

TESTIMONY BY GEORGE GERBNER FOR THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE OVERSIGHT FIELD HEARING ON VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION, DECEMBER 15, 1992, NEW YORK.

My name is George Gerbner. I am Professor of Communication and Dean Emeritus at The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. I testify here in my capacity as co-principal investigator (with Profs. Larry Gross, University of Pennsylvania; Michael Morgan, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Nancy Signorielli, University of Delaware) of the Cultural Indicators research project which has tracked violence (and other themes) on television since 1967. My testimony represents my own conclusions and not those of any school, university or organization.

My principal purpose is to call attention to behavioral and policy issues consistent with but broader than the usual concern with imitative violence. Constant displays of violent power and victimization cultivate an exaggerated sense of danger and insecurity among heavy viewer of television. That is the most pervasive and debilitating consequence of daily exposure to television violence. What we call the "mean world syndrome" contributes to a loss of sensitivity and trust, demonstrates power for some and vulnerability for others, and invites violence and victimization. No regular viewer escapes the burden of this scenario, but it falls most heavily on women and some minorities.

My second purpose is to report some preliminary and partial results of our latest Violence Index of network television dramatic programs. I will note these first and then address my primary purpose as I discuss their implications. I will conclude with a suggestion for action. Selected references to our most relevant studies can be found in the Bibliography.

Cultural Indicators

The Violence Index is an ongoing effort of the Cultural Indicators project based at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, initiated by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969 and supported by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, the White House Office on Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, and the National Science Foundation and other organizations. The project has been broadly based from the beginning to include many aspects of the role and functions of television violence in

life and society. Reports have also included studies of television and political orientations, aging, religion, health, women and minorities, and science and technology.

Currently three projects are in progress and should be completed early in 1993. A full report of the Violence Index and Profile covering the three major broadcast networks' prime time and weekend daytime (children's) dramatic programs for the past 25 years will be forthcoming at that time. Also to be concluded is a study of violence in cable-originated dramatic programming, commissioned by the National Cable Television Association (NCTA). The third study is of women and minorities on television, commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Radio-Television Artists (AFTRA).

The Violence Index; the last two seasons

The Violence Index is based on the observation of clear-cut, unambiguous, and overt episodes of physical violence -- hurting or killing or the threat of hurting and/or killing -- in any context.

Annual week-long samples of programming have been recorded since 1967. The tapes are screened and coded by trained analysts using an extensive instrument of analysis. The instrument requires the reliable observation by independent coders of many aspects of the programs and characters in the sample.

The Violence Index combines three sets of observations (also noted separately) into a single indicator. The separate observations measure (1) the percent of programs containing any violence (%P), (2) the rate of violent scenes per program (R/P) and per hour (R/H), and (3) the percent of major characters involved in violence (%V) either as perpetrators or as victims or both. The Violence Index is the sum of these measures with the rates of violence and of killing weighted by a factor of two.

Prime time violence

Long-time trends will be presented in the full report. Here I will relate the two seasons to average levels for the past 25-years.* It can be seen in Table 1 that violence in prime-time dramatic programs for the past two seasons studied has been slightly below the 25-year average. Although some of the separate measures of violence straddle

*Assisting with this update have been Amy Nyman and Nejat Ozyegin.

TABLE 1: VIOLENCE IN PRIME TIME

	Percent of programs with any violence (%P)	Rate per program (R/P)	Rate per hour (R/H)	Violence Index (VI)
1990-91	74.1	3.4	4.0	141.7
1991-92	62.3	4.2	5.1	141.7
25-year ave.	71.6	4.7	5.3	155.9

the 25-year average, the rates of violent scenes and the percent of violent characters fall below the average, making the Violence Index 141.7 for both seasons compared to the 25-year average of 155.9.

Children's program violence.

As in previous years, children's programs were much more violent than prime time programs. Table 2 shows that although "only" about 8 out of 10 programs were violent

TABLE 2: VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

	Percent of programs with any violence (%P)	Rate per program (R/P)	Rate per hour (R/H)	Violence Index (VI)
1990-91	82.5	7.8	32.0	244.2
1991-92	76.7	6.5	26.2	214.7
25-year ave.	92.7	6.4	22.1	231.6

compared to the 25-year average of 9 out of 10, those that were violent were much more saturated with violence than ever before. The rate of violence per hour of children's programs was 32. (an all-time high) and 26.2, compared to the 25-year average of 22.1. Consequently the Violence Index was 244.2 and 214.7, with the 25-year average 231.6.

