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Scenario for Violence

George Gerbner

By the time American children graduate from high school they will have watched on the average over 15,000 hours of television. This represents more time than they will have spent on any other activity except sleeping, and far more time than spent in school. In the following article from *Human Behavior* Dr. George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, evaluates the social results of most of those hours being filled with "more than seven acts of violence per prime-time hour and . . . double that number per cartoon-time hour."

In this 1975 essay Gerbner correctly predicts the inadequacy of the National Association of Broadcasters' "family programming" time period, and sees little chance for an early end to the TV violence debate. A co-developer of the most sensitive and scientifically sophisticated "violence index" (a measure of the amount of violence in each program, and itself a subject of heated debate), Dr. Gerbner outlines the history of political and scientific concern over the effects of TV violence, and points toward the symbolic functions of dramatic violence as the heart of the problem.

The debate over violence on television has settled in for a long run. It promises to outlast both "Kojak" and "Hawaii Five-O." While the partisans haven't yet come to blows, neither have they settled much. It may be they've been arguing over the wrong issues.

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The way a culture depicts sex and violence is symptomatic of its definition of humanity and is indicative of the structure of its power. The conflict over that depiction goes beyond fads and fashions and becomes part of the general contest over who should define that which safely entertains (in both senses of the word) and that which threatens the established social order.

In our time, that contest revolves mainly around television. The symbolic representation of violence and sex in the mainstream of American culture has become a battleground in the larger struggle over the control of that mainstream.

Perhaps there is no more significant battleground than the depiction of vital human acts. But the battledust of clichés and oversimplifications clouds the issues and confuses experts and laypersons alike. Everyone is supposed to know what sex and violence mean; the debate is about how to deal with them. But they mean very different things in "real life" and on television. Real life violence maims and kills; television violence demonstrates, which is the essence of its symbolic functions. The question of what it demonstrates (the communication question) must be tackled before we turn to the question of how to deal with it.

Even many communication researchers set out to investigate only what they assumed or feared stories of violence might cause instead of first studying what they might mean. By limiting their focus to preconceived effects such as aggression, they have ignored the full range and diversity of symbolic functions (including fear of victimization and the cultivation of a hierarchically structured sense of risk and power) and thus may have actually obscured the real significance of the rise of a mass-produced common symbolic environment largely ruled by

violence. Politicians and bureaucrats have been simplistic for more understandable reasons. Sex and violence make "good issues" because they exploit fears about moral breakdown and the erosion of public safety and order. But behind the gestures and the jockeying is the unarticulated struggle for influence over television as the central cultural arm of the industrial order.

From the vantage point of a communications researcher involved in the study of television violence for various commissions, I would like to sketch the progress of that struggle and then focus on what our research seems to say about the meaning of violence and how that should affect the issue of control.

"ANTIVIOLENCE BOMB UNDER MEDIA," cried *Variety*'s front-page banner headline on January 29 of [1975]. Since then the industry's bomb-disposal squad, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), dampened the sputtering device by declaring a two-hour *cordon sanitaire* of evening "family programming." We are now witnessing the first round of that experiment. Even the Motion Picture Association of America—under its new code and rating administrator, communications professor Richard D. Heffner [Rutgers University], who was pressed by complaints from some communities and especially from distributors abroad—gave its first X rating on grounds of violence alone—if one can call "violence alone" the offending scene in a Japanese martial arts movie entitled *The Street Fighter* in which the hero vividly castrates a 300-lb. black rapist.

It is too early to tell whether the new NAB code will stick and just how it will work. Independence may circumvent it, authorized exceptions may defeat it, time zones may confuse it, the kiddies may stay up later (more than 20 million of them already watch beyond 9 p.m.; 3 million still hang on at midnight!), the "adult" fare may become even more exploitive and the lack of definition may confound the whole effort. But, in any case, the "family hours" will not stem the tide of congressional and public concern.

The "antiviolence bomb" is not a passing phenomenon. It is, according to *Variety* analyst Morry Roth, a growing national mood and movement. Some cities (Chicago, for example) are drafting antiviolence statutes that will certainly wind up in the courts, and these are also affected by the new movement. "Unlike the antiporno laws," writes Roth, "the antiviolence movement would have a large portion of the liberal intelligentsia on its side, a not inconsiderable factor. So, too, the blue-collar class that worried about porno undoing its daughters is increasingly beginning to believe that the media is [sic] creating the growing violence in the streets. A coalition between Archie Bunker and The Professor is not too wild a dream."

