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Televised Violence and Paranoid Perception: The View from Great Britain

J. M. WOBER

IMAGERY and metaphor to be found in the currency of everyday communication may be useful indirect pointers to underlying truths about a society. If one observes that the injection of life-saving vaccine and the recording of a photographic image of personal identity are both labeled in a culture in common with the lethal bullet, such a society is probably one that is preoccupied with violence. If television is a major source of stimulus, and much of its content is of violence, the ways in which such violence may function psychologically, socially, and even politically are clearly major topics for academic and applied research.

Several investigators have developed a great deal of empirical evidence around the themes that televised violence might have beneficial (cathartic) effects, or harmful effects by the precipitation of new

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Abstract American viewers who have seen large quantities of violent material have a greater tendency to answer questions about the real world in ways which make it seem closer to the nature of the world depicted on television than do viewers who have only seen small amounts of television. Interpretation of the implications of these findings has been vigorously developed, probably far beyond the certainty which can be attached to the rigor of the empirical results. If the effects of heavy violence consumption are as strong as alleged, they should be discernible when sought again in a similar culture, and with similar methods. An attempt to replicate the American results among British viewers suggests that the paranoid effect is absent from their viewing experience. It may not have been convincingly demonstrated hitherto in America either.

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violence via a variety of mechanisms.[1] All these theories focus on effects which may involve actors who might be led to commit or desist from violence. However, a major new perspective was recently opened up by Gerbner and Gross (1976), who contend that televised violence may have unwanted effects through identifications that may be set up with its victims rather than its perpetrators.

Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue that television fiction is essentially realistic in style, conveying "a continuous stream of 'facts' and impressions about the way of the world." This material cultivates "types of common consciousness." Gerbner and his colleagues have established by content analysis that there is a great deal of conflict and violence portrayed on American television; they have then set out to explore the screen's "contribution to notions of social reality" by comparing the answers of heavy and light viewers to a series of questions about "facts of life that relate to law enforcement, trust, and a sense of danger."

In 1976 Gerbner and Gross reported that among an unspecified sample of adults 17 percent more of the heavy viewers (defined as those acknowledging over four hours' viewing per day) than light viewers (two hours a day or less) answered "can't be too careful" to the question "can most people be trusted"; the excess was 13 percent for those giving the "television answer," i.e., exaggerating their own chances of being involved in violence; finally, the excess among heavy viewers was 9 percent on a question on the proportion of people involved in law enforcement. Evidently, therefore, the most subjective question produced the largest difference.

A year later, Gerbner and five colleagues (1977) showed that televised violence had actually increased. Three questions about dangers in the real world were combined into a "mean world" index and again "television answers" were more frequent among heavy viewers, even when controlling for sex, age, and education. The element of race did not follow this picture, however, with black light viewers just as likely as black heavy viewers to give "television answers." A table of partial correlations was also given, showing significant relationships between weight of viewing, and the tendency to give television answers to questions about violence and law enforcement. However, these correlations are all very small (from 0.08–0.18, depending on the subsample), thus suggesting that amount of television viewing contributes very little to the variance in the dependent variable. The contentions that "television effects cannot be accounted for in terms of the major demographic variables of age, sex, education, or even, in the case of our New Jersey children's sample, IQ" do not follow convincingly from the data displayed, since partial correlation does not exclude the possibility that one of these variables (or some other one yet) may account for as much as, or even more of the variance than does weight of television viewing. Among light viewers (whose television influences interfere least with other ones) education and race are as strongly associated with perception of a mean world as is weight of television viewing.

