Aliens in the Living Room:
How TV Shapes Our Understanding of "Teens"

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INTRODUCTION

Working on behalf of the William T. Grant Foundation, the FrameWorks Institute has commissioned a series of reports on the place of teenagers (or "youth") in American society. Cultural Logic's previous contributions to this research have included (1) a report on cultural models (i.e. shared understandings) of teens – based on a series of in-depth interviews with a diverse group of adults; and (2) a set of recommendations for ways of reframing teenagers as assets rather than liabilities. The current report takes a different tack and addresses – from a cognitive perspective – the general question of how television impacts American understandings of teens.

The cognitive perspective, in this case, includes three very distinct ways of looking at the impact of television on American understandings of teenagers:

- one that emphasizes the different "viewing angles" that various types of programming encourage viewers to take with respect to teens (empathizing vs. spectating vs. contemplating the larger causal picture)

- one that emphasizes the specific portrait of teens that emerges from television programming (i.e. the nature of television's "typical teen")

- and one that emphasizes the difference between TV's impact on private understandings of teens and public discourse about them.

Taken as a whole, this cognitive perspective allows us to consider a different set of questions from those addressed in most previous research on the social impact of television. Where most studies have concentrated on the content of what is shown, our discussion consistently focuses on how that content feeds into the cognitive and cultural models that guide thought, language and decision-making about teens.

The analysis presented in the report draws on material gathered for FrameWorks by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) and by Katharine Heintz-Knowles of Children's Media Research and Consulting – including televised news and entertainment segments featuring teens, and statistical analyses of those segments.

METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

A number of principles and perspectives arising from previous cognitively-based work (including our own) have shaped the conclusions reached in this report:

- *There is an important distinction between the input people get from the media and how they process it – i.e. between messages and impact.* This is the conceptual starting point of the report – that we gain important insights by explicitly considering the relationship between TV content and the minds of people who watch it.

- *There is an important distinction between what people learn from public discourse (PD) – including the media – and what they learn from their own lived experience (LE)*, or the lived experience of people close to them. Both kinds of input to people's understanding are highly relevant to WTG and it's mission to promote constructive policies towards youth.

- *There is an important distinction between the category (or "cultural model") of teenagers, and the "cognitive stances" from which people consider them.* The first relates to the content of people's beliefs – *what* people picture when they think about teens – while the second is more analogous to point-of-view, or *how* they look at them.

- *It is important to consider the impact of TV as a whole (in addition to the impact of particular genres).* We consider several genres of TV programming – both separately and as they make up the whole of what people see on the screen. Genres considered in the report include: local news, network news, reality TV, and dramas (or, in Heintz-Knowles' terminology, "scripted fictional entertainment in series format").

- *From the perspective of cognitive theories of enculturation, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is not necessarily very meaningful.* Both fictional and nonfictional representations of teens function as input to people's thinking, and the report makes little explicit distinction between them.

- *There is an important distinction between the depiction and description of teens.* That is, there is a difference between *showing* teens in particular situations – as dramas do, for instance – and making explicit *statements* about them, as some news texts do. We hypothesize that depictions have a more insidious effect, since they present information in a way that is harder to reject.

KEY FINDINGS

- TV overall contributes to an impoverishment of people's understanding of youth, by reducing the "Teenager" category to a set of highly entrenched scripts.

- Local news is especially damaging in its reinforcement of narrow and negative stereotypes.

- Overall, scripted dramas do a better job of representing teens as a broad and diverse category.

- Representations of teenagers on TV very often reinforce their isolation from the rest of American society – teens are often cast as "superindividuals."

- The stereotypical TV teen embodies (a caricature of) traditional masculine qualities.

- Scripted dramas promote an "empathetic stance," and sometimes a "big picture stance" towards teenagers.

- Local news promotes a "spectator stance" towards teenagers.

- Scripted dramas contribute more to private understandings; TV news (both local and network) contributes more to public discourse about teens.

- Effects on American public discourse (as opposed to individual, private understandings) are especially pernicious.

- TV's effects on private understandings are mixed .

