On Bias

by George Gerbner[1]

Bias is in the eyes of the beholder. What we see depends on who we are, where we are, what is available to us, and what our interests are. That vantage point is as much a part of our communication as the camera angle is a part of a photograph.

The same applies to media. Mass media are the cultural arms of an industrial establishment. They are the successors of the symbiotic nexus of power that used to be state and church. Now it is state and media, especially broadcasting, the most pervasive and cradle-to-grave cultural environment, licensed by the state. Broadcasting in any society is the mainstream of the common cultural environment to which other media must adjust and on which other media, and indeed governments, depend for their appeals and their markets.

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Media bias, therefore, is a manifestation of the common ideological perspective of society. What that is depends on the history, nature and structure of the society — capitalist, social-

ist, communist, fascist, religious fundamentalist, etc. — of which it is a part.

Given these fundamental considerations, we can now look at the issue of bias from a basic historical point of view of who is telling all the stories.

I

Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell.

Unlocking incredible riches through imagery and words, conjuring up the unseen through art, creating towering works of imagination and fact through science, poetry, song, tales, reports and laws — that is the true magic of human life.

Through that magic we live in a world much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate physical environment, which is the world of other species. Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and life-style, and offer models of conformity or targets for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs.

The storytelling process used to be handcrafted, homemade, church and community-inspired. Now it is mostly mass-produced and policy-driven. It is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. The situation calls for a new diagnosis and a new prescription.

II

The stories that animate our cultural environment have three distinct but related functions. These functions are (1) to reveal how things work; (2) to describe what things are; and (3) to tell us what to do about them.

Stories of the first kind, revealing how things work, illuminate the all-important but invisible relationships and hidden dynamics of life. Fairy tales, novels, plays, comics, cartoons, and other forms of creative imagination and imagery are the basic building blocks of human understanding. They show complex causality by presenting imaginary action in total situations, coming to some conclusion that has a moral purpose and a social function. You don't have to believe the "facts" of *Little Red Riding Hood* to grasp the notion that big bad "wolves" victimize old women and trick little girls — a lesson in gender roles, fear and power.

Stories of the first kind build, from infancy on, the fantasy we call reality. I do not suggest that the revelations are false — which they may or may not be — but that they are synthetic, selective, often mythical, and always socially constructed.

Stories of the second kind depict what things are. These are

descriptions, depictions, expositions and reports abstracted from total situations and filling in with "facts" the fantasies conjured up by stories of the first kind. They are the presumably factual accounts, the chronicles of the past and the news of today.

Stories of what things are may confirm or deny some conception of how things work. Their high "foeticidal" (*i.e.*, correspondence to actual events presumed to exist independently of the story) gives them special status in political theory and often in law. They give emphasis and credibility to selected parts of each society's fantasies of reality. They convey information about finance, weddings, crime, lotteries, terrorists, etc. They alert us to certain interests, threats, opportunities and challenges.

Stories of the third kind tell us what to do. These are stories of value and choice. They present things, behaviors or styles of life as desirable (or undesirable), propose ways to obtain (or avoid) them, and the price to be paid for attainment (or failure). They are the instructions, laws, regulations, cautionary tales, commands, slogans, sermons and exhortations. Today, most of them are called commercials and other advertising messages and images we see and hear every day.

Stories of the third kind clinch the lessons of the first two and turn them into action. They typically present an objective to be sought or to be avoided, and offer a product, service, candidate, institution or action purported to help attain or avoid it. The lessons of fictitious "Little Red Riding Hoods" and their more realistic sequels prominent in everyday news and entertainment not only teach lessons of vulnerability, mistrust and dependence, but also help sell burglar alarms, more jails and more executions (all promised to enhance security — which they rarely do). In short, these same lessons teach ways to adjust to a structure of power.

Ideally, the three kinds of stories check and balance each other. But in a commercially driven culture, stories of the third kind pay for most of the first two. That creates a coherent cultural environment whose overall function, and bias, is to provide a hospitable and effective context for stories that sell. With the coming of the electronic age, that cultural environment is increasingly monopolized, homogenized and globalized. We must then look at the historic course of our journey to see what bias this new age imparts to our children.

