THE DEMOCRATIZATION
OF COMMUNICATION

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The cultural frontier: Repression, violence, and the liberating alternative

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The new frontier of the struggle for democracy is the cultural frontier. Of course, traditional forces of inequity and injustice have had their cultural supports. But the cultural arms of new systems of colonization are now centralized, conglomeratized and globalized. They manufacture most of the stories for most of the children and discharge them into the common cultural environment. The mainstream of the environment, television, pervades every home and affects us every day from cradle to grave.

This is a report from that cultural frontier. It is in the spirit of Michael Traber's life's work, alerting us to the dangers of an increasingly dehumanized and constrained system of cultural mass-production and marketing. That system has taken the process of socialization out of the home, the school, and the church. Cultural policy-making has drifted out of the community and even the nation state, and out of democratic reach. We need to understand that process in order to liberate it from the constraints that, in the name of efficient marketing, twist it out of human shape.

In this report we shall review evidence from the ongoing Cultural Indicators (CI) project studying television content and effects since 1967. The CI database is a unique resource. It has detailed and coded observations including over 39,000 characters and 3,000 programmes in 1994. It yields our analysis of casting and fate, violence and victimization on television. The Cultivation Analysis contributes evidence about the consequences of growing up with television. We conclude with the results of our studies of what drives television violence and what we can do about it.

The typical viewer of dramatic network programmes on US television (now exported to almost every country) sees an average of

353 characters in prime time and 139 characters in Saturday morning children's programmes. Unlike life, fiction goes behind the scenes and shows how things work out in the end. Casting and fate reveal powerful moral and practical lessons. They demonstrate who is valued and why, who is likely to succeed and how, and who can get away with what against whom. Rarely, if ever, does a person encounter as many social types and relationships as often and in as compelling and revealing ways as on television.

The moral and behavioural lessons embedded in that synthetic world hold out great promise but also pose great dangers. Their aggregate facts and figures, remote as they may seem to be from everyday viewing experience, reveal what large communities absorb in common over long periods of time. That is the television everyone watches but nobody sees. Our children grow up and learn, and we all live, in the context of that world. Its patterns are repeated and confirmed every day, many times a day. It is resistant to change unless we know its contours and understand its dynamics.

Casting and fate in prime time

The world of US prime-time network television presents a coherent social structure that changes little over time. Men outnumber women three to one. Women tend to be concentrated in the younger age groups and 'age faster' than men. While 16 per cent of males but 25 per cent of females are portrayed as young adults, by the time they reach 'settled' adulthood, the proportions are reversed: 72 per cent of men but only 58 per cent of women are portrayed as settled adults. Men of nearly any age play romantic roles; their partners are younger women.

Romance may be rampant on prime time, but marriage is not. Only 11 per cent of all characters and 20 per cent of major characters are married. Marriage is a more defining circumstance for women than it is for men. More than two-thirds of all men but less than half of all women characters appear in roles whose marital status is indeterminate. Despite their generally younger age, women are almost twice as likely to play the role of wife as men are to play the role of husband.

Predictably, the population of prime-time television drama is overwhelmingly (about nine out of ten) 'middle class'. 'Upper class' characters are three to four times as numerous as 'lower class' characters.

The US Census classifies more than 13 per cent of the population, nearly one-third of the children of New York City, and one-third of all African Americans, as living in poverty. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports about 7 per cent of white, 15 per cent of African Americans and 20 per cent of teenagers seeking work as unemployed. Many more are low-income wage-earners. Avid viewers but poor consumers, they are all but invisible on television. Clearly identifiable 'lower class' characters make up only 1.2 per cent of all characters in prime time and even less in Saturday morning children's programmes. 'Lower class' women, who hold most of the lower-paid jobs in real life, are even more out of the picture; their percentage drops to nearly half of the men's in prime time and to one-third of the men's in Saturday morning children's programmes.

Race and ethnicity of prime-time characters is as skewed as gender, age and class, except perhaps African Americans. Their percentage increased in a twenty-year period, to over 11 per cent of all and 9 per cent of major characters. However, the representation of Latino/Hispanic American characters remained little over 1 per cent, Asian-Americans about 1 per cent, and Native Americans ('Indians') 0.3 per cent of all characters, and even less as major characters.