FINDINGS I: THE IMPACT OF TV ON COGNITIVE STANCES TOWARDS TEENS

Most analyses of television's impact on the viewing public emphasize its ability to impart values and beliefs to the viewing public. As many observers have noted, TV provides us with images of ourselves, others, and the world, that over time find widespread acceptance.

Our research suggests that TV plays an additional and more basic role, determining viewers' cognitive stances toward what it portrays. Different TV genres tend to promote three different points of view toward teens, which we call *empathetic*, *spectator*, and *big picture*.

In themselves, these cognitive stances are empty of content, but they strongly predispose viewers to treat programming content in very different ways. These distinct states of mind act both as informational "gates" that reject some content while accepting other content, and as emotional "paintbrushes" that color the viewer's relationship to portrayals of teenagers.

In the following sections we briefly discuss each cognitive stance in relation to the category "teen."

The Empathetic Stance

The empathetic stance takes the point of the view of the person depicted (the subject). It typically leads to a process of identification with the subject, so that the subject becomes a role model for the viewer.

Of the three stances discussed in this report, the empathetic stance is probably the most familiar. The process of identification is well recognized in media studies, often to the exclusion of other stances. Much research, for example, has established that viewers identify with characters and many researchers make the assumption that identification with role models is the principal mechanism by which TV influences the public.

<u>Scripted drama and the empathetic stance</u>

The empathetic stance generally takes more time and effort to achieve, and for this reason is most closely associated with scripted drama programming. It implies a kind of psychological investment in the subject that is consistent with this sort of entertainment show. The empathetic stance is traditionally associated with good storytelling, in which the viewer is drawn in, i.e., enters the action from the perspective of one or more of the characters in the story.

[Note: Some TV advertisements seem to provide a highly compressed type of scripted narrative that, when successful, is able to promote a strong sense of empathy and even identification with the main characters.]

Awareness of the power of TV to promote an empathetic stance leads to analyses about which characters are most likely to be imitated (e.g., Bandura 1994). It leads to questions of how "positive" the role models are. It has been well established, for example, that viewers – both young and old – tend to imitate characters they see on TV (see e.g., Josephson 1996, and Johnston & Ettema 1986 for reviews).

It also leads to the well-established observation that there aren't enough positive role models to go around. Heintz-Knowles's current research, for example, convicingly demonstrates the shortage of African-American and especially Asian-American leading characters on television series (Heintz-Knowles 2000).

[It is worth pointing out that the tremendous diversity that exists in American society suggests some practical limits to the number of constituencies that are likely to be satisfied by the available role models. In addition, the assumption that identification across ethnic, political, religious, gender, age, and cultural lines is increasingly impossible and/or unacceptable to the American public certainly deserves further examination. One example that we consider in this report is the identification of adult Americans with teens.]

The empathetic stance can also lead to sympathy for the subject(s): In this case although the subject does not act as a role model for the viewer, the viewer has sympathy for the subject. He or she is "in the other person's shoes." The empathetic stance can lead adults to see things from teens' point of view.

The Spectator Stance

The spectator stance puts the viewer near the action, but safely out of reach of the action. It combines vividness of perception with lack of empathy. It is especially suited to the viewing of action that is fast-paced and potentially threatening.

One way of understanding the spectator stance is to consider the cross-cultural finding that young children normally spend time being carried by their caretakers – typically propped up on a parent or older sibling's hip. From the safety of this perch, they are able to safely get a close view of events that are complex, fast-moving, and potentially dangerous to a young child. When in this stance, the viewer is like the child: along for the ride, "in the action," but not "of the action."

Two metaphors associated with this stance are "looking through a window," or "looking down into an arena." In either case, the events portrayed are vivid and exciting, but emotionally removed. There is little involvement, either in the sense of being responsible for the action, or of being vulnerable to consequences of it.

<u>Local news and the spectator stance</u>

Just as the empathetic stance is closely associated with certain types of scripted drama, the spectator stance is effectively promoted by local news. Several factors contribute to this process:

- *Juxtaposition.* Stories follow one after the other too quickly to allow for empathetic viewer involvement. For various reasons rooted in human neurobiology, an empathetic state of mind requires more time and attention on the part of the viewer than does, for example, a fight or flight response. The development of a feeling for the protagonist of the story (an accident victim, for example) is consistently interrupted by local news' format. The rapid pace of local news mitigates empathy responses.

