

TELEVISION VIOLENCE

At a Time of Turmoil and Terror

◆ George Gerbner

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of violence as the present. Monitoring by the *Des Moines Register* found that of the six top stories on Des Moines evening newscasts during February 1994, 118 stories dealt with crime and violence, 27 featured business, 17 dealt with government, 15 reported on racial relations, and 2 discussed schools. A 1994 study of local news by the University of Miami found that time devoted to crime ranged from 23% to 50% (averaging 32%) while violent crime in the city remained constant, involving less than one tenth of 1% of the population.

Community leaders have often said that blacks, Hispanics, and now people of Middle Eastern appearance or Muslim religion are demonized by the choice of faces shown in crime stories. Evidence supports that charge. For example, a study for the Chicago Council on Urban Affairs found that “a high percentage of African-Americans and Latinos are shown as victimizers of society, and few as social helpers.” This distorted portrayal, the council said, contributes to the notion that “the inner city is dominated by dangerous and irresponsible minorities.” Similarly, the *Journalism Quarterly* reported that Chicago newspapers carried stories on only one of every three homicides in the city and that the slayings most likely to be selected were those in which the victims were white, contrary to actual crime statistics.

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We have studied local news on Philadelphia television stations since 1967 as part of the Cultural Indicators monitoring project. We found that crime and/or violence items usually lead newscast and preempt balanced coverage of the city. Furthermore, only 20% of crime and violence on local news were local to the city, only 40% were local to the region, and since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, that proportion shrank even further. As also found in other studies, whites are more likely to be reported as victims, and people of color as the perpetrators.

Crime and violence also play a prominent and pervasive role in TV entertainment. Scenes of violence occur an average 3 to 5 times per hour in prime-time dramatic fiction, and between 20 and 25 times per hour in cartoons. We are awash in a tide of violent representations such as the world has never seen. Images of expertly choreographed brutality at home and half a world of away drench our homes. There is no escape from the mass-produced mayhem pervading the life space of ever larger areas of the world.

The television overkill has clearly drifted out of democratic reach. Children all over the world are born into homes dominated by television's global monopoly of turmoil and terror. They are fully integrated into television's mean and violent world. The United States dominates that world, throwing its military weight around from Panama to Afghanistan. As Sam Smith, editor of the online *Undernews*, wrote: "Our leaders have failed us by creating a world so filled with hatred for our land."

TV's investment in mayhem was first reported by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters in 1951. The first Congressional hearings were held by Senator Estes Kefauver's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954. Through several more rounds of hearings in the 1960s and 1970s, despite the accumulation of critical research results, despite condemnation by government commissions and virtually

all medical, law enforcement, parents', educational, and other organizations, and in the face of international embarrassment, violence still saturates the airways (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1993).

Broadcasters are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." But they are paid to deliver a receptive audience to their business sponsors. Few industries are as public relations-conscious as television. What compels them to endure public humiliation, risk the threat of repressive legislation, and invite charges of visions of violence undermines health, security, and the social order? The answer is not popularity.

The usual rationalization that television violence "gives the audience what it wants" is disingenuous. As the trade knows well, violence is not highly rated. But there is no free market or box office for television programs through which audiences could express their wants.

Unlike other media use, viewing is a ritual; people watch by the clock and not by the program. Ratings are determined more by the time of the program, the lead-in (previous program), and what else is competing for viewers at the same time than by their quality or other attractions. Ratings are important only because they set the price the advertiser pays for "buying" viewers available to the set at a certain time, but they have limited use as indicators of popularity.

Therefore, it is clear that something is wrong with the way the problem has been posed and addressed. Either the damage is not what it is commonly assumed to be, or television violence and global mayhem must have some driving force and utility other than popularity, or both. Indeed, it is both, and more.

