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Essay Reviews

The Hidden Message in Anti-Violence Public Service Announcements

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In this essay, George Gerbner reviews eight television public service announcements (PSAs) that deal with urban violence and are produced by the media conglomerate HBO/Time Warner. Gerbner couches his critique of the PSAs in terms of the historical tension between the commercial nature of television in the United States and broadcasters' mandated role to serve the public. In creating a framework to understand the anti-violence PSAs, Gerbner broadens the discussion to include both the media industry in the United States and the demand for violent television programming in the international marketplace. Although he acknowledges the high production value of the PSAs, Gerbner contends that the race, age, and gender of the characters, as well as the situations depicted, constitute a hidden message of stereotyped violence. Gerbner argues that the images portrayed in the PSAs reflect the type of violence that is presented by the television industry itself, not the kind of violence that may actually exist in the United States.

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none has been as filled with images of violence as contemporary society. Via communications technologies, societies throughout the world are constantly bombarded with representations of violence. Today, children in the United States grow up in homes where a television is kept on an average of over seven hours a day, and they are exposed to televised images of expertly choreographed brutality.[1] For the first time in human history, many of the stories about people, life, and values are told to children not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant media conglomerates that have something to sell. In other words, the roles children grow into are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, and community-inspired. Children are influenced by

[1] George Comstock with Haejung Paik, *Television and the American Child* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1991).

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a complex, integrated, and globalized manufacturing and marketing system, and television violence is an integral part of that system.

Despite the growing concern in the United States about the quantity and seemingly graphic portrayal of violence on television, such programming remains in place because of the commercial imperatives of programming in an international marketplace, from which more than one-half of U.S. media income is generated. In the international marketplace of television, violent programming needs no translation, is image-driven, and "speaks action" in any language and in any culture. Such factors help facilitate the sale of violence-laden television programs produced in the United States to countries abroad, and often at reasonable prices.[2]

If the television industry in the United States were solely a private entity, the commercial nature of television would not be a problem. In this situation, broadcasters would be under no obligation to meet anything but their own needs. But the industry is *not* a private affair. Under the Communications Act of 1934, U.S. broadcasters are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use the public airways in "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." In other words, broadcasters receive a license free of charge in exchange for acting as public trustees. The notion of commercial broadcasters controlling the airways, in contrast to publicly supported systems such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, has become a standard practice of broadcasting in the United States.

However, some lingering notions exist of broadcasters' social responsibility, or of what the current chair of the FCC, Reed Hundt, calls "the social compact." The social compact to which Hundt refers allows broadcasters to have access to the public airwaves in return for the "quid pro quo" of service to the public. However, because the FCC has failed to provide any clear definition of the notion of service to the public, broadcasters often cite vague descriptions of educational programming and public service announcements (PSAs) as evidence of their fulfilling the quid pro quo.[3]

Simply put, many commercial broadcasters air educational programming and PSAs to give the appearance of serving the public and consequently to retain their broadcast licenses. Broadcasters are not reimbursed in any manner for airing PSAs, which effectively act as unpaid commercials. Furthermore, PSAs are aired at times of broadcasters' discretion, often not at times when they would target viewers who might most benefit from their messages, unlike regular commercials. The dismantling of most FCC rules against unrestricted commercial exploitation of the public airways (called deregulation) during the 1980s has exacerbated this situation.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of the patterns and structural dynamics of television violence, from which some of these passages have been drawn, see my "Television Violence: The Power and the Peril," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Text-Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1995).

[3] Public service announcements (PSAs) are 30- to 60-second messages on topics of social concern (e.g., encouraging the use of seat belts or discouraging cigarette smoking). Local broadcasters air PSAs voluntarily and do not receive financial compensation for the air time.

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Eyebrows must be raised, then, when media corporations produce PSAs to "educate the public," and when broadcasters claim that they are earning their right to retain their licenses specifically because of the PSAs they air. Recently, the world's largest media conglomerate, Time Warner, and two of its subsidiaries, Home Box Office (HBO) and Warner Music Group, the world's leading producer of recorded music, teamed up to produce a series of eight anti-violence PSAs, entitled "Peace: Live It Or Rest In It." The world, or at least the media world, took notice.