- *Eyewitnessing.* The theme of the disengaged spectator is central to the identity of local news -- in fact, "eyewitness news" is the label preferred by the outlets themselves. Local news relies heavily on witnesses to events, and just as significantly, its reporters and even anchors adopt the role of witnesses. That is to say, they act as viewers' "window on the world," rather than as analysts, in part because of a concern with "objectivity." The explicit role of anchors is to act as transparent lenses, mediums who channel information in an unbiased manner. [One unintended consequence of their performance, given their status as TV personalities, is to act as role models, in this case models of emotional disengagement].

- *"If it bleeds it leads."* As the Center for Media and Public Affairs report notes, the three most frequently reported topics of youth news are crime victimization, accidents involving young people, and violent juvenile crime, which together account for nearly half of all stories (Amundson et al 2000). The emphasis on these sorts of stories promotes arousal responses on the part of viewers, with an interesting cognitive consequence: As demonstrated in a well-known series of experiments (Schachter 1964), when people experience physiological arousal (associated with increased levels of adrenaline), they tend to search for interpretations of the world that match their interior state. Stories that frighten or shock (i.e., create a state of arousal) lead the viewer to seek simple explanations – One of the marks of tabloid news in general is its Procrustean insistence on simple explanations. In the words of one of the New York Post's City Editors, "We used to joke that we had just twelve types of story – a heroic this, a brave that, a lucky guy, a tragic kid, and so on." In this context an authority figure, such as a real or fictional judge, often satisfies a thirst for explanation and a quick answer.

<u>Two other genres</u>

The genre that perhaps most clearly illustrates this cognitive stance is the law enforcement reality show. The viewer experiences vivid, exciting, and potentially dangerous action from the safety of a shoulder-held camera -- whose perspective closely approximates that of a child being carried by its caretakers.

The same analysis can be applied to violent video games, which are based on the illusion of a "window on the (dangerous) world." Games such as "Doom," combine vividness of perception, the experience of safe perch, and a disregard for others.

<u>Consequences of the spectator stance</u>

The portrayal of teens on local news tends to separate them from the rest of society. The illusion of a window created by local news encourages viewers to see teens as "alien," and very different from yesteryear's teens (see Aubrun & Grady 2000a). In addition, they are associated with certain contexts (e.g., crime, violence, accidents) that promote a sense of threat and a correspondingly judgemental attitude on the part of viewers.

The Big Picture Stance

The Big Picture stance allows the viewer to see the world from an encompassing distance, sometimes experienced as being "above the fray." This perspective is consistent with increased awareness of context, problems and solutions, a sense of proportion, and more generally with acquiring a deeper understanding of the subject.

Unlike either of the two other cognitive stances, the Big Picture stance tends not to be about individual people and events. In this, it is consistent with Iyengar's (1991) notion of "thematic" frame.

<u>Network news and the Big Picture stance</u>

Network news tends, for various reasons, practical as well as principled, to do a better job of promoting the Big Picture stance. Given that its audience is national rather than local, it cannot rely as easily on vivid footage of events –- individual crimes, for example -- which are important to a small fraction of its viewers. As Americans, viewers necessarily take a larger view. Network news tends to make greater use of devices such as maps, and indicators of temporal depth. Even the advertisements that bracket the stories, which tend to be for nationally available products aimed at a composite or average person, reinforce the Big Picture stance.

Network news tends, as the CMPA's study notes, to take a thematic approach to its coverage. For this reason it is important to note that the network news (along with non-tabloid newspapers) has been losing viewership, and that it devotes relatively little attention to teens.

<u>Scripted drama and the Big Picture stance</u>

Scripted dramas, in the tradition of storytelling, are often able to promote a Big Picture stance, usually by connecting the fate of individual characters to larger themes. Series such as "Judging Amy," "The Practice," "Third Watch," "Ally McBeal," "Law and Order," do an effective job of tying larger social issues to individual stories. Each of these series makes use of the device of professions that combine a spectator with a big picture stance: Judges, lawyers, paramedics, social workers, doctors take both perspectives. They (and the viewer) both witness vivid and shocking events and occasionally take a big picture view.