The victims of prime time

The burden of violence in television programs is not randomly distributed. Table 3 shows that women and

TABLE 3: KILLERS AND KILLED; WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

	Involved in violence %	Killers %	Killed %	For every 10 killers, no. killed
Men	60	11	5	4.5
Women	42	4	3	7.5
"Mentally ill"	70	20	20	10.0

minorities tend to be underrepresented and overvictimized. About 6 out of 10 men are involved in violence and more than 1 in 10 kill someone. More than 4 out of 10 women characters are involved in violence and also 1 in 10 kill someone. But for every 10 male killers there are nearly 5 men killed while for every 10 women written into scripts as killers nearly 8 get killed, almost double the male killer-killed ratio.

Characters portrayed as mentally ill are the most violent and the most highly victimized. No other group of characters is shown to deserve such fate.

The highly structured lethal "pecking order" of television drama is shown in Table 4. On top are "good"

TABLE 4: THE LETHAL PECKING ORDER

	Percent involved in violence	Killer/killed ratio
On top		
"Good" men:	57	For every 10 killed, 33 are killers
All men	58	-"- -"- 24 -"-
On the bottom		
Older women	30	No killers; only killed
Nonwhite women	35	For every 10 killers, 23 killed
"Good" women	41	-"- -"- 11 -"-
"Mentally ill"	70	-"- -"- 10 -"-

(i.e. positively presented) men. They kill more than three times as often as they are killed. Men in general ("All men" on Table 4) kill twice as often as they are killed.

On the bottom are women and "mentally ill" characters. Older women get involved in lethal violence (about one in 3)

only to be killed. Nonwhite women are killed more than twice as often, and "good" women as often, as they kill. Their relative chances of ending up dead are two or three times as high as the men's. In a word, men kill and women get killed.

Characters portrayed as mentally ill ("crazy," "mad," "insane") are the most violent: 7 out of 10. They are twice as likely to be shown as killers as are men in general. For every "mad" killers there is one killed. This frightful and false but routine presentation contributes to the stigma of mental illness.

What does it mean?

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras but none as filled with images of violence as the present. Prime-time mayhem occurs at the average of every ten minutes. ~~Children's programs display expertly choreographed brutality an average of every two minutes. Their humorous and fanciful context is the sugar coating on the pill of power.~~

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. It is a violent world. Violence is a legitimate cultural expression, even necessary to balance deadly compulsions against tragic costs. But the historically limited, individually crafted, selectively used and often tragic symbolic violence has been swamped by "happy violence" produced on the dramatic assembly-line and discharged into the mainstream of our common culture. Happy violence shows no pain or tragic consequences. It is a swift and easy dramatic solution to many problems, employed by good characters as much as bad, and always leading to a happy ending.

Why "happy violence?"

The most highly rated programs are typically not violent. But formula-driven happy violence is a commercial ingredient that "travels well" while humor and more complex drama do not. Violence requires no translation, speaks "action" to most people in any language, and is sold cheaply (thus profitably) to distributors in many countries. It is imposed on viewers because global marketing makes them profitable.

Consequently, our children are born into a symbolic environment of four to five violent acts per prime-time hour, five or six times as many in presumably humorous children's programs, and an average of two entertaining murders a night. The moderate viewer of prime time sees every week an average of 21 criminals arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. An average of 150 acts of violence and about 15 murders entertain us and

our children every week, and that does not count cartoons and the news. Those who watch over 3 hours a day (more than half the people) absorb much more.

The violence we see on television bears little or no relationship to its actual occurrence. Neither its frequency nor its typology are accurate representations of violence and crime statistics. The fear of crime in a community is unrelated to its occurrence but reflects the amount of viewing and other forms of crime publicity.

Consequences

Our method of assessing the consequences of growing up in the violence-laden symbolic world of television is called Cultivation Analysis. It is a way of ascertaining if those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and repetitive messages and lessons of the television world. (See Signorielli and Morgan, 1990, for a detailed discussion of the theory and methodology of Cultivation Analysis.)

We have consistently found that heavy viewers are more likely than comparable groups of light viewers to express a feeling of living in the self-reinforcing cycle of a mean and violent world. The sense of vulnerability and dependence imposes its heaviest burdens on those most likely to appear as victims rather than victors: women and minorities. In the last analysis, television violence produced as entertainment for global markets distorts the role and nature of violence in the real world but facilitates the functions of real violence as domination and intimidation of those seen most vulnerable to victimization.

Public policy must take account of the fact that a *de facto* censorship imposed by marketing strategies stifles creative diversity as much as any government censorship would. Only education in media literacy and a grass-roots citizens movement can address this predicament. Such a movement will approach the cultural environment as we now approach the problems of the physical environment. A Cultural Environment Movement will build a constituency for non-governmental public participation in the increasingly centralized cultural policy-making. Its objective will be to liberate creative people in the media industries from the formulas and other constraints imposed upon them. When media professionals will be free to create more valid and diversified solutions to human problems, the social pathology of happy violence will fade from the air.

