EDITORIAL RESPONSE
A Reply to Newcomb's "Humanistic Critique"

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Newcomb's essay on "Assessing the Violence Profile Studies of Gerbner and Gross: A Humanistic Critique and Suggestion" (1978) is a welcome contribution to the dialogue of the "two cultures," although perhaps the contrast is a bit overdrawn.

After noting that our social scientific approach to the study of television as an "environment of symbols" is "thoroughly congenial to the humanistic perspective" (p. 267), Newcomb questions our emphasis on the similarities among television plays in preference to the differences in style, format, and nuances of plot, and so on. Our reason for this emphasis is that we consider most television plays assembly-line drama rather than works of unique craftsmanship. The patterns that the corporate assembly-line imparts to its products become the aggregate and repetitive terms of common exposure and usage. Our main interest is in the commonalities of exposure and association that cultivate public conceptions, rather than in the variety of individual differences. When a certain type of dramatic action (such as violence) is presented an average of seven, eight, or nine

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times an hour, and viewed nonselectively by most viewers, we are dealing with a standardized and cumulative pattern which is not traceable to single programs. It is like looking down from a plane as it flies over a familiar neighborhood: the view is different but it is still the same territory. As Hirsch (1977) noted recently, "it is well to remember that many more people are hooked on television itself than specific programs."

Newcomb questions our assertion of television's realism. He claims we do not consider the world of television "real," but assume that viewers do. However, our assumptions are not that simple. Viewers may suspect or even dismiss contrived plots (although accept them as explanations for motivations, actions, and outcomes, thus for much of how things may actually *work,* rather than what they *are*), but they may still absorb much of the authentic-looking background detail. For example, viewers seem to "know" what courtrooms, police stations, or surgical operating rooms look like, how people work and act in them, what social types are likely to succeed or fail. This type of "knowledge" relates to the informational qualities of the realistic style of presentation of background "facts" and acts, and not necessarily to whether viewers believe the foreground plots (although many do).

In addition to our analyses of survey questions addressed by ourselves or others to samples of viewers, we have encouraged auxiliary studies which investigate viewers' perceptions in greater depth. In her recent doctoral dissertation, Schwartz-McDonald (1977) describes the conceptions of crime and law enforcement of a sample of Philadelphia residents who respond to extended individual interviews. These respondents typically reported the sort of incidental, background learning from television which we believe characterizes the way most of us have formed our images of many social institutions and processes. These television-related images can range from technical details—

Q: What makes you think that lawyers are not supposed to lead witnesses?
A: Television. "I object, your Honor, Counsel is leading the witness."
Q: Seriously.
A: I'm dead serious. I've never been in a courtroom in my life (99).

to more general assessments of credibility—

Q: Do you have any idea whether the plots are realistic? (On "The Streets of San Francisco")
A: They seem to be. They seem to be things that could happen to anybody. I don't think they're particularly exaggerated.
Q: What sorts of crimes do they have on there?
A: All kinds. Rapes, robberies, murders. The run of the mill (p. 138).

to extreme faith in the realism of television—

A: Most of the shows are realistic because if they weren't, they wouldn't be able to produce them on TV (p. 110).

Our most recent report (Gerbner et al., 1978) provides further evidence that viewers do absorb "broad facts" from their experience of many hours in the world of television. Whether they believe any specific plot is irrelevant to our argument.

Next, Newcomb tackles our definition of violence and, in the process, misinterprets some fundamentals of the analysis of communications content. Our definition is minimal, commonly understood, and unambiguous: it essentially entails hurting and/or killing, or forcing some action on pain of being hurt or killed. Newcomb asks why we don't "determine a meaning of violence as it is understood by the *characters* themselves in the fictional world of television," and then compare that with other definitions. That suggestion is much more puzzling and problematic than anything we are doing.

Of course, we recognize that not all violence is alike. Striking out against brutality and injustice is not the same as perpetrating them. But, as noted, we deal with violence as an industrial ingredient injected wholesale into formula plays. The overall patterns of violence as demonstrations of social power are little affected by exceptions to the rule and by subtle differences in "meaning." Victimization denotes vulnerability whether deserved or not. Plots may add "meanings" to standard fates assigned to different social types, but do not change the calculus of risks implicit in those fates.

Newcomb also objects to our observation that television provides a "symbolic world ruled largely by violence," even though he notes that it occurs an average of 7.4 times per hour. But rule does not rest entirely on numbers. Perhaps we can be charged for rhetorical excess, but we mean "ruled" literally. We attempt to explain (and in the latest report, to elaborate) the finding that the ratio of victims to violents within any group sets up a hierarchy of social powers, a "pecking order." That order is, of course, the regulatory component in a social structure.