The usual question—"Does television violence incite real-life violence?"—is itself a symptom of the problem. It obscures and, despite its alarming implications and intent, trivializes the issues involved. Television violence must be understood as a complex

scenario and an indicator of social relationships. It has both utility and consequences other than those usually considered in media and public discussion. And it is driven by forces other than free expression and audience demand.

Whatever else it does, violence in drama and news demonstrates power. It portrays victims as well as victimizers. It intimidates more than it incites. It paralyzes more than triggers action. It defines majority might and minority risk. It shows one person's, country's, race's, or ethnic group's place in the "pecking order" that runs the world.

Violence and now war, no matter how distant, is but the tip of the iceberg of a massive underlying connection to television's role as universal story-teller and an industry dependent on global markets. These relationships have not yet been recognized and integrated into any theory or regulatory practice. Television has been seen as one medium among many rather than as the mainstream of the cultural environment in which most children grow up and learn. Traditional regulatory and public interest conceptions are based on the obsolete assumption that the number of media outlets determines freedom and diversity of content. Today, however, a handful of global conglomerates can own many outlets in all media, deny entry to new and alternative perspectives, and homogenize content. The common-carrier concept of access and protection applicable to a public utility such as the telephone also falls short when the issue is not so much the number of channels and individual access to them but the centralized mass production of the content of all the stories we grow on in common.

Let us, then, preview the task of broadening a discourse that has gone on too long in a narrow and shallow groove. Violence on television is an integral part of a system of global marketing. It dominates an increasing share of the world's screens despite its relative lack of popularity in any country. Its consequences go far beyond inciting aggression. The system inhibits the

portrayal of diverse dramatic approaches to conflict. It depresses independent television production and thereby diversity of choicer, views, perspectives, and, not incidentally, political parties. No other country that calls itself democratic has such a monopoly on political expression and organization, lacking socialist, communist, religious, and regional parties, and therefore, alternative views on how society might be organized.

Television's socio-political-cultural monopoly deprives viewers of more popular choices, victimizes some and emboldens others, heightens general intimidation, and invites repressive measures that exploit the widespread insecurities it itself generates.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbade the only censors its authors knew—government—from interfering with the freedom of their press. Since then, large conglomerates, virtual private governments, have imposed their formulas of overkill on media they own. Therefore, raising the issue of overkill directs attention to the controls that in fact abridge creative freedom, dominate markets, and constrain democratic cultural policy.

Behind the problem of television violence is the critical issue of who makes cultural policy on whose behalf in the electronic age. The debate about the current tidal wave of mayhem creates an opportunity to move the larger cultural policy issue to center stage, where it has been in other democracies for some time. The convergence of communication technologies concentrates control over the most widely shared messages and images. Despite all the technocratic fantasies about hundreds of channels, it is rare to encounter discussion of the basic issue of who makes cultural policy. In the absence of such discussion, cultural policy is made on private and limited grounds by an invisible corporate directorate whose members are unknown, unelected, and unaccountable to the public.

We need to ask the kinds of questions that can place the discussion of television violence as a cultural policy issue in a useful perspective. For example: What creative

sources and resources will provide what mix of content moving on the “electronic superhighway” into every home? Who will tell the stories and for what underlying purpose? How can we ensure survival of alternative perspectives, regardless of profitability and selling power?

There are no clear answers to these questions because, for one thing, they have not yet been placed on the agenda of public discourse. It will take organization, deliberation, and exploration to develop an approach to answering them. What follows, then, is an attempt to draw from our research answers to some questions that can help develop such an approach. We will be asking: What is unique about television, and about violence on television? What systems of “casting” and “fate” dominate its representations of life? What conceptions of reality do these systems cultivate? Why does violence play such a prominent, pervasive, and persistent role in them? And, finally, how can we as a society deal with the overkill while, at the same time, enhancing rather than further curtailing cultural freedom and diversity?