That coalition is no longer a dream. Conflicting pressures converge on TV as the most universally visible common scenario and symptom of an increasingly troubled society. In less than a quarter century, video has come to symbolize all that pagan rites, priestly mumbo jumbo, Machiavelli, the robber barons, Wall Street and Madison Avenue meant to former generations of crusaders and critics.

Violence, like pornography or crime, is largely a matter of definition. Most societies, including ours, define it one way for rulers and another way for the ruled. We are not as likely to decry as violent the force used in maintaining the established order as that used in transgressing or threatening it. Historically, concern about symbolic sex or violence arises when the "wrong" people are exposed to it. Obscenity became a legal concept when cheap printing made it available to the lower classes. The great 19th-century debates about pulp literature and the penny press set the stage for the controversy (and research) on the effects of movies and led to the adoption of the motion picture and broadcast codes of industry self-regulation.

Senator Estes Kefauver, whose crime investigations spread the "myth" of the Mafia and marked national television's coming of age (and his own rise to national visibility), chaired the first Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to inquire into the

industry's inside workings. The next chairperson, Senator Thomas J. Dodd, made political hay of video lawlessness (before he himself was censured for real corruption) and added volumes to the archives on TV violence and children. Senator John O. Pastore took up the cudgels a few years ago and, as chairperson of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, has wielded them longer and more skillfully than has anyone before him.

Televised hearings demonstrated what the medium could do for (and to) politicians and started the politicos thinking about what they could do with the medium. In the wake of a presidential assassination and the civil rights and antiwar turmoil, two months after the student takeover of Columbia University, a month after the uprising in France and five days after the shooting of Robert F. Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence and named Milton S. Eisenhower to head it. When the commission completed its work and released its findings, including *Violence and the Media*, the reports were buried and the recommendations quickly swept under the rug. That was not unusual; it happened to the Kerner Commission, the Pornography Commission, the Scranton "campus unrest" Commission. The creation of a presidential commission serves as a symbolic act that usually calms the populace and scares the target industry. The practical results are generally achieved within six months. The Eisenhower Commission, for example, was set up in June 1968. What effect its media investigations were to have was achieved by December of that year when network presidents were called on the carpet to tell the commission what they had done or intended to do. By the time the volumes of findings (including our own research report) came out, the political situation had changed, and another committee was already at work on the same problem.

That this other effort did not follow the pattern of presidential commissions was largely due to the skill and timing of Sen. Pastore. Using as leverage the anxiety that gave rise to the Eisenhower Commission plus the turbulent televised images of the Chicago Democratic Convention and a new "law-and-order" administration, Sen. Pastore set in motion a government process that would be capable of follow-up and would provide fixed targets for future demands for action. He recalled how the smoking-cancer "link" had been established as a basis for official policy. So in March 1969 he wrote a letter to the new secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) requesting that he direct the U.S. surgeon general to appoint a Scientific Advisory Committee to conduct a study to determine if there was a link between TV violence and antisocial behavior such as might constitute a public health hazard.

The request was quickly accepted. However, following the precedent set by the surgeon general's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health, the industry (in this case television) was given the opportunity to blackball seven from a list of 40 social scientists on grounds that they had already taken an affirmative position on the issue. No scientific groups were similarly invited to exclude proindustry representatives; after all, it was the cooperation of the industry, and not of the scientists, that was to be sought. Of the 12 committee members finally chosen, two were network staff researchers, two were consultants to the networks and one was a former TV industry employee. The flap over stacking the deck in this way threatened the credibility of the work for a while but actually turned out to stiffen the backs and strengthen the hands of the drafters of an objective report. Two years, $1 million, one extensive independent research program and five volumes of findings later, for the first time in the history of any media research, an industry-approved committee of scientists unanimously agreed that there "was some preliminary indication of a causal relationship" between exposure to television violence and violent behavior. The first press accounts misread the report, but, called to elaborate before Sen. Pastore's subcommittee, the surgeon general bared the teeth in it:

> After a review of the committee's report and the five volumes of original research undertaken at your request, as well as a review of previous literature on the subject, my professional response today is that the broadcasters should be put on notice. The overwhelming consensus and the unanimous Scientific Advisory Committee's report indicates that televised violence indeed does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society.
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> While the committee's report is carefully phrased and qualified in language acceptable to social scientists, it is clear to me that the casual relationship between televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action. The data on social phenomena such as television violence and/or aggressive behavior will never be clear enough for all social scientists to agree on a formulation of a succinct statement of causality. But there comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come.

