NEW YORK

The Man Who's Killing TV Violence

By Anthony Haden-Guest

"...Gerbner and his Mean World have driven the networks crazy. The networks have been under fire before, but never like this..."

Careful, now. Watch it out there. Violent men are waiting. Don't trust strangers. Strangers maim and kill. Children are much at risk, as are the black, the poor, the old. Women, who, in this curious world, are outnumbered by men four to one, are there to be taken by the mugger, the rapist, the delinquent with a brain like a moldy pecan. Psychos slink through the fetid gloom with standard equipment of knife, rope, gun, while terrorists wield more complex armories of death.

Everybody, it seems, is dangerous, except for us. We, the Victims.

This is the world which Dr. George Gerbner describes as "The Mean World." It is the world in which the heavy television watcher has, increasingly, been living.

Actually, George Gerbner himself may not, I suspect, be entirely at ease with this gothic treatment of his findings. Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, is not a man for sensationalism. He inhabits a temperate clime, furnished with statistics, questionnaires, succinctly phrased forms. But it is by means of these forms that Gerbner has mapped a topography. The Mean World. George Gerbner and his Mean World have driven the networks crazy.

The networks, of course, have been under fire before, but it has never been like this. Within the past eighteen months, the following things have happened: The AMA came out and blitzed TV violence as "an environmental hazard," indeed a "serious problem of air pollution." The organization of parent-teacher associations made it its issue of the year, which might not seem impressive to some, except that the PTA is six and a half million strong, and they were talking boycott. J. Walter Thompson, the advertising agency, sensing declining effectiveness, made strong representations to the advertisers. The sponsors themselves suddenly came to life.

The networks, suddenly, or so it seems, buckled. "We had a two-hour movie, *Nightmare in Badham County*, which ran into sponsor trouble," said somebody at ABC. "We took it out of peak time and ran it without sponsors." Many action shows have disappeared from the fall schedules. Karl Malden will no longer roam *The Streets of San Francisco*. Also gone will be *Hunter*, with James Franciscus, and *Most Wanted*, with Robert Stack. It was announced that *Starsky and Hutch* —assuming that Paul Michael Glaser does finally agree to remain with the show—would concentrate on establishing "a relationship."

And the single most effective agent in this transformation scene has been George Gerbner, a 57-year old Hungarian folklore expert who became dean of the Annenberg School of Communications in 1964. (It is interesting, but not particularly relevant, that he will in this capacity probably be administering the $40-million Annenberg operation lately departed from New York's Metropolitan Museum.)

For ten years, Gerbner and a minuscule staff have been doing the only constant, systematic research on TV violence. Among their product: annual "Violence Profiles." Ironically, he might have failed to make much of a dent on the national psyche but for one thing—his frequent appearances on television.

George Gerbner disclaims any wish to become the Ralph Nader of the networks. A rising populist discontent and embattled corporate forces may be turning him into one, despite himself. This is how television's balance of power was (certainly) altered, and how the battle against violence was (perhaps) won.

We were in an NBC studio, Rockefeller Center. It was May 2, and there were already rumors that the networks were on the defensive. The studio audience, of which I was one, was awaiting *Not for Women Only*. The day's subject: violence on television. "We'd like you to applaud," said the producer, "but we don't want to use the applause sign." We should, she said, watch for the gestures of our "applause leader" instead.

The hosts came on. Lynn Redgrave and Frank Field. The guests were Alfred Schneider, an ABC vice-president, heading that network's Department of Standards and Practices, which is to say the censors, the moral digestive tract through which all products pass;

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Illustrated by Larry Williams

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Marshall McLuhan—known, the cast list reminded me, as "the electronic prophet"; and George Gerbner.

Air time approached. The troupe drank coffee comfortably out of china mugs, not the Styrofoam that had been given to them off camera. Lynn Redgrave, who had been landed with Styrofoam, hastily hid it behind her seat. Oh, the superior reality of television! On the air, now—and Marshall McLuhan, a practiced tactician, ran away with the ball.

Television? "If you wish to retain the American way of life," he said jauntily, "it should be turned off *totally*." McLuhan was wearing a mustache that looked as if it had been glued on, and a suit checkered like a TV test pattern. The audience, which had confessed, prior to the show, an average daily viewing time of four hours, looked at him with numbed delight. The electronic prophet chucked in a few more veteran McLuhanisms—"hardware," "software," and such—and turned to Gerbner.

