

Selling all the Stories -The culture of violence and what you can do about it

Return to the Arms menu

A lecture by George Gerbner to Science for Peace, Toronto, July 14, 1995

A new colonization is affecting the USA which is different from anything in previous history. The major influence on children is no longer parents, school, church, neighborhood and community. The permanent TV environment is a major transformation in the socialization of the species, emanating from a (shrinking) handful of global conglomerates with something to sell. The people in charge of this are not even media people.

Dr. Gerbner is Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication, U of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia PA. Born in Hungary, his research shows that the lowest 1/3 of the population is represented by only 1.2% of the people seen on TV and these are twice as likely to be shown as focus for crime/drugs and other urban problems.

So it become irresistible for local candidates to suggest the solutions are more jails, longer sentences, more executions. We still have that barbaric custom of legal killing which is increasing in the United States. Violence is the most frequently discussed and misconstrued aspect of television. Violence is at the heart of the dramatic news formula. Murders occurring 5x per hour in prime time. There are 3 entertainment murders/night. In cartoons, the favorite viewing of children, have 20-25 violent incidents/hour. Violence is a social scenario, an interaction with modelling for perpetration and victimization. It is the lowest common denominator of attention holding material, easily understood in any language, since no translation is required.

Media Violence is about the demonstration of power. Who will be the winners and losers, and the effect is indoctrination into the system of power. Victim statistics show 17 female victims/ 1 white male and 22 colored women/ 1 white male. In the Calculus of Risk is that the white male feels best. The Calculus of Risk and Vulnerability points to women, especially colored. Such victim minorities are not born, they are culturally induced.

The frequent repetition of violence is a social training exercise with long range consequences for growing up. It is about where power is, and who fits into the power structure. There is no way to escape long range consequences to which are:

A. Acceptance that violence is normal.

This is the accepted way to solve local, neighborhood, international problems. It's effects are: militarization of the mind; and the expectation that violence is the legitimate, preferred solution to any conflict. Violence as such is a legitimate element of News. It is even necessary to show the tragedy and pain that resort to the methods of violence create.

"Happy violence" is a popular image - swift, painless, thrilling, and with a happy ending - since the purpose of television with it's content, is to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood!

B. Desensitization grows. Violence is expected. It is thrilling, good entertainment but we lose ability to empathize, protest, and lose sleep over it, to become troubled by one of the most inhuman and uncivilised manifestations of our culture.

C. Growing insecurity, mistrust, apprehension and anxiety. Projection of violence intensifies "the mean world syndrome" which makes the world seem even worse than it is; - dependence on the authorities, acceptance of strong measures, in the USA, the prison industry is the most rapidly growing industry in the USA while real violence is diminishing; Fear is exploitable politically; repressive measures and answers. There is no evidence that it reduces crime, but it gets votes.

D. Marketing and economics: The US media industry cannot break even on the domestic market. Violence travels well on the global market. 50% of US media earnings come from abroad.

E. Television has become the mainstream of our culture.

TV and electronic media have greatly transformed the way in which newspapers are published, owned and managed. The way in which books are published. In the USA there are hardly any independent print publishers left. This has become the way in which all cultural activities are organised, all event promotion is cultivated, so market expectations, appeal, impact - all now depend on television.

There are claims that a high level of violence in the formula is what people want - but this is not true. Public Opinion polls show that 75-80% don't approve of the level of violence. The myth of audience preference for violence simply isn't true. Even television station managers don't like it, but they say it is cost effective because of competitive prices and the structure of international marketing. There is lots of cheap filler sold as take it or leave it.

In recent comparisons of violent and nonviolent programs studied over five years, aired at the same time, Nielsen Ratings showed US audience preferences for nonviolent programs.

Media Economics tell us that the Media industry is increasingly conglomeratized and global, for TV and film producers, there are limited sales opportunities notably at worldwide TV and Video festivals around the world. They ask themselves - what can I include that will be dramatic, image driven, not requiring translation - competitive! So though it is not popular anywhere, the violence formula is imposed.

The issue of censorship is often brought up, but the system under which creative writers have to work today, limits them to the violence formula. What is in place is before the fact censorship - follow this formula. It is imposed on the creative people, and foisted on the children of the world. Power-Rangers with which you have had a little experience 300,000,000 children see it every night - a form of Martial Arts training - "you know who the source of all evil is in the Power Rangers is - it's an old woman called Rita Repulsa living on the Moon and who will save us but a bunch of teenagers" - this is a favourite, popular children's program formula. Our study of children's programming shows that the evil characters are mid-life and older women. This is highly prejudicial, stereotypical martial arts oriented programming, and something cheap and easy to produce and sell.

So the producers can offer on the worldwide market, "an hours worth of this material for less than it will cost you to produce a minute of your own." Country after country agree.

