: Our research has showed that in prime time, reality TV is the most gender balanced, 48 percent female characters and 52 percent male characters. Children's TV shows have the least gender balance with only 31 percent of the characters being female. In terms of sexualization, prime time TV has more female characters but also the highest percentage of those characters in sexy attire and partially nude, both at about 35 percent, and with thin body types, about 38 percent.

DeFilippis: It is worth mentioning body size: most women on television remain skinny and beautiful. Sure, there are some notable exceptions to the dominance of Size 0 on the airwaves: Brooke Elliot (*Drop Dead Diva*), Mindy Kaling (*The Mindy Project*), Melissa McCarthy (*Mike and Molly*) and Amber Riley (winner of *Dancing with the Stars*) did wonderful work on their respective programs. But they are the exceptions that prove the rule–most women on television remain wafer thin...not to mention able-bodied, white, and young.

Also, women's behavior towards each other was sometimes more encouraging. On several high profile programs, women's friendships are central. Supporting each other, personally and professionally, are regular features of the

dynamics between the women on *Broad City, Downton Abbey, Girls, Grey's Anatomy, Orphan Black, Nurse Jackie,* and *Parks and Recreation*. However, just as often, women are still regularly pitted against each other. On *American Horror Story*, *Nashville*, *Revenge*, *Scandal*, and all of the *Housewives* reality shows, women are still presented as major obstacles for other women's fulfillment.

Re:Gender: Laverne Cox is quoted as saying, "We talk about the character of Piper [the show's lead Caucasian character] as the 'gateway drug' (in order to sell the show)… The reality is, people love to see white people on television." This YouTube video by Jenni Ruiza and Jesenia (aka the Comedy Girls), the recent protest hashtag #HowIMetYourRacism, and other social media activism are fighting back against the stereotypic portrayals of difference. Is there any movement in shifting stories of people of color (especially women), LGBT folks, disabled people, etc. from the sidelines to the center of stories told on television?

DeFilippis: Of the series nominated as Best Drama of the year, most of them focus on men's lives and stories. *Breaking Bad, Mad Men,* and *True Detective* are shows which completely centralize the narratives of the male leads, with women existing primarily to move the male characters' stories forward. And *Game of Thrones,* which has several strong female characters who are central to the storyline, is still essentially a male fantasy show where women get naked all the time for absolutely no reason. Additionally, of the six shows nominated for Best Comedy, four feature casts in which men are the majority of the lead characters.

The 2013-2014 season did little to move forward television's inability to address structural inequalities facing women or society in general. On *Orange is the New Black*, most of the women are in jail because of their personal mistakes, rather than because of the systemic racism of the criminal justice system or a destructive war on drugs. On *Downton Abbey*, the class system is presented as a conservative fantasy filled with benevolent aristocracy who look out for, rather than exploit, their staff. *House of Cards* and *Veep* present deeply cynical views of politics, but that cynicism is primarily extended to the characters and does not include looking critically at the political system itself. And *Mad Men* remains a white male fantasy of nostalgia for the good old days, rather than a critique of the gender and race politics of the time. None of this is terribly surprising. *The Wire* aside, television has never been a medium that attempted to take an honest look at our major institutions. But in a season filled with so many shows that had the potential to do so, it feels particularly disappointing.

Re:Gender: Gender diversity showed up in several different forms this past TV season. Of course there is Laverne Cox's transgender character Sophia Burset on *Orange is the New Black*. She is joined by Bullet, the genderqueer lesbian on *The Killing*, Adam and Unique, transgender teens on *Degrassi* and *Glee*, respectively, and gender-nonconforming Roscoe, Marty's son on *House of Lies*. At the same time, representations of cisgender characters (i.e., those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned when they were born) are notably "traditional," whether you look through at reality television, shows with traditionally strong female characters such as *Grey's Anatomy* or relatively newcomers like *Elementary*. Has the transgender movement's revolution been a success (at least on TV)?

Ellis: Stories about transgender and gender-nonconforming people have been gradually increasing in both quality and quantity on television for a number of years now thanks to groundbreakers like *Ugly Betty*, Chaz Bono on *Dancing with the Stars*, *Degrassi*, and of course, Laverne Cox. This forward momentum is long overdue, but in many ways transgender representation still remains 10 years behind where gay, lesbian, and bisexual representation is today, with many stories or characters still relying on offensive stereotypes rather than truthful depictions. Trans images must continue to evolve for the better.

GoForth: There seems to be a cautionary tale being told in regards to transgender characters. It is very similar to the path Ellen Degeneres took when she came out. This "Look at me, I am the same as you" where the issues are the same. The gender performance is still heteronormative, or based on the idea that heterosexuality (and the existence of only two genders/sexes) is normal, while anything other than that is abnormal. While we have come a long way from the transgender psycho kid killer from *Nip/Tuck*, transgender character story arcs still serve to prove that they are "one of us," and are moving towards a heteronormative life. In the 1990s, gay characters served to show that the main characters could grow and expand using the gay character as a plot device (i.e., "Gee, deep down I guess people are just like me!"). We are now seeing transgender characters as sages, direction givers or character

reinforcers. These characters inhabit a space formerly occupied by gay and lesbian characters. Gender, not sexuality, is the other.

