



Bulletin Photo by William Owens

Captain Noah and some of the characters on his morning cartoon show.

Cartoon Violence Sparks Hot Debate



Bluto hits Popeye on the head with an outboard motor and grabs Olive Oyle. She yells, "Help, Popeye! Save me!" Popeye wolfs down a can of spinach and pounds Bluto through the bottom of the boat. Bluto yells, "Help, I'm drowning." Olive Oyle says, "Popeye, this is fun." Popeye sings, "I'm strong to the finish, because I eats my spinach. I'm Popeye the sailor man!"

And so ends another socko cartoon on Captain Noah's morning kid show on Channel 6—a cartoon

that Captain Noah says is wholesome entertainment for the kids and that a guy named George Gerbner says is sugar-coated mayhem.

Gerbner, the dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at Penn, says TV is more violent than ever with an average of 10 violent incidents every hour during regular programming and an average of 20 an hour during cartoons.

He says only one in 100 persons ever gets involved in violence in real life, but on television it happens to one out of 10 persons. On

TV, he says, 65 percent of the major characters are involved in violence, compared to a fraction of 1 percent in real life. He obviously is not referring to my real life, which has been exceeded in violence only by World War II.

'Opinionated Bean-Bags'

I hashed all this out with Gerbner and Captain Noah whose real name is W. Carter Merdreier, in separate interviews and found them at distinct odds with each other.

"Frankly," said Captain Noah, "I don't honestly believe that most of the opinionated bean-bags I've read about lately really know what is going on in children's programming."

The skipper of the Magical Ark added, "If anyone says the Road Runner and Popeye and the Three Stooges are harmful to children they'll have to prove it to me. Everything I have read points to the fact that cartoon fantasy does not have the same effect as real violence. Most children and adults realize the difference between fantasy and reality. And we ought to have fantasy in our lives."

"The cartoons are a sugar-coated pill," Gerbner said. "Anytime you sugar-coat the pill you make it more effective. Children take fantasy much more seriously than other programs. Fantasy is the part of our lives that forms our pictures of the world. When we see reality we always can say, 'That happens to someone else, not to us.' But fantasy happens to all people. It's a way of saying, 'This is how things really work.'"

Gerbner insisted he simply reports the amount of violence on television "the way meteorologists report the weather" and he doesn't speak out for or against it.

'To Create Terror'

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with violence on television," he said. "I just said it exists now more than ever. If you want to teach children that they can be mean and cruel to each other and that's the best way to get along, go ahead."

He said the ultimate purpose of the media is to create terror. "The basic intention of the media is to create fear and dependence on the media," he said.

Captain Noah, meanwhile, lashed out at the PTA and the American Medical Association for "but-



Bulletin Photo by Salvatore C. DiMarco Jr.

Dean George Gerbner of Penn opposes violence in cartoons.

Cartoon Violence Seen as Mere Fantasy

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ting into something that's none of their business" and criticizing children's TV programming.

"The primary purpose of children's programs is entertainment, not education," Captain Noah said. "If there's a

secondary purpose it's imagination. The AMA and the PTA are responsible for removing one of the funniest cartoons ever made from television — the Road Runner. Those cartoons with the bird and the coyote are funny."

However, Gerbner compared the Road Runner cartoons to public exe-

cutions. "There was a time when the funniest story was an execution, and everyone went to watch it," he said. "The Road Runner is cheaper and much more effective at conveying violence. It entertains. The Road Runner is full of little moral lessons. The execution had just one moral lesson."

Gerbner said TV "seldom varies from its set formula. The only thing that is more predictable than the shows on television is the news. The news is, of course, totally predictable."

"There are two kinds of fiction," Gerbner said. "One by drama and the other fiction by selection, which is called news. There's no nonfiction in that you can't communicate the totality of existence. You must be selective."

That's why this entire piece of writing is fiction. Not because I made it up, but because it's selective. Got that?