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Advising and Ordering: Daytime, Prime Time

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Abstract

The patterns of advice-giving and receiving and order-giving and receiving among television's dramatic characters provide an efficient and economical way in which to study the relationships between knowledge, activity, and sex of characters seen on the home screen. In addition, the study of these patterns allows comparison of the dramatic world of daytime TV - addressed primarily to women - with that of prime time. This article is a summary of some of the findings from a study on the advising and ordering patterns of men and women in soap operas and evening dramas.

Advising and Ordering: Daytime, Prime Time

by Joseph Turow

*Women characters in television
dramas sometimes advise and direct
men—but usually on “feminine” matters.*

The patterns of advice-giving and receiving and order-giving and receiving among television's dramatic characters provide an efficient and economical way in which to study the relationships between knowledge, activity, and sex of characters seen on the home screen. In addition, the study of these patterns allows comparison of the dramatic world of daytime TV—addressed primarily to women—with that of prime time. This article is a summary of some of the findings from a study on the advising and ordering patterns of men and women in soap operas and evening dramas.¹

A sample of 12 hours of daytime and 12 hours of prime-time programming was analyzed. The general characteristics of the programs and of all the speaking characters were noted. At the same time, every advising and ordering interaction (“episode”) between the sexes was systematically observed and coded for (a) the name or label of the giver and receiver (whose characteristics were recorded along with those of other speaking characters), (b) the general area of the knowledge discussed, and (c) the correctness of the advice or order in the episode. Areas of knowledge were grouped into (a) traditionally “feminine” categories such as love, the family, the home, personal problems, and the arts; (b) traditionally “masculine” categories like business, law, government, crime, and coping with danger; and (c) “neutral” categories, which were defined as directives given in non-business contexts or simple dealings between the interactors and a third party (examples: “Close the door!” or “Tell Murray to close the door!”). The giving of advice and orders by doctors was coded as an area of male expertise, while knowledge about health in a nonprofessional or business context was coded as an area of female expertise.

Table 1 shows the number and classification of all advising and ordering episodes by the sex of the advice and order-givers and by the subject category of the directives given. Since this study was only concerned with advising and ordering *between* the sexes, all directives by males were received by females and vice versa. It should also be noted that for purposes of the pres-

¹ The data presented here are taken from a larger investigation of the effects of audience change on TV program content. An exposition of the full study may be obtained from the author.

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ent discussion, advising and ordering have been dealt with as an aggregate.

The world of the evening dramas was an urban landscape peopled mostly (70 percent) by men, in which most of the directives (53 percent) revolved around “masculine” subjects. Men gave directives in 70 percent, women in 30 percent, of the episodes. The types of advice and orders given by men and women conformed in most cases to the traditional categories for their sex. Only 22 percent of the interactions initiated by women related to the “masculine,” professional, action-oriented milieu so characteristic of evening dramatic programs. Even women whose occupations were related to business gave directives which related to typically “feminine” topics rather than to business topics. Men, too, conformed to traditional stereotypes with respect to their occupations and the subjects on which they advised and ordered women. For example, only 10 percent of the directives given by males were in the area of “feminine” knowledge.

Men and women were on a more even footing in the daytime serials than in the evening programs. The much more equal number of men and women characters (54 and 46 percent, respectively, of all speaking roles), the fact that women gave 44 percent of the orders and advice in the afternoon programs (compared with 30 percent in the evening), and the much higher percentage of “feminine” subjects discussed are manifestations of the greater centrality of women in the afternoon time period. The evening dramas’ urban milieu of cops, soldiers, and business professionals gave way, in the afternoon, to a homey, small-town atmosphere unconcerned with the exploits of the police and the military and populated with people whose occupations dealt with the personal, the intimate, and the domestic.

Table 1: Breakdown of advising and ordering episodes by sex of giver and subject of advice/order

SUBJECT	Daytime			Evening		%T (N = 105)
	%M* (N = 65)	%F* (N = 52)	%T* (N = 117)	%M (N = 73)	%F (N = 32)	
Feminine	26	46	36	10	34	17
Masculine	6	2	4	67	22	53
Neutral	68	52	60	23	44	30
	—	—	—	—	—	—
	100	100	100	100	100	100

SUBJECT	Both			%M = males
	%M (N = 138)	%F (N = 84)	%T (N = 222)	
Feminine	17	42	26	F = females
Masculine	38	9	28	T = total
Neutral	45	49	46	
	—	—	—	
	100	100	100	

In view of the domestic environment of the daytime dramas and the small percentage of advising and ordering episodes that dealt with “masculine” subjects, it may seem surprising that men should still control most of the action. Control they did, however, giving 56 percent of all advice and orders in the 12-hour sample of programs.

The largest subject category of the afternoon advising and ordering episodes was neither “masculine” nor “feminine,” but “neutral.” “Neutral” advice and orders often function as plot-advancing devices which help set the stage for new developments. (A mother’s order to her son to buy a newspaper, for example, might lead to her reading an article about a former husband which could start a new serial subplot.) The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the burden of this function fell upon male characters. In this manner, men were placed in direct control of much of the action despite the more “feminine” milieu.

Another way in which men maintained control of the action was through the accentuation of the role of the medical doctor. The medical profession was by far the best represented male occupation. Doctors, who learn professionally what women are supposed to understand “instinctively,” could be shown to direct women in stereotypically female areas while still maintaining the traditional compartmentalization of knowledge. The importance of male doctors is seen in the fact that they initiated 71 percent of their sex’s “feminine” advising and ordering episodes.

It is significant to note that, despite male dominance and control in both daytime and evening dramas, the overwhelming majority of advice given by both men and women was “correct” and the great majority of di-

rectives was accepted. The stereotypical pattern that had been played out over the home screen was shown to be the appropriate one.

Male-female knowledge stereotypes formed an integral part of the advising and ordering patterns in this sample of daytime and prime time dramas. The differences between the two periods show a shift in the proportion and centrality of women but not a fundamental change in their portrayal and stereotype. Television's dramatic landscape was shaped in such a way that the selection of characters, the assignment of occupations, and the movement of plots operated in concert to minimize the chances of women being given the opportunity to display superior knowledge with respect to men and to ensure that the areas in which they were given such opportunities were compartmentalized along traditional lines. In this manner, the fundamental strictures of the culture are not violated while the expectations and desires of the female audience to see itself portrayed in central roles are gratified.