"I don't think that is very meaningful," Gerbner said. He was sitting slap-bang dead center. He looks a bit like Kosygin, but a fuller, browner Kosygin, a Kosygin who might have defected to, say, Miami Beach. He removed the play from McLuhan. TV was, he said, the most important thing in America.

Schneider looked bleak. How does television compare with the family? he demanded. The president?

Gerbner gave the faintest of smiles. "They are not competitive anymore," he said. "Television has won."

McLuhan looked anguished. Huffing his cheeks, arms rising and falling as though he were limbering up for flight. "But George," he complained, "you're talking about *content*."

"I am a diagnostician," Gerbner explained.

"Hold on a moment, I am a diagnostician too."

"Good," Gerbner said, politely.

The bout was halted by a man in a leisurewear jacket, holding up a sign that indicated it was time for the commercials.

After the show, things got a mite heated. Schneider was talking intensely to Gerbner in the corridor. "It isn't your *research*," he said. "It's the uses that it has been put to."

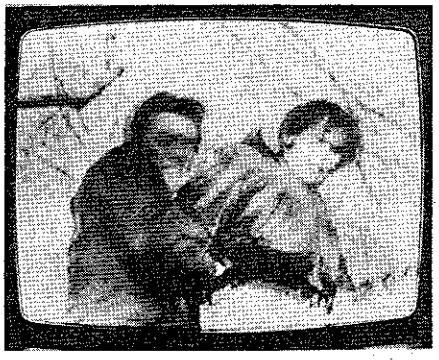
"We have no control over that," said Gerbner. And what about the CBS counterattack?

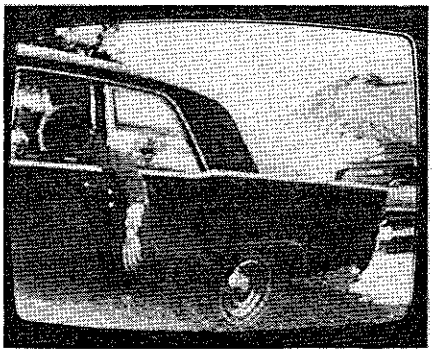
"You fight CBS," Schneider said morosely. "I've got my own problems."

Marshall McLuhan was in the green room, limbs akimbo. Toward the end of the program he had tried to dust off such familiar sizzlers as the "Xerox Revolution," but to little avail. "Gerbner's just a lecturer," he was saying. "He's entirely a left-hemisphere man.

"If you merely want to understand what's happening, you go right hemisphere. But if you want to become a respected, public figure, you go *left* hemisphere." A Parthian shot: "You should write about him in your magazine." I didn't have the heart to say I was.

It was a short walk from NBC to Time Inc., where Gerbner had an appointment with a leading exec. The executive, a polished man in a polished office, wished to discuss television. "It occurs to me," he said, "that *Time* and *Newsweek* are *another network*."





"Do you ever work together?" asked Gerbner.

"We have talked about it. But we are so damn competitive, we lose sight of who the real enemy *is*."

What is needed, of course, is a strategy. Television may be a giant, but it is a clumsy one. "Television deals in effect. But if something's there in black and white, it means . . . honesty . . . truth. Print is a hell of a lot stronger than some advertisers believe."

He sounded hopeful. Gerbner started talking, dispassionately, fluently, about the difference between "light" and "heavy" viewers. The Time man began to personalize, talking of his own family. One child, it seems, has plentiful outside interests while the other adheres to the television set as to flypaper.

"His perceptions are 180 percent different," the Time man said, dolorously. "I may be the victim of the old kind of thinking, but television is his life. It's like an escape to him." A pause. "It probably *is* an escape to him."

"No father or mother can compete with television," Gerbner observed. "The stories are—*there*."

"What do you think the future of reading will be?" asked the Time man. The inevitable *High Noon* of a question.

"Reading and writing will not be universal skills," George Gerbner said. "They will be more . . . specialized." Cold comfort.

En route to the Metroliner, Gerbner was even less cheery. "Print culture is dying," he said and thumbed through his schedule. Philadelphia, Washington, Los Angeles. "Did you know that one can telephone from the Metroliner?" he asked.