A parallel situation exists for some shows aimed at teenagers.   Series such as "Popular" and "Freaks and Geeks" explore both the experience of stereotypes (of popularity in this case), and the larger question of what it means to be subject to stereotypes. Many shows for teens include an attempt at putting the world in perspective.

FINDINGS II: THE IMPACT OF TV GENRES ON PRIVATE UNDERSTANDINGS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT TEENS

It has been well established that television contributes in important ways to the public discourse about teens, and that as with much public discourse, it tends to have a negative rather than constructive impact. The assumption is often made by researchers that the public discourse contributes directly, if unevenly, to the public's private understandings. Our research suggests that this assumption is mistaken, and that TV influences the public's views on adolescents in quite different ways.

Our previous research on a variety of different cultural domains, including the public's understandings about school, teens, global affairs, the environment, etc., suggests that there is typically a conflict between public discourse (constituted in large part by media representations) and private understandings (derived from lived experience). A consistent finding is that the understandings that people derive from their lived experience (of teens, for example) are often less politically polarized and closer to expert or scientific opinion than are the models expressed in the public discourse.

The conflict comes from the fact that people tend to treat both the media's representations of the world and their own lived experience as real, despite the contradictions between the two. People typically deal with this conflict in two separate ways. Most commonly, they tend to "toggle" back and forth between the models expressed by public discourse and their private understandings, often based on the immediate context (e.g., having a conversation with a friend as opposed to watching the news). If forced to consider the contradiction, people often resort to exceptionalizing their lived experience and private understandings, i.e., to assume that although the public discourse is a poor fit with their lived experience, it must nonetheless better represent the world at large. People often think something along the lines that "my teenagers/ beliefs about gun control/ views on crime/neighborhood/ etc. are unusual." That is to say, they tend not to question the public discourse, often instead devaluing their own experience in favor of the public discourse.

Broadcast news and public discourse

There are a variety of reason why broadcast news contributes effectively to public discourse:

- Both local and network news refer to events and objects that defined as both objectively real and of relevance to the public as a whole. In Benedict Anderson's terminology, the news is good at creating an "imagined community." It creates a situation in which a set of people who are looking at the same object assume that others are having the same experience. This imagined community consists of very different kinds of people -- the news is imagined by viewers to be watched by everyone else, and to be the basis of conversations everywhere.

- The spectator stance promoted by local news contributes to a public conversation. It is natural to talk about a shared spectacle. Local news especially provides a conversational context, with chatty anchors commenting on what they (like the viewers) have just seen reported, thus priming the public conversation.

- Local news' emphasis on weather and sports also contributes to creating an atmosphere of public discourse. Topics such as these are the bedrock of a conversational scenario – when two strangers meet, they usually talk about the weather; fathers and sons who have nothing to say to each other can talk about sports. The topics are highly scripted: they combine relevance with an outcome whose parameters are easy to predict, but whose exact nature is always surprising: "The Knicks won." "Oh, really?"

The public conversation set up by the news in general and local news in particular tends to remain at a low level of discourse, with a negative impact on the public's perception of teens. In this public conversation the fate of "teens" is to be personalized, stereotyped, and exaggerated.

Dramas and private understandings

A large body of literature has demonstrated that scripted entertainment programs have a great impact on the viewing public. Our analysis suggests that dramas contribute less to the public discourse than do other genres, such as news, and more to private understandings:

- In the empathetic stance promoted by dramas the relationship between the viewer and the subject is more salient than is the relationship between the different viewers. Identification is a relatively private rather than public process, one that involves less reference to an imagined community.

- The audience for dramas is (imagined to be) much more segmented than the news audience, for example. Individual viewers realize that other people have different dramatic interests, a fact that is recognized by one of the networks in its reference to scripted entertainment as a "guilty pleasure" — this tag would not apply as well to local news.