Positively valued characters (heroes) outnumber negatively valued characters (villains). 'Upper class' and Latino/Hispanic male characters have the largest proportion of villains, about twice the general percentage. The same groups, and 'lower class', disabled, gay/lesbian, and mentally ill characters have the highest negative ratio of 'good' vs. 'bad 'characters.

Ageing depresses the relative valuation of female characters. Women not only age faster than men but are also seen as relatively more likely to be evil as they age.

Heroes are destined to win and villains to lose, at least in popular fiction. Beyond that, however, being characterized as very rich, ill, or otherwise disabled is most likely to accompany failure. Characters depicted as mentally ill fail almost twice as often as they succeed, the highest ratio of failure in any group. Gender comparisons show that being old, 'lower class', lesbian, Asian or mentally ill places a special burden of relative failure on women.

Saturday morning children's programmes
The world of Saturday morning children's programmes magnifies all anomalies of prime time. Minorities drop in representation in

Saturday morning children's programmes, especially in major and female parts. Characters of the parents' generation, especially married and mother figures, are few and relatively ill-fated. There are few, if any, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific, or Native American females as major characters in twenty years of Saturday morning children's programmes samples.

The moral lessons of Saturday morning children's programmes are also more sharply delineated than those of prime time. There are more villains, and characters pay a higher price for heroism in that they have a higher ratio of 'bad' for every 'good' character. Older women and African American women bear the brunt of the relative devaluation.

The failure rate also rises with age until it reaches one out of four at the age of most viewers' parents. The relative balance of success vs. failure penalizes the old, the ill and disabled, and the poor.

The 'gender gap' heightens the inequities. Being relatively rare and 'bad' to begin with, older women are most likely to be depicted as deranged and to fail by a larger margin than in prime time. This is where the witches come from.

Violence

Violence can be seen as a legitimate cultural expression, even necessary to convey valid lessons about human consequences. Individually crafted and historically inspired, sparingly and selectively used symbolic violence of powerful stories is capable of balancing tragic costs against deadly compulsions. There is murder in Shakespeare, mayhem in fairy tales, blood and gore in mythology, although Greek drama, often cited for its compelling pathos and cathartic effects, showed only the tragic consequences of violence on stage. 'Greek sensibilities', observes theatre historian Oscar G. Brockett (1979: 98), 'dictate that scenes of extreme violence take place offstage, although the results might be shown.'

Under the increasing pressures of global marketing, however, graphic imagery is produced for world-wide entertainment and sales. This 'happy violence' is swift, cool, thrilling, painless, effective, and always leads to a happy ending, designed not to upset but to deliver the audience to the commercial message in a receptive mood. In this formula-driven dramatic fare, the limited degrees of attempted justifications for violence have been swamped in a tide of violent overkill and expertly choreographed brutality.

The marketing strategies driving mass-produced violence affect the total tone and context of programming. Beyond considerations of both quantity and quality, and above all other features and justifications, violence is a social relationship in which naked power is exerted. People hurt or kill to resolve a conflict, to force (or deter) unwanted behaviour, to dominate, to terrorize. Symbolic violence is literally a 'show of force'. It demonstrates power and shows who can get away with what against whom and at what cost to themselves.

Prime time
Our studies have found that violence extends the inequities of casting and fate. More major than minor characters commit violence, but minor characters, with their larger share of minorities, pay a higher price in victimization for the violence they commit. Latino/Hispanic and Native American characters, and those portrayed as poor, are the most likely to be involved in violence and to become victims of violence. In terms of a violence/victim ratio, 'lower class' characters pay the highest price: two victims for every perpetrator of violence.

Women generally pay a higher price in victimization for their violent actions than men do, and the price rises as they age. Older men suffer 182 victims for 100 perpetrators; older women suffer 215.

Lethal violence further extends the pattern. Characters of colour, Latino/Hispanic Americans, 'lower class', disabled or ill characters, and older characters are at the greatest relative risk of being killed instead of killing. The age differential strikes older women especially hard: they encounter lethal violence only to get killed. In short, men kill; women (especially older women) get killed.