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[1] Feshbach and Singer (1971) have provided field experimental data backing up Feshbach's earlier thesis that viewing violence can reduce aggressive behavior by catharsis. Experimentally too, Bandura and Walters (1963) showed, on the other hand, that viewed screen violence plays an important part in shaping children's behavior towards acting out aggressions. An 11-year follow-up study by Lefkowitz et al. (1972) involving "cross-lagged correlations" shows that the amount of viewed violence relates for boys (though not for girls) with aggressiveness a decade later. In on-the-spot field studies, Parke et al. (1975) reported that viewing violent films for a week went with greater subsequent aggressive behavior than did seeing nonviolent films, again only for adolescent boys. Two lines of argument have related screen violence to aggressive behavior via the intervening variable of arousal. Tannenbaum and Zillman (1975) find that not only violent programs but some other kinds of content can also be arousing; subsequent provocation or opportunity may then precipitate aggressiveness more likely than for nonaroused subjects. Less directly, Carruthers and Taggart (1973) showed that physiological changes occur on viewing screen violence, but that these changes can become desensitized with habituation, with the result that viewers may accept violence as a normal way of mediating relationships.

Nevertheless, Gerbner's 1977 summary keeps alive the claims and sociological extrapolations made in his 1976 paper. These include that "symbolic violence is a demonstration of power and an instrument of social control serving, on the whole, to reinforce and preserve the existing social order . . . "; a "heightened sense of risk . . . is more likely to increase acquiescence to and dependence upon established authority, and to legitimize its use of force." Finally, "our chief instrument of enculturation and social control, television may function as the established religion of the industrial order." Gerbner has called for cross-national exploration of his claims, and journalists in Britain have reported them uncritically. Thus, it is of interest to pursue the topic in Britain, where some 15 percent of screen time much of it in peak, is occupied by American material largely of the kind which Gerbner asserts is responsible for his findings.

Method

In 1976 the Independent Broadcasting Authority commissioned Gallup Polls Limited to carry out an annual survey on Attitudes to Broadcasting. One hundred sampling points were chosen throughout the United Kingdom, and 1,113 adults aged sixteen and over were interviewed in a sample structured by quotas within each sex by five age bands, four social class groups, and two working status groups so as to represent the population of the country. Over 96 percent of respondents had television, and the present study was based on these people. Interviewing took place over a one-week period in October.

In the same week a program appreciation diary was mailed to an entirely separate sample of adults randomly selected from electoral registers in the Midlands television franchise area (known to be the area whose demographic composition most closely resembles that of the nation as a whole). Diary respondents endorse an opinion for each program they have seen in a week, thereby also incurring a record of what they have seen on the three available channels. In the week in question 380 programs altogether were screened; of these, using Gerbner's violence definition, the descriptions of each item in the program journals, and the advice of experienced program administrators at the IBA, 38 programs were identified as containing violence. British scheduling patterns ensure that programs containing violence, especially if it is realistically set in drama or documentary, are shown at or after the main peak viewing times. It is also known that light viewers concentrate their viewing at peak times, with heavy viewers attaining this status by viewing in off-peak hours as well. So it could be that light viewers may see just as much violence as do heavy viewers. The use of overall viewing weight as an index of violence viewed, especially in the British situation, needs therefore to be justified. This is the question examined in Table 1.

Two conclusions emerge from Table 1. The heaviest quartile of viewers clearly saw more than twice as many violence-containing programs as did the lightest quartile of viewers. Secondly, the proportion of violence programing in the "viewing diet" was somewhat greater for lighter than for heavier viewers. Since Gerbner's hypothesis rests on the absolute levels of violence viewed, this finding from the panel can be accepted as likely to be representative of the situa-

Table 1. Number of Violence-Containing Programs, and Total Number of Programs Endorsed for One Week of Viewing Recorded in an Appreciation Diary

	Heavy Viewers[a]	*Light Viewers*[b]
N	54	53
Total programs endorsed over the week	66.1	17.0
SD	9.7	4.9
Violence-containing programs endorsed, over the week	10.7	4.1
SD	4.4	3.1

[a] Top quartile of respondents, viewing 53 or more items in the week.

[b] Bottom quartile of respondents, viewing 23 or fewer items in the week.

tion among the viewing population at large, or among any large sample thereof.

