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YOUTH VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

TELEVISION VIOLENCE

The Art of Asking the Wrong Question

The television violence overkill was first reported in a study by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters in 1951. It reported the then-startling fact that crime and violence made up 10 percent of programming time.

The first congressional hearings on this subject were held by Sen. Estes Kefauver's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954. The usual industry suspects were rounded up and gave what have since become the usual promises of mending their ways "next fall." Next fall, and in most subsequent seasons, violence further increased as the freeze on new frequency allocations established the unchallenged cultural hegemony of national network broadcasting.

Violence has saturated the airways for the nearly thirty years we have been tracking it in our ongoing Cultural Indicators Project (see sidebar) despite:

several more rounds of hearings in the 1960s and '70s;

the accumulation of critical research results that show violence in seven out of ten prime-time programs during the past 10 years;

condemnation by government commissions and virtually all medical, law-enforcement, parental, educational, and other organizations; and international embarrassment.

WHAT IS WRONG?

C[early, something is wrong. Broadcasters are licensed to serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." They are paid to deliver receptive audiences to their commercial 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 undermining health, security, and the social order?

The usual rationalization that violence delivers the goods--it "gives the audience what it wants"--is disingenuous. As the trade knows well, and as we shall see, violence as such is not highly rated. That means that it coasts on viewer inertia, not selection. There is no free market or box office for television programs through which audiences can express their wants regardless of the time they are available to the set.

Unlike other media use, viewing is a ritual; people watch by the clock and not by the program. To the limited extent that some programs have a larger share of certain time slots (although not in general, as we shall see) and can, therefore, extract a higher price for commercials, violent programs in those time slots may yield the broadcaster some marginal profits. But for a robust industry, sensitive to public and legislative criticism, those incremental profits are hardly worth the social, institutional, and political damage that violent programs exact.

Something is wrong with the way the problem has been posed and addressed. A virtual obsession with asking the wrong question obscures the factors that, in reality, drive violence and trap the industry in a difficult dilemma. The usual question--"Does television violence incite real-life violence?"--is itself a symptom, rather than a diagnostic tool, of the problem. Despite its alarming implications and intent, or perhaps because of them, the question distracts from focusing on the major conditions producing violence in society and limits discussion of television violence to its most simplistic dimension.

Violence is a complex scenario in social relationships. Whatever else it does, violence in drama and news demonstrates power. It portrays victims as well as victimizers and victors. It intimidates as well as incites. It shows one's place in the "peeking order"that runs society. And it "travels well" on the world market.

THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Let us, then, try to change the terms of the debate so that something might come of it. The profitable marketing of film and TV programs is increasingly dependent on reaching a global audience. Violence on television is an integral part of a system of global marketing, and it dominates an increasing share of the world's screens. Despite its relative lack of popularity in any country, the global marketing system has far-reaching consequences. It inhibits other dramatic approaches to conflict, depresses independent television production, deprives viewers of more popular choices, victimizes some and emboldens others, heightens general intimidation, and invites repressive postures that exploit the widespread insecurities it itself generates.

Behind the problem of television violence is, therefore, not only the simple problem of regulation (or industry self-regulation) but the more critical issue of who makes cultural policy in the post-electronic age. Reconsidering the debate about violence creates an opportunity to move the cultural policy issue to center stage, where it has long been in most other democracies.

The convergence of communication technologies concentrates control over the most widely shared messages and images. With all the technocratic fantasies about hundreds of channels

and with antiviolence posturing filling the mass media, it is rare to encounter discussion of basic issues of policy. The questions that can place the discussion of television violence as a cultural policy issue in a useful perspective are: What creative sources and resources can provide what mix of content flowing along the "electronic superhighway" into every home? Who will tell all the stories to all our children most of the time, and for what underlying purpose? How can we assure the survival of alternative perspectives?

These questions have been discussed and sometimes dealt with in the parliaments and legislatures of both established and newly emerging democracies. For example, France levies a 3 percent tax on theater admission and a 2 percent tax on videotapes, which is paid into a fund that provides loans for independent productions. Other countries in Europe and Scandinavia have comparable programs.

In the United States, these questions have not yet been placed on the agenda of public discourse.

What follows, then, is an attempt to formulate and address some necessary questions prior to constructing such an agenda. What is new and different about 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 to deal with the overkill while enhancing, rather than further curtailing, cultural freedom and diversity?

THE NEW CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

A child today is born into a home in which the television set is on an average of over seven 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. This means that TV is most likely to tell stories that lend themselves to a marketing effort and present life in salable packages, thus distorting and omitting large areas of life that are not visible.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent and shape the cultural environment. Television is a relatively nonselectively used ritual. Other media require literacy, growing up, going out, and making a selection based on previously acquired criteria. Traditional media research found and then assumed such selectivity based on tastes and predisposition learned before the selection. But most people watch by the clock and not by the program, and that means that TV is the only medium that will reach viewers with messages and images they would otherwise never select. All other media--films and print--are used selectively, by people seeking out what interests them.