The Annenberg School of Communications is in a trim part of Philadelphia, belying that bilious metropolitan myth. Gerbner was here when he was tapped by the commission headed by Milton Eisenhower to analyze TV violence over the 1967–68 season.

People had kicked up a stink before, among them Estes Kefauver and Thomas J. Dodd. The Eisenhower Commission, which was set up by Lyndon Johnson five days after the shooting of Robert Kennedy, was not necessarily a breakthrough. "A presidential commission accomplishes its purpose when it is appointed," Gerbner says, "not when it reports."

The report was duly published, and duly ineffectual, but, coincidentally—and fueled by the TV violence in Chicago in 1968—Senator John Pastore got a governmental process set in action. "That's when the ball started rolling," says Gerbner. "A bureaucracy was committed."

The National Institute of Mental Health began to give Gerbner and his five associates an annual grant—averaging about $100,000 a year—for what he entitles the Cultural Indicators program. For the first few years, the work,

and the Violence Profiles, consisted exclusively of monitoring and analysis, which takes place thus:

A typical week of programming is taped. This comprises Prime Time, Late Evening, and Weekend Daytime product. This will then be analyzed by a group of between twelve and eighteen coders, students who have been put through a three-week training course, wherein they learn to dissect programs on forms, variously colored, for instance, yellow (the Number of Violent Acts, their Tone, Seriousness, and Significance), green (Close Personal Relationships), and blue (Sex, Age, Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Violence by, or Victimization).

Since the fall of 1972, complementary "live" research has been fed into the project. Despite decades of gloomy speculation, there had never been a painstaking examination of the psychological impact from persistent TV viewing. Gerbner found a New Jersey

school willing to cooperate. Several hundred pupils have been filling out questionnaires ever since.

The children were graded light viewers, medium, or heavy. A typical "heavy" told researcher Suzanne Jeffries-Fox that "I'm almost always watching it. I watch it in the morning. When I get home from school I watch. Then I go across the street and watch it. Then I come home at supper and I watch it. Then I watch it before I go to bed. I fall asleep to it."

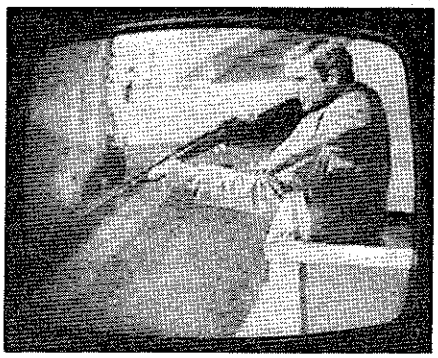
The recently released Violence Profile for 1976 notes that this year, despite the so-called "family hour," had "the highest Violence Index on record." Detailed breakdowns stated that "three quarters of all characters were involved in some violence, compared to 65 percent in 1975," and that "violent episodes" increased from 8.1 per hour to 9.5. It was pointed out that "the analysis focused on clear-cut and unambiguous physical expressions of overt violence in any context."

Truly an *annus mirabilis*. For a decade the networks had been endeavoring to ignore the Violence Profiles, but their period of immunity was coming to an end. An investigation was sputtering through Congress—and is now, under Congressman Lionel Van Deerlin—and ominous rumblings were being heard in other quarters.

In 1975 the PTA sent out what they described as a "very strongly worded resolution." That fall, J. Walter Thompson took a much publicized stand against excessive mayhem on the box, creating a presentation which it showed to clients around the country.

"We knew that there were enough people who objected to the violence to affect the effectiveness of the advertising," says Arnold Grisman, a JWT executive. "Even a year ago there were plenty of people ready to boycott products. If somebody organized them. Any product was vulnerable."

Organizers began to manifest themselves. Groups like ACT—Action for Children's Television—and the apparently moribund National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting. The NCCB had been set up under Thomas Hoving



in the sixties to prepare the way for public broadcasting. That delivery safely effected, the NCCB languished until revived under Nicholas Johnson, who had joined at the end of his seven-year stint with the FCC.

