

TELEVISION VIOLENCE -- THE FACTS AND THE POLITICS

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Our research project called Cultural Indicators has been studying the content of television and its cultivation of ideas and actions for the past fifteen years. Our results have been confirmed and amplified by independent investigations in the U.S. and abroad. The conclusions are clear and compelling. Violence on television continues unabated. Violence-laden television constitutes a significant national health problem. The problem goes beyond the stimulation of violent tendencies.

Our research and related studies show that the most pervasive correlate of violence-laden television is the cultivation of insecurity and the corrosive effect of living in what is perceived by heavy viewers -- compared to light viewers in the same groups and neighborhoods -- as a very mean world. The syndrome is associated with demands for protection, dependence on authority, and a vulnerability to repression and control that rises with minority status. A sampling of research results and a prospectus of the project with a full bibliography is available.

Are these relationships large and significant? They are not large, but they are significant. Small and pervasive differences can be lethal and of epidemic proportions. When deaths from influenza rise from the average rate of 24 per 100,000 to 26 per 100,000, an

additional 5,000 people are dead, nearly five times the total number of AIDS victims. The U.S. homicide rate is 13 per 100,000. If only one of these can be attributed to television violence, a very modest assumption, that would give us the same proportion of victims as the flu epidemic. The differences between heavy and light viewers in terms of insecurity and fear are in the 5 to 15 percent range, sometimes even higher, and they affect the majority rather than a minority of the population.

So let us note the power of small but pervasive differences. It takes but a few degrees' drop in the average temperature to usher in an ice age. A few votes can decide a close election. A percentage point difference in ratings is worth millions of dollars over a season -- as the networks know only too well. Billions are spent on advertising for marginal gains in a large market. It's not always the size of the difference, but its direction, persistence, and pervasiveness that counts. Even the NBC study you will hear about later found such a difference, although its authors minimize its significance, I believe unduly.

The violence we are concerned with is not Shakespeare or even Roots. At a rate of about six acts per hour in prime time and about twenty or more in children's weekend daytime programs, it is a cheap industrial ingredient polluting the symbolic environment. It hypes weaker programs and makes for cheaper delivery of audiences on a dramatic assembly-line. It is precisely because small differences in that formula can have large economic consequences that the networks defy the often expressed desire of the American people for less violent and more interesting programming, and deny and distort the overwhelming weight of evidence supporting that desire.

The research verdict is in, and has been in for at least 20 years. Why are there no results? The problem is not scientific but political. The networks have successfully defeated the efforts of legislators, citizens, and public organizations to look into the structural causes of their manufacture of that cheap industrial ingredient called television violence and its discharge into the common cultural environment. The full story of that counterattack has never been told.

Briefly, congressional investigations in the late 50's and early 60's resulted in the first round of network promises, but no action. The National Commission of the Causes and Prevention of Violence in the late 60's, which sponsored the first of our violence profiles, came to the same conclusion as investigations before and since, and with the then existing evidence behind it. The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee launched the most ambitious program of media studies ever undertaken, and confirmed the same verdict, providing ample scientific support for a broad movement of citizens' organizations. That movement led to a series of congressional hearings, first in the Senate under the leadership of John Pastore, and then in the House under the guidance first of Torbert Macdonald and then Lionel Van Deerlin. Finally, in 1977, after many years of investigations and hearings, all pointing in the same direction, the House subcommittee on communications drafted a final report which included this paragraph:

The Subcommittee instructs its staff...to explore fully the structure of the broadcasting industry in order to enable the Subcommittee to better evaluate (a) whether the present system of commercial network broadcasting which dominates viewing habits arbitrarily restricts program choice or is in any way primarily responsible for the high levels of violence on television, and (b) whether consideration should be given to altering the structure of the broadcast industry by

legislation designed to increase competition and, perhaps, choice.

Needless to say, in network circles all hell broke loose. Members of the subcommittee told me that they had never before been subjected to such relentless lobbying and pressure. Major campaign contributors were also contacted. The report was delayed for months. The Subcommittee staffer who wrote the draft was forced out -- fired. The day before the final vote was to be taken, a new version drafted by broadcast lobbyists was substituted. It ignored the evidence of the hearings and gutted the report, shifting the burden from network structure to the families of America. When the network-dictated draft came to a vote, members of the parent committee who had never attended hearings were mobilized, and the watered down version passed by one vote. Small differences can have far-reaching consequences!

The movement to reduce violence on the airways never recovered from that defeat, and violence continued at a high level. But research also continued. Last year, the National Institute of Mental Health, which sponsored the original report to the Surgeon General, published a two-volume survey of research entitled Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties. The survey, which includes the NBC study, again concludes that the weight of additional evidence, gleaned from literally hundreds of studies completed in the last ten years, including our investigations, confirms and amplifies the conclusions of not ten but twenty years of research.

At that point the network counterattack rolled into high gear again. This time the target was not Congress but the NIMH report. Spearheading the attack was an ABC booklet, widely distributed, entitled "A Research Perspective on Television and Violence." The

committee of social scientists advising NIMH on the report sent a critique to the Surgeon General exposing the ABC booklet for the crude hatchet job it was. The Surgeon General studied the matter and was impelled to characterize the ABC booklet "an embarrassment to the social science research community as well as to the media."

I hope no such embarrassment will mar today's proceedings. But I am sure that the network counterattack will continue until an effective mobilization of parents, educators, religious and political leaders, and all concerned citizens can halt it. We need a broad environmental movement that can address the industrial pollution of mass-produced violence poisoning the environment most vital to our humanity -- the environment of symbols and stories into which our children are born and in which we all live.