But there is no "before" with television (except perhaps the generation "BT" that is rapidly giving way to the generation "AT"). Television is there at birth and stays there throughout life. It 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 needs and wants.

The roles children grow into are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex, integrated, and globalized manufacturing and marketing system. Television violence is an integral part of that system.

Of course, there is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. But not all violence is alike. Violence is a legitimate and even necessary cultural expression. Individually crafted, historically inspired, sparingly and selectively used expressions of symbolic violence can balance tragic costs against deadly compulsions. However, such a tragic sense of life has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly line. This "happy violence" is cool, swift, painless, and often spectacular, designed not to upset but to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a mood to buy.

How people and life are represented in the new cultural environment is not only a question of numbers. Representation cultivates a sense of opportunities and life chances. It contributes to our conceptions of who we are and how we relate to others and the world. It helps define our strengths and vulnerabilities, our powers and our risks. No longer can family and community engerder a sense of self and of values without the presence in the home of a tireless stranger telling all the stories.

On the whole, prime-time television presents a relatively small set of common themes, and violence pervades most of them. The majority of network viewers have little choice of thematic context or character types, and virtually no chance of avoiding violence. Nor has the proliferation of channels led to greater diversity of actual viewing. 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.

CASTING AND FATE

Annual monitoring and analysis of network television drama provides an aggregate bird's-eye view of familiar territory. It is what everybody watches but nobody sees--from the ground.

Casting and fate--the building blocks of the storytelling process--reflect and accommodate the violence scenario by setting the stage for stories of power, conflict, and violence. Middle-class white male characters dominate in numbers and power. Women play one out of three characters. Young people comprise one-third and old people 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.

The moderate viewer of prime-time television drama sees every week an average of twenty-one violent criminals arrayed against an army of forty-one public and private law enforcers, most of them equally violent. There are, week in and week out, fourteen doctors, six nurses, six lawyers, and two judges to handle them. An average of 150 acts of violence and about 15 murders entertain us and our children every week, and that does not count cartoons and the news. Those who watch over three hours a day (more than half of all viewers) absorb much more.

About one out of three (31 percent) of all characters and more than half (52 percent) of major characters are involved in violence 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, the average "risk ratio" (number of victims per 10 violent characters) is twelve. Violence is an effective victimizer--and characterizer. Its distribution is not random; the calculus of risk is not evenly distributed. The price paid in victims for every 10 violent characters is 15 for boys, 16 for girls, 17 for young women, 18.5 for lower-class characters, and over 20 for elderly characters. Women, children, poorer and

older people, and some minorities pay a higher price for violence than do white males in the prime of life.

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

Lethal victimization extends the pattern. About 5 percent of all characters and 10 percent of major characters kill or are killed, or both. Most likely to be so involved are Latino/Hispanic and lower-class characters. Being poor, old, or a woman of color means double trouble; they pay the highest relative price for projecting that kind of power.

Major characters who are "bad" are, of course, more likely to be killed than those portrayed as "good." But gender, race, and age also matter. For every ten positively valued men who kill, about four are killed. But for every ten "good" women who kill, six are killed, and for every ten women of color who kill, seventeen are killed. Older women characters get involved in violence only to be killed.

The Cultural Indicators team calculated a violence "pecking order" by ranking the risk ratios of the different groups. Hurting and killing by most majority groups extracts a tooth for a tooth. Minority groups tend to pay a higher price for their show of force. Women, especially older women, children and youth, the lower class, mentally disabled people, and

Asian Americans are at the bottom of the heap.

WHAT DRIVES TELEVISION VIOLENCE?

Formula-driven violence in entertainment and news is not a reflection of freedom, viewer preference, or crime statistics. It is the product of a complex manufacturing and marketing machine. Mergers, consolidation, conglomeratization, and globalization fuel 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 is declining while their share of domestic and global markets is rising. Channels proliferate while investment in new talent drops, gateways close, and creative sources shrink.

Concentration brings streamlining of production (denying entry to newcomers, reducing the number of buyers and thus competition for the products) and increasing the dramatic formulas suitable for aggressive international promotion. Program production is costly, risky, and hardpressed by oligopolistic pricing practices. Most producers cannot break even on the license fees they receive for domestic airings. They are forced to go into syndication and foreign sales to make a profit. They need a dramatic ingredient that requires no translation, "speaks action" in any language, and fits any culture. That ingredient is violence. (Explicit sex is a distant second; ironically, it runs into more inhibitions and restrictions on the global market.)