According to experts on child development, adolescence is the most individualistic life stage. Adolescence is characterized by growing autonomy, a relative lack of responsibility to and for others, and a focus on one's own development.

TV greatly exaggerates this normal tendency, caricaturing the individualism of adolescence to the point of creating a dangerously misleading portrayal. On television, and in public discourse, the picture of teens as individualistic predominates to the point of making it difficult for the public to accept information about real teenagers – people who get along well with their parents and participate in the world around them.

The cumulative effect of representations of teens on TV is that a limited number of highly reinforced scripts and prototypes shape expectations about what teens think and do. When a viewer sees an image of a teen walking down a street, for example, he or she is less likely to imagine that the teen is thinking about family, work or academics than about sex, drugs or some other risky behavior. What follows is a list of specific ways in which TV's various genres creates this caricature, followed by a discussion of how it does this in cognitive terms.

TV's isolated teen

Teens are portrayed as "super-individuals," particularly in scripted dramas and advertisements.

The American emphasis on individualism naturally (if not constructively) leads to a fascination with the teen years. One indicator of this American cultural obsession is that so many TV ads feature teenagers. Even more significantly, they often feature adults acting the part of teens (car commercials and beer commercials are particularly prone to this tendency). These ads tap into an image of a person devoted to self-expression, acting out a little, questioning authority, and shucking responsibility. American adults tend to glorify adolescence in other media as well – think of songs like Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days", or John Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane" ("Oh yeah, life goes on, long after the thrill of living is gone" – i.e. after the teenage years). Movies have glorified adolescent self-absorption at least since James Dean.

In short, teens are partly understood as models of what American adults wish they themselves could be. The flip-side of this cultural pattern is that if teens are identified as the individualists par excellence, then any American ambivalence towards individualism translates into ambivalence toward teens.

As Heintz-Knowles's report demonstrate, TV's scripted entertainment programming continues the trend. Since such a very high percentage of stories on entertainment programs depict teens worrying about their social standing in school, for instance, this is likely to be a very strongly entrenched script in viewers' minds.

Teens are rarely portrayed in "mentoring" relationships.

Here we do not have in mind any official or professional sense of mentoring, but more generally, a relationship between a teenager and an adult, perhaps in an institutional setting, which is based on respect, and which helps the teen pass the obstacles to adulthood. A great deal of cross-cultural evidence suggests that there is a natural and developmentally important stage in the life of an adolescent which involves breaking away from the family and seeking bonds with other adults. Yet news and dramas on American television tend not to place teens in mentoring situations. As Heinz-Knowles points out, dramas featuring teens are more likely to emphasize the foolishness and incompetence of adults, and the autonomy of teens. In these shows, the only relevant adults are often the teens' parents, and they are relevant primarily because of the interesting ways in which they are absent from their childrens' lives (prison, travel, divorce, etc.). Ads featuring teens are an even more extreme case; they often focus on a stance of questioning authority, and more specifically, mocking outside (adult) sources of wisdom. Overall, such potential mentors as teachers, coaches, ministers and bosses play a very minimal role in the lives of TV teenagers.

While the reality of relationships between teenagers and their parents is better than media stereotypes would suggest (see Bostrom 2000), there are certain roles parents probably cannot fill. American society places a particularly heavy emphasis on the importance of the family (see, e.g., Zill & Nord 1998), and one consequence is that mentoring relationships are largely absent from the media and public discourse, despite their potential as both material for dramatic storytelling and as topics for news stories.

Teens are isolated from larger society

TV representations tend, more generally, to isolate teens from the larger social context. A number of recent studies have suggested that adults have little contact with teens who are not their close relatives. Research on American cultural models of youth suggests that the impoverishment of the cultural model of teens is part of the larger movement in American society towards an individual-centered worldview (Aubrun & Grady 2000).

TV reflects and promotes that trend, by depicting teens as separate and apart from the world of adults. As several of Heintz-Knowles' findings suggest (Heintz-Knowles 2000), scripted entertainment programs portray teens as primarily interested in themselves, largely autonomous and capable of solving their problems without adult help. In addition, adults on these programs tend to use language that "sets adolescents apart as young and childlike."