Bibliography

- Gerbner, George. "Dimensions of Violence in Television Drama." In Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball (eds.), *Violence in the Media*, staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 311-340.
- Gerbner, George. "Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1970, 388, pp. 69-81.
- Gerbner, George. "Communication and Social Environment." *Scientific American*, 1972, 227(3), pp. 152-160. Reprinted in *Communication: A Scientific American Book*. San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1972, pp. 111 -118.
- Gerbner, George. "Violence and Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions." In George A. Comstock and Eli Rubinstein (eds.), *Television and Social Behavior*, Vol. 1, *Content and Control*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972, pp. 28-187.
- Gerbner, George. "The Violence Profile: Some Indicators of Trends in and the Symbolic Structure of Network Television Drama 1967-1971." In *Surgeon General's Report by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, Appendix A*. (Hearings before the Subcommittee on Communications of the Committee on Commerce, U.S. Senate, Serial No. 92-52.) Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1972, pp. 453-526.
- Gerbner, George and Larry Gross. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication*, 1976, 26(2), pp. 173-199.
- Gerbner, George and Larry Gross. "The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer." *Psychology Today*, 1976, 9(11), pp. 41-45, 89. Reprinted in David Manning White and John Pendleton (eds.), *Popular Culture: Mirror of American Life*. Del Mar, CA: Publishers, Inc., 1977, pp. 123-127.
- Gerbner, George. "Death in Prime-Time: Notes on the Symbolic Functions of Dying in the Mass Media." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1980, No. 447, pp. 64-70.

- Gerbner, George and Larry Gross. "The Violent Face of Television and Its Lessons." In Edward L. Palmer and Aimee Dorr (eds.), *Children and the Faces of Television: Teaching, Violence, Selling*. New York: Academic Press, 1980, pp. 149-162.
- Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli. "Living With Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process." In Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman (eds.), *Perspectives on Media Effects*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986, pp. 17-40.c
- Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli. "Television's Mean World: Violence Profile No. 14-15." The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, September 1986.
- Gerbner, George. "Violence and Terror in the Mass Media," *Reports and Papers in Mass Communication*, No. 102. Paris: Unesco, 1988.
- Gerbner, George. "Television's Cultural Mainstream: Which Way Does It Run?." *Directions in Psychiatry*, 8(9). New York: Hatherleigh Co., Ltd., Summer 1988.
- Gerbner, George. "Violence and Terror In and By the Media." In *Media, Crisis and Democracy*. Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais (Eds.) Sage, in press.
- Gross, Larry. "Television and Violence." In Ben Logan and Kate Moody (eds.), *Television Awareness Training*. New York: Media Action Research Center, 1979, pp. 19-23.
- Gross, Larry. "The Cultivation of Intolerance: Television, Blacks, and Gays." In Gabriele Melischek, Karl Erik Rosengren, and James Stappers (eds.), *Cultural Indicators: An International Symposium*. Vienna, Austria: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984, pp. 345-363.
- Gross, Larry. "Sesso 'Anormale' e Violenza 'Normale': Televisione, Devianza e Controllo Sociale ('Abnormal' Sex and 'Normal' Violence: Television, Deviance and Social Control)." In Roberto Grandi, Massimo Pavarini, and Mario Simondi (eds.), *I Segni Di Caino: L'Immagine Della Devianza Nella Comunicazione Di Massa (The Mark of Cain: The Representation of Deviance In The Mass Media)*. Naples, Italy: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1985, pp. 231-250.

- Morgan, Michael. "Symbolic Victimization and Real-World Fear." *Human Communication Research*, 1983, 9(2), pp. 146-157. Also in Gabriele Melischek, Karl Erik Rosengren, and James Stappers (eds.), *Cultural Indicators: An International Symposium*. Vienna, Austria: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984, pp. 365-376.
- Morgan, Michael. "Heavy Television Viewing and Perceived Quality of Life." *Journalism Quarterly*, 1984, 61(3), pp. 499-504, 740.
- Morgan, Michael, James Shanahan and Cheryl Harris. "VCRs and the Effects of Television: New Diversity or More of the Same?" In J. Dobrow (ed.), *Social and Cultural Aspects of VCR Use*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990, pp. 107-123.
- Michael Morgan and James Shanahan. "Do VCR's Change the TV Picture?: VCR's and the Cultivation Process." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1991, 35:2, 122-135.
- Signorielli, Nancy. "The Measurement of Violence in Television Programming: Violence Indices." In Joseph R. Dominick and James E. Fletcher (eds.), *Broadcasting Research Methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1985, pp. 235-251.
- Signorielli, Nancy and Michael Morgan (eds). *Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990.
- Signorielli, Nancy. "Television's Mean and Dangerous World: A Continuation of the Cultural Indicators Perspective." In Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan (eds), *Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990, pp. 85-106.