We do not mean (or say) that violence is more prominent than other actions, as Newcomb suggests (although it may be); we only find that it tends to exemplify power relations in the symbolic social order. Newcomb calls that "highly debatable." Perhaps. But some of the findings in our latest report provide additional evidence of the connection between television violence and symbolic demonstrations of power.

Newcomb questions our procedure designed to assess the contribution of television to viewers' conceptions of social reality. The objection goes like this: we define what is presented on television, then turn around and question viewers to determine whether the patterns implicit in those presentations are acually confirmed by heavy viewers more than by light viewers. The validity and reliability of our definitions determines the soundness of the test.

That indeed is what we do. We spend much time and effort assuring (and measuring) the validity of our definitions. We find that heavy viewers *do* tend to answer our questions in line with the television presentations, even when we control for demographic and other characteristics. Therefore, it seems that they do learn at least some of the lessons brought out in our analysis, and learn them independently of other media exposure and real-life differences. Newcomb does not offer an alternative explanation for these findings, nor another way to assess TV's contributions to what people think and do.

The fact is that heavy viewers overestimate their chances of involvement in violence and their general vulnerability (compared to light viewers in the same social groups) *however defined*. Newcomb's big question, "what does violence mean to the respondents" is not only irrevelant but distracting. We study what exposure to violence-laden television contributes to their conceptions of the realities of their own lives.

Newcomb's "point that any attempt to determine 'the way things are in the observable world' is equally, if not far more, problematic as determining meanings in fictional constructs" (p. 274) is puzzling. The fictional meanings our type of analysis attempts to determine are simple and unambiguous events reliably coded and commonly recognized. The real world conceptions we study are those our respondents reveal in their answers. The two sets of data can be related in fairly straightforward ways. The procedure may be painstaking, but not particularly problematic.

Newcomb thinks that these "problems" arise from an implicit model of communication. He notes correctly that we reject simple "opinion change" theories in favor of "cultivation" or "ritual" theory. But then he suggests we implicitly follow the "transportation theory" designed to study influence and control, not just ritual. Newcomb's reasoning ignores the fact that ritual *must be learned*. We are not born with rituals and stable images; nor are they

"transported" into us. We are born into and grow up in a symbolic environment of which television is now the mainstream that *cultivates* stable images after some of its own patterns.

The "transportation theory" claim transports Newcomb into an interesting discussion of the social sources of television content. He correctly elaborates our view that those sources are deeply rooted in the structure of our society, and that television mainly standardizes, ritualizes, streamlines, and spreads assembly-line symbol mass production into the life-space of an otherwise heterogeneous public. But then Newcomb suggests that "such technological distinctions" may "merely increase the pervasiveness of the symbols" (p. 278). That is like saying the coming of the automobile merely increased the pervasiveness of movement. It did, and in the process it transformed and standardized significant aspects of living. In any case, Newcomb adds, "mass dissemination makes it all the more important to establish the meanings of symbols as fully as possible" (p. 278). We can only respond that we study the relationships between patterns of messages and images regularly presented on television and what viewers think and do, especially as these relate to issues of public policy. That is enough "meaning" for us and, we submit, for most practical research purposes.

Toward the end of his essay, Newcomb develops some useful suggestions for studying the history of ideas and symbols. We hope the rest of us will not be required to await their conclusion before we are permitted to investigate the relationships between television, ideas, and action.

Unfortunately, puzzling nonsequiturs mar Newcomb's concluding comments. He asserts that symbol systems can have both negative and positive meanings, that "the fear of hell and the joy of salvation can operate together, perhaps in creative tension" (p. 281). And he goes on:

> Television is no less complex. I believe it more than likely that some members of the TV audience fear and resist change, and at the same time work to insure the equal rights of all people. My common sense tells me that it is possible to be afraid in city streets, and, at the same time, abhor the idea of a police state [p. 281].

One can believe anything one wishes about "some members" of the TV audience. One can listen to the voice of "common sense" to justify anything, however historically improbable.

The cultivation of fear, insecurity, and social rigidity does not contribute to the tendency to accept the massive changes that would be necessary for the realization of equal rights of all people. Fear of city streets tends to strengthen the demand for police protection and even repression, no matter how "abhorrent" that might seem to some people in the abstract. To obscure these overriding general relationships in the name of some particularistic observation of presumably greater sophistication or complexity violates not only the lessons of social science, but also the principles of humanism.

Newcomb is incorrect when, in his last sentence, he dubs our research on TV's contribution to viewer conceptions as "a reductive view of human experience." But as we move further into the investigation of different dimensions, such as television's contributions to occupational choice, assumptions about politics, aging, health, law, minorities, and so on, we welcome the serious attention and critique of scholars like Newcomb and accept the charge of the need to be more precise, cautious, and clear.