"Teens live dangerous lives."

Broadcast news', and especially local news', treatment of teens emphasizes the violence and danger associated with teen years. Given that such a high percentage of news stories concerning teenagers show them involved in crime or car accidents (as causes and/or victims), viewers are undoubtedly primed to expect to see stories of teens in dangerous situations. This becomes part of the basic structure of the cognitive model.

Though it focuses on different aspects of the portrait, the news ends up reinforcing the same basic picture of teens as individualistic and isolated from the rest of society.

Teens are masculinized, especially in news portrayals

One way to understand the complementarity between scripted dramas and news coverage of teens is to recognize that individualism and masulinity are closely linked in American culture. In American culture, the Lone Hero is connected with acts of violence, accidents, and heroism; and newsworthiness is closely associated with these aspects of masculinity. When local news in particular presents teens in the context of violence or danger (which occurs in about half of the stories, according to the CMPA study), it inevitably reinforces the association between teenagers and a certain kind of masculinity.

The masculinization of teens has two negative consequences for the category Teens. First, it obviously leaves cultural models of femininity off the screen, to the detriment of girls, boys, and adult viewers. Second, it presents a caricature of masculinity, emphasizing the individualistic, adventure-seeking, aspect of masculinity (i.e., the Lone Hero), while ignoring the other-directed, responsible side of masculinity (i.e., the Breadwinner).

How TV creates the caricature: Prototypes that structure the category

In this section we discuss "teenager" as a category that is shared by most Americans and that is part of public discourse. Thinking of the effects of TV in terms of the cognitive notion of categories places the discussion of teenagers within a larger conceptual picture, and lends explicitness and precision to some familiar observations. The goal is to explore an explicitly cognitive perspective on how representations of teenagers on television end up shaping the representation of teenagers in people's minds.

Why the category matters – filtering facts and guiding reasoning

Like all categories, the "Teenager" category guides and shapes reasoning, and it is more relevant to people than objective facts, because it organizes and filters those facts. Decision-making, in both private and public spheres, depends on the shape of the category in people's minds. One of the significant reasons for thinking about the media in terms of categories is that the Teenager category, as it is informed by TV representations, is skewed, in a variety of ways, relative to the objective reality of American teenagers. When it skews the category, TV content skews reasoning.

How the category comes into being – enculturation, repetition, and vivid cases

The category can be thought of as what the word *teenager* refers to. This is not just a simple image, proposition or belief about teenagers, but a complex, structured set of associations. These associations come about in a number of ways: personal experience is one source, but a great percentage of our understanding comes from other sources: through conversations, the media, etc. This process is known as *enculturation*, the dissemination of cultural understandings. TV is, of course, a major force in this process in current American society.

The types of content analysis performed by Heintz-Knowles, CMPA and other researchers relate closely to the process of enculturation; the material viewers see on TV – whether fictional or not – shapes and reinforces the network of associations connected with the idea of a teenager. This effect takes place through a "steady drip" of inputs (Jeffers 1997, Gerbner) – as when teens are shown thinking and talking about their social popularity on show after show ("Mission Hill," "Popular," "Freaks and Geeks" etc.) – or when particularly vivid images are encountered, as in a news story about a shocking crime committed by a teenager.

Cognitive scientists have studied the importance of various kinds of prototypes in structuring our thinking about a category (e.g. Rosch, Lakoff 1987). TV helps shape all of these kinds of prototype, and each ends up guiding our thinking:

The ideal teen and the "paragon" teen

Both entertainment shows and news reports present direct or indirect evaluations of teenagers – they suggest which ones are to be emulated and highly regarded. Representations of happy and successful teenagers contribute to shared understandings of the ideal teenager. A paragon (in Lakoff's terms) is a specific example that comes close to embodying the qualities of the ideal – a highschool freshman who is breaking records on the football team and eliciting shouts and grins from the news anchors – "This freshman can *play*!" – is an example of a paragon.

In news reports, ideal teens tend to be individuals who have achieved something remarkable. This model of the ideal teen ignores or even clashes with other qualities that are appreciated in teenagers in everyday life – those that make them good citizens and beloved members of families, for instance.