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."

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

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 editorialized (Sept. 20, 1993, p. 66) 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 necessarily with the audiences.

We compared over one hundred prime-time programs that contained violence with the same number of nonviolent prime-time programs stored in the Cultural Indicators data base. The average Nielsen rating of the violent sample was 11.1, for the nonviolent sample, it was 13.8. The audience share of 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, what violent programs lose on ratings is more than made up for by grabbing the younger viewers the advertisers want to reach and extending their reach to the global market hungry for cheap products. Even though these imports are typically less popular than quality shows produced at home, their extremely low cost, compared to local production, makes them attractive to exporters and the broadcasters abroad who buy them.

Of course, graphic violence in movies, videos, video games, and other spectacles attracts sizable audiences. But those audiences are minuscule compared to the home audience for television. They are the selective retail buyers of what television dispenses wholesale. A small proportion of one day's television audience addicted to explicit violence can make many movies and games spectacularly successful.

Most television viewers, however, 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 percent of respondents disapprove of violence they see on television. A Gallup poll of October 1990 found 79 percent 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 from 44 percent in 1983 to 59 percent. Furthermore, 80 percent said entertainment violence was "harmful" to society, compared with 64 percent 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 one hundred general managers across all regions and in all market sizes. Three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television; 57 percent 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, de facto censorship extending the dynamics of domination, intimidation, and repression domestically and globally. The typical political and legislative response too often reflects, exploits, and exacerbates those dynamics.

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, common, and centrally directed cultural contributions to what large communities absorb over long periods of time. This represents a shift of controls from home and community to a few national and international power centers.

Cultivation analysis attempts to assess those "lessons." It explores whether those who spend more time with television are more likely than lighter viewers to perceive the real world in ways that reflect common and repetitive features of the television world, the most pervasive of which is violence.

The systemic patterns observed in television content provide the basis for formulating survey questions about people's conceptions of social reality, such as, "Are you afraid to walk at night in your own neighborhood?" or "Do you think most people can be trusted?" Respondents in any sample are divided into three roughly equal parts, 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. Although individual samples vary, overall, light viewers view less than two hours daily, medium viewers from two to three hours, and heavy viewers in excess of three hours.

Violence-laden television tends to make an independent contribution 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. By far the most pervasive effect is that of a cluster of responses we call the "mean world syndrome."

The symbolic overkill takes its toll on all viewers. However, heavier viewers in every subgroup (defined by education, age, income, gender, newspaper reading, neighborhood, etc.) 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."

The relationship is stronger in some groups and weaker in others. These differences across groups illustrate the dynamics of what we call "mainstreaming"--the tendency for viewing to blur distinctions between groups, bringing heavy viewers of otherwise different groups closer together in the mean world of the television mainstream.

Heavy viewers in most subgroups are more likely than comparable light viewers to express feelings of gloom and alienation. Many subgroup patterns show evidence of mainstreaming. For example, light-viewing men are less likely to express feelings of gloom than light-viewing

women, while about the same percent of men and women who are heavy viewers have a high score on our "Gloom and Doom Index." In other words, heavy-viewing members of the genders are closer together than light viewers of the two groups. Similar patterns hold when the associations are controlled for education and income. In short, heavy viewers seem to be more homogeneous, and more likely to express gloom and alienation, than their light-viewing counterparts.

Television's impact is especially pronounced in terms of how people feel about walking alone at night on a street in their own neighborhoods. Overall, less than a third of the light viewers, but almost half of the heavy viewers, say that being out alone at night on their own street is "not safe." Whatever real dangers may lurk outside people's homes, heavy television viewing is related to more intense fears and apprehensions.

The patterns of victimization on television and real-world fear, even if contrary to fact, are also related. Viewers who see their own group as more likely to end up as victims rather than as victors in a violent encounter tend to have a higher expectation of risk than those of other groups and develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation--the "mean world syndrome." This unequal sense of danger, vulnerability, and general unease, combined with reduced sensitivity, invites not only aggression but also exploitation and repression.

The projection of power is a function of all cultures and mainstream mass media. Television streamlines it, sanitizes it, puts it on the dramatic assembly line, and discharges it into the world's common cultural environment.

Insecure 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 repression if it promises to relieve their anxieties. The "mean world" of television explodes with a powerful political fallout. Although violence occurs at a younger age and plagues poorer (often minority) neighborhoods, the real epidemic we have is not homicidal violence but the fear of violence and the soaring rate of incarceration in what is already the most imprisonment-prone society in the industrial world. The more affluent are also imprisoned in their own neighborhoods and cars, afraid to walk in the city or use public transportation. Dramas using subways as the scene of action have projected such fearful images that the city of New York banned the use of its subways as locations. Most politicians, however, cannot resist the appeal (and competitive pressure) of advocating ever harsher measures that have never reduced violence but always got votes.