Re:Gender: Looking at the nominations, there are a number of categories with a noticeable absence of gender (and other forms of) diversity. I am thinking here about writing and directing in particular. The Shonda Rhimes dynasty is growing, but she continues to be an anomaly. Why has movement toward greater gender equity been so slow in these categories? And what will it take to change the reality in the near- and long-term?

Ellis: Shonda Rhimes is a trailblazer when it comes to diversity, especially when it comes to LGBT characters and storylines. The success of her series should encourage media executives to find new, talented creators and give them the opportunity to work on high profile content. The Directors Guild of America and the Writers Guild of America have put in place diversity programs to launch new talent and get more diversity behind the camera, something the networks and studios should be taking advantage of if we want to see more women, including LBT (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) women, behind the camera in the long term.

Goforth: While there may be an absence of female writers and directors – there are still a few that deserve the recognition they are getting. The female writer, Moira Walley-Beckett, for *Breaking Bad*'s "Ozymandias" episode is one example here. That episode is largely regarded as one of the best in the series. Would I want her standing next to her peers and winning or having the perception that she is only there to fill a gender quota? I know that is taking it to the extreme, but I have been thinking on this. How can we promote mentoring for women like her to younger female writers and directors so that we have more Lena Dunhams and Jenni Konners in front and behind the cameras? What will it take without seeming patronizing?

Re:Gender: We are always on the lookout for characters in leadership roles on TV, without also being comedic, ineffective or "brought down" by sexual violence. What strong women characters fit that bill in your minds?

DeFilippis: Despite Julia Louis-Dreyfus' bungling Vice-President of the United States, most shows present men in positions of institutional power. Although there are many shows (*Elementary, Game of Thrones, House of Cards, Mad Men and Scandal*) that present smart, powerful women with proximity to institutional power, for the most part they have no institutional power themselves. We do have Alicia Florrick and Diane Lockhart leading the law firms on *The Good Wife*, and Mary Crawley taking on some of the power at *Downton Abbey*, but these are real exceptions. Most women on television lack authority in the workplace. In fact, out of all the procedurals on TV right now, there is not one female chief justice or district attorney. Additionally, the vast majority of fictional politicians, doctors, and executives are also male. Instead, we have programs like *Modern Family* that features two female leads among the ensemble, and both of them play stay-at-home mothers.

One program that stands out in my mind as a non-traditional representation of cisgendered women is Orphan Black. It stars Tatiana Maslany in an astonishingly amazing performance in which she portrays Sarah (a con woman), Beth (a police officer), Allison (a soccer mom), Cosima (a biologist), Helena (an assassin), and Rachel (an executive). All six characters are smart, independent, powerful women, who drive the storylines and do not easily fit into any definition of traditional gender roles. It is a transgressive program that, unsurprisingly, has been ignored by the Emmys.

Goforth: How often women are portrayed as the "bitch" of the workplace while the male lead is seen as "one of the guys"? This is sometimes in the aside by a main character towards an underdeveloped boss character. Plus, there are generally rumblings that in order to get out of a sticky work situation – one must resort to using sexuality.

The stories about how there are more "strong, independent female" characters and examples of these women given to illustrate it do not tell the whole story. For example, we will hear about Laverne Cox's role but it will be downplayed that there will be a new show in the 2014-2015 season relegating women to the role of Eliza Doolittle, i.e., need an educated man to help them help themselves. We will hear about how amazing and powerful and "masculine" Claire

Underwood's character in House of Cards has become. What we will not see is the cost to her femininity that Claire pays in order to be seen as a leading woman.

Re:Gender: And what about sexual violence and female characters this year? For example, we were struck by the Olivia Benson storyline on *Law and Order SVU*—as soon as she steps foot on the path to leadership (and power), she also becomes the target of a psychopath stalker, engages in great violence (i.e., becomes a criminal) and experiences intense PTSD (i.e., goes "crazy"). But in the show's 14 years, none of the male detectives has been sexually assaulted.

Goforth: Going back to Claire Underwood's character—she could have been a powerful story where sexuality and gender were used by both Frank, her husband, and Claire to promote their ends. But instead, there has been the introduction of the plotline that Claire was raped. Thus, forgiving her more masculine nature in pursuing success with Frank as a reaction to events that happened earlier in her life. To explain her gender performance (which goes beyond accepted femininity) there needs to be a damage point, a gender transition where she felt she could not depend on anyone but herself and as a result has adopted these masculine–esque traits.

DeFilippis: Much has been made of this in the press already, but it must be mentioned: this was TV's year of rape. High-profile programs used rape storylines because they could not figure out any other way to make some of their prominent female characters more sympathetic or more interesting. Villains like Mellie Grant on *Scandal*, Claire Underwood on *House of Cards*, and Cersei Lannister on *Game of Thrones*, as well as perfect heroine Anna Bates from *Downton Abbey* were all raped this season, and each of those storylines has been widely criticized for mishandling the issue. Interestingly, the actresses who play three of those four characters (Joanne Froggatt, Lena Headey, and Robin Wright) were Emmy-nominated for their portrayals, and the omission from the nominee list of Bellamy Young as Mellie Grant was widely criticized. Apparently being raped is a great way to win awards. Add to those four shows just about any episode of *Criminal Minds, CSI,* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,* and 2013-2014 was a veritable parade of men committing rape and violence against women.

#Emmys