◆ *The New Cultural Environment*

Nielsen figures show that an American child today is born into a home in which television is on an average of more than 7 hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life, and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

Television, the mainstream of the new cultural environment, has brought about a radical change in the way children grow up, learn, and live in our society. Television is a relatively nonselectively used ritual; children are its captive audience. Most people watch by the clock and not by the program. The

television audience depends on the time of the day and the day of the week more than on the program. Other media require literacy, growing up, going out, and selection based on some previously acquired tastes, values, predispositions. Traditional media research assumed such selectivity. But there are no “previously acquired tastes, values, predispositions” with television. Viewing starts in infancy and continues throughout life.

Television helps to shape from the outset the predispositions and selections that govern the use of other media. Unlike other media, television requires little or no attention; its repetitive patterns are absorbed in the course of living. They become part and parcel of the family’s style of life, but they neither stem from nor respond to its particular and selective needs and wants. It is television itself that cultivates the tastes, values, and predisposition that guide future selection of other media. That is why television had a major impact on what movies, magazines, newspapers, and books can be sold best in the new cultural environment.

The roles children grow into are no longer homemade, handcrafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex, integrated, and globalized manufacturing and marketing system. Television violence, defined as overt physical action that hurts or kills (or threatens to do so), is an integral part of that system. A study titled *The Limits of Selective Viewing* (Sun, 1989) found that, on the whole, prime-time television presents a relatively small set of common themes, and violence pervades most of them.

Of course, representations of violence are not necessarily undesirable. There is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. Not all violence is alike. In some contexts, violence can be a legitimate and even necessary cultural expression. Individually crafted, historically inspired, sparingly and selectively used expressions of symbolic violence can indicate the tragic costs of deadly compulsions. However, such tragic sense of violence has been swamped by “happy violence”

produced on the dramatic assembly line. This happy violence is cool, swift, painless, and often spectacular, even thrilling, but usually sanitized. It always leads to a happy ending. After all, it is designed to entertain and not to upset; it must deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood.

The majority of network viewers have little choice of thematic context or cast of character types, and virtually no chance of avoiding violence. Nor has the proliferation of channels led to greater diversity of actual viewing (see, e.g., Gerbner, 1993; Gerbner et al., 1993; Morgan & Shanahan, 1991). If anything, the dominant dramatic patterns penetrate more deeply into viewer choices through more outlets managed by fewer owners airing programs produced by fewer creative sources.

◆ *Message System Analysis*

My conclusions are based on the findings of our Cultural Indicators project (CI) that began in 1967.¹ CI is a cumulative database and an ongoing research project that relates recurrent features of the world of television to media policy and viewer conceptions of reality. Its computer archive contain observations on over 3,000 programs and 35,000 characters coded according to many thematic, demographic, and action categories.

CI is a three-pronged research effort. "Message system analysis" is the annual monitoring of television program content; "institutional policy analysis" looks at the economic and political bases of media decision making; "cultivation analysis" is an assessment of the long-range consequences of exposure to television's systems of messages.

Message system analysis is the study of the content of television programs. It includes every dramatic (fictional) program in each annual sample. It provides an unusual view of familiar territory. It is not a

view of individual programs but an aggregate picture of the world of television, a bird's-eye view of what large communities of viewers absorb over long periods of time.

The role of violence in that world can be seen in our analysis of prime-time network programs and characters. Casting and fate, the demography of that world, are the important building blocks of the storytelling process. They have presented a stable pattern over the almost 30 years of monitoring network television drama and coding every speaking character in each year's sample. Middle-class white male characters dominate in numbers and power. Women play one out of three characters. Young people comprise one third and old one fifth of their actual proportions of the population. Most other minorities are even more underrepresented. That cast sets the stage for stories of conflict, violence, and the projection of white male prime-of-life power. Most of those who are underrepresented are also those who, when portrayed, suffer the worst fate.

The average viewer of prime-time television drama (serious as well as comedic) sees in a typical week an average of 21 criminals arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. There are 14 doctors, 6 nurses, 6 lawyers, and 2 judges to handle them. An average of 150 acts of violence and about 15 murders entertain them and their children every week, and that does not count cartoons and the news. Those who watch more than 3 hours a day (more than half of all viewers) absorb much more.

