

## Blacks want better TV shows – or do they?

Written by Freddie Allen Washington Correspondent NNPA News Service  
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Nearly all African-Americans polled – 97 percent – say they are unhappy with the Black TV programs currently on air. Seventy-five percent say they want more documentaries, 71 percent prefer more history, 68 percent desire to see more independent films and 59 percent would like to see more news, according to a new study conducted by Target Market News, a Chicago-based organization that tracks Black consumer market trends. But what Blacks say they want and what they're watching are two different things. According to Nielsen, a leading global provider of information and insights into what consumers watch and buy, African-Americans watch television seven hours, 12 minutes per day, 40 percent more than Whites (five hours and two minutes per day). And they're not watching "Mythbusters" on the Discovery Channel or "Frontline" on PBS.

After sporting events, which received high viewership among Blacks and Whites, sitcoms and music awards shows dominated the list of top 10 cable programs African-Americans watched between September 19, 2011 and January 29, 2012.

Based on data collected by Nielsen, Tyler Perry's "For Better or Worse" (TBS) topped the list with nearly 2.5 million viewers, followed by the "Soul Train Awards" on BET (2.4 million), "The Game" also on BET (2.1 million).

"The Soul Train Awards Pre-show" pulled in slightly more than 2 million viewers and "The BET Hip Hop Awards" attracted 1.5 million. Noticeably absent were the documentaries and history programs that, according to the Target Market News poll, Blacks say they prefer.

Meanwhile, Whites were plugged into national politics over that period, with three out of five of the top viewed cable programs (excluding sporting events) going to the GOP presidential debates. Nearly 9.7 million viewers watched the Republican presidential debate and analysis hosted by the FOX News Channel. "Rizzoli & Isles" (TNT) drew 9 million White viewers, good enough for second place, followed by "Royal Pains" (USA) with more than 4.6 million. CNN hosted the GOP debates in Florida (4.6 million) and in Arizona (4.6 million) that were also highly viewed among the White cable audience.

The NFL danced in the end zone of broadcast TV all season, producing games that captured the highest number of viewers in the top 10 ranked shows between September 19, 2011 and

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January 29, 2012 among African-Americans and Whites on CBS, FOX, and NBC. It's been 10 seasons since Kelly Clarkson captured the top prize on "American Idol" (ABC) and the show still remains wildly popular with Blacks and Whites.

While episodes of "NCIS" (CBS), "Modern Family" (ABC), and "The Big Bang Theory" pulled high viewership in the White broadcast TV audience, Blacks tuned into "X-Factor," another singing competition similar to "Idol."

Some industry leaders are not surprised.

"Music has always been apart of our DNA," said Bounce TV President Ryan Glover, noting that Blacks gravitate to shows such as "Idol," "Dancing With The Stars," and the "X-Factor." He explained, "Music resonates with the Black audience, just like comedy as a genre and movies".

Bounce TV, launched last September as a digital broadcast network created primarily for African-Americans, features movies, live HBCU sporting events, and reruns of groundbreaking shows such as "Soul Train" and "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids." The network's first original series, "Family Time," a sitcom about a working-class Black family that wins the lottery and moves up to the middle class, is set to launch June 18.

BET's "The Game," a sitcom that follows a group of star athletes that play for the fictional "San Diego Sabres" and the women in their lives, continues to be a top-rated show on cable in Black households with more than 1.9 million viewers the week of April 23-29. BET is the most-watched cable network and its most popular shows are of sitcoms and movies. Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET) often reminded anyone who would listen that the "E" in "BET" stands for entertainment, not education.

Denise Sawyer is well aware of that fact.

"I never watch BET," said Sawyer, a broadcast journalism major at Howard University. "They don't have any news programs or talk shows." Sawyer wonders what happened to public affairs programs such as "Teen Summit" and "Lead Story."

Sawyer prefers TV One and said she loves "Unsung," the network's highest rated show.

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“For the last decade biopics featuring musicians have been popular,” said Toni Judkins executive vice president of original programming for TV One. “‘Unsung’ is a great place to mine through some of the unforgettable talent in the music genre and get those stories out there.”

After “The Game” on BET, “The Real Housewives of Atlanta” on Bravo, “Basketball Wives” on VH1, and “Bad Girls Club” on Oxygen consistently attract Black cable TV viewers.

Some experts believe it has more to do with casting and less to do with the heavily-produced conflict on the shows.

“All media is about seeing yourself,” said Ken Smikle, president of Target Market News. “On reality shows there are such a broad range of character types that they are able to appeal to a lot of different interests versus a scripted show where you have a star and that star is surrounded by like-minded people and they’re designed to complement one another.”

When a show has multiple cast members, there’s a greater chance that one of the characters will resonate with you, said Judkins.

Which explains why characters on “The Real Housewives of Atlanta” such as Kandi Burruss, a Grammy Award winning singer and songwriter, and Phaedra Parks an entertainment attorney who runs an Atlanta-based boutique law firm, add balance to the show’s more controversial characters such as NeNe Leakes, famous for trading stinging verbal jabs with Star Jones on Donald Trump’s “Celebrity Apprentice” a few seasons ago.

“There’s someone to root for and there’s someone to root against. You put it all together and it can be quite a dramatic display,” Judkins said.

Dramatic is an understatement.

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“Conflict sells, we don’t want to see people hugging and singing ‘Kumbayah,’” Sawyer said. “We want to see the fights.”

Sawyer said that she stopped watching reality shows, her guilty pleasure, because they’re too predictable now.

“If you give me the shenanigans and the ratchetness [a slang term for classless or ghetto] all the time, [a show] will make its way into my life for a period of time, but it will just be a fad,” Sawyer said.

“Scandal” on ABC, a political drama produced by Shonda Rhimes and starring Kerry Washington, both African-American, made a big splash when it debuted in early April with more than 7 million viewers, including 1.88 million Black viewers. “Scandal” settled into the No. 2 position among most watched broadcast TV shows in Black households, but it’s still too early to tell if the show will last.

With a show like “Scandal,” the network is looking for a settling point, the shows “natural audience,” said Ken Smikle, president of Target Market News.

“If that turns out to be enough to draw advertisers, if there’s enough 18-34 year-olds watching the show, then fine,” Smikle said. If not, network execs will cancel the show and begin looking for the next big thing.

To change what children and adults are offered on television, Blacks must exercise their economic clout, Cheryl Pearson-McNeil, Senior Vice President for Public Affairs and Government Relations at Nielsen, wrote in recent column for the NNPA News Service.

“‘Scandal’ beat out standard favorites and reality shows the first week. But what about week two?” she asked. “Well, not so much. Black viewers tuned in higher numbers for “The Game” (2.01 million), followed by “Dancing with the Stars” (1.99) and

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“Real Housewives of Atlanta” (1.87), with ‘Scandal’ dropping to 1.74 million Black viewers.”

Pearson-McNeil added, “The second week’s lower ‘Scandal’ numbers don’t coincide with the outcry I often hear from Blacks about the need for “quality programming with positive images.” It’s been 37 years ya’ll since an African-American woman has held a starring role in an hour-long primetime network dramatic series. Not since 1974, when ABC starred Teresa Graves in ‘Get Christie Love’ has a Black woman held that honor. So, if ABC and [Shonda] Rhimes [the Black creator of the show] are bold enough to give Blacks what we ‘say’ we want, wouldn’t one expect that the number of Black viewers to increase and not decrease each week?”

Read more:

<http://www.nnpa.org/news/lead/blacks-want-better-tv-shows-%e2%80%93-or-do-they-by-freddie-allen/#ixzz1uNsUOA83>