At the end of the March 1972 hearings, Sen. Pastore declared that "what has taken place in the past few days is nothing less than a scientific and cultural breakthrough. For we know there is a causal relation between televised violence and antisocial behavior which is sufficient to warrant immediate remedial action. It is this certainty which has eluded men of good will so long."

I am not so sure that the "break-through" was as much scientific and cultural (previous reports contained similar evidence) as it was political. Pastore succeeded in using his position as chairperson of the committee that must pass on legislation affecting broadcasting licensing and other industry matters to vest responsibility for "his issue" in government agencies that could be prodded whenever the situation demanded it. In his breakthrough statement, Pastore immediately called upon the HEW secretary, the surgeon general and the FCC to establish a "violence index" that would yield annual reports "measuring the amount of televised violence entering American homes."

That was when the "antiviolence bomb" began to tick. Pastore knew there already *was* a violence index because I had developed it for the surgeon general's Scientific Advisory Committee and because it had been introduced into the record of the same hearing by Rep. John M. Murphy of New York. So he could just sit back and wait—but not too long.

The secretary designated the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) as the HEW agency carrying on after the Scientific Advisory Committee discharged its duties. NIMH convened a conference of research consultants in June 1972 to discuss what to do about the senator's request. They recommended broadening the scope of the research and constructing a profile that would take account of the social relationships portrayed in the violence and their effects on viewers. Our research team, now including coinvestigator Larry Gross and other associates, received a NIMH grant for a broad-gauge project on television content and effects, called Cultural Indicators, including the development of the violence profile. Pastore was told that everything was under control and results would be forthcoming in two to four years.

Two years later, Pastore held further hearings. NIMH director Bertram S. Brown pleaded for another two to four years and advised the senator that a social science research council committee was reviewing research options and directions. I presented our newly developed violence profile. Network presidents also testified and Pastore congratulated them but warned that "we will keep your feet to the fire."

At year's end FCC chairperson Richard E. Wiley, prodded by Pastore and pressured by the Appropriations Committee, met with network presidents in a series of private sessions. Out of these sessions came the NAB plan. In February, the FCC issued a report announcing what the networks already promised and praised them for their promises. Pre-occupied with energy hearings and FCC nominations, Pastore called the plan "a wonderful idea," said he'd call hearings this fall and, at least temporarily, passed the cudgels to House Communications Subcommittee chairperson Torbert MacDonald. With his freshly streamlined,

staffed and budgeted subcommittee geared up and ready to take its turn in the limelight, MacDonald blasted the FCC announcement as "like writing a letter to Santa Claus." He announced his intention to hold hearings of his own and gave clear notice that the "family hour" plan will not defuse the "antiviolence bomb."

TV Guide (February 8, 1975) carried a column by Kevin Phillips that revealed a deeper concern. "Demographics suggest that television violence has its greatest effect in low-income ghetto areas," wrote Phillips. "I hasten to say that the network impetus is not one of social disruption but private profit." He concluded that "as winter turns to spring and summer, unemployment is almost certain to rise to levels not seen since the 1930s . . . Violent crime could reach unprecedented levels . . . If a clear nexus can be found, measures must be taken to suspend or prohibit certain types of programming."

The "antiviolence bomb" plot seems to include mounting pressure on the networks as somehow responsible for exacerbating if not actually causing social unrest under worsening conditions. The scenario is well calculated to keep the networks' "feet to the fire." But is it not strange to claim that the modern corrupters of youth and inciters of the dispossessed are not some errant philosophers or reformist prophets or radical pamphleteers but the cautious cultural organs of corporate America? Would the business establishment incite costly social disruption just for the sake of profits derived from TV violence? I believe that it is both more parsimonious and more plausible to suggest that the social control functions of symbolic violence may—from the point of view of "law and order," if not mental health—outweigh the disruptive consequences.