About one out of three (31%) of all characters and more than half (52%) of major characters are involved in violence either as victims or as victimizers (or both) in any given week. The ratio of violence to victimization defines the price to be paid for committing violence. When one group can commit violence with relative impunity, the price it pays for violence is relatively low. When another group suffers more violence than it commits, the price is high.

In the total cast of prime-time characters, defined as all speaking parts regardless

of the importance of the role, the average “risk ratio” (number of victims per 10 violent acts) is 12. Violence is an effective victimizer—and characterizer. Its distribution is not random; the calculus of risk is not evenly distributed. Women, children, poorer, and older people and some minorities pay a higher price for violence than do males in the prime of life. The price paid in victims for every 10 violent acts is 15 for boys, 16 for girls, 17 for young women, 18.5 for lower-class characters, and more than 20 for elderly characters.

Violence takes on an even more defining role for major characters. It involves more than half of all major characters (58% of men and 41% of women). Most likely to be involved either as perpetrators or victims, or both, are characters portrayed as mentally ill (84%), characters with mental or other disability (70%), young adult males (69%), and Latino/Hispanic Americans (64%). Children, lower class and mentally ill or otherwise disabled characters, pay the highest price—13 to 16 victims for every 10 perpetrators.

Lethal victimization further extends the pattern. About 5% of all characters and 10% of major characters are involved in killing (kill or get killed or both). Being Latino/Hispanic or lower class means bad trouble: they are the most likely to kill and be killed. Being poor, old, Hispanic, or a woman of color means double trouble, a disproportionate chance of being killed; they pay the highest relative price for taking another’s life.

Among major characters, for every 10 “good” (positively valued) men who kill, about 4 are killed. But for every 10 “good” women who kill, 6 women are killed, and for every 10 women of color who kill, 17 women are killed. Older women characters get involved in violence only to be killed.

We calculated a violence “pecking order” by ranking the risk ratios of the different groups. Women, children, young people, lower class, disabled, and Asian Americans are at the bottom of the heap. When it comes to killing, older and

Latino/Hispanic characters also pay a higher than average price. In other words, hurting and killing by most majority groups extracts a tooth for a tooth. But minority groups tend to pay a higher price for their show of force. That imbalance of power is, in fact, what makes them minorities even when, as women, they are a numerical majority.

Cultivation Analysis: The “Lessons” of Television ◆

What are the consequences? These representations are not the sole or necessarily even the main determinants of what people think or do. But they are the most pervasive, inescapable, and policy-directed common and stable cultural contributions to what large communities absorb over long periods of time. We use the term *cultivation* to distinguish the long-term cultivation of assumptions about life and values from short term “effects” that are usually assessed by measuring change as a consequence of exposure to certain messages. With television, one cannot take a measure before exposure and rarely without exposure. Television tends to cultivate and confirm stable conceptions about life.

Cultivation analysis measures these “lessons” as it explores whether those who spend more time with television are more likely than comparable groups of lighter viewers to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and repetitive features of the television world. (See Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, for a detailed discussion of the theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures of cultivation analysis.)

The systemic patterns in television content that we observe through message system analysis provide the basis for formulating survey questions about people’s conceptions of social reality. These questions form the basis of surveys administered

to large and representative national samples of respondents. The surveys include questions about fear of crime, trusting other people, walking at night in one's own neighborhood, chances of victimization, inclination to aggression, and so on. Respondents in each sample are divided into those who watch the most television, those who watch a moderate amount, and those who watch the least. Cultivation is assessed by comparing patterns of responses in the three viewing groups (light, medium, and heavy) while controlling for important demographic and other characteristics such as education, age, income, gender, newspaper reading, neighborhood, and so forth.