They began to sniff at the problem. "We do not do any basic research," says the NCCB's Ted Carpenter, happily admitting indebtedness to Gerbner. "We monitor prime time to see how much violence there is. And who is sponsoring it." Two 1976 studies named the names. The twelve leading violence sponsors were: American Motors, Anacin, Burger King, Campbell's, Chevrolet, Eastman Kodak, Frito-Lay, General Foods, Mr. Coffee, Procter & Gamble, Schlitz, and Sears Roebuck.

Last June, the AMA House of Delegates, meeting in Dallas, announced that television could be "an environmental hazard" which threatens "the health and welfare of young America."

The PTA was, again, heard from. The response to its 1975 blast had not, it was felt, been sufficient. "We felt we had heard it all before" said a spokesman for that organization. "For years we had been getting polite P.R. letters. 'We're pleased by your interest and concern, blah-blah-blah.' So in 1976, Carol Kimmel, then PTA president, decided that the organization should gear up and see what it could do."

What she did was appoint a commission and hold a seminar. That was last October at the PTA's headquarters in Chicago. Honchos arrived from the networks. Their promises were still, it seemed, unconvincing. Eight public hearings were organized for the PTA's eight national regions. The first was in Pittsburgh last November. "We didn't even break for meals," said the spokesman. "It was most crowded in the mornings. That's when the people who knew about the deadlines for electronic media tried to speak. They'd call up and complain: 'You've got me scheduled at 3:30 P.M.' They wanted to be on the TV news." Instinctual judo. Use the giant's own strength to break its neck.

What went on at a meeting was like what goes on at a bonfire if you add kerosene. Teachers testified that network product was destroying creativity, hardening juvenile hearts. Parents complained that their kids were more and more aggressive and antisocial. Searing tales were told. One particular NBC drama was blamed for two rapes—a Coke bottle rape, for instance, on a California beach. Further copycat crimes were brought into the record. A woman from Chicago testified that her foster child had tried to strangle the family dog.

Most chilling of all, a woman described her maiming by her husband, an addict of video mayhem. "On June 13, 1976," she said, "I was shot directly in the head in the privacy of my own home. As I state it, it doesn't happen like it does on TV. I didn't lose consciousness right away. I can quite clearly remember the sound of the gun firing, the devastating pain as the bullet ripped through my head. . . ."

But unscientific stuff, right? The networks' media experts can mock the relevance of murderous spouses, delinquent rapists—"haphazard incidents." Which is where George Gerbner's research comes in. Last November the AMA gave the NCCB $25,000. This year, having relied on Gerbner for strategy advice, it has given him $32,000. (The current NIMH grant expires on February 28, 1978. "We are waiting for Gerbner to submit another research proposal," says Dr. David Pearl, of that organization, adding: "We think that George has done the best work of any. It's been the only consistent show in town.") And this January it wrote to the chief executives of the violence-sponsoring corporations.

The pressure was beginning to tell. "Every single one of the corporations has made clear public statements," says

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Ted Carpenter of the NCCB. "Chevrolet was *very* outspoken. Kodak even defined what it thought constituted gratuitous violence."

Schlitz sent out a release on February 7, reading, in part, thus: "The Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company announced today that it has issued instructions to its advertising agencies to refuse to purchase commercial time in television program episodes depicting excessive violence, glorifying violence, or other antisocial practices. . . ."

And always buttressing the attacks was George Gerbner. The beleaguered networks counterattacked, employing researchers and experts of their own. Jack Schneider, president of CBS Broadcast Group, wrote to the congressional committee on April 25, attacking Gerbner's work, "its misleading aspects, and its general acceptance." Accompanying his letter was a ten-page attack on the Gerbner methodology, and a 21-page alternative offering from the CBS "Office of Social Research."

The Gerbner group responded on May 17, characterizing the CBS contribution as "a corporate defense mechanism." They concluded with a characteristic feline touch, suggesting that "instead of trying to explain away findings when they happen to be inconvenient, CBS should take the lead in responding to our call for pooling research data in the national television archive of the Library of Congress." The librarian of the Library of Congress, by the way, is Daniel Boorstin, formerly an enthusiastic media critic and the inventor of such seminal concepts as the "pseudo event."