When they do this, they sell the socialization of their children, ignore the moneys inversed in education,

and as far as I am concerned, ignore the money invested in their army. What is the point of having an army if you surrender the socialization of your children and the behaviour of your people to a group of foreign conglomerates?

It is a refusal that what we are talking about now is not entertainment, or even news, but about the cultural environment into which our children are born, their outlook on the world, so it has been possible to raise several generations of poor people with the mentality of millionaires who think about how to buy or what to buy, who don't know where our and their interest lies, but can be easily manipulated come election time. It is irresponsible to ignore in this way, the socialization of children. This is now the inescapable cultural environment like the air or water. It can often be seen in a home that TV is the first asset gained and the last to be lost.

We are facing a seamless convergence of Communications Technology and media development into a seamless cultural environment with more channels but fewer owners. The multiplicity of channels shows no real improvement since there is homogenization of content with diminishing diversity. Cultural life and social life have never before faced this kind of predicament. There have been more blood thirsty eras than the present, but there has never been a time when images of violence with cultivation of a sense of power and powerlessness, with meanness and losing ability to empathize, to act and resist has invaded every home.

We have to ask ourselves - all this anxiety, this vulnerability, this inclination to consider violence an effective solution to problems is leading us in a direction that betrays the hopes - of the post war era; of the end of the Cold War; that leads in the direction of an upsurge in NeoFascism in a very entertaining and very amusing disguise.

Is there a liberating alternative - do we have to go down that repressive road?

What can we do:

There is a liberty alternative- at least a prospect of an alternative which is Independent Citizen Action. C-CAVE is a good example. I consider C-CAVE one of the more prominent examples of independent citizen action.

We can't trust governments alone. Corporations too are trapped in a global system earning their dividend.

It requires a broad international independent coalition of many groups. This is coming to be united in what we call the Cultural Environment Movement to create a liberating alternative. We need to develop objectives including:

- to liberate creative people from the formulas imposed upon them.
- we need to help create more jobs, to address denial of access to newcomers;
- every merger and staff reduction reduces creative opportunities.
- to refute that system in which we are all trapped.
- to create a better cultural environment for our children.

The only way to do this is to create a global international coalition as we have now formed. The Founding Convention for the Cultural Environment Movement takes place in March 15-17, 1996. Actions and future agenda will be worked out. The scope of the first meeting is US national with global

roots. We do need to understand that the problems we are facing are not just local but global, otherwise we can be treating symptoms for ever.

So please consider these questions, and consider joining us. It might take a long time, but it is about creating a better cultural environment for our children which is reasonably free and reasonably fair.

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Question: Why is it that the most violent video games are selling the most? - If you are growing up in this violence laden culture, at least 5% of the population become addicted. The 5% market is sufficient for the video game to make a lot of money out of this niche market. If you show the most violent horrible movie, you get a small fraction of the market audience, but these things help to develop the niche market.

Question: Please comment on the print media that stories are bigotted etc to sell papers. I find I get better coverage in small communities. - Most big papers subscribe to national and global services. They are increasingly catering to tastes developed by television. - the lead story formula - "if it bleeds, it leads." Most local news isn't even local, but from a wholesale news service. It may be slightly better in Canada, but in the USA there are hardly any independent print publishers left. The names haven't changed, but the ownership has. When the mainstream moves in a certain direction, the rest follow. To say that violence isn't popular is tricky - but it is cheaper to produce. It doesn't need trained people or special investment. You listen to the police reports, get a picture; it is fast and cheap. The important media thing is the audience cost/1,000 you deliver to the advertizer. It helps to reduce production cost. Crime and violence is very cheap. Monopoly helps. Circulation depends on how much advertizing support you can get. The only media that now comes into the home and cultivates tastes, predisposition and therefore markets for other media - is television.

Question: Inertia on the part of ordinary people? - People are receptive to the idea of a liberating alternative. What to do depends of where you are and when. We have rights - use them. Be active and contribute. Make representation and apply what pressure you can. Don't believe there is nothing you can do.

Question: Are boys are more violence prone than girls? Are fathers important role models? Violence has been part of male socialization. We find for heavy viewers, that people lose differences and become more alike; we call this mainstreaming. Mentalities become more alike. Television is a contributing factor across many other influences, but you have to ask how it contributes for each one. It is the most centralized policy directed aspect of our culture.

Question: Have you studied Television in relation to the Gulf War? - Read my book "The Triumph of the Image." West View Press, 1993.

CEM Membership and request forms for Dr Gerbner's publication were provided. Please include US\$5.00 postage.

This lecture was sponsored by Science for Peace and C-CAVE (Canadians-Concern about Violence in Entertainment). [Return to the Arms menu](#)