These surveys indicate that long-term regular exposure to violence-laden television tends to make an independent contribution (i.e., in addition to all other factors) to the feeling of living in a mean and gloomy world. The "lessons" range from aggression to desensitization and to a sense of vulnerability and dependence.

The symbolic overkill takes its toll on all viewers. However, heavier viewers in every subgroup express a greater sense of apprehension than do light viewers in the same groups. They are more likely than comparable groups of light viewers to overestimate their chances of involvement in violence; to believe that their neighborhoods are unsafe; to state that fear of crime is a very serious personal problem and to assume that crime is rising, regardless of the facts of the case. Heavy viewers are also more likely to buy new locks, watchdogs, and guns "for protection." It makes no difference what they watch because only light viewers watch more selectively; heavy viewers watch more of everything that is on the air. Our studies show that they cannot escape watching violence (see, e.g., Gerbner et al., 1993; Sun, 1989).

Moreover, viewers who see members of their own group underrepresented but over-victimized seem to develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation, what we call the "mean world syndrome."

Insecure, angry people may be prone to violence but are even more likely to be dependent on authority and susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, hard-line postures. They may accept and even welcome repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences—measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes—if that promises to relieve their anxieties. That is the deeper dilemma of violence-laden television.

The Structural Basis of ♦ Television Violence

Formula-driven violence in entertainment and news is not an expression of freedom, viewer preference, or even crime statistics. The frequency of violence in the media seldom, if ever, reflects the actual occurrence of crime in a community. It is, rather, the product of a complex manufacturing and marketing machine.

Mergers, consolidation, conglomeratization, and globalization speed the machine. "Studios are clipping productions and consolidating operations, closing off gateways for newcomers," notes the trade paper *Variety* on the front page of its August 2, 1993, issue. The number of major studios declines while their share of domestic and global markets rises. Channels proliferate while investment in new talent drops, gateways close, and creative sources shrink.

Concentration brings denial of access to new entries and alternative perspectives. It places greater emphasis on dramatic ingredients most suitable for aggressive international promotion. Having fewer buyers for their products forces program producers into deficit financing. That means that most producers cannot break even on the license fees they receive for domestic airings. They are forced into syndication and foreign sales to make a profit. They need dramatic ingredients that require no translation, "speak action" in any language, and fit any

culture. That ingredient is violence and mayhem. The events of September 11 were a striking example. (Sex is second but, ironically, it runs into more inhibitions and restrictions.)

Syndicators demand “action” (the code word for violence) because it “travels well around the world,” said the producer of *Die Hard 2* (which killed 264 compared to 18 in *Die Hard 1*). “Everyone understands an action movie. If I tell a joke, you may not get it but if a bullet goes through the window, we all know how to hit the floor, no matter the language” (quoted in Auletta, 1993).

Our analysis shows that violence dominates U.S. exports. We compared 250 U.S. programs exported to 10 countries with 111 programs shown in the United States during the same year. Violence was the main theme of 40% of home-shown and 49% of exported programs. Crime/action series comprised 17% of home-shown and 46% of exported programs.

The rationalization for all that is that violence “sells.” But what does it sell to whom, and at what price? There is no evidence that, other factors being equal, violence per se is giving most viewers, countries, and citizens “what they want.” The most highly rated programs are usually not violent. The trade paper *Broadcasting & Cable* (Editorial, 1993) editorialized that “the most popular programming is hardly violent as anyone with a passing knowledge of Nielsen ratings will tell you.” The editorial added that “action hours and movies have been the most popular exports for years”—that is, with the exporters, not the audiences. In other words, violence may help sell programs cheaply to broadcasters in many countries despite the dislike of their audiences. But television audiences do not buy programs, and advertisers, who do, pay for reaching the available audience at the least cost.

We compared data from more than 100 violent and the same number of nonviolent prime-time programs stored in the CI

database. The average Nielsen rating of the violent sample was 11.1; the same for the nonviolent sample was 13.8. The share of viewing households in the violent and nonviolent samples was 18.9 and 22.5, respectively. The amount and consistency of violence in a series further increased the gap. Furthermore, the nonviolent sample was more highly rated than the violent sample for each of the five seasons studied.