Instead of muting the mayhem and inequities of prime time, Saturday morning children's programming intensifies them. More than half of all (including minor) characters are involved in violence, twice as many as in prime time. Eight out of ten major characters are involved in violence, compared to 52.3 per cent in prime time. The rate of retribution is also higher. For every 100 violent acts in Saturday morning children's programmes, there are 139 victims; for major characters the ratio is 127. Comparable ratios for prime time are 122 and 108.

Not only is there generally more violence in Saturday morning children's programmes, but minorities are disproportionately and mostly negatively affected. Native Americans ('Indians') and Latino/Hispanic American characters are the most violence-prone,

significantly more than in prime time. The pattern is extended to the violence/victim ratio. African American characters suffer 108 victims for every 100 perpetrators of violence in prime time but 205 on Saturday mornings (whites suffer 135). 'Lower class' characters encounter violence only to be victimized; they have no power to inflict it. Asian-Americans pay the highest price: 267 victims for every 100 perpetrators (compared to 118 in prime time).

Although Saturday morning children's programmes present escalation of the pattern of prime-time violence in almost every age category, older women are again the most affected. Nine out of ten commit violence, and they absorb as much punishment as they inflict. They are evil, they are violent, they are the losers. Witches must die.

What are the consequences?
Cultivation Analysis ascertains what it means to be born into and grow up in a television home. Using standard techniques of survey methodology, questions about reality, security, feelings of vulnerability, and so on, were posed to samples of children, adolescents, and adults. The patterns of responses of heavy vs. light viewers, holding other factors constant, reveal the 'lessons' of growing up with television.

The 'lessons' range from aggression to desensitization and a sense of vulnerability and dependence. Victimization on television and real world fear, even if contrary to facts, are highly related. Viewers who see members of their own group have a higher calculus of risk than those of other groups, develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation.

Heavy viewers in most subgroups are much more likely to express feelings of gloom and alienation than the light viewers in the same groups, and these patterns remain stable in surveys over time. 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 percentage of men and women who are heavy viewers have a high score on this 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.

These patterns illustrate the interplay of television viewing with

demographic and other factors. In most subgroups, those who watch more television tend to express a heightened sense of living in a mean world of danger, mistrust and alienation. This unequal sense of danger, vulnerability and mistrust, and the homogenization of outlooks are the deeper problems of violence-laden, market-driven television. These are not simple policy issues. They are structural problems that any programme of change has to confront.

What drives television violence?
The standard rationalization is that violence is pervasive in television programming because it is popular. The evidence challenges the notion that violence is 'what the public wants to see'.

Of course, popular stars, strong stories and intensive promotion can make any programme a relative success, at least temporarily. Also, if only a small portion of the television audience gets 'addicted' to television violence, that can make graphically violent movies, videos, and games a commercial success. In fact, escalation of the body count seems to be one way to get attention from those addicted to global mayhem.[1] But that does not necessarily make violence *per se* popular with the television audience. Results of our comparative study of Nielsen ratings suggest that factors other than what the audience wants need to be considered to understand what makes violent programming profitable.

Is it popularity?
The A. C. Nielsen Company provides survey-based estimates of television viewing used by most broadcasters to set the prices charged for advertising time and to calculate 'cost per thousand' (CPM). CPM is the cost of reaching 1,000 viewers – the standard for assessing the relative marketing efficiency of different media and programmes, and the key economic factor in programming.

Nielsen rating is the estimated size of the audience viewing a programme, expressed as a percentage of the total sample. Share is the percentage of households tuned into a programme out of all households viewing at that time.

Two methods were used to compare Nielsen ratings and shares of violent and non-violent programmes. The first comparison samples were drawn by scanning all 30-minute and hour-length titles in the Cultural Indicators data base for five years, covering the 1988–9 to 1992–3 seasons. Violent programmes were defined as those that

contained at least 10 seconds of overt physical violence per hour. Non-violent programmes had none. After eliminating titles that aired more than once within the same season's sample (in order to avoid undue emphasis on such programmes), each sample ended up with 101 programmes.