Released in June 1994, the commercial-length spots were featured on NBC's *Today* show, CNN (also controlled by Time Warner), and other media outlets. The news release accompanying the PSAs called them a campaign to combat gun violence. "The talent involved with this project," the release stated, "include hip hop performers . . . who will have a tremendous effect on their wide range of fans. The PSAs are at times dark and haunting . . . humorous . . . and hopeful . . . [and enlist] the creative energy of young and talented performers and directors of today's generation. . . ." The *New York Times* extolled "the unusually artistic and at times startling" series targeting urban youth, and cited Cornel West saying, "They are quite powerful. . . . I think they can make a difference."[4]

Peace: Live It or Rest In It

The campaign of eight PSAs, five of which feature leading rap artists, captures scenes of urban violence amid fast-paced, creative, visually stunning imagery. By combining these images and the slogan "Peace: Live It Or Rest In It," the PSAs depict graphically the horrors of urban violence. The next few paragraphs summarize the PSAs, not in an attempt to present individual critiques, but rather to set the stage for a broader discussion of the implications of the violent situations and characters depicted

> "Stray Bullet" — Directed by Allen and Albert Hughes (the Hughes Brothers), "Stray Bullet" tracks the flight of a single bullet in great detail as it discharges in the hands of a White boy playing with the gun in his bedroom. The speeding bullet rips through walls, windows, a car, and a television set showing a baseball game about to come to a climax. The perspective shifts to a Black child peacefully eating a bowl of cereal on a kitchen highchair, and — bang — in the final frames, the bowl, spoon, and meal crash to the floor in chilling slow motion.
>
> "These Walls Have No Prejudice" — Also by the Hughes Brothers, this PSA is an equally chilling piece in which images appear only in shades of blue. Guns fire, barrels zoom, and triggers click at a frantic pace, followed by flashes of dead bodies, Black and White, laid out in the morgue.
>
> "Chuck D." — Directed by Steve Conner and starring Chuck D., leader of the group Public Enemy, this PSA is an easy-going rap. The rapster exhorts the community to somehow get together and solve its own problems. "Save the drama and save the trauma" is his advice.

[4] Sheila Rule, "A Message that Guns Are Lethal Weapons," *New York Times*, May 31, 1994, p. 15C.

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"Nikki and Khalif" — Directed by Nelson George and David Taylor, the PSA features rap artist Queen Latifa relating a poignant story of the lives of two urban Black adolescents — their love, stubborn independence, fear, vengeance, and death from a drive-by shooting.

"What Are You, Stupid?" — Directed by Peter Askin, this spot features the gallows humor of comedian John Leguizamo, who saunters down the streets of New York and taunts swaggering, macho-nerds with the words "the larger the gun the smaller the penis." The scene changes, and, inexplicably, he is hung on a meathook in front of what seems like a butchershop. Then suddenly he is at a cemetery, intoning "People should kill guns and not guns . . .". when a gun thrusts into his stomach, fires, and kills him. As he falls forward, the camera swings around to expose a masked and hooded figure towering over him.

"Good Kids" — Directed by Steve Conner, the piece features a young Black man in hooded black fatigues walking down the street on his way to a grocery store. A White matron crosses his path, stands petrified for a moment, and then walks on. The young man enters the grocery store, startling a Korean grocer who stands at the register as the young man proceeds down an aisle. The audience is set up to expect the worst. Then the young man emerges with a bag of potato chips and the money to pay for it, exchanges pleasantries with the grocer, and exits the store. "For every kid that carries a gun," says the voice-over, "there are thousands that don't. Let's not forget that."

"Hero" — Also directed by Steve Conner, this PSA is filmed in the directing style popularized by the television series *ER* and, in fact, was filmed in the Elmhurst Hospital in Queens. Real medics work frantically to save the life of a young Black man, shot by mistake. they are informed, by friends. The young man's last ghastly moan before dying reinforces the numbing, paralyzing effects of yet another tragic mistake.

"Et Tu Brutus" — Directed by Marcus Turner, the PSA features Sticky Fingaz and Fredro Starr from Onyx, a music group with the reputation of being both violent and raunchy. The slow-motion chase in this spot, the wild shooting, the dreadful recognition that a hooded Black youngster is out for vengeance, and a voice-over crying out, "Stop — you're only killing yourself," could be from any movie popularizing Black gangs.

The Hidden Message

Two aspects of this series of anti-violence PSAs are problematic: the times the PSAs were actually aired, and their perpetuation of the kind of stereotyped violence seen in regular television programming. The PSAs were shown only on cable systems, some owned by Time Warner itself. Not all eight PSAs were aired, however. For example, MTV, usually innovative and irreverent, ran only "Good Kids," "Hero," and "Chuck D.," over a two-week period in June 1994. Apparently, squeamish MTV screeners (company censors) objected to actual guns firing in "Stray Bullet" and "Stupid." The PSAs that were aired did not necessarily appear at times when young people were likely to be in the audience. For example, ETV

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(Entertainment Television) showed "Chuck D." ten times during one week in July 1994 — at 3:30 a.m., 4:30 a.m., and 5:30 a.m.!