However, despite their low average popularity, what violent programs lose on general domestic audiences they more than make up by grabbing younger viewers the advertisers want to reach and by extending their reach to the global market hungry for a cheap product. Even though these imports are typically also less popular abroad than quality shows produced at home, their extremely low cost, compared to local production, makes them attractive to the broadcasters who buy them.

Of course, some violent movies, videos, video games, and other spectacles do attract sizable audiences. But those audiences are small compared to the home audience for television. They are the selective retail buyers of what television dispenses wholesale. If only a small proportion of television viewers growing up with the violent overkill become addicted to it, they can make many movies and games spectacularly successful.

Public Response ◆ and Action

Most television viewers suffer the violence daily inflicted on them with diminishing tolerance. Organizations of creative workers in media, health professionals, law enforcement agencies, and virtually all other media-oriented professional and citizen groups have come out against “gratuitous” television violence. A March 1985 Harris survey showed that 78% disapprove

of violence they see on television. A Gallup poll of October 1990 found 79% in favor of "regulating" objectionable content in television. A Times-Mirror national poll in 1993 showed that Americans who said they were "personally bothered" by violence in entertainment shows jumped to 59% from 44% in 1983. Furthermore, 80% said entertainment violence was "harmful" to society, compared with 64% in 1983.

Local broadcasters, legally responsible for what goes on the air, also oppose the overkill and complain about loss of control. *Electronic Media* reported on August 2, 1993, the results of its own survey of 100 general managers across all regions and in all market sizes. Three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television; 57% would like to have "more input on program content decisions."

The Hollywood Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors, speaking for the creative community, said in a statement issued in August 1993: "We stand today at a point in time when the country's dissatisfaction with the quality of television is at an all-time high, while our own feelings of helplessness and lack of power, in not only choosing material that seeks to enrich, but also in our ability to execute to the best of our ability, is at an all-time low."

Far from reflecting creative freedom, the marketing of formula violence restricts freedom and chills originality. The violence formula is, in fact, a de facto censorship extending the dynamics of domination, intimidation, and repression domestically and globally. Much of the typical political and legislative response exploits the anxieties violence itself generates and offers remedies ranging from labeling and advisories to even more censorship.

There is a liberating alternative. It exists in various forms in most other democratic countries. It is public participation in making decisions about cultural investment and cultural policy. Independent grassroots citizen organization and action can provide the broad support needed for loosening the

global marketing noose around the necks of producers, writers, directors, actors, and journalists.²

More freedom from violent and other inequitable and intimidating formulas, not more censorship, is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity and reduce the dependence of program producers on the violence formula, and to reduce television violence to its legitimate role and proportion. The role of Congress, if any, is to turn its antitrust and civil rights oversight on the centralized and globalized industrial structures and marketing strategies that impose violence on creative people and foist it on the children and adults of the world. It is high time to develop a vision of the right of children to be born into a reasonably free, fair, diverse, and nonthreatening cultural environment. It is time for citizen involvement in cultural decisions that shape our lives and the lives of our children.

Notes ♦

1. The study is conducted at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication in collaboration with Michael Morgan at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Nancy Signorielli at the University of Delaware. Thanks for research assistance are due to Maria Elena Bartesaghi, Cynthia Kandra, Robin Kim, Brian Linson, Amy Nyman, and Nejat Ozyegin.

2. One such alternative is the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM). CEM is a nonprofit educational corporation, an umbrella coalition of independent media, professional, labor, religious, health-related, women's, and minority groups opposed to private corporate as well as government censorship. CEM is working for freedom from stereotyped formulas and for investing in a freer and more diverse cultural environment. It can be reached by writing to Cultural Environment Movement, P.O. Box 31847, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

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