The second comparison eliminated programmes that were only occasionally violent, i.e. programmes that did not have violence in each annual sample. That comparison tests the ratings of repeatedly and consistently violent, occasionally violent, and non-violent programmes.

Comparisons of Nielsen ratings

The first comparison tests the general viewership of the total violent and non-violent programme samples. It shows that the overall average rating of the non-violent sample is 13.9 and the rating of the violent sample is 11.2. The shares of the non-violent and violent samples are 22.5 and 18.92, respectively. Furthermore, the non-violent sample is more highly rated than the violent sample for each of the five seasons tested.

The second method tests if there is a further difference between the viewership of repeatedly and consistently violent vs. only occasionally violent programmes. Programmes with some episodes that were violent and others non-violent are in a 'mixed' category. The remaining two categories contain consistently violent and always non-violent programmes.

This most rigorous test further demonstrates the relative unpopularity of violent programming. Non-violent programmes rate 17.2, mixed programmes rate 12.9, and always violent programmes rate 11.8. The respective shares are 27.7, 21.8 and 19.7. The gap between the relatively high viewership of non-violent and lower viewership of violent programmes increases with the increase of violence in the programmes.

The more consistently violent the programmes are, the more they decline in ratings, share, and presumably earnings based on them. The question arises that, as CPM is the key formula for longevity, perhaps violent programmes are sufficiently cheaper to produce than non-violent programmes to offset the loss of ratings. Therefore, the next assumption investigated was that controlling costs rather than increasing ratings may be an economic driving force behind violent programming.

Cost, genre, importance

Data compiled from the trade papers *Variety* and *Channels* (now defunct) show that the cost-control assumption is false. The average cost of non-violent programmes is $702,000, of occasionally violent programmes is $801,000, and of consistently violent programmes is $1,208,000.

The paradox of the persistence of violent programming despite low ratings and high cost required further investigation. It is possible that the programmes' genre rather than the presence or absence of violence accounts for differences in viewership. Ratings vary also by time period, as audience flow depends on the time programmes are aired. Finally, whether violence is incidental, significant, or the main focus of the programme might also affect viewing.

However, none of these potentially confounding conditions changes the results. The ratings gap favours non-violent programmes both before and after 9 p.m. Situation comedies that have some violence receive lower ratings and shares than those that have none. Crime-action programmes (where most violence is concentrated) are consistently rated lower than sitcoms and others. Humorous non-violent programmes have consistently higher average ratings and shares than mixed or serious programmes, and these ratings and shares generally decline as violence enters the programmes. Finally, as the significance of violence increases, viewership decreases.

Backlash

The trade paper *Broadcasting & Cable* editorialized (20 September 1993, p. 66) that 'the most popular programming is hardly violent as anyone with a passing knowledge of Nielsen ratings will tell you.' The violence formula is, in fact, a reason for popular dismay, political pressure, international embarrassment, and general institutional stress. Of course, growing up with violence produces its addicts who then provide the core audience for even more graphic cable programmes, movies, video games, etc. It only takes a small proportion of viewers, perhaps the equivalent of one night's television audience, to make other violent media a commercial success. But there is no evidence that, other factors being equal, violence *per se* is giving most television viewers in any country 'what they want'. On the contrary, most people suffer the violence 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 television violence.

A March 1985 Harris survey showed that 78 per cent disapprove of violence they see on television. A Gallup poll of October 1990 found 79 per cent in favour 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 per cent from 44 per cent in 1983. Furthermore, 80 per cent said entertainment violence was 'harmful' to society, compared with 64 per cent in 1983, reported Diane Duston of the Associated Press in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (24 March 1993, p. F5).

'No topic touches a nerve in American homes as does violence on television . . .' began the lead article of a highly publicized special issue of *TV Guide* on 22 August 1992. Soon after, ten senators signed a letter to television executives demanding voluntary controls on violence. The Television Violence Act, in force since 1990, offered a three-year limited exemption from the threat of anti-trust action if the industry responded. It expired without evoking significant policy change.