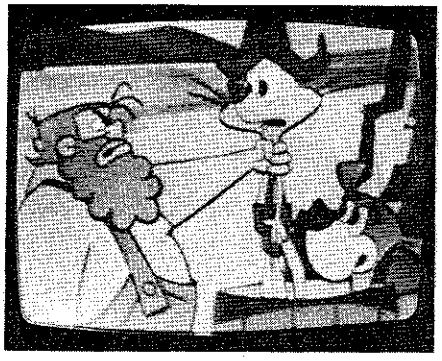
Gerbner did not then know it, but the skirmish was won. The fall schedules were softened, with rancor from the network execs, fury from the eliminated stars ("I'm really bitter" said Robert Stack, of *Most Wanted*. "I don't think television violence hurts the child at all"), and much sourness from the ad agencies, not all of whom, by any means, had followed the nobler-than-thou line of J. Walter Thompson. "Gerbner's definition of violence may be valid," says Richard Low of Young & Rubicam, "but it isn't practical.

"The whole thing might have been stopped. But by the time the networks reacted, it was too late. . . ."

The networks themselves have, of course, tried to put a good face on it. "We are decreasing police action by two hours a week," says Van Gordon Sauter, CBS vice-president of program practices, which is to say censor, talking of the impact of "well-organized, widely publicized groups."

"But," he adds, "there was an exhaustion of that particular genre of television. There was an overpopulation of police types. TV is a cyclical business, and the policemen were going out of cycle."

Ted Carpenter at the NCCB seems to doubt whether the cycles had much



to do with it. "It's a very rare public-interest victory," he told me, jubilantly. "A clear modification of corporate behavior. And it's unheard of in the broadcasting industry. They have never been particularly . . . responsive."

And George Gerbner? He seems less enthusiastic about the victory than anybody. "We have heard this before," he told me. "Annually. This may be a swing of the pendulum. To say that the war against violence is won is silly. The so-called Hollywood creative community is organizing a series of meetings. This may bring about a backlash. Especially if there is a loss of ratings.

"We will continue our work. The Cultural Indicators program is not purely, or even principally, concerned with violence. We are studying cultural meteorology. We hear there is a certain amount of sex coming."

With dry pleasure, he notes that he will be looking out for "the sadistic syndrome," but with a touch of passion he notes the weapons that have been used against him. Sy Salkowitz, Twentieth Century–Fox TV president, complained of "McCarthyism." Network execs have talked to me, darkly, of the First Amendment and censorship. Gerbner finds this line of argument spurious, and worse. "This isn't between freedom and censorship. There's no freedom on television. They have the cameras. They have the microphones. It's most unbecoming. Especially from the groups that cooperated with McCarthy. We're interested in breaking up the present de facto dictatorship on TV.

"What we have to ask is this: Is television just another medium? I think it isn't. People are born into a television room. They absorb it before they can speak, let alone read. They use it nonselectively. It has become a collective responsibility, and should be handled not as books and films are handled but as religion is handled.

"It has become a centralized process, with its myths and rituals in a seamless whole. Separating news from drama or entertainment is like separating the sermon from the hymns you sing. The historic nexus of power, church, and state has been replaced by another: television and state."

Nor has he found the current brouhaha too inspiriting. "The advertisers latched onto a popular issue. But underneath the whole discussion about violence is the struggle for control of programming. Who is going to have a finger in the pie? The networks? The sponsors? The government?"

There may be some lasting good from the growing debate. The AMA will not go away, nor will the PTA. "This summer," a PTA spokesman said breezily, "we are training our people. On monitoring, listing the advertisers, encouraging people to write letters. We'll be sending out little packets with bumper stickers and things. We are going to establish a TV action center, with a hot line. For parents to call in.

"I would guess that by fall we will mobilize 11,000 units. That's 2 million people. At *least*."

George Gerbner had been talking of his youth; the salvaging of folklore in villages far from Budapest. Now, fingers stitching the air, he returned to the makers of a more modern folklore.

"It is too limited that the greatest educational institution our country has ever had should be limited to advertising budgets and purposes. It simply does not address itself to the great variety of interests and needs our people have."

Gerbner's telephone yammered. Another television talk show.

He found a free day. "I'm being typecast," he told me, aside. "I'm being used by television. Everybody is."

The program agreed to Gerbner's date. "NBC must pay expenses," he said, with a kind of a bleak gaiety. ■