III

For the longest time in human history, stories were told only face to face. A community was defined by the rituals, mythologies and imageries held in common. All useful knowledge was encapsulated in aphorisms and legends, proverbs and tales, incantations

and ceremonies. Writing was rare and holy, forbidden for slaves. Laboriously inscribed manuscripts conferred sacred power to their interpreters, the priests and ministers. As a 16th century scribe put it:

> Those who observe the codices, those who recite them.
>
> Those who noisily turn the pages of illustrated manuscripts.
>
> Those who have possession of the black and red ink and that which is pictured; they lead us, they guide us, they tell us the way.

State and church ruled in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension. State, composed of feudal nobles, was the economic, military and political order — the church its cultural arm.

The Industrial Revolution changed all that. One of the first machines stamping out standardized artifacts was the printing press. Its product, the book, was a prerequisite for all other upheavals to come. Printing begins the industrialization of storytelling, arguably the most profound transformation in the humanization process.

The book could be given to all who could read, requiring education and creating a new literate class of people. Readers could now interpret the book (at first the Bible) for themselves, breaking the monopoly of priestly interpreters and ushering in the Reformation.

When the printing press was hooked up to the steam engine the industrialization of storytelling shifted into high gear. Rapid publication and mass transport created a new form of consciousness: modern mass publics. Publics are loose aggregations of people who share a common consciousness of how things work, what things are, and what ought to be done — but never meet face-to-face. That was never before possible.

Stories could now be sent — often smuggled — across hitherto impenetrable boundaries of time, space and status. The book lifts people from their traditional moorings as the industrial revolution uproots them from their local communities and cultures. They can now get off the land and go to work in faraway ports, factories and continents, and have with them a packet of common consciousness — the book or journal, and later the motion picture (silent at first) — wherever they go. Their bias is that of their author, publisher, marketer — still fairly diversified.

Publics, created by such publication, are necessary for the formation of individual and group identities in the new urban environment, as the different classes and regional, religious and ethnic groups try to maintain some sense of distinct integrity, while living

together with some degree of cooperation with other groups.

Publics are the basic units of self-government. They make it possible to elect or select representatives to an assembly trying to reconcile diverse interests. The maintenance and integrity of multiple publics makes self-government feasible for large, complex and diverse national communities. People engage in long and costly struggles to be free to create and share stories that fit the reality of competing, and often conflicting values and interests. Most of our assumptions about human development and political plurality and choice are rooted in the print era.

One of the most vital products of the print era was the creation of the only large-scale folk-institution of industrial society — public education. Public education is the community institution where face-to-face learning and interpreting could, ideally, liberate the individual from both tribal and medieval biases and cultural monopolies.

IV

The second great transformation, the electronic revolution, ushers in the telecommunications era. Its mainstream — television — is superimposed upon and reorganizes the multiple biases of print-based culture. Unlike the industrial revolution, the new upheaval does not uproot people from their homes, but transports its biases into every home. It "retribalizes" modern society.

For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these stories. The stories do not come from their families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and often not even from their native countries or, in fact, from anyone with anything relevant to tell. They come from small groups of distant conglomerates with something to sell.

The cultural environment in which we live becomes the by-product of marketing. The historic nexus of state and church is replaced by the new symbiotic relationship of state and television. The "state" itself is the twin institution of elected public government and the nonelected private corporate government. Television is dominated by the private establishment, despite its use of the public airways, and reflects its biases. (Public television is deprived of funds for dramatic fare that could attract large audiences, thereby making it noncompetitive with commercial television.)

Giant industries discharge their biases into the mainstream of common consciousness. Channels proliferate and new technologies pervade the home and office

while mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink creative alternatives and reduce diversity of content.

These changes may appear to be broadening local, parochial horizons, but they also mean a homogenization of outlooks and limitation of alternatives. For media professionals, the changes mean fewer opportunities and greater compulsions to present life in saleable packages. Creative artists, scientists and humanists can still explore and enlighten and occasionally even challenge, but, increasingly, their stories must fit marketing biases and priorities.

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Viewing commercials is "work" performed by audiences in exchange for "free" news and entertainment. But, in fact, we pay dearly through a surcharge added to the price of every advertised product that goes to subsidize commercial media, and by allowing advertising expenditures to be a tax-deductible business expense. These giveaways of public moneys for private purposes further erode the diversity of the cultural mainstream and reinforce the market-based biases of broadcast television.

Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized and globalized medium. The top U.S. 100 advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations — our private "Ministry of Culture" — control the bulk of production and distribution and shape the cultural mainstream, including most cable programming. Other interests (religious or educational), minority views, or the potential of any challenge to dominant biases, lose ground with every merger.

Formula-driven, assembly line-produced programs increasingly dominate the airways. The formulas themselves reflect the biases of the power structure that produces and functions to preserve and enhance that structure of power. Perhaps the leading example of such story functions is the principal dramatic demonstration of power — violence. This is a good example of

how the biases of the system are projected into the culture.

V

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of violence as the present. While violent crime rates remain essentially flat or decline, news of crime surges to new highs.

Monitoring by the *Des Moines* (Iowa) *Register* (March 27, 1994) illustrated how crime and violence skew news priorities. Of the six top stories on Des Moines evening newscasts during February 1994, one out of four (118 stories) dealt with crime and violence. By comparison, 27 featured business, 17 dealt with government, 15 reported about racial relations, and two were stories about schools.

A University of Miami study of local television news found that time devoted to crime ranged from 23 to 50 percent (averaging 32 percent) while violent crime in the city remained constant, involving less that one-tenth of one percent of the population.

A study by Robert Entman for the Chicago Council on Urban Affairs found not only that local news shows are dominated by vivid images of violence, but that "a high percentage of African Americans and Latinos are shown as victimizers of society, and few as social helpers," contributing to a sense of fear and distrust (that our own research diagnosed as the "mean world syndrome"), and to the notion that "the inner city is dominated by dangerous and irresponsible minorities."

Another study of the biases of homicide news reporting found that only one of three actual homicides was reported, and that the most likely to be selected were those in which the victims were white rather than black or Latino, contrary to the actual crime statistics. University of Pennsylvania sociologist Elijah Anderson also noted in the November 1994 issue of *Philadelphia Magazine* that media portrayals of crime and violence involving blacks, and the resulting demonization of black males, becomes a major reason for "white flight." However, African American men, not whites, are more likely to be the victims of violence.

Our own study of local news on Philadelphia television found that crime and/or violence items usually lead the newscast and preempt any balanced coverage of the city. Furthermore, 80 percent of crime and violence reported on Philadelphia local news was not even local to the city. It is as if a quota were imposed on the editorial staff to fill from wherever they can. (It is also the cheapest way to fill the time.) We also found that whites are more likely to be reported when they are the victims and African Americans are more likely to be reported when they are the perpetrators. Black-

on-white crime is less frequent but more newsworthy than any other combination.

The average percent of prime-time television dramatic programs with scenes of overt physical violence is five per hour. In Saturday morning children's programs, scenes of violence occur between 20 and 25 per hour. They are sugarcoated with humor, to be sure; but that makes the pill of power easier to swallow.

Violence is, of course, a legitimate and even necessary subject to show the tragic costs of deadly compulsions. However, such a tragic sense of violence has been swamped by "happy violence" produced on the television dramatic assembly line. "Happy violence" is cool, swift and painless, and always leads to a happy ending.

Action movies cash in on the trend. *Robocop's* first rampage for law and order killed 32 people. *Robocop 2* slaughtered 81. The sick movie *Death Wish* claimed nine victims. In the sequel, the "bleeding heart liberal" turned vigilante disposed of 52. *Rambo: First Blood*, rambled through Southeast Asia leaving 62 corpses. *Rambo III* visited Afghanistan killing 106. *Godfather I* produced 12 corpses, *Godfather II* put away 18 and *Godfather III* killed no less than 53. The daredevil cop in the original *Die Hard* saved the day with a modest 18 dead. *Die Hard 2* achieved a phenomenal body count of 264. You can take it from there and do your own count.

Violence is a demonstration of power. Its principal lesson is to show quickly and dramatically who can get away with what against whom. That exercise defines majority might and minority risk. It shows one's place in the societal "pecking order."