Attorney General Janet Reno and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, along with Department of Education Secretary Richard W. Riley, convened in Washington, DC, a 'National Consultation on Violence'. Their report, released in July, 1993, broke new ground in pointing out that: 'The issue of media violence is really just the first phase of a major cultural debate about life in the 21st Century. What kind of people do we want our children to become? What kind of culture will best give them the environment they will need to grow up healthy and whole?' The group recommended that citizens 'take lessons from the environmental movement to form a "cultural environmental" movement.'

By the end of 1993, President Bill Clinton and most members of the cabinet spoke out on television violence. No speech reverberated more than that of the Attorney General. 'Top cop Janet Reno may have turned Congress's anti-TV violence bandwagon into a runaway freight train', exclaimed *Variety* (1 November 1993, p. 25). Nine bills were introduced in Congress to curb television violence. A year later, none had even advanced to the floor of either house.

Meanwhile, local broadcast licence holders complained about their loss of freedom to choose what they show and exercise some control over violent programming. The trade paper *Electronic Media* reported, on 2 August 1993, the results of its survey of 100 television

station general managers across all regions and in all market sizes. Despite the law that makes the licence holder fully responsible for programming for the local community and 'in the public interest', three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television; 57 per cent would like to have 'more input on programme content decisions'.

Networks were imposing their own programming formulas on affiliates, in clear violation of the letter and intent of the law and FCC (Federal Communications Commission) regulations. Even the trade paper *Variety* observed (22 August 1994, p. 19) that 'tough language in recent contractual agreements . . . is raising questions of whether the webs are playing fast and loose with long standing FCC rules mandating that stations – and not the networks – have the ultimate say in programme schedules.' For example, when, in the most dramatic media merger of 1994, Fox Broadcasting – the network owned by Rupert Murdoch's Australia-based News Corporation, 'financed', according to *Variety* (6 June 1994, p.1), '99 percent by foreign coin', and airing the most violent action shows – acquired the 12-station New World Communications Group, its contract stipulated that 'no (Fox) programming will be deemed to be unsatisfactory, unsuitable, or contrary to the public interest . . . which the licensee believes to be more profitable or more attractive', and none may be preempted 'except to present locally produced non-entertainment . . . approved by Fox.'

In an industry quick to claim the protection of the First Amendment when the violence formula is attacked, no loud voice was raised to protest against violations of broadcast licencees' freedom to choose programming most suitable to their viewers and the public interest. (It remained to the New York chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to charge Fox with 'flagrant violation' of the FCC rule limiting foreign ownership of a broadcast station or network to 25 per cent. The reason was the web's cancellation of *Roc*, the only issue-oriented comedy about a working-class African-American family.)

Many in the creative community, however, expressed great concern about the loss of freedom. The Hollywood Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors said in a statement issued on the eve of the August 1993 'summit' conference: '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.'

Industry conflict and Hollywood's dissatisfaction was also reflected in a *U.S. News and World Report* poll, reported by the Associated Press on 30 April 1994. The Hollywood survey was conducted for the magazine by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy and found that views on violence inside the entertainment industry are not much different from those of the general public. The survey found that 59 per cent of Hollywood workers polled saw entertainment violence as a serious problem, 87 per cent said media violence is at least a contributing factor to violence in America, 58 per cent said they themselves have avoided violent programmes, and 76 per cent said they have stopped or discouraged their children from watching such programmes.

Leaders of the television industry responded by declaring their intention to run disclaimers and 'parental advisories', and, a year later, by commissioning violence 'monitors' to report still another year later. Another effort at damage control was the 'Industry-Wide Leadership Conference on Violence in Television Programming' in Los Angeles on 2 August 1993. It was dubbed the 'Violence Summit' by the international media crowding into its hotel ballroom. This was the first time that the electronic media industries invited legislators, educators, researchers and representatives of citizens' groups to discuss a matter of programming policy. The conference was covered by all major networks, broadcast live by CNN and later aired in full by C-SPAN. It made no effort to reach consensus, adjourned without making any recommendations for change, and had no impact on overall programme policy.

Nevertheless, industry sources cited in the trade paper *Broadcasting & Cable* (25 October 1993, p. 6) complained that 'we're not getting any credit for what we've already done.' Others called for a counter-attack and unveiled some of the most violent movies, programmes, and cartoon series ever produced. 'Up to now' said 'a network source' quoted by *Broadcasting & Cable,* 'we have tried to be good guys . . . I think you'll see a change in how we react.' A one-day 'snapshot' study of programming, reported in *TV Guide* on 13 August 1993, showed a significant rise of violence in the news, in promotional announcements, and in cartoons.