The most obvious limitation of these PSAs, however, stems from the corporate structure of their production. The anti-violence content of the eight spots deals with symptoms of urban violence, while the PSAs ignore the wholesale manufacture of a media-generated culture of violence, Time-Warner being a leading contributor to this culture. The PSAs do not confront television as a pervasive source of messages and images that can cultivate an acceptance of violence and a sense of victimization, vulnerability, and vengeance among viewers.

The PSAs overlook the complexity of violence, which in general involves a wide range of motivations, circumstances, and justifications. Violence depicted in the media sends out messages about power and vulnerability, problem-solving, human relations, law enforcement, consequences of actions, and the rules of society. Many of these lessons may be interpreted differently by different viewers and different age groups. But on a more basic level, constant exposure to dramatic violence may cultivate similar assumptions about power and vulnerability, regardless of whether the violence is "gratuitous" or justified, as long as the social relationships involved are stereotyped, repetitive, or pervasive.

By not dealing with the way the media contributes to the culture of violence, the anti-violence PSA campaign actually reinforces television's negative messages and stereotypes about violence. The overt message in this series of PSAs is anti-violence, as reflected in the productions' words and actions. The PSAs' hidden message, whether intended or unintended, is in furthering the stereotypical context of media violence, and is accomplished by casting certain characters and selecting certain fates for them.

Upon closer examination of the cast of characters in these PSAs, violence is mostly a problem among Black male youths. Victims are disproportionately women (in fact, when involved at all, women are only involved as victims). Moreover, in these PSAs, a character from any minority group is more likely to encounter a violent situation, either as a perpetrator or as a victim. The PSAs' portrayals are congruent with the stereotypical characterizations of violence seen in general televised programming. In other words, these anti-violence PSAs may actually be perpetuating media images of violence. In regular television fare, the risk of violence to different categories of characters is not random. Women, children, poorer people, older people, and some minorities pay a higher price for violence on television than do males in the prime of their life.[5]

[5] This information comes from the Cultural Indicators database, an ongoing research project updated on an annual basis that relates recurrent features of the world of television to viewers' conceptions of reality. The research began in 1967 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It has continued under various sponsors, including 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 Center for Substance Prevention of the U.S. Public Health Service, and other organizations. This project is now based at the University City Science Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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The Cultural Indicators research has shown that the symbolic overkill against such specific populations of characters may have a strong impact on viewers' perceptions of reality. The data suggest that viewers who watch more television — controlling for factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and neighborhood — are more likely to express feelings of insecurity and dependence.[6] In other words, "heavy" viewers of television express a greater sense of apprehension than do "light" viewers. Heavy viewers 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 the fear of crime is a "very serious personal problem"; and to assume that crime is rising, regardless of the facts of the case.

We have found that viewers who see members of their own group (race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc.) under-represented but over-victimized develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation — what the Cultural Indicators project calls the "mean world syndrome." Research from this project also suggests that insecure, angry people may be prone to violence, but that they are even more likely to be dependent on authority and susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, hard-line appeals. Further, 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 the votes of an anxious and angry electorate. The cultivation of such beliefs is the deeper dilemma of violence-laden television.[7]

The splendid artistry of the production of these PSAs may have earned HBO/Time Warner brownie points with Congress, perhaps even with advertisers, and with the relatively few viewers who saw them at the obscure times they were aired. Unfortunately, in these PSAs, the complex roots of violence — its motivation, circumstances, and justification — remain unexamined. The structural constraints of the PSAs' being sponsored by one of the world's leading mass-producer of violent images and messages, and the requirements of mounting an effective campaign against violence in U.S. culture may be what inhibit a more accurate characterization of violence.

Nonetheless, the task of educators, parents, and other caring adults who spend significant time with children is not to deplore or ignore these anti-violence PSAs and other similar efforts. On the contrary, they should take the opportunity offered by these PSAs to use the broader context of their production and functions to illustrate for children the way that television perpetuates selective images of violence. For example, educators might require students to perform a content analysis of the violence present in scenes from prime time television programs. In such a content analysis, students would keep track of each character involved in any physical violence. Students would note the characters' gender, race, and class, as well as whether the characters perpetrate or suffer violence, or both. After students code the characters (30 to 40 characters should

[6] This information is gathered from surveys from the Cultural Indicators project.
[7] See, for example, George Gerbner, "Television Violence: The Art of Asking the Wrong Question," *The World and I: A Chronicle of Our Changing Era*, July 1994, pp. 385–397.

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reveal the trends consistent in commercial television programs) in a number of scenes containing violence, they can calculate for themselves how non-randomly victimization occurs on television. If the scenes the students code are at all typical, their results will reveal the "hidden message" of violent portrayals and relationships on television.

Despite the negative attributes inherent in the kind of PSAs produced by HBO/Time Warner, they can be used in similar ways as tools of analysis that teach, energize, mobilize, and organize, rather than as media agents that mostly terrorize and paralyze young audiences.

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