The role of violence in the media mainstream of television emerges from our analysis of prime-time network programs monitored since 1967. Women play one out of three characters in drama, one out of six in the news. Young people comprise one-third and old persons one-fifth of their actual proportions of the population. Most other minorities are even more underrepresented. Most of the groups that are underrepresented are also those who suffer the worst fate.

The typical viewer of prime-time television drama sees, every week, an average of 21 criminals arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. Crime and violence employ more characters than all other occupations combined. About one out of three speaking parts and more than half of all major characters are involved in violence, either as victims, victimizers or both.

We calculated the violence "pecking order" by counting the number of victims for every ten perpetrators of violence. That "risk ratio" expresses the "price" groups of characters pay for committing violence. We found that

the overall average risk ratio (the number of victims per 10 perpetrators) is 12. But the ratio for women is 17, for lower class characters is 19, for elderly characters is 20, and for women of color is 22. In other words, minority groups tend to pay a higher price for their show of force than do the majorities. That reflects the media's class bias. In a market-driven culture, poor people represent only 1.3 percent of all dramatic characters. When they do appear, they are most likely to threaten the social order.

Our surveys show that heavy viewers express a greater sense of apprehension and vulnerability than do light viewers in the same groups. 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 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" (thus, becoming the major cause of handgun violence).

Moreover, viewers who see members of their own group underrepresented but overvictimized develop an even greater sense of apprehension and mistrust. Insecure, angry, mistrustful 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 and appeals. In other words, media violence is not only biased against women and minorities but sets them up for repression.

VI

What drives media violence? The usual rationalization that media violence "gives the public what it wants" is disingenuous. The public rarely gets a fair choice in which all elements but violence, including placement, headline, promotion, airtime, celebrity value, treatment, etc., are equal. There is no evidence that, cost and other factors being equal, violence per se gives audiences "what they want." As the trade paper *Broadcasting & Cable* editorialized on September 20, 1993, "the most popular programming is hardly violent as anyone with a passing knowledge of Nielsen ratings will tell you."

We compared the ratings of over 100 violent and the same number of nonviolent shows aired at the same time on network television. The average Nielsen rating of the violent sample was 11.1; the rating for the nonviolent sample was 13.8. The share of viewing households in the violent and nonviolent samples, respectively, was 18.9 and 22.5. The nonviolent sample was more highly rated than the violent sample for each of the five seasons

studied. The amount and consistency of violence further increased the unpopularity gap.

Concentration of ownership denies access to new entries and to alternative perspectives. Having fewer buyers for their products forces the remaining "content providers" deeper into deficit financing. As a consequence, most television and movie producers cannot break even on the U.S. domestic market. They are forced into video and foreign sales to make a profit. Therefore, they need a dramatic ingredient that requires no translation, "speaks action" in any language, and fits any culture. That ingredient is violence.

Syndicators demand "action" (the code word for violence) because it "travels well around the world," said the producer of *Die Hard 2*. "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 shows that violence dominates U.S. exports. We compared 250 U.S. programs exported to 10 countries with 111 programs shown in the United States during the same year. Violence was the main theme of 40 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.

People suffer the media violence inflicted on them, and its implicit and explicit biases, with diminishing tolerance. A March 1985 Harris survey showed that 78 percent disapprove of violence they see on television. In a Times-Mirror national poll in 1993, 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, that in its own survey of 100 general managers, three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television and 57 percent would like to have "more input on program content decisions." A *U.S. News & World Report* survey published on April 30, 1994, found that 59 percent of media workers saw entertainment violence as a serious problem.

Formula-driven media violence is not an expression of freedom, popularity or crime statistics. It is a de facto censorship that chills originality and extends the biases of domination, intimidation, and repression domestically and globally. The media violence overkill is an ingredient in a global marketing formula imposed on media professionals and foisted on the children of the world.

What is to be done? Four things.

The first is selective viewing in the home. Watch by the program and not by the clock.

The second is education in media literacy to immunize children against the viruses of media biases.

The third is an independent citizen voice in cultural policy making. The public should be represented in the now invisible and unelected global conglomerate Ministry of Culture that determines the biases of media behind closed doors.

And the fourth is diversity of sources of support. That is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity of content. That is also the democratic way to counter media monopoly and reduce its biases.

Note

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