The more general consequence of the news tendency to showcase the feats of individual "heroic" teens is that it reinforces the understanding that teens are unconnected to society at large.

By contrast, high-quality entertainment shows tend to present a broader variety of positive ("ideal") teens, including teenagers who are portrayed as sympathetic because they are loyal friends, because they act responsibly or helpfully in a difficult situation, etc.

"Salient exemplars"

A teenager (or group of teenagers) who figures prominently in the news becomes a touchstone for thoughts and conversations about the nature of "teens today." During the period covered by the CMPA study, Samuel Sheinbein was a familiar name who came to symbolize the thorough disaffectedness and valuelessness of teenagers for some Americans. During a tennis tournament

like the U.S. Open, other teenagers, such as Martina Hingis may become more salient examples of the category in many people's minds (if the fact that they are teenagers is stressed in media reports). Since teenagers who perform outstanding individual feats, either heroic or shocking, are the ones who are most likely to end up in the news, salient exemplars of the Teenager category rarely if ever reinforce important qualities that lead to happiness and success in teenagers' everyday lives – including connection with friends and family, and so forth.

The stereotypical teen

A stereotype is a model that is accepted in public discourse, though it may be acknowledged to be exaggerated and inaccurate on some level. When news anchors do the verbal equivalent of winking as they refer to "common knowledge" about what teenagers are like, they are making reference to the stereotype. This is the same stereotype that is easily elicited in focus groups (see Bostrom 2000) and in one-on-one interviews (see Aubrun & Grady 2000) – teens as rebellious, self-absorbed, indifferent to work and family, and so forth.

The typical teen

The most obvious negative effects of TV relate to distortion of people's understanding of the typical teenager. As studies by Heintz-Knowles and the CMPA have detailed, TV viewers are flooded with images that do not accurately represent the reality of American teenagers. When the preponderance of local news coverage of teenagers portrays them as perpetrators or victims of crime, for example, the "typical teen" comes to be associated with crime, in a way that doesn't match the lived experience of most teenagers. Previous studies have provided a detailed picture of this skewed input to the category; we offer some additional perspectives on this problem below. Speaking more generally, when TV representations imply that there most teens conform to some particular description, they reinforce the objectification of teens, which limits teens and sets them apart from adults as a curiosity, threat, and so forth.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that TV as a whole has a number of negative consequences for people's thinking about teens:

- It is a force for reducing our thinking to a set of stereotyped scripts.
- It often invites viewers to take a spectator view of teens, treating their lives as exciting or disturbing action footage.
- It promotes thinking in which teenagers stand in for large and troubling social issues such as individualism, and

- It often emphasizes the social distance between teens and other people (including each other), reinforcing an unfortunate trend in current American reality.

On the other hand, the news on television isn't all bad, and there are real differences between the various kinds of representations of teens on TV. In particular, high-quality dramas and local news stand at two ends of a spectrum, where one end (dramas) presents a broader picture of what teens can be like and invites deeper understanding of their lives, while the other (local news) trades more commonly in stereotypes and objectifying images.

The chart below summarizes differences between some common genres, based on what cognitive stance they tend to promote, the degree to which they tend to reduce representations of teens to narrow stereotypes, and the strength of their impact on public discourse vs. private understandings.

	Cognitive Stance*	Stereotyping Effect	Public

			Discourse/Private Understandings
Scripted Dramas	Empathetic Big Picture	Relatively low	Relatively private
Network News**	Big Picture	Relatively low	Public
Local News Reality TV	Spectator	High	Public

**Note: Teens are for the most part invisible on network news – Amundson et al. report that only one in twenty-five stories on national news was youth-related during the period of their study.

*Note: While there is a strong tendency for genres to be associated with particular cognitive stances, this relationship is by no means simple or predictable. For instance, sports are usually a prime exa mple of programming which promotes a spectator stance, but they can also lead to empathy – when they invite us to relate to some players as individuals – and can even lead to big-picture thinking, as when broadcasters are explicit about the issue of race in sports.

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