Respondents in the national interview sample were asked two "mean world" questions based on Gerbner's most discriminating items. One question on trusting people was worded in a way that would be comprehensible to British subjects. Secondly, Gerbner's query on the likelihood of being a victim of violence was represented by one question on the chance of being a victim of robbery, this being a more likely irruption of personal security in Britain. These questions were each framed in two versions, one a positive format put to half the sample, the other a negative format put to the other half. The distribution of answers to the "safe from robbery" format was close to a reversed image of the "unsafe from robbery" distribution, suggesting that both were tapping the same actual range of feelings on this topic among two separate and representative subsamples of the population. This helps to dispel a possible criticism that a positive response set may be partly responsible for any observed relation between self-reported amount of television viewing and estimates of the dangers in the real world. The results of asking one subsample of respondents how trustworthy people are had some convergent relationship with the "unsafe from robbery" distribution, while the same could not be said for the comparison within the other subsample between results of asking how untrustworthy people are and how safe from robbery respondents felt. Therefore the two questions put to the first subsample were combined to form a "security scale"; one point was given for each of the number of people a respondent said he could trust out of any 10 people, and five points for declaring he was not at all likely to be robbed, down to one point for saying he was extremely likely to be robbed. The scale therefore runs from 1 (least secure—trusts nobody and feels extremely likely to be robbed) to 15 (most secure).

Table 2 shows the security scale scores for heavy and for light viewers, of separate sex, age, and social class categories. None of the values in Table 2 even approaches significance at the 0.1 level. Thus there is no convincing or systematic tendency for heavy viewers to have lower security scale scores than are found among light viewers.

Discussion

The method used here—combining two questions into a security scale—is more powerful than Gerbner's original procedure of comparisons of single question results against weight of viewing. Indeed, it is the procedure adopted in Gerbner's second paper (1977). If the

Table 2. Average Security Scale Scores, Related to Weight of Television Viewing

Security Scales Scores among:	*All Adults*	*Sex*		*Ages*			*Social Class*[a]		
		Men	*Women*	*16–34*	*35–54*	*55+*	*ABC1*	*C2*	*DE*
Heavy Viewers (4+ hours/day	6.1	6.1	6.1	5.5	6.5	6.3	5.4	6.1	6.5
Light viewers	6.2	6.7	5.5	6.5	5.5	6.2	6.0	6.3	6.3
df	256	120	135	102	64	87	94	82	77
t	0.24	0.95	1.05	1.52	1.34	0.12	0.92	0.27	0.21

[a] These categories have been spelled out by the Market Research Industry in Great Britain in terms of occupation and economic status, and form the basis of its day-to-day analytic practice. In effect, *AB* refers to people in professional and larger executive positions; *C1* includes smaller executive, clerical, and skilled or semiprofessional positions; *C2* is the skilled working class; DE is the semiskilled and unskilled working class. Over the United Kingdom, the percentages of individuals who are designated as within these strata are 32, 35 and 33%, respectively (*ABC1, C2, DE*).

effects which Gerbner attributes to television are as strong as he asserts they are, then they might well have been discernible in Britain ("we cannot isolate television from the mainstream of modern culture because it is the mainstream" . . .). However, the present results have failed to replicate Gerbner's findings in Britain.

Almost simultaneously with the present fieldwork, Piepe, Crouch and Emerson (1977) carried out 842 interviews in and around Portsmouth and tested two Gerbner-type propositions: "these days a person doesn't know whom he can depend on," and "how often do you think that violent incidents happen around here?" There was no tendency for those who agreed with the first question to claim heavier amounts of viewing than those who disagreed. The same failure to confirm Gerbner's hypothesis occurred also with the second question.

It should be accepted, therefore, that there is no evidence for a paranoid effect of television on British viewers, although the proposition has twice, and adequately, been put to the test. Two approaches are available for interpreting this situation. One is that what may be true in America is not true in Britain, for which difference it will be useful to explore the reasons. The second is that the Gerbner thesis has still not been demonstrated convincingly in America, and the effect exists neither there nor in Britain.

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