

Viewpoint: Forum

'Science' on the tube

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Bizarre and dangerous though it may be, scientific work on television is not all bad and certainly not "mad." Scientists were rated stronger and smarter than other professionals, and quite rational. Of all occupational groups on television, scientists were observed as among the least sociable. They were the most likely to work alone and to hold jobs they considered "very important."

If we include medicine—as did most of the respondents to the survey we conducted—the images of science and technology appear in seven out of every ten prime time dramatic programs. In addition to news and occasional documentaries, the average prime time viewer will see 11 doctors and one or two other scientists each week.

Science and technology dominate all programs set in the future and are most likely to be featured in fast-moving, globe-trotting adventure. Television doctors are among the

most valued characters in prime time, but other scientists, while still positively presented, have a greater share of ambivalent and troublesome portrayals. They are a bit older and "stranger" than other professionals, and more of them are of foreign (non-U.S.) nationality. For every villainous ("bad") scientist in a major role there are five who are virtuous ("good"). But for every "bad" doctor, 19 are "good," and for every "bad" law-enforcer, 40 are "good."

This relative flaw in the aggregate image of television scientists is also reflected in their success rate. For every scientist in a major role who fails, two succeed. But for every doctor who fails, five succeed, and for every law enforcer who fails, eight succeed.

One reason for the higher rate of failure might be that about 5% of scientists kill someone and 10% get killed. That is the highest casualty rate of all occupations on television, including the army, police and private investigators. It is even higher (14%) among male scientists.

A roll call of major characters includes a Dr. Zayes, the minister of science on a fictional planet; the improbable

physicist Dr. Bernard, with a dual U.S. and Russian nationality; a Dr. Ludwig von Drake "Professor of Human Nature"; electronic inventor Takahasi and forensic medico Fugiama; a veterinarian's assistant Gloria Stivic; astrogeologist Dr. Leath; a Dr. Jekyll; two computer wizards; a paleontologist and a marine biologist; a creator of humanoids; researchers into mind control and the antidote to mind control; experts on terrestrial and undersea wildlife, arcane and standard archeology, civil and architectural engineering, and a crime-fighting geologist.

All in all, scientists presented an image lacking in some respects only in comparison to doctors and other professionals than in absolute terms. But it is a somewhat foreboding image, touched with a sense of evil, trouble and peril.#

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