There is a liberating alternative. It exists in various forms in most other democratic countries, exemplified by elected or appointed representation in either advisory or policy-making capacity over the programming policy of TV systems. In very different ways, most democratic countries have faced this problem and developed their own approaches to it, involving public participation in making decisions about cultural investment and cultural policy. Independent grass-roots citizen organizations and action can provide the broad support needed for loosening the global marketing noose around the necks of producers, writers, directors, actors, and journalists.

More freedom from violent and other inequitable and intimidating formulas, not more censorship, is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity and 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 to the centralized and globalized industrial structures and marketing strategies that impose violence on creative people and foist it on the children of the world. The role of citizens is to offer the liberating alternative to repressive movements in the field. Thanks for research assistance are due to Mariaelena Bartesaghi, Cynthia Kandra, Robin

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By George Gerbner

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THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENT

There is an alternative to the centralized control of both old and new communication technologies. In March of this year, the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) was founded in Philadelphia as a nonprofit educational tax-exempt coalition of independent media, professional, labor, religious, environmental, health-related, and women's and minority groups.

The purposes of the CEM are:

reverse the concentration of control over media;

halt increasing media commercialization, conglomerization, and globalization;

end formula-driven homogenization of content;

invest in a freer, fairer, and much more diverse cultural environment; and

create broadly based participation in cultural decisions that shape the lives of children.

The CEM views mass-produced and policy driven TV programs as the modern counterparts of the stories that parents and grandparents used to tell children. But the TV programs constrain life's choices--just as the natural environment defines life's chances--and the choices are distorted.

They include the portrayal and promotion of

practices that drug, hurt, poison, and kill thousands every day; portrayals that dehumanize and stigmatize; cults of violence that desensitize, terrorize, and brutalize; the growing siege mentality of our cities; the drift towards ecological suicide; the silent crumbling of our infrastructure; widening resource gaps and the most glaring inequalities in the industrial world; the costly neglect of vital institutions such as public education, health care, and the arts; make-beleive image politics corrupting the electoral process.

More information can be obtained from CEM, P.O. Box 31847, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): "The First Stage of Cruelty," by William Hogarth, an uncompromising recorder of human squalor, degradation and violence in eighteenth-century England.
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PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): "The Second Stage of Cruelty," by William Hogarth, 1761.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): "The Third Stage of Cruelty, or Cruelty in Perfection," by William Hogarth, 1761.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): "The Reward of Cruelty," by William Hogarth, 1751.

YOUTH VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

CULTURAL INDICATORS

Our findings come from an ongoing research project called Cultural Indicators. CI is a data base and a series of reports relating recurrent features of the world of television to viewer conceptions of reality. Its cumulative data archive contains observations on over three thousand programs and thirty-five thousand characters, coded according to many thematic, demographic, and action categories.

CI research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Screen Actors' Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Turner Broadcasting System, the Ark Trust, Incorporated, the Mental Health Initiatives, Incorporated, the Women's Initiative of the American Association for Retired Persons, and currently also the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, an agency of the U.S. Public Health Service, in its efforts to design prevention strategies relating to cultural sources of public health problems, including violence.

Although violence-related findings and indicators have been published most widely, the approach was broadly based from the beginning to collect observations on the role and functions of many aspects of life presented on television. Studies have focused on television's contributions to images of women and minorities; sex-role stereotypes; occupations; political orientation; aging; disability; mental illness; death and dying; school achievement and aspirations; health-related issues such as drugs, safety, nutrition, and medicine; science and scientists; family life; religion; adoption; portrayals of animals; expressions of anger; and other issues. It has also been extended to comparative studies of television content and effects in several countries.

The research consists of two interrelated parts: (1) message system analysis, monitoring the world of network television programs and (2) cultivation analysis, determining the contributions of television to viewer conceptions of social reality. The message analysis provides information about the historical and social dimensions of the television world, its cast of characters, their occupations and actions, and the values that govern their fate. The cultivation analysis focuses these messages upon specific lessons that living with television might cultivate in different groups of viewers.

The Violence Profile has been published periodically since 1972, based mostly on prime-time and weekend-daytime dramatic programs. Cable-originated dramatic programs, the Fox

network, news, commercials, daytime serials, and game shows have been included in some of the studies. In each case, the focus of the investigation is the contribution of recurrent, stable, and pervasive features of the world of television to viewer conceptions and actions.

The project is conducted at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and directed by George Gerbner in collaboration with Michael Morgan at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Nancy Signorielli at the University of Delaware.

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By George Gerbner

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