The global marketing factor

What accounts for the perennially violent fare, a virtual policy

paralysis in the face of the ratings and cost paradox, turmoil in the media industries, and fierce public backlash? The answer challenges the two standard rationalizations: first, that violence is what people want, and, secondly, that it is an expression of creative freedom.

Broadcasting & Cable magazine wrote in its editorial of 20 September 1993 (p. 66) that 'action hours and movies have been the most popular exports for years . . .'. Bruce Gordon, President of Paramount International TV Group, explained in the same journal (15 June 1992, p. 19) that 'the international demand rarely changes . . . Action-adventure series and movies continue to be the genre in demand, primarily because those projects lose less in translation to other languages . . . Comedy series are never easy because in most of the world most of the comedies have to be dubbed and wind up losing their humour in the dubbing.'

The magazine of the broadcasting industry returned to the theme in its 25 August 1994 'Special Report', entitled 'Action Escalates for Syndicators'. It noted that '. . . the closest thing to a guaranteed hit overseas continues to be U.S. action-adventure shows' (p.27). The most dramatic new entry into the 'action market' in 1994–5 is the *Action Pack* series produced by MCA TV, employing lavish special effects used in *Jurassic Park* and *The Mask*, and, despite its relatively good ratings, expecting a domestic deficit to be made up on the world market. Some executives, like Keith Samples, President of Rysher, a major syndicator of action programmes, have earned their 'reputation for negotiating international co-production deals that allow projects to succeed financially with lower domestic ratings . . .' (p.34)

Global 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.' (Cited by Ken Auletta in 'What Won't They Do', *The New Yorker*, 17 May 1993, pp. 45–6.)

'Syndicators are developing action shows with international play in mind and are triggering 20 to 22 initial hours', *Electronic Media* reported in its 8 March 1993 issue (p. 4), because foreign buyers are 'tired of . . . series ordered in dribs and drabs of six or eight episodes – in genres they don't find appealing.' 'Action series' reported *Variety* on 5 October 1992 (p. 21) 'sell particularly well if produced by the dozens.' In today's trigger-happy market-place, a 22-episode order is a

creative (and financial) cushion for producers 'because the network standard of 13 or even 6 instalments' is too paltry 'for cable and foreign markets where the marketers' profits come from'.

The answer to the dilemma of violent television programming thus rests in a highly concentrated and globalized system of production and distribution. Governments and private operators import violent action series in large quantities at low unit cost. The local product is typically more popular but, for smaller markets, much more expensive to produce.

US-based media industries dominate more than half of the world's screens, and violence dominates US production for export. A pilot study of international data in the Cultural Indicators database provides some information about the scope of the international 'overkill'. A thematic analysis of a sample of 250 US programmes exported to ten countries, compared with 111 programmes shown only in the US at the same time, found that violence was the main theme of 40 per cent of home-shown and 49 per cent of exported programmes. Crime/action series comprised 17 per cent of home-shown and 46 per cent of exported programmes.

Economic trends compound the pressures. Expensive and risky production requires the pooling of large resources and even larger distribution capabilities. 'Studios are clipping productions and consolidating operations, closing off gateways for newcomers', notes the trade paper *Variety* on the front page of its 2 August 1993 issue. The number of major studios declines while their share of domestic and global markets rises. Channels multiply while investment in new talent drops, gateways close, and creative sources shrink.

Concentration brings streamlining of production, economies of scale, and emphasis on dramatic ingredients most suitable for aggressive international promotion. Cross-media conglomeration and 'synergy' means that ownership of a product in one medium can be used, reviewed, promoted, and marketed in other media 'in house'. 'It means less competition, fewer alternative voices, greater emphasis on formulas that saturate more markets.' Privatization of formerly public-service broadcasting around the world means a decline of subsidies for the arts, reduction of staffs, and the production and distribution of more of the type of product that can be purchased at the lowest cost on the world market.