Historically, symbolic violence in storytelling from tribal rites to fairy tales, pulps, news, movies and television served to instill awe of authority and to demonstrate preferred notions of how power works in the family, community, nation and universe. The individual mayhem such exhibitions inspire may be the price we pay, appalling as that is to increasingly more people, for the collective cultivation of a sense of danger and fear and ultimate acquiescence in a hierarchy of social controls. Those controls work when most people voluntarily submit to them most of the time. Assisting that process by symbolic means are the ritualistic demonstrations of power and authority through dramatic violence. Television raised that ritual to the assembly-line efficiency of more than seven acts of violence per prime-time hour and (our children obviously need more education) double that number per cartoon-time hour.

The rate of violence per dramatic program or cartoon play has been remarkably stable all through years of agitation, investigations and debates. Our research, now in its eighth year, shows that violence is central to the symbolic world of television drama. It shows who can get away with what and how. It teaches that the risks of victimization are high and unequal. TV's kill ratio (the number of victims divided by the number of violents in each group) defines the pecking order (but not crime statistics) or society. On top of the heap are mature white males; on the bottom lie the bodies of children, the old, the poor, the nonwhite and young or single women. Our research also shows that both children and adults who spend much of their lives in the "world" of television learn some assumptions of that world and project them onto social reality.

The chief social function of symbolic violence is in what it teaches about types of people and power. As we reported to the surgeon general in *Television and Social Behavior*, "Symbolic hurt to symbolic people and causes can show real people how they might use—or avoid—force to stay alive and to advance their causes. The ritual of dramatic violence demonstrates the relative power of people, ideas and values in a clash of personalized forces. . . . The distribution of roles related to violence, with their different risks and fates, performs the symbolic functions of violence and conveys its basic message about people."

That message is one of social typing: different types of people possess different de-

grees of human violability. It is the message to which every *homo sapiens* must be subjected for a long time and in large doses before the notion of social violence—cool, calm, uniformed efficiency with which people are killed simply because they belong to a type called *enemy*—becomes conceivable, let alone practicable. Slight fluctuations in the massive release of that message into the common symbolic environment would make little difference so long as the inequity of the pattern remained, or even sharpened. (Some muting of violent characterizations that the networks offered Pastore and the public were accompanied by increases in the margin of victimization suffered by the already deprived groups in the world of TV drama.)

Symbolic violence can thus achieve some of the repressive aims of real violence and do it much more profitably and, of course, entertainingly. Fearful people want—demand—protection and will accept, if not actually welcome, oppression in the name of safety. Our research shows that heavy viewing of television cultivates a sense of risk and danger in real life. Fear invites aggression that provokes still more fear and repression. The pattern of violence on TV may thus bolster a structure of social controls even as it appears to threaten it.

We need a new approach to the social function not only of symbolic violence but also of television itself. Television is the universal curriculum of young and old, the common symbolic environment in which we all live. Its true predecessor is not any other medium but religion—the organic pattern of explanatory symbolism that once animated total communities' sense of reality and value, and whose relationship to the state is also governed by the First Amendment.

Which brings us to the question of controls. The problem cannot be avoided because television has never been without an imposed system of content controls. The question is what should be the proper purpose of controls and how could that purpose be best achieved?

The first requirement for transforming the power struggle into a more informed and responsible debate is the recognition of the repressive (rather than only incitive) social functions of symbolic violence, and of television itself as something like a corporate religion relating to the state as only the church did in the past.

The second requirement is the recognition that broadcasters' responsibility for long-run social goals and consequences depends more on a structure of supports and rewards than on the mechanics of controls. The exclusive dependence of commercial broadcasters on advertising budgets limits their scope and thwarts their exercise of broader responsibility. The formula that governs broadcasting is not social need, popularity or even audience wants. It is "cost per thousand viewers"—what enough people will buy at the least cost to the sponsor. Assembly-line violence that fits the conventional pattern of power is a dramatic commodity of only moderate acceptability but even lower cost. That is why it is a profitable as well as socially functional ritual of the TV religion.

There is not much to be gained from debating the controls without also considering where the supports and rewards will come from if television is to serve social purposes broader than those that now sustain its prejudicial patterns of victimization. Ultimately, the job can only be done by TV's artists and professionals under arrangements that support rather than distort their own best judgments. Both Senate and House subcommittees announced public hearings for this fall. The challenging task of institutional remodeling needs the discussion of alternatives, and time for development. The new round of hearings on sex, violence and other vital functions could do no better than to begin that task.