Networks pay producers a 'licence fee' for one or two airings of their product. The few buyers that dominate the market can set the

licence fee so low that most producers do not break even on the domestic market. Deficit financing is the rule, not the exception, in programme production. This system places a great burden on producers and distributors. They must find additional sources of income to compensate for lower ratings and higher average cost of violent programmes and to make a profit. That is a difficult task that often takes a long time and demands a long-range strategy.

The additional sources of income are syndication of programmes, home video sales, various forms of ancillary merchandising and franchising, and, most importantly, foreign sales. The dependence on foreign sales affects the nature of the product in crucial ways. It makes producers search for an ingredient in a marketing formula that requires no translation, is image-driven, 'speaks action' in any language, and can be inserted into the culture of almost any country. They find that ingredient in violence. (Graphic sex is second, but, ironically, that runs into many more inhibitions and restrictions around the world.)

Production companies emphasizing alternative approaches to human conflict, like Globalvision Inc., G-W Associates, and Future Wave, report that they have difficulty selling their product. Far from reflecting creative freedom, viewer preference, citizen demands, or crime statistics, the global marketing strategy driving the television violence overkill wastes talent, restricts freedom, chills originality and damages human rights and the public interest. Helping broadcasters loosen these constraints, and serve audiences with more diverse fare addressed to their own needs and interests, is a key aspect of the cultural environment approach.

The cultural environment approach

Channels multiply but communication technologies converge and media merge. With every merger, staffs shrink and creative opportunities diminish. Cross-media conglomeration reduces competition and denies entry to newcomers. The coming of cable and VCRs has not led to greater diversity of product or actual viewing (see e.g. Morgan and Shanahan, 1991b; Gerbner, 1993b; Gerbner *et al.*, 1993).

A study of 'The limits of selective viewing' (Sun, 1989) related frequent thematic categories to the incidence of violence and found that, on the whole, television presents a relatively small set of common themes, and violence pervades all of them. A major network viewer looking for a nature or family theme, for example, would find

violence in seven or eight out of every ten programmes. The majority of viewers who watch more than three hours a day have little choice of thematic context or cast of character types, and virtually no chance of avoiding violence.

Fewer sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardized fare designed for global markets. Global marketing streamlines production, homogenizes content, and sweeps alternative perspectives from the mainstream. Media coalesce into a seamless, pervasive and inescapable cultural environment, with television its mainstream, presenting a world that is iniquitous, demeaning, and damaging to those born into and living in it.

Media anti-trust legislation and broadcast regulations for localism, public trusteeship of licence holders, fairness and equal time, and against multiple, foreign and cross-media ownership and trafficking in stations are ignored, or obsolete, or irrelevant. There is no historical precedent, constitutional provision, or legislative blueprint to confront the challenge of the new consolidated controls that really count – global conglomerate controls over the design, production, promotion and distribution of media content.

The Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) was launched in 1991 in response to this drift. CEM is an educational non-profit tax-exempt corporation organized in the US to address the need to reach out internationally to build a coalition of independent organizations committed to joint action in developing mechanisms of greater public participation in cultural decision-making. It provides the liberating alternative to repressive movements in the field. It works to gain the right of a child to be born into a cultural environment that is reasonable, free, fair, diverse, and non-damaging.

Notes

1. The first rampage of *Robocop* for law and order in 1987 killed thirty-two people. The 1990 *Robocop 2*, targeting a 12-year-old 'drug lord', among others, slaughters eighty-one. *Death Wish* claimed nine victims in 1974. In the 1988 version, the 'bleeding heart liberal' turned vigilante disposes of fifty-two. *Rambo: First Blood*, released in 1985, left behind sixty-two corpses. In the 1988 release 'Rambo III' visits Afghanistan killing 106. *Godfather I* produced twelve corpses, *Godfather II* put away eighteen and *Godfather III* killed fifty-three. The daredevil cop in the original *Die Hard* in 1988 saved the day with a modest eighteen dead. Two years later, *Die Hard 2* thwarts a plot to rescue 'the biggest drug dealer in the world',

coincidentally a Central American dictator to be tried in a US court, achieving a phenomenal body count of 264.

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